

Out of Her Body, Out of Her Mind:
Political Redefinition through Physical Experience in Lorde and Anzaldúa

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Academic literature offers a number of helpful images to explain intersectionality. Roundabouts, birdcages, customs halls, quilts, equations, and lighting schemes have all been enlisted to convey the importance of analyzing multiple simultaneous discriminations. These examples are pedagogically useful. They are certainly colorful, memorable, and engaging. They are not intentionally used to obscure the impacts of intersectional discrimination. They are frequently accompanied by clear elucidations of the political, legal, and economic marginalization directed at those who are multiply targeted. Statistics are employed. Examples are given. It is all quite convincing.

But the reliance on symbolic representation and aggregated data obscures the impacted people who live under the many yokes of endlessly punished “wrong” identities or presentations. These injuries – unlike the statistics or allegories that would represent them – are not abstract. They are painful. They deprive effected people of nourishment (literal and figurative), of opportunity (economic and psychic), of full and flourishing human experience. The effects of intersectional discrimination are inscribed on bodies, experienced with bodies, harmful to bodies.

I turn to a discussion of embodied intersectionality with two hopes. First, that engaging with the real terrain on which these battles are waged might be a reminder that, beyond identity politicking, the harm of intersectional oppressions comes with a moral imperative. When quilts are layered upon one another other we can stand by; when bodies are being harmed we cannot. Second, that addressing the body directly might supplant the need for euphemism. Bodies at the intersection are already the site of everything these metaphors might hope to convey. Furthermore, unlike even the cleverest similes, accounts of embodied intersectional lives can not only show us how oppressions work, but how we can experience wholeness and catalyze change in spite of the political forces that would tear us apart.

Embodied experiences of intersectionality are a foundation of Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde's work. I focus primarily on their memoirs, *Borderlands/La Frontera* and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, which most directly connect the development of their political and physical selves. Writing even before Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term "intersectionality," both trace their navigation of multiple identities to an arrival at some form of crossroads. But these junctures are not the sites of gruesome accidents. With their bodies as anchors, archives, and guides, Lorde and Anzaldúa take these spaces as points of connection. Rather than being torn apart at the intersection, vivisected into warring component parts, they are, at last, whole – *completa*.

Imagining Intersectionality

In her groundbreaking essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," Kimberlé Crenshaw asks us to imagine "traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them."¹ She continues: "Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination."² Taking up this theme, Marilyn Frye suggests that we "Consider a birdcage... If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires... It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment." If we consider this imaginary birdcage it will be "perfectly *obvious* that

¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," in *Feminism & Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 322.

² *Ibid.*, 322.

the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon.³

Moving perhaps farther into the realm of the fantastical, Laurel Weldon would have us consider the causes of multiple oppressions “as light shining through multiple layers of colored transparencies onto a patchwork quilt. The effects are not patches of green *beside* patches of red *beside* patches of purple. The effect is just brown shadows. Each slide always modifies the effect of the others, and none has an independent effect.”⁴ Though perhaps a useful visual, the non-quilters among us can take comfort in another system, this one for distinguishing between additive and multiplicative oppressions. We might understand the former as “ $Y = a + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + c + e$,” while the latter is “ $Y = a + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + b_3x_1 * x_2 + c + e$.”⁵ Surely, an apt description of the lives lived by queer women of color.

Elizabeth Spelman moves, at least, towards human allegories for human experience. We are to picture “a huge customs hall with numerous doors, marked ‘women,’ ‘men,’ ‘Afro-American,’ ‘Asian-American,’ ‘Euro-American,’ ‘Hispanic-American,’ ‘working class,’ ‘middle class,’ ‘upper class,’ ‘lesbian,’ ‘gay,’ ‘heterosexual,’ and so forth. The doors are arranged in banks. ... We’ll all give notice of who we are by going through the requisite doors.”⁶ The relative salience of our identities might be represented by how we arrange the doors, sometimes walking first through gender, other times through race, though (as Spelman suggests) it is never possible for one body, of the non-figurative variety, to cross more than one of these thresholds at a time.

³ Marilyn Frye, “Oppression” in *Feminist Frontiers*, eds. Laurel Richardson, Verta Taylor, Nancy Whittier. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004, 7. Italics original.

⁴ Laurel S. Weldon, “The Structure of Intersectionality: A Comparative Politics of Gender.” *Politics & Gender*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2006, 241. Italics original.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁶ Elizabeth V. Spelman. *Inessential Woman*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988, 144.

Many definitions of intersectionality are considerably less vibrant. For Patricia Hill Collins, intersectionality “refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation.”⁷ Drawing a conclusion similar to Weldon and Spelman, she writes that “Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice.”⁸ In a follow-up to “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Crenshaw clarifies beyond analogy, pinpointing the urgent need for a politics of intersectionality:

This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the development of what has been called the ‘identity politics’ of African Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others....The problem with identity politics is that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences....this elision of difference is problematic because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race, class, and sexual orientation.⁹

Iris Marion Young, pointing to the sources of intersectional oppression, writes that “social groups defined by caste, class, race, age, ethnicity, and, of course gender name subjective identities less than axes of structural inequality. They name structural positions whose occupants are privileged or disadvantaged in relation to one another due to the adherence of actors to institutional rules and norms and the pursuit of their interests and goals within institutions.”¹⁰ These definitions are helpful, too, as excerpted and (to a much greater extent) in their entirety. They pinpoint subjects and

⁷ Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000, 18.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Intersectionality and Identity Politics: Learning from Violence Against Women of Color,” in *Reconstructing Political Theory: Feminist Perspective*, eds. Mary Lyndon Shanley and Uma Narayan. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 178-193, 178.

¹⁰ Iris Marion Young “Lived Body versus Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity.” In *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 21. The language of Young’s discussion of “The Five Faces of Oppression” in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) is also noteworthy for coming closer than most to bridging gaps between abstract metaphor and the body. However, Young ultimately uses “faces” as a synonym for “conditions” or “criteria” instead of exploring the potentiality behind the idea of *faces* of oppression, as per Gloria Anzaldúa in “Haciendo Caras, una entrada” (*Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990).

systems, explain the effects of interlocking oppressions in no uncertain terms, lend academic credibility to marginalized experience, and begin to explain how injury occurs.

With deference to these excellent definitions and the many more like them, I don't mean to suggest that theorists of intersectionality are particularly given to flights of fancy. Even if they were, the task of conveying this particular subject matter may, in some contexts, call for it. These metaphors are excellent teaching tools. Particularly in the university classroom, they may be indispensable. They are non-confrontational. They invite discussion. They help the privileged and resistant enter the conversation on familiar terms. They help instructors convey some of the impacts of multiple oppressions without inspiring panic in those students who don't want to hear about it or creating assumptions about (or demanding emotional disclosures from) those students for whom the subject matter is already all too familiar. But both the abstract definitions and their more vivid counterparts are still woefully abstract, and not all discussions of intersectionality take place in the classroom.

Those of us who live between oppressions, those of us who must constantly decide which part of ourselves most deserves advocacy, those of us who risk discovery even when we are with others who are supposed to be like us – we are not quilts. We are not caged birds, singing or otherwise. We are not traffic accidents waiting to happen. We are not abstractions. We are not carnage. We are bodies.

Locating the Body

Though my argument is primarily concerned with embodied experience, I do not seek to defend a precise epistemological positioning – body-as-instrument-of-discursive-power or body-as-linguistic-remnant or body-as-Lockean-property or body-as-Cartesian-tool. It would be an odd starting point for an argument that rejects abstraction and depends on seeing the body as a source of

information that exceeds the bounds of rational discovery. Instead, I contend that rationalizing the body can be a form of distraction, maybe even oppression, particularly when it rests on separating “the body” from embodied experience.

Though not alone in reading the body as mostly abstract and passive, Judith Butler is perhaps the best-known contemporary proponent of the discursive body. Even when writing about it, and even when fighting for recognition of a broader range of presentations and experience, Butler treats the body as something inscribed-upon rather than acting. While gender might be performed through the body, “there is no power, construed as a subject, that acts, but only...a reiterated acting that *is* power in its persistence and instability.”¹¹ Even when directly addressing questions of bodily materiality, even when acknowledging that questioning materiality “is not to say that the materiality of bodies is simply and only a linguistic effect,” Butler rejects depictions of the body as a source of agency.¹² Consistent with a position that gives the body meaning only within discourse, Butler argues that “if there is *agency*, it is to be found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law, by the materialization of that law, the compulsory appropriation and identification with those normative demands.... the citational accumulation and dissimulation of the law that produces material effects, the lived necessity of those effects as well as the lived contestation of that necessity.”¹³ Even when the body is engaged in the process, it (or its inhabitant) is not the driving force behind action. Rather, actions will be “mobilized by the law,” and shaped by pre-existing forces. It is those forces that evolve, not the people subject to them. Grand-scale shifts may change the constraints within which lives are lived, and may, as a byproduct, liberate new possible actions. But agency does not, seemingly cannot, belong to the individual, nor can it be rooted in the body.

¹¹ Judith Butler, “Critically Queer” in *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993, 171.

¹² Judith Butler, “Bodies that Matter” in *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993, 6.

¹³ Judith Butler, “Introduction,” in *Bodies that Matter*. New York, Routledge, 1993, xxi.

Yet Butler also tells us that the “question of who and what is considered real and true is apparently a question of knowledge. But it is also...a question of power.”¹⁴ What, then, happens if we deny experiences of pain? On whom do we exercise power when we deny the potential of embodied experience to disrupt discursive cycles? Elaine Scarry suggests that the “failure to express pain...will always work to allow is appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power; conversely, the successful expression of pain will always work to expose and make impossible that appropriation and conflation.”¹⁵ While this construction of embodied experience still cedes power to the discursive forces through which those experiences must be conveyed, it allows for the possibility that pain (or, I argue, pleasure) – for “its compelling vibrancy or its incontestable reality or simply its ‘certainty’” – can exist outside of our discussion of it.¹⁶

It suggests, too, that ignoring embodied experience does a certain violence to the subject in pain. To ignore those pains that do not yet have names is to forego the possibility of exposing injuries hidden by discursive forces, to allow them to be “appropriate[ed] and conflat[ed] with debased forms of power.” If “Having or bearing ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ is an enormously powerful prerogative within the social world” then to exclude embodied experience from our consideration is to deny power to those whose bodies have been devalued by discursive forces.¹⁷ It is to make these injuries, and the injured, doubly invisible: first by subjecting them to pain, and then by ignoring their experience of same. Conversely, if we respect reports of pain, if we allow the pained to voice their experience, even if they are “only” located in the body, we alleviate some of the harm that pain creates when we deny its reporters the power of truth and reality.¹⁸ We can avoid denying voice –

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2003, 215.

¹⁵ Elaine Scarry, “Introduction,” in *The Body in Pain*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2003, 215.

¹⁸ I intentionally distinguish here between pain and harm, seeing the former as a physical experience that has no inherent value as good or bad and the latter as the social or political source/consequence of that experience. While pain may become productive, particularly if given voice, harm is often silencing and almost always destructive.

the power of truth and reality – to those who don't have a language for expressing the pain of multiple oppressions, but who still know that it hurts.

And the body will still hurt, whether or not we think of it as a product of language. The body is not without limits, and sensation would exist even if we had no language through which to discuss or direct it. Without attempting to draw strict lines between the biological and socially constructed, we can still know that the “body is not open to *all* the whims, wishes, and hopes of the subject: the human body, for example, cannot fly in the air, it cannot breathe underwater unaided by prostheses, it requires a broad range of temperatures and environmental supports, without which it risks collapse and death.”¹⁹ These limits have discursive reflections, but exist independently of them, may even precede or generate them. Because they don't depend on discursive structures – even if our expression of them might – they may be uniquely situated to inspire discursive shifts. Recognizing the informational value of sensation can allow us to push against those forces that require desire, pain, and pleasure to be made rational and intelligible (and, in the process, often neutered) before they can be discussed. We can allow, instead, for the possibility that insistence of sensation might become politically generative, that its urgency and irrefutability could catalyze action.

We can also – particularly if we are mindful of who is speaking about what pain – attempt to avoid obfuscating real harms experienced by real people. We can engage in what Adrienne Rich called “the core of revolutionary process,” wherein we “reconnect our thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual” and “Pick up again the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction.”²⁰ Towards that end, I mean to use the term “body” in the commonest of ways – that which we walk around in, see through, hear with. That thing that is sometimes too hot and sometimes too cold and sometimes has a runny nose and sometimes makes strange and

¹⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, 187.

²⁰ Adrienne Rich, “Notes toward a Politics of Location” in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986, 213.

unfortunately timed noises. That which is the seat of unruly desires, from wherever they may come. That which is, or contains that which is, injured, deprived, and cast aside by interlocking oppressions. That place in which we are everything at once, in which it is impossible to pull apart race and gender and desire and class and nation and kinship and geography and a thousand other identities. That place in which we are marked from birth by the blood that sustains it – sustains us. Blood that seamlessly combines every part of our history, blood that is as complexly whole as we can hope to be, but that may yet mark us for injury, exclusion, or death.

These bodies are not metaphors. They hold more power than any analogy. They hold, too, a promise – for a new way of living that is, as we are, whole.

Generative Pains

Metaphors of intersectionality trade in abstraction, but nevertheless manage to promise a certain amount of harm: the car crash, the imprint of wire, separation from loved ones. But, like the circumstances to which they allude, these implied harms are only figurative. By retreating from embodiment, withdrawing from an accounting of the real pains of marginalization, they do a dual disservice. First, by allowing us to ignore the existence of viscerally affected bodies, by offering one more easy strategy for creating and enforcing invisibility. Then, as I discuss below, by ignoring the politically productive potential of pain.

Living in, writing from, bodies that are dark-skinned, female, multi-national, and queer, Lorde and Anzaldúa's experiences of pain are a source of revelation as well as grief. Forced to move in worlds that will not accommodate them, they are compressed and bruised as society tries to reshape them into something intelligible. Without physical intervention, this slow reworking might not be noticeable. Pain brings it into sharp relief. Pain forces confrontation and recognition.

This is not to say that it is not rooted in discursive structures. In describing *mestiza* consciousness, Anzaldúa writes: “Like all people we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision.”²¹ This struggle is the source of a “struggle of the flesh.”²² But without the rooting sharpness of visceral hurt, it might occur without awareness as we “blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves...In order to escape the threat of shame or fear, one takes on a compulsive, repetitious activity as though to busy oneself, to distract oneself, to keep awareness at bay.”²³ The drive towards self-destruction will be generated regardless of where it nests, and will wreak particular havoc on those who cannot turn to some bulwark of cultural solidarity; multiple pains are that much harder to diagnose and resist. But while harm may be inevitable, it can take many forms. Numbness is an enemy; pain, an intervention.

It may be “an illness, forcing us to rest.”²⁴ It may be a spotlight on otherwise subtle disciplinary forces, as when Anzaldúa remembers “being caught speaking Spanish at recess – that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler.”²⁵ It may be conspicuous evidence of difference, as was the case for Anzaldúa, who started to pubesce in infancy²⁶ and who finds that “The bleeding distanced her from others. Her body had betrayed her.”²⁷ It could be a reminder of trauma and the impetus to address it: “When I don’t write the images down for several days or weeks or months, I get physically ill. Because writing invokes images from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residues of trauma...I sometimes get sick when I *do* write. I can’t

²¹ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books: 2007, 100.

²² *Ibid.*, 100.

²³ *Ibid.*, 67

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁶ Ikas, Karen. “Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa” in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007, 238.

²⁷ Anzaldúa, 65.

stomach it, become nauseous, or burn with fever, worsen.”²⁸ But those who ignore the signs are no less likely to be harmed. Ignoring these pains could not save them from “small pox, measles, and typhus.”²⁹ It cannot save them from the *coyote* who “doesn’t feed her for days or let her go to the bathroom....rapes her or sells her into prostitution” even as “She cannot call on county or state health or economic resources because she doesn’t know English and fears deportation.”³⁰ The question of pain is not, then “whether” but “how?” and “what for?”

Instead of “drinking, smoking, popping pill, acquiring friend after friend who betrays; repeating, repeating, to prevent oneself from ‘seeing,’” pain channels vision and compels action. Discursive violence in the abstract and the fear of harm may create blindness, and with it an inability to distinguish the source of harm from one’s self. But confronting “Pain makes us acutely anxious to avoid more of it, so we hone that radar. It’s a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate.”³¹ Pain transforms fear into sight. It gives the target her own scope with which to aim back.

When Lorde writes that “Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me” she is not resting on figures of speech.³² Her attempts at connection leave her with an unwanted pregnancy, a physically strenuous illegal abortion, with poverty so dire she is forced to sell her blood and pawn her typewriter, with scorched floor tiles, dead kittens, a burnt hand. Lorde’s many scars are a price paid for knowledge. Pain brings awareness or affirmation of some otherwise invisible injury. There is the moment when, visiting Washington D.C. for the first time, Lorde’s family is denied service in a whites-only ice cream parlor and “the white heat and the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer made me sick to my stomach for the whole

²⁸ Ibid., 92.

²⁹ Ibid., 27.

³⁰ Ibid., 34.

³¹ Ibid., 61.

³² Audre Lord, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1982, 255.

rest of that trip.”³³ Segregation is always salient to Lorde’s experience, but social ills are made real through the embodied experience of illness. As an adult, pain is a signal to engage in self-exploration, to confront “things I did not understand, and things I felt that I did not want to feel, particularly the blinding headaches that came in waves sometimes.”³⁴ The “things” might be ignored, but sensation refuses to be turned away.

Once made real, once brought into the realm of the physical, the remnants of pain might be made into something more. When emerging independence and her nascent lesbian identity puts Lorde at odds with her family, forcing a choice between those who share her history and those who understand her desire, she finds that “scenes of violence and mayhem peopled my nightmares....Frequently I woke to find my pillowcase red and stiffened by gushing nosebleeds during the night, or damp and saturated with the acrid smell of tears and the sweat of terror.”³⁵ Unlike fear of separation, or the distresses experienced as Lorde first attempts to reconcile identities shared with and those rejected by family, the physical signs of her distress – that “unbleached muslin record of all the nightly blitzes of my emotional war – can be seen, named, explored.”³⁶ For all that they are borne of terror and grief – the emotional ramifications of which would have persisted with or without a material record – “the stains, like the smells, were evidence of something living.”³⁷

To have a body is a door to disappointment, to heartbreak, to physical trauma. But if hunger, keloids, blood stains, and peeling skin mark Lorde’s body, it is not beyond the analogous potential effects of oppression on her psyche. Perhaps it is not so strange that the tension between her racial and sexual identities, her desire for family and romantic love, her search for home and independence, her need to write and the forces that would silence lead, after a particularly painful

³³ Ibid., 71.

³⁴ Ibid., 214.

³⁵ Ibid., 83.

³⁶ Ibid., 83.

³⁷ Ibid., 83.

romantic split, to an injury that separates her skin from the muscle beneath it, as “water cascaded down, bounced off the back of my hand and flowed down the drain. I watched the brown skin cloud with steam, then turn red and shiny, and the poison began to run out of me like water....The steamed flesh had already started to blister.”³⁸ If Anzaldúa is felled by pain from her body’s non-compliance and made separate from her fellow *Chicanas*, fellow lesbians, fellow workers, and family, her experience is not so different from that she shares with other *mestizas*, for whom “The world is not a safe place to live in....daily drinking shock along with our morning coffee, fearing the torches being set to our buildings, the attacks in the streets. Shutting down. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey.”³⁹ Lorde and Anzaldúa could, like so many others, choose numb ignorance. But pain made real is the beginning of a way out.

Just Pleasures

Pain confirms the many differences that alienate Lorde and Anzaldúa from even those sources of support and community that singularly-marginalized people might seek. As they search for alternatives, pleasure is the confirmation of a path well chosen. A source of energy, it provides knowledge beyond rational discovery and offers a reminder that difference need not be misery.

In order to reclaim herself from the many categories that capture only parts of herself, Anzaldúa seeks her spiritual ancestry. She reaches through history to find a source of self beyond compulsory heterosexuality, beyond poverty, beyond white supremacy, beyond Western linguistic and spiritual hegemony, beyond Mexico, beyond Spanish colonization. She reaches back to the “male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture [that] drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the

³⁸ Ibid., 233.

³⁹ Anzaldúa, 42.

female Self and the female deities.”⁴⁰ This split, combined with Western society’s wholesale denial of this spiritual legacy, is a significant source of Anzaldúa’s own pain: I was two or three years old the first time *Coatlicue* visited my psyche...I felt alien. I knew I was alien. I was the mutant stoned out of the herd, something deformed with evil inside.⁴¹ To heal herself, Anzaldúa delves into the *Coatlicue* state, a psychic plane to which her body serves as guide. Her entry is precipitated by what “In the Mexican culture...is called *susto*, the soul frightened out of the body.”⁴² Then, averse to the risk of pain, Anzaldúa develops a “Resistance to sex, intimate touching, opening myself to the alien other where I am out of control.”⁴³ Calling on “*Antigua, mi Diosa, the divine within*” Anzaldúa surrenders her claims to physical and psychic autonomy so that *la Coatlicue* may be released. While the process she undertakes to reach this state is painful, her reunification is affirmed by the replacement of pain with new sensation: “suddenly I feel everything rushing to a center, a nucleus. All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetized toward that center. *Completa*.”⁴⁴

Anzaldúa’s physical body becomes a vessel for this experience: “Something pulsates in my body, a luminous thin thing that grows thicker every day. Its presence never leaves me. I am never alone.”⁴⁵ When she transcends the temporally, geographically bound plane on which she is endlessly divided, her body grounds her to the earth and pleasure signals an affirmation of her path: “A tremor goes through my body from my buttocks to the roof of my mouth. On my palate I feel a tingling, ticklish sensation, then something seems to be falling on me, over me, a curtain of rain or light. Shock pulls my breath out of me. The sphincter muscle tugs itself up, up, and the heart in my

⁴⁰ Ibid., 49.

⁴¹ Ibid., 65.

⁴² Ibid., 70.

⁴³ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 73.

cunt starts to beat.”⁴⁶ This “delicious caving into myself” signals a yielding of the endlessly categorized body to a divinely-controlled reformation of consciousness and spirit, now exposing ways in which the many pieces of body and soul can coexist peaceably.

Lorde’s body gives her knowledge of a different sort. Rather than coming all at once, each moment of new pleasure is a landmark, lighting the way towards new awareness. There is little she can be sure of without physical confirmation, down to her own sexuality: “Until the very moment that our naked bodies touched...I had no idea what I was doing there, nor what I wanted to do there. I had no idea what making love to another woman meant. I only knew, dimly, it was something I wanted to happen, and something that was different from anything I had ever done before.”⁴⁷ Once gained, knowledge from the body is reliable and, for the certainty pleasure offers, transformative: “My hands moved down over her round body, silky and fragrant, waiting. Uncertainty and doubt rolled away from the mouth of my wanting like a great stone, and my unsureness dissolved in the directing heat of my own frank and finally open desire. Our bodies found the movements we needed to fit each other...wherever I touched, felt right and completing.”⁴⁸ Until her body confirms it, Lorde is unable or unwilling to clearly see or give priority to her own attraction. Within the physical moment Lorde’s cerebral self is not in charge. The political categories and impossible identity choices that would hold her back fade and it is “*Our bodies* [that] found the movements we needed.”⁴⁹ Her body leads Lorde towards truths that would remain hidden without the promise of pleasure. Once gained, that knowledge is uncontested.

This mode of discovery opens doors to integrating the past as well as creating new future. A source of information independent of reason or intellectual discovery, Lorde’s body shows her

⁴⁶ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁷ Lorde, *Zami*, 138.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 138-9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 139. Italics added.

connections that would be otherwise inaccessible. Using her mother's mortar and pestle to pound spices for a celebratory meal after she gets her first period, Lorde writes that:

As I continued to pound the spice a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach...The thread ran over my ribs and along my spine, tingling and singing, into a basin that was poised between my hips, now pressed against the low kitchen counter before which I stood, pounding spice.⁵⁰

The mortar and pestle are beloved objects for Lorde, as “Every West Indian woman worth her salt has her own mortar” and “the best mortars came from...the vicinity of that amorphous and mystically perfect place called “home.”⁵¹ Yet she is not able to derive anything personal or spiritual from this history-laden object until her body, just past a landmark of sexual maturity, becomes an intermediary between communal history and self. Lorde does not will this connection into being, but her body acts to unify the physical and historical regardless. The relationship between mortar and pestle creates a closed circuit. Lorde's fingers replicate a motion that is common among West Indian women. This practice, ripe with historical meaning, travels through her body into the mortar, where spice is transmuted into menstrual blood. Lorde's bodily actions – the pounding, the creation of a thread – are the venue through which the cultural history that has shaped her becomes visceral and meets with her burgeoning sexuality. The intimacy of this experience, this pooling of blood, promises a newly intense physicality, becomes “a tiding ocean of blood beginning to be made real and available to me for strength and information.”⁵² Her body both accesses and creates knowledge that would otherwise remain concealed.

As with Anzaldúa, Lorde's pleasure leads to reunification as well as information, connecting the cultural and historical history of her body to new futures. She meets Afrekete at a house party in

⁵⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁵¹ Ibid., 71.

⁵² Ibid., 78.

Queens, and runs into her years later at a gay bar in the Village, following a wrenching breakup that has left Lorde devastated. It is an encounter full of mundane details, but “as Kitty and I touched our bodies together in dancing, I could feel my carapace soften slowly and then finally melt, until I felt myself covered in a warm, almost forgotten, slip of anticipation, that ebbed and flowed at each contact of our moving bodies.”⁵³ Like the divine figures Anzaldúa reaches for through time and space, the figure of Afrekete is reclaimed from “the original ‘old thunder god religion’ which preceded Yoruba.”⁵⁴ Even before connecting Kitty to the same powers that call Anzaldúa to the crossroads, Lorde describes finding a level of understanding with Afrekete that has escaped her elsewhere: “*Our bodies met again, each surface touched with each other’s flame, from the tips of our curled toes to our tongues, and locked into our own wild rhythms, we rode each other across the thundering space, dripped like light from the peak of each other’s tongue. We were each of us both together.*”⁵⁵ Her previously unmatched pleasure tell her, even without words, even beyond the realm of those discursive forces that would make her choose, that what she experiences with Afrekete is right. Rather than being incidental to her spiritual growth or sense of self, Lorde’s body, and the affirming pleasure it provides, is the only venue through which wholeness can pass from outside to inside, through which she can be changed. While her “experience with people who tried to label me was that they usually did it to either dismiss

⁵³ Ibid., 245.

⁵⁴ AnnLouise Keating tracks the figure of Afrekete through Lorde’s work, particularly noting Lorde’s description, via Judy Grahn, of Eshu: “Originally he was a female, Afrikete, [sic] in the old thunder god religion that preceded Yoruba.” (Grahn, 125), though in Lorde’s 1978 poetry collection *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde uses the name Eshu instead of Afrekete. (Keating, 26) Anzaldúa evokes the same figure: “A chicken is being sacrificed/at a crossroads, a simple mound of earth/a mud shrine for *Eshu*,/ *Yoruba* god of indeterminacy, who blesses her choice of path.” (Anzaldúa, 102) The inclusion of Afrekete/Eshu (also known as Esu, Elegba, and Elegbara) is particularly significant because, per Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Eshu is “master of the roads and the crossroads.” (Gates, 31) Moreover, among other roles, “Esu...represents power in terms of the agency of the will. But his ultimate power, of which even the will is a derivative, is the power of sheer plurality or multiplicity.” (Gates, 37) (AnnLouise Keating. “Making ‘Our Shattered Faces Whole’: The Black Goddess and Audre Lorde’s Revision of Patriarchal Myth.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1992); Judy Grahn, *Another Mother Tongue*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1990; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; Kara Provost and Audre Lorde, “Becoming Afrekete: The Trickster in the Work of Audre Lorde,” *MELUS*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Winter 1995), 45-96.)

⁵⁵ Lorde, *Zami*, 249. Italics original.

me or use me,”⁵⁶ when the embodied space where all labeled aspects of self must coexist is given to pleasure, she can be wholer than words would allow.

At the Crossroads

Lorde and Anzaldúa’s stories are not dissimilar. Two women attached to multiple racial/ethnic identities, affiliated with multiple homelands, speaking multiple languages, growing up in and feeling the effects of poverty, and finding their way to lesbian identities. Two women trying to find a way to exist as all of these things in a U.S. American paradigm that values whiteness, straightness, and wealth. Both experience these divisions as painful deprivation. Both leave home at a young age, seeking to escape the expectations of their respective families. Both spend their lives searching for a way to hold these identities in balance, to mitigate the psychic pain that comes with being a part of so many things but belonging to none.

At the end of their respective narratives Lorde and Anzaldúa both find themselves at a crossroads.⁵⁷ Without knowing that these arrivals anticipate a theoretical corpus, they come to these intersections as sites of embodied wholeness, where enforced divisions are transcended instead of picked apart and reinforced. Their arrivals are a victory over violence, not its anticipation.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁷ I offer an aside, here, on the use of metaphor. Lorde and Anzaldúa both rely on the idea of a metaphorical crossroads, which is also the founding symbol of intersectionality. While the imagery is similar, its usage is substantively, and significantly, different. Crenshaw’s use of the intersection distills experiences of discrimination so that each lane of traffic can represent a single oppression, defined in the familiar terms of identity politics. Conversely, Anzaldúa and Lorde use the image of the intersection to convey parts of their own experiences that might not otherwise be communicable. Instead of hyphenated, readily legible identities, Lorde and Anzaldúa’s intersections bring together many strands of personal history, family history, strength, humor, weariness, loss, caution, desire, spiritual experience, reinvention, disenfranchisement, contingency, questioning, and uncertainty, along with preferences for certain foods and music and types of weather. As a result, Lorde and Anzaldúa are able to describe selves that exceed the boundaries of identity categories, and to include those parts of themselves that would not fit into Crenshaw’s identity labels. Anzaldúa and Lorde use metaphor to complicate the meaning of political identity, joining together many more component parts than Crenshaw’s four lanes of traffic could permit. More generally, inasmuch as there is a distinction to be made between types of metaphor, I make it between those that obscure the complexities of experience in the pursuit of legibility and those that use metaphor to illuminate and complicate. While both trade in a certain amount of abstraction, the former acts to conceal and simplify while the latter is used to reveal and complicate. The issue I take is, then, not with metaphor *qua* metaphor, but with images that flatten the rich experiences they are meant to represent.

Lorde arrives in a state of bliss. Her West Indian roots, her blackness, her gayness, her womanness, her poetry, her losses, her strength have come together at last. Riding through the night with Afrekete as they make “moon, honor, love, while the ghostly vague light drifting upward...reflected in the shiny mirrors of our sweat-slippery dark bodies, sacred as the ocean at high tide.”⁵⁸ In the midst of this sacred pleasure, Lorde reaches into the abstract endless space of intersection. It must come from the flesh: “*The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters.*”⁵⁹ Afrekete has not made her choose one thing to be. Instead they “talked about how Black women had been committed without choice to waging or campaigns in the enemies’ strongholds...and how our psychic landscapes had been plundered and wearied” and “what it meant to love women, and what a relief it was in the eye of the storm, no matter how often we had to bite our tongues and stay silent” and “held each other and laughed and cried about what we had paid for that toughness, and how hard it was to explain to anyone who didn’t already know it that soft and tough had to be one and the same for either to work at all.”⁶⁰ Where previous lovers have silenced Lorde or ignored those aspects of her identity they found incomprehensible, Afrekete accepts her many selves, bringing her fruits that remind her of Carriacou and telling her ““that’s what I like about you; you’re like me. We’re both going to make it because we’re both too tough and crazy not to!”⁶¹ With her toughness and craziness and all the pain that’s created them transmuted into strength and commonality, her many roots grounded instead of divided, Lorde prays: “*Afrekete Afrekete ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman’s power.*”⁶²

⁵⁸ Lorde, *Zami*, 252.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 252. Italics original.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 252. Italics original.

Anzaldúa's arrival at the crossroads is heralded by Eshu, Afrekete's Yoruba iteration, "god of indeterminacy/who blesses her choice of path."⁶³ Pain stalls her appearance there: "She is getting too close to the mouth of the abyss....That's why she makes herself sick – to postpone having to jump blindfolded into the abyss of her own being and there in the depths confront her face, the face underneath the mask."⁶⁴ But knowing her pain transforms its potential for harm. Her surrender to the *Coatlícué* state comes with the willingness to engage "the sacrifice that the act of creation requires, a blood sacrifice."⁶⁵ And then, surrender does not harm her. She gives "over my own body, my sexual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths. Mine. Ours. Not the heterosexual white man's or the colored man's or the state's or the culture's or the religion's or the parents' – just ours, mine."⁶⁶ The boundaries between "ours" and "mine" are blurred, the "massive uprooting of dualistic thinking" undertaken.⁶⁷ Anzaldúa's willingness to "offer my neck to its teeth," to engage the possibility of harm, creates the possibility of unity, to be found in the body, at the crossroads.⁶⁸ "*Su cuerpo es una bocacalle*"; your body is an intersection.⁶⁹ Instead of creating cocooned escapes into numbness, using pain and pleasure as a compass, "the officiating priestess at the crossroads" is able to be many things at once: "As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is a queer of me in all races.)...I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining."⁷⁰ And though Anzaldúa's experience of the intersection is less ecstatic than Lorde's, its message is nevertheless clear. To find the intersection and dwell in it, to insist on unity, is to be transformed: "Something pulsates in my body, a luminous thin thing that

⁶³ Anzaldúa, 102, and AnnLouise Keating and Gloria Anzaldúa, "Writing, Politics, and las Lesberadas: Platicando con Gloria Anzaldúa." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1993) 105-130.

⁶⁴ Anzaldúa, 96

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 102-3.

grows thicker every day....I am never alone. That which abides: my vigilance, my thousand sleepless serpent eyes blinking in the night, forever open. And I am not afraid.”⁷¹

The divisions that Anzaldúa and Lorde may confront at the crossroads – of the tangible from the psychic world, the individual body from its larger history, of painful histories from pleasurable presents – are not the same disunions that have rent Lorde and Anzaldúa from home after home. Instead, by claiming terms on which they can be whole, Lorde and Anzaldúa make their experience of self a source of pleasure. In these moments their many parts may come together, exist with unity. Not by being a casualty of the intersection, but by claiming it as an unlikely new home

The Body Politic

Anzaldúa and Lorde must eventually leave the crossroads. They must return to worlds where their speech is dissected, where painful histories continue to shape their lives, where they must choose between identities if they wish to find political allies. Their bodies open doors to liberation, but even these reclamations cannot erase the social rules that would sanction their individual othernesses and finds combinations of same alternately unintelligible or threatening. The world Lorde and Anzaldúa return to after their revelations at the crossroads hasn’t changed, but their (un)willingness to accept enforced division has. Once experienced, the desire for wholeness cannot be put aside, and can motivate a new politics that challenges the separability of our selves.

When Lorde leaves the crossroads with Afrekete, it is with the hope “*that the discarded evils, abandoned at all crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys.*”⁷² This is, in many ways, an impossible hope. These evils have already inscribed themselves on Lorde’s body because of her politically marginalized identities. There are her fingertips, darkened by exposure to radiation at the only plant in Stamford that will keep on black workers, where “nobody mentioned that carbon tet destroys the

⁷¹ Ibid., 73.

⁷² Ibid., 252. Italics original.

liver and causes cancer of the kidneys...that the X-ray machines, when used unshielded, delivered doses of constant low radiation far in excess of what was considered safe even in those days.”⁷³

There are, later, the pain and scars of breast and liver cancer.⁷⁴ But even for these pains, Lorde’s experience of her body changes when she experiences a form of pleasure that takes her on her own terms.

Even when she has gone in search of community Lorde finds that: “*Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different.*”⁷⁵ Categories cannot contain her, cannot be home, no matter how many combinations she may try. Genuine support is not guaranteed by shared color or sexuality. Lorde knows that “Most Black lesbians were closeted, correctly recognizing the Black community’s lack of interest in our position...To be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet in a white environment...was considered by many Black lesbians to be simply suicidal.”⁷⁶ But she can recognize shared understanding, acceptance, and fruitful desire by “an ache in the well beneath my stomach, spreading out and down between my legs like mercury,” by the feeling “that there had never been anything else by body had intended to do more, than to reach inside of her coat and take Afrekete into my arms, fitting her body into the curves of mine tightly.”⁷⁷ While Afrekete is, by her own admission “like me,” Lorde doesn’t know this by her sex or gender presentation or skin color.⁷⁸ Others with whom she shares those things have harmed her, too. Shared political identity is not a guarantee of support, and community can constrain instead of liberating. But Afrekete and what she represents *feel* right. The commonalities they share – their strength, the pull towards the heat and fruit that represent Lorde’s home, their resistance to

⁷³ Lorde, *Zami*, 126, 145

⁷⁴ Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*. Aunt Lute Books: Special Edition, 2006; Alexis DeVeaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

⁷⁵ Lorde, *Zami*, 226. Italics original.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 245, 248.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 250.

bifurcation, their determination, their will to survive – cannot be explained except by the feelings they inspire.

After travelling to the crossroads with Afrekete, Lorde is “passed, reformed, reshaping...the better for the exchange.”⁷⁹ Once she has experienced this transformative pleasure, that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible.⁸⁰ Pleasure in a body that is not pulled apart by political categories, that is not subject to piecemeal, Frankensteinian reconstruction along politically defined terms, opens the possibility of a power that “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.”⁸¹ Transformation and reconciliation within the body create a demand on the political world. The pain, pleasure, and desire that Lorde experiences as an embodied being confirm some truths and make it essential to question others. When confronted with experiences that are too painful to bear or too desirable to resist, Lorde is moved to action. But acting on the agendas of pre-existing coalitions is no longer sufficient when so much more might be possible. Instead of relying on, or trying to combine, pre-existing political communities, Lorde calls for a redefinition of the political, drawing out the potential of erotic experience, of anger, of finding belonging after so many fragmented years. Her pleasure, that which she learns with her body, confirms that changing the political terms must precede meaningful political change that can accommodate her capacity for joy as well as the color of her skin or the gendering of her body.

Before reaching the crossroads, Anzaldúa recognizes there are at least two ways to arrive: as she does, through *la Coatlicue* or, “When pain, suffering, and the advent of death become intolerable, there is *Tlazolteotl* hovering at the crossroads of life to lure a person away from his or her

⁷⁹ Ibid., 253.

⁸⁰ Audre Lorde. “Uses of the Erotic” in *Sister Outsider*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984, 56-57.

⁸¹ Ibid., 59.

seemingly appointed destination.”⁸² Pain can impel either crossing, and its potential to be generative is dependent on recognizing it – “if I escape conscious awareness, escape ‘knowing,’ I won’t be moving.”⁸³ Pushing through that pain, recognizing it and searching for its source, can lead to the blindingly pleasurable affirmation of new truths. And after pain has been transmuted into pleasure, even if only for a few brief moments, “*La mestiza* has gone from being the sacrificial goat to becoming the officiating priestess at the crossroads.”⁸⁴

The *mestiza* consciousness that is realized at the crossroads can “show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended.”⁸⁵ Unquestioned allegiance to others of the same gender or ethnicity or region can compromise the other selves at stake.⁸⁶ The pain-driven development of *mestiza* consciousness tears at the stringencies that atomize people: “the borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death.”⁸⁷ Maintaining distinct categorizations and the boundaries between them is a path of stagnation. The *mestiza* can succeed – can survive – only by finding a new path, by becoming “an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.”⁸⁸ Though her road to the crossroads is marked more by pain than pleasure, Anzaldúa recognizes the unique potential of the body to model a new way of being. To heal differences, internal and external, “we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once.”⁸⁹ In this world, bound into the bodies that give us so much

⁸² Anzaldúa, 69.

⁸³ Ibid., 70.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 102, italics original.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 102.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 104-108.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 103.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 100.

pain while holding out the promise of pleasure, we cannot actually meet at a psychic crossroads, or heal our differences with an act of literal crossing. To meet each other “weaponless with open arms, with only our magic...our way, the *mestiza* way, the Chicana way, the woman way” even when we acknowledge “that the self and the race have been wounded,” we must acknowledge the body, which can force us to name our needs and validate our confrontation of them.⁹⁰ Beyond political categories and social construction, “The *mestizo* and queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls.”

Blood, bodies, the potential for pain, the desire for painlessness. For Anzaldúa and Lorde, the experiences of the body can spur action. Our bodies can exist beyond the language we use to define them. Letting the body lead – whether by using sensation as a compass or recognizing the blood-deep commonalities that course through us – can expand our vision. It can create the demand for new words, new meanings, new structure. In our skin, to our marrow, we are all already a mix of so many histories. These can be used to divide us. When we accept and enforce the belief that the pseudo-history of one drop of blood can define who we are, when we see the convexity of a chest as a mark of inferiority, when we demean the sounds of tongues that move differently from our own, we neglect the shared redness in our veins, the ribcages that protect hearts under every breast, our shared need for nourishment. When we ignore the body altogether, we miss the chance to reclaim a commonality that might move us towards a politics that demands new constructions instead of endlessly reamalgamating the old: “For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they

⁹⁰ Ibid., 110.

must arise from the human body – flesh and bone – and from the Earth’s body – stone, sky, liquid, soil.”⁹¹

Redefining the Intersection

Underlying the many definitions of intersectionality, both allegorical and academic, is the assumption that the identities at stake ever could be separate. This assumption is based on powerful and dangerous political realities. I do not – could not – suggest it was a fiction when identity-based laws and coalitions continue to be a source of both harm and hope. Nor should categories be entirely ignored when identity politics offer a rallying point, when sharing space with others who have like identities is an essential source of support for so many. But I do suggest that departing from the pain inflicted by these distinctions requires a willingness to adapt to new descriptors, and that we must stop relying on the old standbys. The body is a fecund ground for this re-imagining because it is already what so many metaphorical descriptors try to convey: the point at which all historically-constructed identities work together to inflict or protect from injury. Discussing identity through the body not only avoids the negating effects of metaphor, it offers a mode through which to reconceive political demands.

Identity politics rely on coalitions built on shared categorizations, and some theorists of intersectionality have come to rely on these categories, to take their realness for granted as though there could be one meaning to being female, or white, or black, or Latina, or poor, or able-bodied. Theories that combine these classifications still assume that they are, at some point or for some purposes, distinct. In order for multiple identities to meet at an intersection or form a cage, we must first understand them as distinct entities that we can put together or take apart. Even when critiques of this disjuncture point to its falseness, they often use terms that underscore it. Race is one lane of

⁹¹ Ibid., 97.

traffic, one wire in the birdcage, one bank of doors. Gender is another, class another still, and so on. Though theories of intersectionality seek to recognize the interactions between marginalized identity categories they persistently rely on those lists of “color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness” that, Judith Butler points out, “invariably close with an embarrassed ‘etc.’”⁹² This “etc.” is owed to the impossibility of the task it follows: attempting to name every axis of human identity that defines group identities.

Proponents of identity politics argue that these categories are useful. They are a rallying point for political change and point to the real history of identity-based discrimination. I don’t contest either claim, but I do challenge the choice and deployment of these categories. Even when, in the spirit of intersectionality, we recognize the interactivity of identity-based oppressions, politics predicated on the existence of categories will, strategically, prize some identities over others.⁹³ Recognizing these intra-movement inequalities does not ameliorate them. Nor does it move us away from a particular type of identity politics, in which categories must have a stagnant meaning to be politically salient.

By seeking to aggregate the effects of different categories, theories of intersectionality must reify those categories, maintaining their stability and making them even more crucial to personal and political intelligibility. If we are to understand ourselves as the sum of many identities, we must understand the political valence of each individual category. We must be, and remain, conversant in terms whose power depends on historical stability. Theories of intersectionality that total or multiply the effects of different injustices still restrict the framing of those experiences. They make intersectionality most salient in relation to injury, rather than difference. We must sum up the value of different identities in order to understand how and why they create unique harms, not unique

⁹² Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990, 196.

⁹³ Dara Strolovitch *Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class, and Gender in Interest Group Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

value. To complete these mathematics of oppression, we must take for granted the negative value of different categories instead of challenging those connotations. If the purpose of theorizing intersectionality is to understand injury, we are only ever attributing loss, pain, and exclusion to hyphenate identities. Yet if we are to make intelligible political claims we must continue using these labels, just in combination. Instead of giving emergent voices the power to deny labels we express them in unwieldy amalgamations. There is little room for the creation of something new when we are so busy putting ourselves into old categories, and when we must do so in order to be heard. But even if a comprehensive list of identity types could be compiled, how could we calculate, with any consistency, their effects? How, in human terms, when we look at lived experiences, can these ever really be distinguished? What if, instead of aggregating them, we let the body – that place where they are all always already one – speak beyond speech?

Intersectionality, or the idea it represents, does not have to be predicated on labels or injury. We can prioritize affinities over identities, creating politically salient group agendas that do not require that our allegiances match our skin tones or anatomies.⁹⁴ We can refuse to focus the study of intersectionality on those identity categories that have been particularized and marked as injurious, instead recognizing the contingency and multiplicity of all subjective experience.⁹⁵ We can refuse the premise that these identity categories have historically continuous value, choosing instead to “embrace the instability of analytical categories” and prize uncertainty and variability because they push us to think critically about our usage and because they more accurately reflect the experience of life at the intersection.⁹⁶ We begin to move towards these alternative paradigms when we stop treating the body as a compilation of oppressions and instead let it tell us something new.

⁹⁴ Susan Bickford, “Anti-Anti-Identity Politics: Feminism, Democracy, and the Complexities of Citizenship.” *Hypatia*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Autumn 1997), 111-131, 120-121.

⁹⁵ Cristina Beltran. “Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies and the Challenge of *Metstizaje*.” *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Dec. 2004), 606.

⁹⁶ Sandra Harding. “The Instability of Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory.” *Signs*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Summer 1986), 648.

Unlike the florid metaphors we may use to make oppression intelligible, palatable to a general audience, talking directly about the body can accomplish at least two worthwhile tasks.

The first is almost tautological: by talking about the body, we bring the body back into conversation. But this would already be an accomplishment. When we deal in abstraction we make the affected people invisible as anything more than their oppressed identities, thereby duplicating the oppressions that intersectionality seeks to ameliorate. There is little room, if any, for humor, or strength, or redefinition. The meanings of the terms themselves are collapsed, so that their importance rests only in the harms imputed to them. When we talk about bodies, particularly when we talk about subjective embodied experiences instead of aggregating statistics on bodily injury, we not only return the conversation to a human scale but might reintroduce a fuller conception of humanity. We might also be reminded of a basic moral obligation to not participate in activities that harm those around us. The abstractions of academic intersectionality make it easier to see the existence of systems of privilege, but obscure their effects. When confronted with the real harms caused to real people, we might also be confronted with the effects of our own inaction instead of shunting privilege off into the same conceptual realm as intersectional oppression.

Second, talking about the experience of bodies demands a new language. If we are only talking about dark-skinned bodies or female bodies, we are not really having a complete conversation about how identities work. We are, again, particularizing only the negative. If embodied experience is our starting point instead of the pre-existing categories we use to define it, we might instead need to particularize all identities. If we talk about skin we must talk about light skin as well as dark skin. If we talk about gender we must specify masculinity as well as femininity. When we talk about how our political identities impact our physical experience we must own our privileges as well as our oppressions. When we engage in a political archeology of our own bodies we bear responsibility for the things they have done as well as the things that have been done to them. We

are responsible for recognizing the ways that we have benefitted as well the ways in which we have been harmed. We have the potential to shift the conversation from one about some people's injuries to one about each person's cultural, political and personal history. And in so doing, we engage in discussions of privilege and oppression that involve more than "stand[ing] on the opposite river bank, shouting questions...A counterstance lock[ed] into a duel of oppressor and oppressed...both reduced to a common denominator of violence."⁹⁷

If there is a commonality between us, a river we might all wade into it, it is the shared experience of having a body. This conversation does not require that we have similar bodies or similar experiences of them. We may – we inevitably will – have different desires, different pains and pleasures, different degrees of bodily agency. But these differences exist within groups as well as between them. These differences are common to all people. These differences, when we examine how they are created by the political systems that open or foreclose opportunities for all of us, allow us the complexity that are bodies already have: to give pain as well as to be in pain, to be capable of feeling pleasure as well as pain, to experience overwhelming desire and the frustration that accompanies its denial, to be advantaged and disadvantaged all at once. The body already lives across political categories and, if we let it, can produce new political definitions and demands. There is no guarantee (there is never any guarantee) that a politics of embodied experience would reach across these boundaries. There is always an *if*, always the real possibility that people will deny their bodily experiences just as they deny their relation to abstract categories. But there is also potential. It is "In our very flesh, [that] (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds we've made some kind of evolutionary step forward."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Anzaldúa, 100.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 103.

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