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THE POLITICS OF FORM AND POETICS OF IDENTITY IN POSTWAR AMERICAN POETRY

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Postwar US poetry is haunted by the question of how elaborations of antiracist and feminist poetics came to be severed both from one another and from the critique of political economy in the wake of the “New Left” (Van Gosse 2008). These developments in US poetry have been driven by broader theoretical debates over the relationship between capitalism and so-called “identity politics” (Jenkins 2014) as they have unfolded across a sweeping cross-disciplinary “cultural turn” (Chaney 2002). In the postwar era, the retreat to *kulturkritik* by Western Marxists (Anderson 1979), along with the relatively recent equation of racial justice with what Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor has called a politics of cultural recognition (Taylor 1994), combined to make culture a suture point between what many critics see as discrepant political discourses. Typically, this turn to culture in social theory has been defined through the consignment of Marx’s systematic critique of the basic categories and premises of political economy to the ash heap of totalizing historical grand narratives. Accounting for how contemporary US poets represent the complex relationship between racial identity and capitalism, therefore, forces us to confront an ideological terrain structured by an entrenched opposition between culture and political economy. Since 1970 or so, that opposition has given rise to what we call the antinomies of postwar poetics, wherein distinct aesthetic programs are associated with seemingly incommensurable political projects keyed to discrete social subjects. Turning toward both black feminist and contemporary Marxist feminist social reproduction theory, in our argument, helps dissolve those antinomies. The resultant view opens onto a more incisive reckoning of how contemporary poetry registers the co-constitutive character of race, gender, and class as politically contested social locations in postwar US poetry.

The rise of the Poetry Wars and the fall of the new left

The Poetry Wars of the 1970s–1990s, in which an avowedly anticapitalist poetic avant-garde defined itself in opposition to what it took to be a formulaic mainstream verse culture, were deeply informed by the rise and fall of the New Left. From the heady days when the “movement of movements” was on everyone’s lips to the implosion of the New Left flagship Students for a Democratic Society amid fractious debates concerning race, gender, and imperialism, things quickly fell apart. We follow Van Gosse (2008), therefore, in using
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the term “New Left” in the more capacious sense of referring to the many and variegated new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that was typical at the time, rather than the narrower sense that confined it to the student and antiwar movements in much subsequent scholarship. Two historical narratives dominate existing accounts of the period. For some, increasing militancy and the splintering of the core activist group, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), into antagonistic political demands organized around specific social identities betrayed the halcyon days of the Port Huron Statement. Todd Gitlin and Kirkpatrick Sale epitomize this view of left fragmentation. Sale’s monumental study of SDS inaugurated the narrative of historical decline centered on student and antiwar movements. Gitlin’s work (1987, 1995) influentially turned that historiographical trend to polemical ends. For others, however, the acrimony owes less to the betrayal of uniformly liberal values by days of rage or organizationally distinct concerns with racial and gender identity than missed connections and roads not taken for a variety of reasons including, above all, counterinsurgent state violence (see Dawson 2013). Where all critics agree, however, is that by the end of the 1970s the Women’s, Black, Gay, Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Asian American Liberation Movements were in acrimonious retreat along with the student, antiwar, and rank-and-file rebellions that, together, comprised the New Left. In their wake, they left a host of unresolved theoretical questions and political antagonisms. Such divisions are registered in the disciplinary separations that continue to organize more recent accounts of a New Left not defined by the centrality of student and antiwar movements (see Gosse 2005: 211–19).

As liberation movements faded from the streets, American poetry provided a cultural proxy for their concerns in politically charged theoretical debates. Collectively known as the Poetry Wars, those debates were set in motion by the emergence of Language Writing as an explicitly anticapitalist project over the course of the 1970s. As readers familiar with the ins and outs of postwar poetic controversies will recall, in its early days that project was routinely articulated in opposition to the “expressive” first-person lyrics dominant at the dawn of the MFA program era headlined by the Iowa Writers Workshop. Fierce coterie debates were waged in little magazines, at poetry readings, and at local talk series (Kim 2000). Language Writers repeatedly critiqued so-called workshop poems in the vein of Robert Lowell’s Life Studies and William Stafford’s “Traveling Through the Dark” on the grounds that such cloying lyrics gave voice to bourgeois forms of subjectivity in the service of capital. These coterie debates were subsequently taken up by academic literary critics (Perloff 1984; McGann 1987; Middleton 1990). Language Writing, we were told repeatedly, sabotages the service of capital by poetry.

How, precisely, Language Writing did so was worried at length beginning in the mid-1970s. In polemics such as the Politics of the Referent symposium edited by Steve McCaffery (1977), Ron Silliman’s “Disappearance of the Word and Appearance of the World” (1977), and Barrett Watten’s “The Politics of Poetry: Surrealism and \( L=A=N=G=U=A=G \)” (1984), prominent Language Writers argued that experimental formalisms sabotage the smooth reproduction of class belonging greased by lyric modes. Often, those polemics depend upon functional analogies between linguistic and economic production. The force of such analogies varied. Some argued that poetic experiments disrupt the production of linguistic reference in ways akin to the downing of tools in the workplace (McCaffery 1977; Ross 1988; Hartley 1989). Others argued that poetic experiments raise class consciousness outside the workplace by making readers coproducers of textual meaning (Andrews 1977; Silliman 1987b; Bernstein 1992; Hejinian 2000). Neither literary road to overcoming capitalist social relations was particularly well-defined. Yet by the time those coterie debates
entered the academy, questions concerning the class politics of literary form constituted “a surrogate social struggle” (xxii), as Silliman influentially put it in his introduction to the Language Writing anthology In the American Tree (1986). The debates surrounding that claim grew hotly contested and theoretically gnarled; they quickly eclipsed the rather more heterogeneous body of work from which the claim was abstracted. Today, therefore, Language Writing is best remembered for advancing the familiar “politics of form” according to which experimental formalisms are anticapitalist and expressive poetry is not.

That politics of form similarly eclipsed concerns with the critique of political economy. Virtually all observers take for granted the oddly cultural character of the Marxism on offer during the Poetry Wars. As George Hartley’s definitive Textual Politics and the Language Poets (1989) makes clear, the peculiarly linguistic Western Marxism favored by Language Writers was an unruly mélange of Althusser, the Frankfurt School, and Gramsci unceremoniously mixed with structuralist linguistics and its post-structural variants. Those are names with which to conjure; we aim to conjure little with them. For our purposes, it is enough to note what all these intellectual currents share in the eyes of Perry Anderson. Anderson (1979) long ago remarked that the bureaucratic petrification of Marx’s critique of political economy in the wake of the Second International helped push Adorno, Althusser, Benjamin, Gramsci, and Lukacs toward a variously shared kulturkritik. “The progressive relinquishment of economic or political structures as the central concerns of theory was accompanied by a basic shift in the whole centre of gravity of European Marxism towards philosophy” (49) with a particular attunement to culture. We need not share Anderson’s prognosis that what was to be done was to rejoin the separated spheres of Marxian theory and the historical workers’ movement, therefore, in order to note what was already clear in 1976. The turn toward cultural forms as a “surrogate social struggle” was, in the first instance, a turn away from what was widely perceived as a rigid and formulaic economism.

It was also a turn away from anticapitalist currents within the New Left. The peculiarly linguistic Western Marxism favored by champions of Language Writing as an anticapitalist project had little overlap with the global Maoism that animated the New Communist Movement, for instance. The organizations which comprised that movement were variously structured along racial and nationalist lines that were also internally riven by questions concerning gender, sexuality, and imperialism. The New Communist Movement was, at best, a microcosm of the antagonisms that shaped the New Left. Yet in Max Elbaum’s definitive account (2002), what held the New Communist Movement together was a forthright and widely shared commitment to national liberation movements abroad and antiracist struggles at home as the leading edge of class struggle in the postwar world. Peasants, the unemployed, and Frantz Fanon’s lumpenproletariat had more currency in the New Communist Movement than the historically white, male, industrial working class of traditional Marxism.

One finds little trace of those historical developments in the anticapitalist poetics of Language Writing. Indeed, the politics of form associated with Language Writing traffics in generic notions of class struggle between a bourgeoisie and working class that may have been lifted from the pages of nineteenth-century factory inspectors. Analogical relationships between cultural forms and social classes left both the composition of those classes and the forms of antagonism between them curiously undetermined just as the agents and sites of class struggle were being radically transformed in the postwar world. At the same time, the most prominent Marxist champions of functional analogies between linguistic and economic production in the Language Writing cohort were white men. Not surprisingly, therefore, in the annals of postwar poetic history, Language Writing is routinely aligned with a generic working-class subject traditionally composed of white male wage laborers.
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By the mid-1980s, the principal referents for social struggle in living memory were the Liberation Movements that formed the leading edge of the New Left in the 1970s. In ways that have proven as durable as they are false, the poetry associated with leading figures of those movements—including Amiri Baraka, Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Janice Mirikitani, and Rudolfo Gonzales—was widely understood as the unmediated expression of the “content” of various racial, gender, and sexual identities. Viewed as dependent upon literary conventions associated with the workshop poems of the era’s literary mainstream, the poetry associated with New Left liberation movements thus existed in a politically ambiguous and frequently vexed relationship to the anticapitalist, avant-garde poetics of Language Writing. These taxonomic distinctions translated New Left organizational debates into a language of fundamentally distinct formal strategies, aesthetic programs, and poetic lineages.

This was especially true for the most ardently Marxist champions of Language Writing. Two years after the publication of In the American Tree, Silliman gave that opposition signal clarity in the anti-Maoist pages of the Socialist Review. In “Poetry and the Politics of the Subject” (1988), Silliman extends his earlier claim that the field of poetry constitutes a surrogate social struggle to argue that distinct poetic forms constitute discrete social struggles for different social subjects. Because different groups of people confront different political problems at the same time, Silliman reasoned, “many white heterosexuals” are “apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona, and even reference.” Meanwhile, those groups who have not yet been “the subject of history,” including “women, people of color, sexual minorities, [and] the entire spectrum of the ‘marginal’” are apt to “appear much more conventional” because they “have a manifest political need to have their stories told” (63).

That view has proven remarkably durable. From the vantage of contemporary avant-gardes and their critical champions, the hegemony of lyric continues to presume a model of language as essentially referential, and the poem as a mimetic expression of the experiences of coherent, singular-speaking subjects. This remains the case even as both Flarf and Conceptual Poetry, to name two influential examples of what could be called twenty-first-century poetic avant-gardes, notably eschew the overtly anticapitalist politics of form associated with Language Writing (Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011; Gardner et al. 2017). At the same time, both retain the political charge associated with formalist experiments opposed to self-expression, autobiographical testimony, and ideals of experiential authenticity historically encoded in lyric conventions. Recent avant-garde experiments with nonnormative syntax have thus come to define poetic experimentation primarily in terms of the disruption of the empirical givenness of identity naturalized by the lyric “I” (Goldsmith 2011; Perloff 2012). According to influential proponents of this view, the denaturalization of the coherence of this lyric-speaking subject underwrites the politics of formal innovation—a politics that continues to be understood as fundamentally antithetical to a contemporary poetics of identity premised upon the representational visibility of marginalized racial subjects for example.

This politically charged division of literary labors naturalized an interpretive framework in which women, people of color, and queer poets embody what could be called a poetics of recognition organized around ideals of self-expression. White heterosexual men, on the other hand, have nothing to lose but their subject positions holding them prisoner in the house of class belonging. Since 1970 or so, this view of opposed poetic modes yoked to discrete social identities has structured contemporary poetic debates in which class, race, and gender are understood as analytically separable categories because of their persistent
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assignment to either expressive and experimental aesthetic programs. Keyed to different forms of aesthetic judgment, these programs, we would argue, remain bound to ongoing unresolved debates both over political strategy and over the complex historical relationship between capitalism and social identity. The antinomies of postwar poetics, in short, continue to structure interpretive approaches to poetic works that seem to straddle or bridge the divide between this influential genre distinction.

Within the broad ambit of the critique Silliman crystallized, for example, race remains a crucial boundary marker between identity and formal experimentation in which social identity and the lyric “I” are understood as essentially homologous kinds of expressive subjects. As critics such as Anthony Reed have begun to point out, a poetics of identity so defined drastically narrows interpretive approaches to contemporary black experimental poetry, for example, by establishing a “hermeneutic circle of lyricized and racialized reading” (Reed 2014: 97). For Reed, such rigid interpretive protocols, premised upon a highly contested conception of the category of the lyric (Jackson 2005), preemptively reduce poems within racially marked literary traditions to “expressions and experiences of a singular intending consciousness that is in turn metonymic for race” (98). More often than not, the specificity of class location falls outside the hermeneutic circle of such reading practices.

In recent decades, these critical premises have been repeatedly challenged by scholars such as Reed. Beginning with a series of anthologies attuned to formally innovative writing by women, the ongoing equation of feminist concerns with confessional verse has come to seem as historically false as it is theoretically anachronistic (O’Sullivan 1996; Sloan 1998; Rankine and Spahr 2002; Frost and Hogue 2006; Rankine and Sewell 2012). A like series of anthologies attuned to experimental writing by poets of color has similarly put paid the equally inaccurate and outdated equation of antiracist concerns with expressive poetics (Lew 1995; Nielsen and Ramey 2006; Giménez Smith and Chávez 2014; Nielsen and Ramey 2015). In the past two decades, a wealth of scholarship variously complicating the vexed relationships between postwar poetics and feminist or antiracist politics has also emerged. Thus, the rigid, politically charged division of literary labors in the wake of the New Left that partly owes to the emergence of Language Writing and what we have called the poetics of recognition has begun to loosen. This makes possible richer and more complex models of the relationship between social identity and poetic experiment. In addition to Reed, scholars such as Elizabeth Frost, Phillip Brian Harper, Dorothy Wang, Joseph Jeon, Lynn Keller, Linda Kinnahan, Nathaniel Mackey, Fred Moten, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Evie Shockley, Juliana Spahr, Anne Vickery, and Timothy Yu have begun to pursue those lines of inquiry in terms of race and gender.

“Coal”: market relations and the material location of identity

Actually existing forms of postwar poetry and politics that were unapologetically feminist, antiracist, and anticapitalist remain less well remarked however. Consider, for instance, the foundational 1977 “A Black Feminist Statement” penned by the Boston and Cambridge-based Combahee River Collective (CRC)—a group of black women who in 1974 broke from what group members considered the more economically and sexually conservative politics of the National Black Feminist Organization. Today, this Statement is best remembered for its powerful articulation of the specific struggles black women face. The Statement’s insistence that “This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics” remains, in the eyes of many scholars, the locus classicus of an “identity politics” typically thought to be incompatible with a critique of political economy. Yet, the CRC Statement
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is unequivocal that while traditional Marxism has neglected concerns with race and gender, the notion of identity the Statement describes is a specifically racialized and gendered class position within a capitalist social order:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy... We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation. We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of Black women who are generally marginal in the labor force, while at this particular time some of us are temporarily viewed as doubly desirable tokens at white-collar and professional levels. We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as black women.

(Combahee 1979: 360)

The peculiar definition of “identity politics” the CRC Statement offers is neither separatist nor unaware of class differentiation among black women. Rather, the Statement provides a broadly materialist account of the position of black women in society. That position is not only a relative class position within the labor force. In the eyes of the Statement, the position of black women is also fundamentally subordinated by a patriarchal black nationalist politics and by a hegemonic second wave feminism largely grounded in the experiences and political demands of middle-class white women within the New Left. This liminal position led the CRC and many subsequent black feminists to understand identity categories as referring to internally divided populations, and to conceive of their own political work as thus by definition coalitional.

The consequences of those divisions are especially visible in the writings of Harlem-born author Audre Lorde, who was a frequent participant in retreats organized by CRC members (Harris 2001). One of Lorde’s most well-known poems, “Coal,” presents an especially suggestive model for thinking through what E. San Juan Jr has called the “race/class problematic” (2003) and the interplay among race, class, and gender in the CRC’s conception of “identity politics.” Close reading the poem challenges poetic taxonomies that can otherwise obscure how racial and gender identities are deeply inscribed within capitalist social relations. Lorde’s writing would seem to obviously fall on the side of a lyric expressivity aligned with a project of reclaiming rather than rejecting a poetics of identity—a reading that retraces the hermeneutic circle Reed describes wherein racial identity and the lyric “I” are understood as formally equivalent kinds of speaking subjects. And yet across Lorde’s entire body of writing, the author repeatedly stages a powerful queer feminist critique of the problem of categorical identities understood as describing static objects rather than dynamic social relations. At the same time, Lorde’s work draws attention to the analytic distortions and separations that categorical thinking inevitably introduces into attempts to understand social inequality.

Initially appearing in the author’s first book of poems The First Cities (1968), “Coal” was subsequently republished, with small but significant revisions, in the author’s 1976 collection of the same name. The poem is structured by an elaborate geological metaphor
in which the earth is a figure for the multilayered, intersubjective structure of racial identity, and where the earth's depths conceal subterranean social forces that produce racially unequal claims on a diaphanous lyric “I.” This “I” is assigned a relative economic value and positioned within atomized market relations through combined processes of racial, gender, and class formation that the poem dramatizes in terms of the transformation of coal into diamond.

The poem begins by isolating a single word, “I,” on its own line in a move that invokes lyric conventions only to immediately question how this racially unmarked, purportedly universal pronoun might conceal the social location of speakers who claim it:

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I
is the total black, being spoken
from the earth’s inside.
(Lorde 1997: 163)
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Forcing a racially unmarked lyric subject to confront its own conditions of possibility, the poem presents this lyric “I” as a kind of empty signifier initially shorn of predicates. This “I” does not speak. Instead, it is ultimately revealed to be “the total black, being spoken/From the earth’s inside” by social forces beyond the immediate control of the speaker.

As a reference to both racial identity and coal, the “total black” doesn’t imagine the racial delimitation of the “I” as a limiting particularity on the way to an unmarked universality. Instead, the racial specification of that “I” is precisely what allows it to address the conditions of its own emergence. This “I” is neither a kind of subjectless postmodern textuality that speaks nor inert material circumstances that mechanistically determine expression. What “is spoken” is revealed in the second stanza to be a fraught, ongoing conversation between subjects.

The poem’s repeated references to “many kinds of open” imply that the “I” is not transparent and equally available to all. Openness seems to signal a shared condition of mutual dependence revealed by the relational, intersubjective character of language itself. A socially disembedded, departicularized “I” is likened to a diamond—an object that among other things suggests a traditional discourse of aesthetic value indexed to the artificial, formally intricate, and highly wrought character of poetic utterance. The abstract emptiness of that “I,” Lorde seems to insist, is a dead form that can only be brought to life, or pried “open,” by the performative particularity of how a speaker might sound and how that performance might be “coloured/By who pays what for speaking”:

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There are many kinds of open.
How a diamond comes into a knot of flame
How a sound comes into a word, coloured
By who pays what for speaking.
(Lorde 1997: 163)
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Extending the geological metaphor by reconnecting the diamond to the process of its formation from coal, the poem plunges into a space “beneath” reified social forms where identities are made. It is a space where language functions as a simultaneously economic and erotic currency that can determine the relative worth of social identities through “who pays what for speaking.” Here, economic exchange is also racially differentiating and governs how speech is “coloured.” The pun implies that the social position of who speaks fundamentally alters the reception of what is spoken and so significantly enlarges or narrows the terrain of the expressible.
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In particularizing this lyric “I,” the poem seems to embody an identity-based expressive poetics while at the same time fundamentally defamiliarizing what is being “expressed.” The poem does not conceive of identity as simply a particular attribute of individuals or groups. In insisting on the “total” nature of blackness here, the poem traces a vision of a collective social body mapped from a racially specific location in social space.

Broadly speaking, there are two possible allegorical interpretations of the “earth’s inside” that the poem references. The first closely resembles the poetics of identity by affirming a positive association between racial identity and lyric expression. On this view, this underground space is the primordial source of black motherhood and a black feminist identity rooted in what Lorde elsewhere calls a “woman’s place of power within each of us” (Lorde 1984: 37) which is “neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep” (37). Likening poetry to a “quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives,” (37) Lorde argues that the exploratory, unpredictable character of poetic language allows it to link experiences—“nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt” (37)—to conceptual thought and ultimately to concerted political action. In poetry collections like The Black Unicorn (1978), these deep sources of identity are explicitly represented in terms of Afrocentric spirituality as well as Dahomean and Yoruban mythologies.

The second possible reading of this subterranean realm imagines blackness as a hierarchical social relation imposed upon individuals who are subject to a kind of systematic economic devaluation among other social constraints. On this view, identities are economically conditioned, compelled, and altered through the making and breaking of intersubjective attachments that establish the conditions of possibility for both intimate relationships and assembling political coalitions. This coalitional, transindividual space orients identity toward a social whole that is fundamentally distinct from a vision of the whole implied by the abstract universality of a sovereign, racially unmarked lyric “I.” From this vantage, we might say that while the title marks the specific racial location of that “I,” the poem lays bare the subterranean violence that makes that individual, racialized subject also an object of systemic forces beyond the boundaries of individual experience.

In light of those two views, the poem’s references to the economic positioning of identity open onto forms of situated agency and what Lorde calls “places of possibility” that are precisely not defined through a political subject whose putative universality is defined primarily through its social unlocatability. At the same time, the second stanza imagines racial divisions as a form of enforced privation, market atomization, and social closure that drastically narrows the expressive capacity of the speaker.

Indeed, the poem implies that the possibility of communication is crucially shaped by economic exploitation governing the calculation of individual profit and loss. Market relations seem to function as a kind of distorted mirror image or underside of Lorde’s expansive sense of the promise of erotic association and “the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person” (Lorde 1984: 56). The reappearance of the language of economic exchange reveals how words map both the social bonds and the boundaries structured by a ubiquitous market logic:

Then there are words like stapled wagers
In a perforated book—buy and sign and tear apart—
And come whatever wills all chances
The stub remains
An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.

While “Some words are open,” others remain incommunicable, seemingly trapped inside of the speaker’s body—“breeding like adders” or breaking off like “An ill-pulled tooth”
and lost. The visceral, embodied loss experienced by the speaker after their failed gamble configures the racial body as isolated and silenced—a kind of prison of social possibility. The stanza’s focus on how far speech might travel beyond the body suggests that emancipatory political possibilities exist between subjects rather than simply within them as “whatever wills all chances” and its speculative investments. At the same time, the parallelism of similes in this stanza draws attention to how communicative action must continually confront the problem of establishing a grammar of likeness across essentially unlike social phenomena otherwise only bound together through market forces. The problem of likening the unlike here seems to mirror the operations of market forces that determine the relative value of speakers according to a single economic measure. While the poem presents language as governed by the grammar of atomized market relations determining “who pays what for speaking,” the “wager” of language used here nevertheless seeks to connect and dereify rather than simply turn away from these forms of alienated sociality.

As the geological metaphor is extended to place the speaker on the other side of the earth in the final stanza, the poem repeats almost verbatim the rhetoric of the first with minor but meaningful syntactical variations. For the first time in the poem, the “I” is not spoken but speaks in order to make another social “wager”:

Love is a word another kind of open—
As a diamond comes into a knot of flame
I am black because I come from the earth’s inside
Take my word for jewel in your open light.

Language successfully and laboriously drawn up from the depths of the earth is here compared to a “jewel.” In the symbolic economy of the poem, diamonds are not simply minerals but a commodity invested with a specific form of value through the rules governing human exchange. Similarly, the meaning and value of blackness is in the poem renegotiated at a moment of encounter whose outcome is unclear.

The final stanza completes a journey of understanding where “the total black” shifts from an ascriptive to an affirmative identity whose worth can be asserted despite the risk of its potential devaluation. That journey traverses both the material constraints of identity and the political necessity of crossing identitarian divides. The lyric “I,” we might say, is where those two views meet in a “knot of flame” that binds together political concerns typically divided by the categories of race, gender, and class.

**Conclusion: the social reproduction of race, gender, and class**

The issues raised by Lorde’s brief poem take us to the heart of contentious contemporary debates about the race/class problematic in the wake of the “Poetry Wars,” while illuminating how Lorde’s socialism might inform her black feminist political commitments. The drama “Coal” stages between an ostensibly lyric “I” and the “total black” that determines “who pays what for speaking” explodes the antinomies of postwar poetics by offering one suggestive model of how readers might imagine an integral account of racial, gender, and class formation.

We might read this symbolic space in the poem, where coal and diamond are transformations of the same metaphorical social substance, in the context of what contemporary Marxist feminists have called a “hidden abode” of social reproduction. For social reproduction theorists, a “split between ‘productive’ waged work and unwaged ‘reproductive’ labour,” as Nancy Fraser has argued, “has underpinned modern capitalist forms of women’s subordination” (Fraser 62). As Angela Davis (2001) and Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) have pointed
out, however, historically black women have been confined within segregated postbellum labor markets where many have been compelled to perform both waged domestic labor within white households and unwaged domestic labor for their own families.

The poem thus might be productively placed in conversation with a social reproduction problematic that gathers white supremacy, patriarchy, and capital together into a single analytic frame. Situating Lorde’s black feminism within a social reproduction framework also allows a better account of the particulars of the poem where lived experience is significantly shaped by a logic of capital that is often simply naturalized, unnamed, or reduced to measures of income and wealth. The “open light” by which one can discern the skeletal architecture of a differentiated, market-mediated social whole reflects the difficulty that the speaker faces in assembling partial intersubjective relations into a single coherent “voice,” or what critic Anna Carastathis (2016) has called a “coalition of one” (182). The poem’s natal imagery indicates a metaphorical transformation, however fleeting, of a ubiquitous social atomization organized through market transactions. The iterative character of these market relations seems, at moments, to suggest a collective capacity for the self-renewal of social bonds consistently thwarted by entrenched racial divisions that are not overcome but instead exacerbated by the economically enforced molecularization of social activity.

By the same token, the poem’s thematic concern with both economic processes and submerged violence sheds light on the pervasive but anachronistic exclusion of women and people of color from conceptions of the working class in postwar poetics. Against the grain of discourses of generic class belonging, Lorde’s “Coal” recalls the postwar transformation of social classes that passed virtually unremarked in the contentious climate of the “Poetry Wars.”

Indeed, today the traditional working-class literary critics have come to associate with some early Language Writers’ anticapitalist polemics is largely a thing of the past in the eyes of economic and labor historians. At the same time, increasing scholarly attention paid to comparatively less well-known Marxist accounts of race elaborated by thinkers from Harry Haywood and Claudia Jones to Harry Chang and James Boggs lays bare the anachronism at the heart of such accounts. While employment in manufacturing did not peak until 1979 in absolute terms, the share of the total labor force employed in manufacturing entered permanent decline after 1966 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017a, 2017b). At the same time, women began to enter the formal labor force en masse during the 1960s. Many found employment in the low-wage but expanding service sector that absorbed the shares of the labor force manufacturers relinquished (Blackwelder 1997). Those trends increased sharply after 1970. Women’s share of the labor force has hovered around 50% since 1990, while women have outnumbered men in the service sector since 1984 (Wood 2014). Manufacturers, meanwhile, continued shedding labor. Predictably, nonwhite workers bore the brunt of those job losses. Unemployment among black workers reached its postwar high in 1983, and has remained at least double that of white workers since 1970 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011). Meanwhile, as a growing body of research documents, the surplus of nonwhite workers excluded from the wage relation continues to be absorbed by a brutally racialized system of mass incarceration (Wacquant 2002; Gilmore 2007). There is no historical referent, in short, for theoretical conceptions of a working class that is not also profoundly gendered and racialized in the postwar US.

Lorde’s poem traces the broad outlines of a unitary model of social domination and economic exploitation which Marxist feminists began to describe in the 1970s (Vogel 1987). The first iterations of that model emerged from so-called “dual system debates” rooted in value theoretical efforts to square class and gender (Sargent 1986). Those efforts were closely associated with the Wages for Housework campaign during the Women’s Liberation Movement (Federici 1984). More recent iterations have addressed the sometimes race-blind
character of those earlier models (Gimenez 2001; Ferguson 2008). Simply put, social reproduction theory extends Marx’s critique of political economy beyond the factory walls. It does so while retaining the logical force of Marx’s categories. It also does so while attending to aspects of social life organized by the law of value without necessarily contributing to either the mass or rate of profit. Rather than viewing race, gender, and class as discrete axes charting differential locations within a taxonomic grid, social reproduction theory defines race and gender as constitutive elements of capital accumulation (Ferguson 2016). The result is an emerging critique of political economy that encompasses forms of subordination both within and beyond the wage nexus (Viewpoint 2015). This emerging critical political economy thus moves beyond not only the opposition between gender and class, but also beyond the race/class distinction that continues to plague contemporary theorizing about the relationship between social identity and capitalism.

We want to conclude by arguing that reimagining what lies “beneath” categorical thinking in “Coal” reattaches social identity to political economy, while also mounting a powerful challenge to conceiving of class subjects in deracialized and degendered terms. This analysis requires readers to abandon an older base-superstructure model of the economic determination of essentially epiphenomenal racial identities in favor of an understanding of economic positioning as a kind of enabling constraint of identity formation, describing forms of political agency that are “open” but nevertheless racially situated in the poem. As Raymond Williams reminds us, “In practice [economic] determination is never only the setting of limits; it is also the exertion of pressures”:

As it happens this is also a sense of “determine” in English: to determine or be determined to do something is an act of will and purpose. In a whole social process, these positive determinations, which may be experienced individually but which are always social acts, indeed often specific social formations, have very complex relations with the negative determinations that are experienced as limits.

(Williams 87)

Lorde’s “Coal” offers a vision of coalitional practice that does not assume an immaterial, socially disembedded universalism as the ground or precondition of collective action that aims to transform these social conditions. The speaker of the poem seems to discover their freedom precisely through determination and not in spite of it.

The hermeneutic circle drawn by the antinomies of postwar poetics is particularly ill-suited to account for how the poem treats the meaning and dynamic structure of racial identity as neither fixed nor ontologically pregiven, and social class as immanently raced and gendered. At the same time, and despite its stylistic adherence to lyric conventions, the poem poses a significant challenge to both assigning an intrinsic and unchanging political valence to formal strategies, and to understanding racial identity as a politically unmediated object of recognition. On the contrary, “Coal” traces how a single intending consciousness seems to split or fracture into multiple registers of experience that illuminate unfamiliar and sometimes frightening aspects of the self. Discordant voices that seem to speak through the subject only later coalesce into a single call for recognition, but it is a demand to recognize the very intersubjective conditions of possibility that undergird any seemingly unitary identity. For the speaker, and for the contemporary social conditions the speaker addresses, there is no “I” without the “total black,” and vice versa.

Lorde’s “Coal” shifts between affirmative and ascriptive views of identity to underscore that the recognition of difference is the starting point rather than ultimate horizon for the
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The poet’s coalitional vision. Consequently, the poem’s investigation of the changing conditions that come to define the complex meaning of identity as both situated and “open” suggests historically unrealized political possibilities typically foreclosed by the antinomies of postwar poetics. In place of formal distinctions shorn of their social referents, the “earth’s inside” that binds race, gender, and class together in the poem maps fault lines that continue to drive contemporary poetic and political debates.

References

The politics of form and poetics of identity


