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# Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul

*Transformative Aesthetics  
and the Practice of Freedom*

Edited by  
Christa Davis Acampora  
Angela L. Cotten

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Practice of Freedom*

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and  
Angela L. Cotten

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*For Christa's brave and creative mother, Frances,  
and  
Angela's wise and generous mother, Mary*

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in the end she sacrifices herself. Ultimately, the everyday revolts that sustain psychic life through creativity and imagination are essential forms of resistance against women's oppression that results in depression and psychic (if not physical) death. If depression is one symptom of oppression, a symptom with a female face, then resistance, particularly everyday revolt and feminine genius, is a prescription for psychic freedom.

### 3

## Authorizing Desire

### *Erotic Poetics and the Aisthesis of Freedom in Morrison and Shange*

CHRISTA DAVIS ACAMPORA

oppression/makes us love one another badly/makes our  
breathing  
mangled/while i am desperately trying to clear the air/  
in the absence of extreme elegance/  
madness can set right in like  
a burnin gauloise on Japanese silk.  
though highly cultured/  
even the silk must ask  
how to burn up discreetly.

—Ntozake Shange, "a photograph: lovers in motion"

Oppression has at least two existential characteristics: (1) it aims to reduce the oppressed to the status of an object, and (2) it excludes the oppressed from the community of those regarded as having the capacity and the authority to make meanings and establish values. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir specifically identifies manipulation of desire as a primary mechanism through which oppression is exercised and finds its most destructive effects. If desire, or *passion* as Beauvoir and Sartre call it, is important for the realization of freedom, incapacitating it—extinguishing desire or mutilating it in some way—would have detrimental consequences for the pursuit of making a life of meaning and purpose. Similar ideas are advanced and further developed in the work of Drucilla Cornell (1998 and 1995), who, as discussed later, makes the case for what she describes as *imaginative agency*. This chapter develops the outlines of a



theoretical framework for considering the relation between freedom and desire for applications in investigations of artistic practices of resistance that aim at producing transgressive expressions of desire and what I shall describe as the *aisthesis* (or felt quality) of freedom. The poetics of desire, or erotic poetics, provide a vehicle for formulating an answer to the question, What would it be good for me (or for us) to *want*? rather than address the question, What should I (or we) *do*? which is the context in which imagination has been explored most often in the area of moral psychology. Erotic poetics allows us to conceive, formulate, and reformulate affiliations that enhance our participation in a social eroticism, an economy in which our energies are oriented toward forging significant relations with each other and striving together toward creating a social order that cultivates and enhances capabilities. (See also Ferguson 1989 on social eroticism.)

To illustrate some cases in point, I open a discussion of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem "Spell #7" and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Both works exemplify concern with the problem of revaluing what oppression denigrates. Both seek meaningful agency emerging out of a situation that is affectively incapacitating. I read Shange's work in particular as endeavoring to open different possibilities for loving—as producing an erotic poetics—and I look to Morrison's work for insights relevant to moral psychology and for an invitation to contemplate what difference it makes in having experience (or a lack thereof) of the *felt quality* of freedom.

### DESIRE AND FREEDOM IN BEAUVOIR

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir casts her own light on the situation of human existence—neither god nor thing, we live as liminal creatures who often find themselves drawn toward one or the other end of this pole. Sartre, of course, names that desire—longing to be either god (for Sartre, pure transcendence, absolute subjectivity) or thing (pure immanence, absolute objectivity)—bad faith. For Sartre, the temptations of bad faith are numerous, nearly ubiquitous, and it becomes difficult to see how we are anything but damned or how a meaningful social existence is possible. Beauvoir is similarly wary of bad faith. Her *Ethics of Ambiguity* operates largely within a Sartrean ontological framework, but for her the trap of bad faith is not inevitable: she distinguishes the desire to disclose being from the wish to possess or coincide with the object of desire.

According to both Sartre and Beauvoir, projects of bad faith fundamentally aim at fleeing our freedom. We pursue it in order to mollify anxiety in the face of freedom and to avoid the metaphysical risks involved in what Sartre describes as "making ourselves a lack of being" or exercising transcendence. Beauvoir also recognizes this tendency, which she describes as a desire to flee freedom that stems from our nostalgia for the security and cheerfulness of childhood.

The child's world is a serious one, but it is one for which she or he bears no responsibility. The serious world, characterized by what both Sartre and Beauvoir identify with the "spirit of seriousness," is one comprised of ready-made values. The child in the serious world considers the world as given, values as inherent, and the adults who structure their lives as having pure being. One may live in such a world playfully because "the domain open to his subjectivity seems insignificant and puerile in his own eyes" (Beauvoir 1948, 35). And one may pursue some measure of freedom within it only insofar as one seeks the realization of those values and traverses the path toward being that is worn by those beings one takes to be complete. This is not to say that children live in bad faith, of course, since children are not yet aware of their subjectivity and do not have a sense of inhabiting the world in any other way. (Beauvoir thinks it is conceivable that eighteenth-century slaves and "the Mohammedan woman enclosed in a harem" [1948, 38] have a similar existence.) However, once one matures in one's subjectivity and becomes acquainted with one's freedom, then the nostalgia for the serious-but-care-free world of the child, the desire to trade freedom for security, and the resignation or outright denial of one's responsibility, constitute bad faith.

If Sartre sees this desire as ultimately damning, Beauvoir does not. It is not the desire itself that is dangerous, but rather the mistaken notion that desiring is terminable, that it aims at a satisfaction of completion. It is not possession of the object itself that desire genuinely seeks, Beauvoir claims, but rather *the process of disclosure itself* (cf. Ferguson 1989, 73–74 and 77–99). What desire as passion celebrates is the disclosive character of human existence, an idea more akin to Heidegger's view than Sartre's. In other words, Beauvoir sees human beings as realizing their existence in disclosing possible ways of being and bringing forth their meanings. She characterizes it thus: Human existence has its being in "vitality, sensitivity, and intelligence," which are not themselves "ready-made qualities, but a way of casting oneself into the world and of disclosing being":

Every man casts himself into the world by making himself a lack of being; he thereby contributes to reinvesting it with human signification. He discloses it.

And in this movement even the most outcast sometimes feel the joy of existing. There is vitality only by means of free generosity. Intelligence supposes good will, and inversely, a man is never stupid if he adapts his language and his behavior to his capacities, and sensitivity is nothing else but the presence which is attentive to the world and to itself. The reward for these spontaneous qualities issues from the fact that they make significances and goals appear in the world. They discover reasons for existing. They confirm us in the pride and joy of our destiny as man. (Beauvoir 1948, 41–42)

Beauvoir describes our living out this destiny as “living warmth,” or passion, and she associates it with love and desire. It is a kind of loving that invests human activity with meaning, a kind of loving that bestows human existence itself with value. Such desire is directed by ends, no doubt, but its pleasure is not sustained by acquiring those ends. The pleasure of desire, desire’s delight, unfolds in the perpetual pursuit and recreation of those ends. And this is what grounds our pursuit of freedom for others, according to Beauvoir. We desire the freedom of others to multiply these possibilities. The freedom of the other provides an opening to the social in which the meanings that we make take on their significance.

These ideas become somewhat clearer in Beauvoir’s discussion of oppression, which emphasizes the significance of the freedom of others for us and elaborates the crucial role of desire in the exercise of freedom and the realization of its ecstasies. In the situation of oppression, the oppressed is both reduced to pure facticity, regarded as an absence of human transcendence, and explicitly denied opportunities for meaningful transcendence insofar as the oppressed is excluded from participation in the production of social meanings. Obviously, a person cannot be stripped of her metaphysical freedom since human existence is radically free according to the existential framework. But it can happen that in the situation of oppression, the possibilities of the joyful exercise of freedom can be diminished insofar as the prospects for meaningful transcendence are minimized or eliminated. Beauvoir writes: “As we have already seen, every man transcends himself. But it happens that this transcendence is condemned to fall uselessly back upon itself because it is cut off from its goals. That is what defines a situation of oppression. Such a situation is never natural: man is never oppressed by things” (1948, 81). In other words, there exists a social reality that provides the context in which one’s ability to make meanings, one’s participation in the production of values, meaningfully occurs. Excluded from that community, incapacitated for such participation, one is unable to make the movements of desire that freedom requires. Beauvoir continues:

As we have seen, my freedom, in order to fulfill itself, requires that it emerge into an open future: it is other men who open the future to me, it is they who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future; but if, instead of allowing me to participate in this constructive movement, they oblige me to consume my transcendence in vain, if they keep me below the level which they have conquered and on the basis of which new conquests will be achieved, then they are cutting me off from the future, they are changing me into a thing. (1948, 82)

And one need not be actively and repeatedly excluded from this process in order to be oppressed. Perversions of desire that draw one toward fruitless endeavors and mechanical gestures are sufficient for cultivating in the oppressed a desire that *wills one’s own exclusion* from the meaningful creation of the future. Beauvoir continues:

Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying, and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation; a life justifies itself only if its effort to perpetuate itself is integrated into its surpassing and if this surpassing has no other limits than those which the subject assigns himself. Oppression divides the world into two clans: those who enlighten mankind by thrusting it ahead of itself and those who are condemned to mark time hopelessly in order merely to support the collectivity; their life is a pure repetition of mechanical gestures; their leisure is just about sufficient for them to regain their strength; the oppressor feeds himself on their transcendence and refuses to extend it by a free recognition. The oppressed has only one solution: to deny the harmony of that mankind from which an attempt is made to exclude him, to prove that he is a man and that he is free by revolting against the tyrants. In order to prevent this revolt, one of the ruses of oppression is to camouflage itself behind a natural situation since, after all, one can not revolt against nature. (1948, 82–83)

Diminish desire and the oppressed effect their own exclusion since they do not want to participate in the pursuit and recreation of ends that afford the ecstatic life, the life of metaphysical risk, of “being thrown dangerously beyond” ourselves, the stakes of which are the very meanings of our lives.

For Beauvoir, the world that oppression erects is one plagued by the spirit of seriousness. It affirms the oppressive order as “a natural situation,” a world that one cannot change and against which one cannot hope to successfully revolt. One cannot know the joy of the “destiny” of human existence caught within a world of ready-made values. There is a kind of existential retelling of the story of the Judeo-Christian “Fall of Humankind” at work in this idea: Just as the mythical first human beings

traded paradise for the pleasures and pains of knowledge, the existentialist sees the human condition as characterized by a brokerage of the pleasures of lacking responsibility (for the meaning and significance of one's life) for the anxieties of subjectivity and its joyful possibilities. The only escape from the serious world is revolt, a thoroughgoing rebellion. One cannot merely make modest modifications in such world: "[T]he oppressed can fulfill his freedom as a man only in revolt, since the essential characteristic of the situation against which he is rebelling is precisely its prohibiting him from any positive development; it is only in social and political struggle that his transcendence passes beyond to the infinite" (Beauvoir 1948, 87).

### THE DILEMMA OF REVOLT: FANON'S CASE

But precisely how does one undertake such a revolt? The logic of rebellion that Beauvoir heralds appears to require a revaluing of precisely that which grounds the oppression of the other. It demands that "the essential characteristic of the situation" (Beauvoir 1948, 87) be challenged. In his *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon contemplates his possibilities for revolt within an existentialist framework, and he struggles to apply it to the particular situation of the colonized, who are subjugated and marked by "the fact of blackness."

Fanon scrutinizes Sartre's assessment of the attempted revaluation of "blackness" in the poetics of "negritude," which aims to affirm and positively define the very difference that serves as the basis of exploitation for the colonizers. In his 1948 preface to *Black Orpheus*, Sartre claims:

In fact, negritude appears as the minor term of a dialectical progression: The theoretical and practical assertion of the supremacy of the white man is its thesis; the position of negritude as an antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is insufficient by itself, and the Negroes who employ it know this very well; they know that it is intended to prepare the synthesis or realization of the human in a society without races. Thus negritude is the root of its own destruction, it is a transition and not a conclusion, a means and not an ultimate end. (xl; cited in Fanon 1967, 133)

But Fanon himself questions whether any movement can be authentic if regarded as merely a turn in a larger historical process. How can one possibly regard one's sense of one's own worth in such terms? When one's very life is on the line, when what one endeavors is the poetic transformation

of the meaning of one's very own existence and future possibilities, how could one simultaneously hold the new valuation as a mere means to yet another end, the "real" or legitimate one that differs from what one had taken as one's poetic aim? Sartre essentially claims that a poetics of blackness, insofar as it seeks to valorize the fact of blackness, simply reverses the very terms against which it aims to rebel. It inverts the content (i.e., what was bad is now good) without obliterating the form, and hence it fails to escape what it aims to overthrow, the terms of valuation itself. If this is so, what remains for the colonized to do; whence comes liberation from oppression of this sort? Whence comes a legitimate black identity? Can there be a black voice that authorizes meaning and writes its own significance? What direction of desire could be liberating? *What should the colonized want?* Fanon laments, "I wanted to be typically Negro—it was no longer possible. I wanted to be white—that was a joke. And, when I tried, on the level of ideas and intellectual activity, to reclaim my negritude, it was snatched away from me. Proof was presented that my effort was only a term in the dialectic" (1967, 132; emphasis added).

If the poetics of blackness cannot escape failure, what is to be done to escape what physically cannot be fled, namely, the facticity that serves as the basis of the oppression, the abiding fact of blackness? The revaluation of blackness seems the only available way out. Fanon writes immediately following Sartre's assessment cited above, "When I read that page, I felt that I had been robbed of my last chance" (1967, 133). He later explains, "And so [as Sartre sees it] it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me. It is not out of my bad nigger's misery, my bad nigger's teeth, my bad nigger's hunger that I will shape a torch with which to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for that turn of history" (1967, 134). He continues, "[M]y shoulders slipped out of the framework of the world, my feet could no longer feel the touch of the ground. Without a Negro past, without a Negro future, it was impossible for me to live my Negrohood. Not yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned" (138). If the poetics of negritude fail, at least in cases in which they constitute reversals of the values they aim to reject, what then can serve as the basis of revolt in situations of racialized oppression? Perhaps, one might claim, Fanon's account better reveals an inherent contradiction in existential thought than it does a fatal flaw in black poetry. Perhaps we can resolve the dilemma articulated by Fanon by simply rejecting the existential account of meaning and human existence. Fanon himself is not wholly willing to do so, and I do not think this contradiction that

Fanon forcefully illuminates necessarily requires us to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

The existential framework sketched above from Beauvoir's work fails to account for one very important idea. In the summary of Beauvoir's discussion of the frivolity of the child in the serious world, I indicated that Beauvoir claims that one who is childlike lives playfully in the serious world (that is a world of ready-made values) until one becomes familiar with the nature of human subjectivity as fundamentally and radically free. Beauvoir indicates, without elaborating, the importance of imagination for envisioning a possible future when she writes that "the goal toward which I surpass myself must appear to me as a point of departure toward a new act of surpassing. Thus a creative freedom develops happily without ever congealing into unjustified facticity" (1948, 27–28).

But what propels one toward taking those goals? What enables one to *see* as one must in order for "a point of departure toward a new act of surpassing" to in fact *appear*? (Beauvoir 1948, 27). It seems that what is necessary, as Beauvoir claims, is "an apprenticeship of freedom" (1948, 37). Precisely how does one become apprenticed in freedom? What leads us to that knowledge such that it animates an entire form of life? *What makes freedom our familiar*? Without an account of this, it seems to me, a tremendous chasm is left in the existential view. To describe it merely as consciousness raising does not seem sufficient. After I become aware of injustices in the serious world that would keep me its subject, how do I acquire the sense that there is something to be done about it, and that I am the one (perhaps together with others who share my situation) to do it? What directs my own way out of the serious world? And if the serious world is the only one I have known and the only one I have previously thought possible, whence comes my direction for conceiving its alternatives?

#### OPENINGS TO OTHERNESS: THE IMAGINARY DOMAIN

Although she is not writing in response to these questions as I have posed them, Drucilla Cornell articulates a conception of the imaginary domain and its fundamental significance for the realization of subjectivity that is relevant. Cornell describes a conceptual space in which one exercises the freedom to do the work of conceiving the world as other, of imagining a world one wants as one's own, of pursuing other modes of disclosure, and of revealing other forms of reality. What she describes as "the imaginary

domain" is "that psychic and moral space in which we [. . .] are allowed to evaluate and represent who we are" (Cornell 1998, x; cf. Cornell 1995). Cornell discusses the imaginary domain specifically in terms of sexual desire and sexuate being, but it could apply to desire generally and other specific ways of being. Cornell further describes the imaginary domain as what "gives to the individual person, and her only, the right to claim who she is through her own representation of her [sexuate] being. Such a right necessarily makes her the morally [and legally] recognized source of what [the] meaning [of her sexual difference] is for her" (1998, 10).

Having access to the imaginary domain activates the possibility for change—insofar as different forms of existence emerge as options to pursue or reject—and hence the imaginary domain facilitates a more rigorous exercise of our agency. Cornell writes that "the imaginary domain is the space of the 'as if' in which we imagine who we might be if we made ourselves our own end and claimed ourselves as our own person" (1998, 8). Simply put, the imaginary domain is that space in which not merely *what* we desire—or what we take to be the good—is derived but also the *shape* of desire is given its form in terms of *how* desire unfolds, *how* its ends might be pursued. Cornell describes the kind of freedom exercised in the imaginary domain as "freedom of personality." It "is valuable because it is what lets us make a life we embrace as our own" (1998, 62).

Cornell's work significantly enhances and fills out the framework of freedom and desire I have drawn from Beauvoir and that I have made more complex and problematic by engaging Fanon, but it would be useful to see it in action, to get a sense of a concrete application of the utilization of an imaginary domain. And Cornell's view still leaves what I perceive as a gap—namely, some account of what other resources one might need to flourish in that space. We need to know what allows for the experimentations of subjectivity the imaginary domain affords. For better appreciation of these considerations, I shall turn to Ntozake Shange whose choreopoem "Spell #7: geechee jibara quik magic trance manual for technologically stressed third world people" explicitly thematizes the nature of poetic power and considers how one might tap it.

#### ACTING OUT: THE ECSTASIES AND AGENCY OF SHANGE'S EROTIC POETICS

Shange's "Spell #7" focuses on the lives of a group of black actors and their friends who struggle to negotiate their oppressive situation. "Betinna," an

actress, describes her experience in the (white) world that determines and constructs her as *being black* when she says of herself, "I am theater" (Shange 1981b, 24). To *be black* is to be already defined, to already have a role, to be a reluctant actor on a white stage. Betinna also recognizes that her possibilities for transcending that role (living out the "fact" of blackness) lie in *acting out* of it. At best, she and the other characters in the play are socially invisible, unrecognized as legitimate candidates for living a human life; at worst, they are despised, devalued, and even physically and mentally destroyed. Their possibilities for *acting out* are limited, since access to many of the ordinary means of such transcendence is prohibited to them.

What they need is magic, "blk magic" [sic], that will allow them not merely to be satisfied with themselves but to be *loved*—to become subjects enabled by "loving perception," a perspective that invests what it perceives as potent and full of possibilities, possessed with the capacity for transfiguration. (The concept of 'loving perception' figures prominently in certain works in feminist and Africana literature. It is initially defined in Frye 1983. Cf. Lugones 1987 and Gordon 1997.) The characters in "Spell #7" need a magic space in which they can conjure the creative energy necessary for exercising meaningful agency. And they need an opportunity to *practice* magic: they need to somehow acquire the means to engage in transforming the negative values they have been given by others into those they can affirm as beautiful and significant. I take it this is another way of envisioning the tasks and possibilities of a poetics of negritude mentioned above.

In the context of existential literature, magic appears to be significantly related to desire. One might say that magic seeks to transform the impossible, to render it within the realm of possibility. Translated into the language of the existentialists with whom I began this chapter, magic aims at the conversion of facticity to transcendence; magic seeks to open as a candidate for otherness (as a candidate for legitimate longing-to-be-other) what has been confined to the realm of brute facts. I think Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* provides a rich basis for a more thorough exploration of how the desire to practice magic constitutes an effort to conjure "an imaginary domain." But such desire is not always creative, not always truly enabling, as one witnesses in the case of Pecola, as I shall discuss in the section that follows. In Shange's "Spell #7" "blk magic" is also risky: the play opens with the magician "lou" recounting how his own father retired from magic when lou was just a child. One of lou's young friends asked his father to practice his magic by making him white. "All things

are possible," lou recalls, "but aint no colored magician in his right mind/gonna make you white" (Shange 1981b, 8). Lou and his father practice magic for the purpose of "fixin you up good/fixin you up good & colored" (8). They aim at making black life good and desirable. When the child asked for whiteness instead, the blk magician's practice was entirely undermined and drained of all its potency.

Poetry and dance are the means through which the characters of "Spell #7" attempt to bring their work to fruition. One of the characters, a poet named Eli, claims that "whoever that is authorizing poetry as an avocation/is a fraud/put yr own feet on the ground" (1981a, 25). Creating poetic expression is described as "authorizing"—drawing on senses of both being an author ("authoring") and granting or grounding legitimacy ("authorizing"). Being a creator is simultaneously granting power, sanctioning, and providing sufficient grounds for the values and worldviews it establishes. To do so in a way that considers the activity as merely a hobby, to write poetry recklessly, is fraudulent. Grounding the significance of one's life is an endeavor that requires a kind of serious energy, but some things break a spirit of that capacity and diminish its possibilities for creative activity, for *poiesis* (the practice of poetry broadly conceived in terms of articulating and reshaping meaningful significances in one's life and one's community). As the choreopoem unfolds, the characters strive to reach the place in which that rift can be transcended, in which magic, specifically "blk magic," can happen. The choreopoem represents Shange's effort to conceive a formal structure that is specific enough to succeed in defining meanings and values that can take hold and yet flexible enough to offer others transformative possibilities.

In her foreword to the collection in which "Spell #7" is published, Shange indicates that her work aims to provide an alternative to the "artificial aesthetics" of a "european framework for european psychology" (1981a, ix). She is specifically concerned to amplify possibilities for communication beyond the verbal, claiming that in her choreopoems, "music functions as another character" (1981a, x). The choreopoem is a poetic amalgamation that draws its elements from choreography, theater, and a variety of meters and musical rhythms. It is a novel dramatic, poetic framework aimed at generating and giving shape to alternative forms of creative expression and producing transformative manifestations of desire. In these works, the "person/body, voice & language/address the space as if [they] were a band/a dance company & a theater group all at once, cuz a poet shd do that/create an emotional environment/felt architecture" (1981a, xi).

Shange's use of language, which some have seen as an effort to destroy the English language as such, is more creative than destructive. Although Shange does regard "the King's English" as a straightjacket that supports oppression and limits creative expression, she is not merely seeking to destroy it by using it recklessly. In an interview Shange explains that "language will allow us to function more competently and more wholly in a holistic sense as human beings once we take hold of it and make it say what we want to say" (Shange and Lester 1990, 727). And a number of her characters struggle to achieve precisely that aim. Choreopoetic structure opens spaces ordinarily closed by other dramatic forms by giving a more prominent place to the full sense of lived embodiment through movement and by tapping the emotive qualities of music. When language fails or cannot reach its aim, music and dance step in. But these elements are not merely surrogates for speech, and narrative wholeness does not loom over the work as the ideal for which the characters should strive and in light of which they are deficient. Rather, the nonlinguistic elements are themselves in a supralinguistic dialogue: music and dance do not merely stand in for speech, they also serve to produce the psychic space in which new articulations and new conceptualizations might occur. The opening scene in which the magician lou sings, dances, mimes, performs, boasts, offers a speech, whispers secrets, and addresses both the audience and the characters works to conjure a specific place—an imaginary domain—in which *what is impossible* in the serious white world in which the actors are thrown *is bracketed out, disabled, or suspended*. It is that transformation of impossibility to possibility—to realize an acting out that is not dependent upon, relative to, or bound by the terms defined by whiteness—that constitutes the practice of lou's magic.

Shange's characters' use of language reflects not only their attempts to make it speak their own voice but also the fact that they are "constricted" and "amputated" characters (xiii), whose movements and musical vocalizations both mirror their dismemberment and mark their efforts to poetically transform and transcend them. The limits of their desire have been defined in terms of two equally impossible directives—*either* desire to be a slave (in other words, desire to have your desire wholly determined by another) *or* desire to be white (in other words, desire to renounce all desire insofar as *being* anything would require you to give up that process of *becoming* described earlier as the direction of desire toward disclosing being). Shange challenges her characters and her audience to sing and dance their way out of this false dilemma in the absence of a liberative narrative framework in which they might insert themselves.

Shange claims that "literature, if it does nothing else, should stimulate one's imagination to know that there is more—maybe not more 'out there,' but more inside of us that we can use for our own survival" (Shange and Lester 1990, 729). Shange's choreopoetry aims to engage that imagination. It seeks to provide openings for the direction of imaginative *re-membering* (both a drawing on the past and a reconstitution of a meaningful world in which one can be a full participant) and the circulation of affirmative desire. It opens new and different circuits for loving—in the sense of valuing—that enable the transformation of desire that has been distorted by oppression. This is the practice of authorizing that is realized in erotic poetics.

Similar conceptions of poetic power and its social applications are advanced in Audre Lorde's well known "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." And one finds in Toni Morrison's work, particularly *Beloved*, connections drawn among the *feeling* of power, the development of human agency, and the materialization of freedom. I conclude by briefly considering both of these works in order to elaborate how the *aisthesis* of freedom—the *feeling* of oneself as free and rich with possibilities—is linked with the creative power of being a maker of meaning and pleasure, and how erotic poetic practice—the engagement of desire enabled for authorizing—affords the creative resources for transgressive resistance.

#### POETIC POWER AND THE AISTHESIS OF FREEDOM

In her well-known "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde articulates and distinguishes a sense of the erotic as a form of loving that draws one out of oneself. It is tied to the creative power of producing meanings and determining worthy goals, and it provides a significant form for resistance. She recognizes that one way in which oppression operates and incapacitates its victims is through the manipulation of desire: "In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change" (Lorde 1984).

Lorde vividly describes the relation between the erotic and a sense of power connected with expressive feeling (contrasted with mere sensation). She explicitly connects this desire to creative production (e.g., writing poetry, dance) and aesthetic experience in everyday life (e.g., "moving into the sunlight against the body of the woman I love"). She describes how the erotic opens aesthetic possibilities and creates a "clearing" for joy:

"Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea." Lorde envisions an erotic poetic practice that affords transgressive resistance. It is transformative and generates a basis for political resistance that is not merely reactionary. What Lorde's erotic poetics aim at is activation and engagement of the *aisthesis* of power—a capacity that is not contingent upon the acquisition of power over others but that is lived out through effective action *with others*, bodied forth in the world.

The creative activity of art reflects a way of organizing the world (or a part thereof). As we experience the work of art, we experience that structuring, that organization. Aesthetic experiences similarly organize us by taking us through a variety of organized structures. Art effects how we experience ourselves (our own form and its possibilities), our relations with others, and how we encounter and make sense of our worlds. Our experience of the *shaping* that happens in art *shapes* us. Our engagement of different aesthetic qualities in art makes us different, too—it *enforms* us with a sense of shaping itself, of what it means to actively give shape and form. Works of art *work* in and through us. It is in this way that aesthetic experience is transfiguring and transformative.

Both words *transfiguration* and *transformation* indicate reshaping, remolding, and rearranging. They suggest a further development, an imposition of a new form, a stage, or a process of forming. Insofar as aesthetic experience provides opportunities for transformation and transfiguration, it provides (quite literally) an exercise of imagination that is vital not only for our appreciation of art but also for projecting ourselves as other than what we are at any given moment. John Dewey has argued that it is this very aspect of art that makes it "the chief instrument of the good," "more moral than moralities" (1987, 350). Citing Shelly, Dewey describes the significance of the power of imaginative projection thus: "The great secret of morals is love, or *a going out of our nature* and the identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man to be greatly good must imagine intensely and comprehensively." Imaginative projection, ignited by love (or what I have described here as the erotic), aims at a kind of standing out of ourselves (ecstasy), a way of being drawn out of our nature, and allows us to transgress the boundaries that appear to be drawn between

ourselves and others. To imagine ourselves as other is absolutely crucial for our growth as individuals: for setting goals, imagining the kinds of persons we want to become, and devising a route to get there.

And imagining ourselves as other is an important way in which we build communities. Such imagination leads us out of ourselves, enhancing our capacity to set aside our own particular interests in order to recognize the needs of others or what would be required for us to pursue a common ideal. Dewey identifies this power as unfolding in the redirection of desire and purpose, the first intimations of which are of necessity imaginative (1987, 352). That redirection of desire and purpose potentially presents us with opportunities to pursue new and different possibilities, opening up what Homi Bhabha calls "liminal spaces," which are sites for the production of cultural hybridities (1994). Such imagination facilitates dynamic manifestations of social agency, garnering the resources to participate in the *production* of political, cultural, or ethnic identities. (This contrasts quite markedly with the conception of identity as linked to some essential or static entity. On the way in which linguistic community and autonomy of expression are relevant to this process, see Cornell 2000, ch. 8, and Anzaldúa 1990, ch 5.) Imagination enables us to better understand how our actions and our decisions affect others, to see ourselves in-relation-to-others. And it heightens our capacity for compassion in the sense of *feeling with* others, what Kundera describes as "the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy [. . . which] in the hierarchy of sentiments . . . is supreme" (1984, 20; cf. Willett 2001, ch. 7, on erotic power and understanding the "individual in relationship-to-others").

Aesthetic engagement potentially activates imaginative resources that enable the realization of agency. This strikes me as crucial at a time when it is argued not only that one must become a moral agent in order to be free but also that one must at least play a role in *determining* the means and meaning of that endeavor as such. This is the very predicament faced by the characters of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: they are (eventually) "free men" before the law but are at sea when it comes to realizing how that freedom might meaningfully animate their lives. Lacking what I describe as the felt quality of freedom—the feeling of themselves as free—they are without the imaginative resources to envision lives of meaning and purpose that they might seek as their own (for a similar discussion of these ideas in a different context, see Acampora 2006).

The experience of the enslaved body generates a mutilated aesthetic. The theft of slavery commits a dual crime—not merely a theft of the

property of one's labor, slavery manipulates and disciplines the slave's erotic resources to serve the master's material interests. Bodies whose senses are anesthetized by an economy that treats them as commodities to be bought, bartered, and broken by others struggle to see themselves as human beings with possibilities to be sought, shaped, and shared. They emerge from slavery with transmogrified desire—the phenomenon of “slave breaking” bears witness to the necessity of the transformation of desire in the maintenance of the institution of slavery—and an impaired sense of the erotic they might otherwise engage in bringing forth beauty, bringing about a world imbued with meanings and pleasures they participate in defining.

In Morrison's *Beloved* we encounter a story about a community of former slaves and their children. Some of them had their freedom from slavery purchased for them, others escaped, and others were literally born in the passage between. Part mystery, part history, part psycho-biography, *Beloved* depicts the specters of slavery, its perversions of desire, and the struggle to realize freedom when emerging from a condition of bondage. It poignantly illustrates the crippling effects of a mutilated aesthetic resulting from the experience of the enslaved body. Much of *Beloved* focuses on attempts (most of which fail) to engage that sense of the erotic and to become aesthetically empowered. Consider, as merely one example, Baby Suggs' “call” in the clearing in which she endeavors to enliven those gathered there by a sense of the erotic that is explicitly tied to seeing one's own body as a source of meaning (both loving and lovable) and value (in social and aesthetic, not merely economic, terms). Such enlivening aims at making a new perspective possible—it facilitates “loving perception,” a way of seeing the world such that one seizes upon and finds one's ecstasies in the *possibilities* of what one perceives.

Shortly following Sethe's escape from slavery, her former master finds her at the house she is sharing with her mother-in-law in Ohio, Baby Suggs. When the master arrives at the house, designated only by its number “124,” Sethe retreats to a shed. There she decides that she and her children would be better off dead than be slaves. Before she can take her own life, the master bursts through the door only to find the baby dead and the other children lying crying nearby. That she would murder her own children is evidence enough that Sethe is “tainted,” and she is viewed as unfit even for life on the plantation. She spends a little time in jail and then returns to 124.

But things are not the same. Once a place where former slaves met, laughed, talked, and tried to heal, 124 is now as anesthetic as its name.

Years later the space, no longer invested with the significances of a *place*, becomes haunted by a baby's ghost. The ghost has violent outbursts and mercilessly taunts the inhabitants until a fellow exslave, Paul D., takes up residence with Sethe and kicks the ghost out of the house. The ghost then appears in the form of a live human being. “Beloved” is all *crave*: for sugar, for complete attention, for life. We are told that “Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes” (Morrison 1987, 57). She had “A touch no heavier than a feather but loaded, nevertheless, with desire. [. . .] The longing [Sethe] saw there was bottomless” (58). Beloved is quite literally the personification of exorcised desire, and she can find no satisfaction.

Baby Suggs has lost her will to live: “Her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse twenty-eight days after her daughter-in-law arrived” (89). It is as if at the very moment that Sethe, Baby Suggs, their family, and their friends finally began to experience the first moments of genuine freedom—described earlier by Baby as a kind of self-granted grace—the shadow of slavery darkened the sky. Before Sethe's ruinous encounter with the master in the shed, Baby Suggs occasionally presided over a gathering of former slaves in a clearing in the wood near her home, issuing a “Call.” The Call is not a sermon, we are told (177), rather it brings the people together as a community and draws them toward pursuing a hitherto unknown love. She tells them that “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard.” The love she evokes is a kind of erotic that would enable them to have the imaginative resources for grace: “She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (88–89). Desiring a route to revaluing their bodies the former slaves laugh, cry, dance, and weep.

Cynthia Willett, in her *The Soul of Justice* (2001), describes this event as a chiefly cathartic moment. I am less inclined to see it as a purging of something that has been constrictive in the past. Baby Suggs' “calling” is a creative exercise or communal practice aimed at the imagination of self- and communal making; it seeks not a release from the past but a reaching toward the future. The difference, as I understand it, is potentially significant: the kind of freedom that would be gained from the removal of impediments or impurities (as *catharsis* suggests) is insufficient for understanding what the meaningful *exercise* of freedom is. In identifying freedom with a communal practice as opposed to an accomplishment of a lone autonomous subject, I follow Willett, but I also think it is crucial to investigate the resources



required to *engage* such a practice. My argument here has been that these resources are significantly, if not exclusively, aesthetic, hence my emphasis on creative and imaginative appropriation rather than purgation. Willett's emphasis on catharsis occludes our sight of expressions of desire (and its failures) to engage a most imaginative and creative activity as it is expressed in Morrison's work. It is the *dis-orderings* and attempted reorderings of desire that seem most vividly at play in *Beloved*.

In *Beloved*, we witness the poverty of aesthetic experience in the lives of many characters. "Color" literally and figuratively evaporates from their lives. Baby Suggs, for example, "was so starved for color. There wasn't any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout. . . . In that sober field, two patches of orange looked wild—like life in the raw" (Morrison 1987, 38). After Sethe kills her child and goes to jail, Baby tells "Stamp Paid" that she's just going to lay down and think about color for the rest of her life (177). Sethe does not notice, but color disappears from her life, too: "[T]he last color she remembered was the pink chips in the headstone of her baby girl. After that she became as color conscious as a hen. . . . It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it" (39). Being severed from a kind of desire that would enable them to creatively and imaginatively live their lives as free and full of possibilities, the characters repeatedly exhibit failure and frustration.

*Beloved's* characters seem to be disabled in ways that their ancestors, who were born in Africa but were enslaved in the United States, were not. What Sethe remembers of her childhood was watching those other slaves transform themselves, if only temporarily. They became enraptured not with fantasies of becoming like white people and not with a kind of nostalgia that can lead to paralyzing resentment. Rather, transported by dancing and singing, they practiced *shape shifting*. Sethe recalls:

Of that place where she was born (Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana?) she remembered only song and dance. Not even her own mother, who was pointed out to her by the eight-year-old child who watched over the young ones—pointed out as the one among many backs turned away from her, stooping in a watery field. [. . .] Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma'ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other. (31)

It is the capacity to imaginatively project oneself as other—to envision one's body as a live, creative, dynamic, and powerful form—that slavery

seems to have stripped from most of the characters in *Beloved*, and it is this same legacy the characters of "Spell #7" endeavor to overcome. Without such power—lacking a form of desire that authorizes and facilitates imaginative transfiguration—they are unable to envision a future that does not resemble the past, unable to sketch before themselves possibilities that differ from the present, unable to give shape to lives that they can come to think of as their own.

Willett emphasizes what happens when the erotic core at the heart of a person is assaulted. The cases she cites strike me as ruptures, breaks in the social bonds. I have focused on what I have characterized as erotic perversions, the ways in which slavery effects a kind of incapacitating desire, desire that is organized for hatred and self-loathing (e.g., that which is exemplified in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and theorized as *ressentiment* in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*) or rendered impotent through direction toward the impossible or other-wordly (e.g., what Baby Suggs explicitly resists and what Beauvoir discusses in her *The Ethics of Ambiguity*). The characters of *Beloved* love—each other, themselves, and their possibilities—badly in the way suggested by Shange in the epigraph to this chapter. Morrison's and Shange's works provide profound examples not only of how we can become severed from the erotic that draws us into transfiguration but also of how vital it is that we gain access to that kind of power in order to see ourselves as free, loving and loveable, and full of possibilities. This is not to say that the characters completely fail to attempt or even have marginal successes in transfiguration. As an example of Sethe's aesthetic reevaluation, see her conversion of the scars she has on her back into "her tree." Paul D. will see the same as "the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display," while Amy (the white indentured servant Sethe meets during her escape) will see the marks as "tiny little cherry blossoms" (Morrison 1987, 17). Willett argues convincingly that the modern conception of autonomy is ill equipped to "protect the person from violations of his meaningful relationships" (2001, 210). I would add that this includes aesthetic meaning—the felt quality of experience as such. The aesthetic is the ground upon which, with which, and out of which the symbolic order is organized, reformed, and shaped anew. *Beloved* ends with the collective forgetting of Beloved's miraculous apparition and subsequent disappearance (Morrison 1987, 274–75). She is "disremembered," which calls to mind the difficulties of "rememory" Sethe experiences. One of the stories "laid down" in that work and in Shange's "Spell #7," perhaps one that *is* to be passed on, is the story of *Eros* (rather than Prometheus) bound, the story that shapes

the many stories witnessed in these texts that mark the binding or constriction of the very desire that is necessary for the pursuit of meaningful freedom.

Making significances and goals appear in the world, discovering reasons for existing, manufacturing joy—these are the goods of the passion, the eros, that animates human existence. Our acquaintance with these activities is what the space of the imaginary domain is supposed to enable. It provides entrée to an apprenticeship in freedom insofar as it serves as a place that we make our own through the imaginative refiguring of our relations to others, ourselves, and our capabilities. It is precisely that facility that is required to make the movements of desire that Beauvoir associates with human vitality and joyful possibilities: to see each goal of our desire not simply as an end in itself but rather as an opening, “a point of departure” (Beauvoir 1948, 28), to new possibilities. It is what enables one to cast oneself into the world in such a way as to disclose its possible meanings and bring forth its desirable qualities. Fanon, Lorde, Shange, and Morrison explore how such bringing forth, or *poiesis*, is relevant for the realization of freedom. For Fanon, the passion Beauvoir describes needs to be able to *burn* if it is to sufficiently fuel revolt against the serious world: it must enable one “to shape a torch with which to burn down the world” (1967, 134). That flame is to be utilized not simply to destroy in the name of vengeance or to be destructive for its own sake. Rather one raises such a torch to blaze a trail out of the serious world that fixes the significance of “the fact of blackness” and determines the horizon of goals that follow from it. At the same time, this fire can be used to ignite a passion that stimulates others to burn. It is the multiple ways in which poetic power is a propellant and accelerant that I have emphasized in the works of Lorde, Shange, and Morrison. Loving, in the form of willing, and authorizing in the sense of creating and sanctioning, are what erotic poetics seek to exercise and make available to others. Aesthetic experience can draw us into this process and help us make it our own. It provides us with a tangible experience of the *aisthesis*—the felt quality—of freedom. Thus enlivened, we are enabled to claim and exercise our authority as makers of meaning and pleasure with others and for ourselves.

## Part II

### Body Agonistes

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## About the Contributors

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