

Chapter 1

---

Testifying  
An Introduction

Prelude I

Tanisha Anderson,  
Yvette Smith,  
Rekia Boyd,  
Natasha McKenna,  
Sandra Bland,  
Kindra Chapman,  
Kimberlee Randle-King,  
Joyce Curnell,  
Ralkina Jones,  
Kayla Moore,  
Gynnya McMillen,  
Korryn Gaines.

...

I name you all and those other Black femmes, girls, and women we have lost as a result of structural/state/quasi-state/individual race-gender violence. I open *Erotic Testimonies: Black Women Daring to Be Wild and Free* with a personal ritual that I use to honor those women who have been stolen from us, from society. I name them. I name these women in

hopes that one day we will all be free. Free to live our lives as sovereign beings. My performance of this ritual, of honoring Black women, is part of my testifying. Testifying is one vehicle I use to live my erotic—that is, my truth. This is my testimony.

This is a book about testifying. Specifically, *Erotic Testimonies* is a book on Black women's acts of testifying and their notes of freedom.



Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another.

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 111–112

What does it mean to be a free Black woman? As we experience COVID-19 and the police brutality pandemics and an economic recession, which are all comingling with preexisting forms of structural violence, what does it mean to be a free Black woman?

Summer 2020, I spend what feels like countless hours sitting on my back porch reading the words of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde, among others. To be specific, I search their words, curiously and fervently looking for how they define and talk about freedom and Black feminine freedom. It seems that we are entering into what for my generation will be our Red Summer—state-sanctioned murders of Black and Brown folk and global resistance to such (for more on the Red Summer of 1919, see Ewing 2019). It is our summer, a summer filled with pandemics that have us sheltering in place as we seek to understand how to protect our minds, bodies, and spirits from the harm of COVID-19 and the harm resulting from race-gender violence while simultaneously protesting against such violence. My understanding of race-gender violence suggests that it is structural, physical, and emotional violence intended to cause harm, hurt, or kill an individual's physical body and soul, based on the simultaneity of their embodied race and gender. So, how do I, as a Black woman, find freedom in the midst of not just this moment, but what for me, like other Black individuals, is a long history of resisting our annihilation? As I sat on my back porch in summer 2020, I was reminded of all those days and nights when I sat in the dark wondering how I was to survive the habitual race-gender violence I faced for ten long years.

I sit and read.  
 Words blur as tears trickle down my cheeks  
 splashing against the page.  
 Words, like my thoughts  
 become murky, so  
 I let my mind wander,  
 imagining a space of freedom and ease.  
 A place that does not require me to fight for survival.  
 I enter my interior, and I find rest.

That is what it feels like at times, like I am in a constant state of fighting for the existence of a sovereign Black personhood. To help ease the pain of it all, I created altars where I remember the Black women, known and unknown, who fought for my freedom. I remind myself of the value of my personhood by reading the sacred texts of Black women, written by those I name above among others. They offer me their testimony; whether it is in the form of fiction, poetry, biomythography, song, choreopoem, prose, or some other form, Black women have recorded their testimonies and how they seek freedom. The testimonies they offer me (and us) lie in the erotic, which is that place that is deep in the interior of the Black feminine divine—that place of truth. Through their testimonies, I enter into my interior.

In 1978 Audre Lorde authored the celebrated and often cited essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”—it was first presented as a talk at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on History of Women, Mount Holyoke College. Since then, many have cited this essay, and it has informed much research (McLauchlan 2018; Young 2012; Molina, 1994). However, to date, no full-length work explores how Black-identified women engage their erotic. Lorde (1984, 57) forcefully writes, “Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives.” Engaging the erotic, for Lorde, was a way to ignite the self to facilitate social transformations. The self that Lorde references is not “the self of liberal individualism” and neither is it used to maintain or prop up neoliberal social formations or ideologies (Bambara 1983, 13). Instead, the self is an “aesthetics of existence” which is used for the abolition of oppressive structures and for the liberation of those who face systemic oppression (Bambara 1983, 13). Consequently,

the erotic is simultaneously a technique of the self and a social practice available when Black women tap into their interior—that place of truth.<sup>1</sup>

*A place of*<sup>2</sup>  
“our deepest and nonrational knowledge”  
*that personifies* “creative power and harmony.”  
A “well of replenishing and provocative force.”  
*It is the* “life force of women.”  
*Available to the woman*  
“who does not fear its revelation.”  
*It is that*  
“internal sense of satisfaction” *that once*  
*experienced,*  
*Our work*  
“becomes a conscious decision.”  
*So, we can no longer*  
*separate the spiritual from the political nor the sensual.*  
*The erotic,* “our deepest knowledge.”  
“empowers us.”  
*Functioning,*  
*by* “forcing us to evaluate those aspects *of our lives* honestly.”  
“Flow[ing] and color[ing] *our* lives with a kind of energy”  
that “heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all [our]  
experiences.”  
*So that our actions* “against oppression.”  
*take on a new tenor.* So that we  
“become  
integral with self,  
motivated and,  
empowered from within.”<sup>3</sup>

Not only does Audre Lorde inform us about how the erotic functions, but she tells us how the erotic functions in her life. Her testimony informs us that the erotic functions

1. by “providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person,”

and

2. by “the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy” (Lorde 1984, 56)

In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Audre Lorde offers an aesthetic of being at an individual and collective level. *Erotic Testimonies: Black Women Daring to be Wild and Free*, like a jazz song, riffs Lorde’s concept of the erotic to explore Black women’s use of it in the face of race-gender violence. And through their testimonies, I delve into how they dare to live wild and free.

How and why am I connecting the uses of the erotic, the interior, truth-telling, and testimony? And what does any of this have to do with “wild” and free Black women? Lorde (1984) tells us,

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual’s. (58)

Audre Lorde offers a way of being/existing in the world that calls on us to know our truths deeply. We come to know that truth by going into the interior of our being and using that, the erotic—our deepest feelings—as a way of organizing our lives. Through the use of our erotic, we can engage in self-articulation and self-actualization. This self-articulation and self-actualization are then shared in community, via testimony, through our words and our deeds. And this is how we begin to effect change at both an individual and communal level.



In this book, I seek to tell the story of how four Black women live their erotic—recognizing that the *I* they reference is also part of the collective *we*—and how they use self, individual and collective, to resist and create change. What makes these women “wild”? Using Black feminism’s understanding of interiority, I understand being a wild woman as one who uses an intuitive spiritual approach, that deep “female and spiritual plane,” referenced by Lorde, and its sensuousness to heal from oppressive structures. I understand that “female and spiritual plane” as our interior,

the place where our feelings reside. When we can access our interior, which requires work and often hard work, then there is an opportunity to align body, mind, and spirit to live an understanding of oneself that (sometimes) allows us to live outside of the often prototypical, stereotypical, or socially sanctioned understanding of Black womanhood, whether that is an understanding of the “respectable” Black woman, the “angry” Black woman, the “welfare queen” Black woman, and the list continues. It is in this space, the interior, that the women who testify here become wild.

Although Audre Lorde does not employ the term *wild woman* in her often-cited piece “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” she writes, “the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feelings” (1984, 53). *Wild woman*, as a concept, is my interpretation of how Lorde suggests that the erotic is grounded in aligning one’s inner truth with one’s outward endeavors. She says that when women live their erotic (outside the expectations of womanhood), they are often feared,

The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women. (Lorde 1984, 57–58)

Furthermore, Lorde cautions us not to reduce the erotic only to the sexual plane. To that end, she writes, “So we are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex” (Lorde 1984, 55). Consequently, when the erotic is only rested on the plane of sex, Lorde implores us to recognize that dissatisfaction sets in.

The women who share their testimonies in this book on Black women’s feelings seemingly embody Audre Lorde’s understanding of the uses of the erotic.<sup>4</sup> One woman uses yoga and Judaism as part of her understanding of self. A second woman exists in a queer space, has experienced sexual violence, and uses this as her entry into race-gender-sexuality-class organizing. And then there is the Black woman who is a Shaman storyteller. For the fourth individual, I opted to tell the story of a Black femme-identified witch. Working their way through state and culturally sanctioned religions, this individual has found respite being a witch. Before this project, these women were known to me—either

directly or indirectly. For the most part, they all have a public presence because of the work that they do—to build community. In fact, of the four women, only one is known to me indirectly—I came across her work and was intrigued by how she articulated her life as a witch. In their way, and as they share their truths, these women have allowed me to come deeper into my erotic. In chapters 3 through 6, I introduce these women in more detail. But why should you even care about the testimonies of these women? The testimonies “become pedagogical and transformative [thereby] opening a space for personal healing, public dialogue, and policy changes” (Spry 2011, 56). Beyond this, these four Black women’s testimonies help us advance Black feminist thought.



*Erotic Testimonies* is written in a manner that resonates from my erotic. In 2019 I wrote,

I also exit in terms of the nature of the research I engage in and how I choose to write—as represented, for example, in this piece. I write this piece without some of the usual elements that tend to accompany academic writings. For example, I use, minimally, headings and subheadings. As I have grown as an academic, I have grappled with why this form of writing has never sat well with me. It always felt that performing my writing in a particular manner reinscribed Western notions of knowledge production and the ways of translating “knowledge.” Beyond this, I simply wanted to write this part of my story on my relationship with academia in a way that was reflective of my identity—a Black woman from Barbados—and how the women like my grand-mother often told their stories and how they developed theory based on lived realities to challenge power structures. (72)

Consequently, this project is written to mirror the testimonies told by my grandmother. The way she and other Black women would testify could result in a tale stretched over time and space—elements offered at different times, constructing a whole while often leaving holes. The testimonies would meander, like a river, trickling or gushing at different times as my gran opted to reveal what she chose to reveal. Her testimonies were

sometimes peppered with different Bajan sayings—some familiar and some less so, often leaving me to wonder did she make that up in the moment. I would sometimes laugh or become somber based on the nature of the testimony and how she chose to tell it. But I was always delighted when my gran decided to offer a testimony that allowed me a glimpse into her interior. In the manner in which my gran would share her testimonies, this work is written in such a way as to be more evocative as opposed to descriptive (Prendergast, Leggo, and Sameshima 2009; Leggo 2008). I sincerely hope that you engage the project through a lens of “think with,” as opposed to “think about,” the testimonies of the women offered here (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 735). In other words, I invite you to become a part of the testimony, to engage in your own performative embodied reading. As you read, think alongside us about how you enter your erotic. This allows for *Erotic Testimonies* to become a shared creation where we can see each other—individually and collectively.

*Erotic Testimonies* is a project about creating and analyzing—what I think of as an interpretive journey. It brings together social science, conventional academic writing, and the arts as a means of challenging these demarcations we often encounter in society. This is a genre-blending text. I use poetry, a blend of my words and the words of authors, to talk about theory and the approach to this “study” as a means of situating *Erotic Testimonies* in the lineage of Black feminist thinking and doing. As a reminder, I italicize my words to set them apart from direct quotes which are indicated with quotation marks, and citations are offered in footnotes so as not to disrupt the poetry. I do this as

*Black feminist writers tell us to  
dismantle the master’s house<sup>5</sup>  
But not with his tools  
If we want to be able to  
Move  
From the margin to the center.<sup>6</sup>  
So, we write in our invented genres  
exploit[ing] “unconventional citation styles.”<sup>7</sup>  
Cause, this is how we get  
free.*

Consequently, I offer you this interpretive journey. As Elaine Richardson (2003, 82) says, “The Black woman’s consciousness of her condition/ing,



her position/ing in American society, the condition/ing of her audiences must be factored into her language and literacy practices.” When I factor in my/our language, this project in its own way becomes wild, mirroring the inventiveness of the women who inform it.

Sometimes We Moan:  
A Way of Entering the Interior

*Testimony,  
holding our feminine energy,  
is both personal and political.  
It is sensuous and liberating.*

As a little girl sitting in the Church of God in Welchman Hall, St. Thomas, Barbados, I would often witness those answering the call to give a testimony. Mainly, women would stand and testify of how good God had been to them or a family member. Testimonies of “God saved me . . .” and “I’m here by the grace of God to tell you of God’s mercy . . .” peppered the air. These testimonies were often mingled with eruptions of “Praise God” and the deep, deep moans of those who bore witness to the testimony.

Outside of church, I got to witness my gran give her testimony. In the middle of completing a task, she would sometimes declare, “Thank you, Jesus!” It sometimes felt random; I was a little girl witnessing her testifying. But what I learned from my gran was that those outbursts were part of her internal dialogue. They reflected that internal place where only she had the privilege of seeing, feeling, and experiencing. But ever so often, the internal would come to the surface and burst forth like a flower budding early in the dawn. It was always there, just the form of it all changed. So, I learned from my gran that we, at least some of us, are always testifying (and that testifying is not simply religious). My grandmother taught me a lot about testifying, and long before I ever explored it as an approach that I would one day rely on as part of my work on telling Black women’s stories. And so, I find myself depending on what my gran taught me as an epistemology/practice of how Black women testify. I rely on this knowledge and that knowledge written by and about Black women to speak on the epistemology of testimony. As a practice of collecting and sharing the testimony of the women who graciously shared theirs, I understand that:

1. Testifying allows that which is on the interior to be shared—with others, God, or just the universe;
2. The testifier has control over what is shared and how. They are the narrators of their story, and as such, their testimony need not be interpreted or changed; and
3. As the recipient of the testimony, I have agency in how I can engage. I can declare “amen,” moan, or simply remain silent, taking only what I need and offering only what is available to me—as such, testifying is a dialectical practice.

The testimony of the Black women who inform *Erotic Testimonies* is a blend of the emotional, mystical, and physical. As Lorde describes in “Uses of the Erotic,” the erotic is multidimensional including the political, sensuousness, and spirituality. The testimonies I listened to and interacted with are that same blend that I witnessed sitting in the pews of the Church of God and the same blend that layered my gran’s utterances. These utterances were a part of my gran’s process of self-actualization.

Black feminist thought often explores the notion of social images and how they are read vis-à-vis Black womanhood. They also analyze/study how Black women work to “create,” self-actualize, themselves in light of race-gender-class-sexuality-religion and other oppressive structures and often negative social images. While it is often implied that this creation of self is an internal project—that place in the interior that this study explores—one can also examine that creation as an external project. Self-creation can become an external project when women live the erotic in their day to day, their activism, and their way of being in the world—what literature refers to as praxis (see Taylor 1998). Thus, bringing together these elements of self-actualization—the internal and external—is a way of exploring how these women understand the erotic and how they dare to live the erotic.

I attempt to tap into the interior, the place where the erotic resides, by asking each woman to reflect on the following words: wild, interior, divine, feminine, energy, and erotic (words extracted, in part, from Lorde’s writings). These words serve as cues, highlighting emotional standpoints of moments of transformation and decision-making that are located in the feeling body as opposed to the external world. One can imagine these words as creating a container of sorts to go within. This process was not an interview as traditionally understood but more of a think-with process. Wild, interior, divine, feminine, energy, and erotic were selected as they

allowed us to give language to feeling states—what can be a really vulnerable space. As I posed the words, the four Black women, in the moment, engaged in a process of think and feel. Consequently, the responses were spontaneous and, at times, raw. I was able to see the movement of their thoughts and the feelings they elicited as they flowed with and through the words. Being in this space with these women required a type of trust and respect—all nurtured and nourished given our shared interest in truth, justice, and liberation.

The testimonies they share may meander in a way that makes sense to them. My role as the holder of the testimony is less to analyze it for themes and more so to offer the reader a rendition of the truths, alongside my truth, that are shared with me. Janette Taylor (1998, 59) writes, “It is not enough to just collect narrative data; rather, we must attempt to locate ourselves and perform research in ways that affirm African American women.” To this end, Taylor suggests the use of testimony as a means for not only locating oneself but also affirming African American women. This is how we get to the context-specific knowledge (grounded in feelings) held by Black women (also thought of as their standpoint) because “as informants, Black women are no longer simply talked to, but talk for themselves” (Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett 2003, 207). A tradition of Black feminism is that Black women should be allowed to speak not just about their experiences but also speak from their own experiences (Collins 2000).

Consequently, I did not massage and/or shape their stories in any way but instead received the testimony and shared it with the reader. And this is where Gloria Anzaldúa becomes valuable as I organize how to present the testimonies of the four women. As Anzaldúa (1990 cautions,

Let the reader beware—I here and now issue a caveat peruser: s/he must do the work of piecing this text together. . . . As the perspective and focus shift, as the topics shift, the listener/reader is forced into participating in the making of meaning—she is forced to connect the dots, to connect the fragments. (xviii)

This approach may challenge academic norms. The same norms that were not necessarily designed to accommodate Black women and our ways of knowing, but that we are expected to follow when we write our stories.

“Gaining insight into the everyday lives of African-American women and how they interpret them requires conscious methodological approaches and research practices.” (Mullings 2000, 20) When this project first came

to me, I knew that I could not simply use the methods I had been trained in as an economist or political scientist. Such training seems to go against what this book on testimonies was calling for. I needed a “conscious methodological approach and research practice,” and so I searched beyond my “disciplines” learning how to un-discipline myself in the process. Eventually, I found a model of how to do this work—of how to engage with testimony in a way that allowed my voice to fade into the background or to simply play a supporting role—like the women who would call out “amen” as another testified. So, I borrowed from others to compose how I respond to the testimonies shared (my process of intimate relation) and how I present the testimonies. From Marya Sosulski, Nicole Buchanan, and Chandra Donnell (2010), I got the following:

1. “Privilege the voices of the narrators and their “interpretations by examining their actual language and symbolic meaning and presents an overview of the connections the narrators make as they weave their stories into the whole narrative construction.” (37)

Janette Taylor (2005) contributed,

Except a few sentences, only minor editing has been done when necessary to clarify the women’s words. The results may be read as a sequence of

2. “intersecting or interwoven stories contained under a theme that represents the collective voice or as single or separate ideas.” (1479)

I pay attention to what the women return to in telling their stories. I also pay attention to the utterances that may not be picked up and repeated but are offered, as they too are important to the testimony. Finally, as this is an embodied performative reading, I pay attention to my responses, how I think with the testimonies. Combined, they offer a multilayered, textually rich testimony.

I was trying to fit these “wild Black women” into a particular format for this book. And I could not see it. I simply could not get it done. It was because they were screaming *no* the whole time as I tried to stuff the women into something they did not want to be. “I’m listening, ya’ll.”

I put the project down and went for a walk. During this walk, I had a meeting with Audre Lorde. It went something like this:

ME: Audre, I don't know what to do. I genuinely don't know what to do with these testimonies. Any thoughts?

AUDRE: [silence]

ME: Well, I guess I'll let it be.

AUDRE: Talk to your ancestors. Invite in the spirits.

ME: I thought that's what I was doing.

AUDRE: I write about Black goddesses and spirits. Let them guide you.

I continued my walk, trusting that this would make sense. But I could not help but wonder how one can use the ancestors and spirits to guide "analysis"? This did not fit anything I had been trained to do.

Eventually, it did. Audre Lorde was invoking the sacred and ancient spirituality. Karla Holloway (1992, 2) says, "It is through the ancient spirituality of this (African-American) literature that the unity of soul and gender is not challenged but is recovered and celebrated. Within this spirituality, the recovered metaphor that articulates the relationship between soul and gender is the metaphor of the goddess/ancestor."

Lorde's body of work reflects her engagement with the sacred and mystical, illustrating how she centers Black feminine power and how it works to imagine and create a more just society. Often, Lorde intersects the spiritual/mystical with collective power movement by drawing on West African goddesses. In the poem "A Woman Speaks," Lorde references the "witches of Dahomey," a type of nod to Vodoun, a West African religious practice. She speaks of how Black goddesses, which also reside in Black women, will rise with "magic" that is "unwritten" and indeed unknown.

Lorde speaks of  
Orishala/Eshu/Mother Yemonja,  
how she and the "beautiful Oshun . . . lie down together"<sup>8</sup>  
Oya

And of

Eshidale's priests, whom she tells us, will be "very busy" in their work of righting wrongs.<sup>9</sup>

Ancestral Black feminine spirit energies and power are centered, bringing together the spiritual and material worlds. Lorde is recovering their voices in the face of white normativity that privileges one way of knowing, thus articulating the relationship that Holloway speaks of. She inserts the past into our prospects of the future by showing us a different way of knowing in the present. Presented to us by Lorde is a way of knowing that is grounded in Black women's subjectivity. And it is through this knowing that Black women can cultivate a whole self, a whole Black women self, that stands outside of constructed distinctions.

My challenge is that I wanted to have the women fit into chapters organized around the words that I used in our conversations. This approach was not working, and I do not know why. After that conversation with Audre Lorde, I listened to my ancestors and decided to give each woman their own story. In a conversation with a friend, she described it this way (and I'm paraphrasing). There is no need to blend the women into one. Each has her essence, their own story; every rainbow has a blend of colors where each color ends and the other begins. The essence of these women is that they each have their own story and experiences, and they stand in them flat-footed. The blend you are seeking is in their essence. So, while I asked each woman to respond to a series of words, I seek not to blend their responses because to do such is to dilute a bit of her essence.

And I offer no analysis of their words, but instead, I offer my "field notes" and the notes I took in the margins as I read and reread the transcripts. These notes capture what I mean by performative embodied reading. The titles of the chapters are based on the words of the women and what resonated with my spirit during and even after our conversation. And I did what Audre Lorde instructed me to do. I went back to her writings on Black goddesses and spirits and sat for a long time until the "method" came to me. I allowed the spirit and the ancestors to guide the write-up of each chapter. Each woman was presented to me either in a color, sound/song, or texture, along with some quality that I later researched and matched to African mythology. Teal and Yemaya, alongside the song "Window Seat" by Eryka Badu, guides the write-up of Maya. Red, and not some bright red, but this intense red color that

seems to have traces of black and other colors mixed in, and the African goddess Ashiakle and crescent moons inform the write-up of Sekile. The spirit of Oshun guided my write-up of Val, and when I hear Val, I hear rain, the steady beat of raindrops hitting the once upon a time tin roofs that covered homes in Barbados. For Lakeesha, the color green and Oya capture her essence.

### When the Author Testifies

**i long**  
*i long to write, but in different ways.*  
*allowing all parts of me to come*  
*together,*  
*creating that genre that has yet to be named.*  
*I long to write,*  
*in a way that defies Western Ideology,*  
*using words and symbols that are yet known.*  
*i long, to write.*

This is the space where I offer up a bit of my testimony—what is often termed autoethnography in the academy. I offer autoethnographic poems as a way of thinking of how I began the process of entering into my interior to discover and live my erotic.

The above poem, “i long,” is part of my testimony of living with race-gender violence and my struggle to find myself in the midst of it all. At some point in our lives, Black women experience race-gender violence either directly or indirectly. We are subjected to the murders of Koryn Gaines, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, . . . We are subjected to what those in power now term *microaggressions*, those insidious acts of what I term racism that we experience in our daily lives. Well, I lived with all of that in addition to repeated attacks against my Black womanhood (Jordan-Zachery 2019). As we say in Barbados, my tongue is tied in telling the stories of all of my experiences. But what I can tell you is that my experience was insidious and raised to a level that I had never experienced before. I eventually termed my experiences with the race-gender violence I faced “the swamp.” Although my experience was tangible, it was reflected in my mind, body, and spirit; I needed something to help me visualize it all. So, I drew it, and I wrote,

*The swamp is  
“institutional betrayal.”<sup>10</sup>  
that place of evil  
where soul murder<sup>11</sup> is committed . . .  
a form of containment  
seeking to limit me.  
Soul Murder*

I kept thinking of the idea and ideography of “soul murder” as a method for articulating my experience as I was left feeling like a shell of myself. All that I loved was seemingly stripped away from me. My words, my hair, my sense of being grounded. All gone as a result of race-gender violence.

While it was hard for me to manage all that I experienced, it was especially hard to manage not writing.

*Watching my words escape  
or maybe  
laying dormant  
inaccessible regardless.  
Phantom pain  
becoming all too real,  
I sit, longing to write.  
Yet, the English language fails me.  
The language given to me,  
or forced upon me  
as I didn't have a choice  
but to learn the language of my colonizer.  
I find myself trapped,  
wanting to utter words  
but muted.  
The words escaping me.  
Or maybe,  
laying dormant.  
Inaccessible regardless.*

How can I be an academic and not write? How can I be a lover of words and not write? I have always loved words. As a little girl, I remember how I would lie next to my mother, an avid reader, and “read” alongside her. I was maybe two or three, or somewhere in between those ages. We would



lie next to each other, on our backs with our knees bent, reading. When she turned her page, I turned my page. Captivated. Linked together by words on a page, falling in love with words and my mother, I would lie there. Entering into my feeling body. My mother tells the story of how she came to pick me up from “school” one day only to find me in tears. I was around three years old and had begged to go to school. As she tells the story, she rushed toward me and bent down to look me in the eye.

“What’s wrong?” she asked

I replied by holding up a pencil. Followed by tears streaming down my face.

According to her, she was even more confused. I guess she expected that I was in physical pain. But I was not. And holding up a pencil made no sense.

But I was in pain. The teacher had cut the pencils in half and had given us each our half.

Eventually, as my mother tells the story, I hiccupped and asked how was I to write with such a small pencil. I asked for a whole pencil.

I am apt to believe my mother’s tale as I strongly detest anything but a new well-sharpened no. 2 pencil.

So, you see, words have long mattered to me. And they matter to me for lots of reasons. Words matter to me in my capacity as an academic, but more importantly, they matter because of the connection I have to words, a connection that makes me feel loved and secure. So not writing was a profound loss and symptomatic of the fact that I was trying to survive in what, for me, was a very violent space.

Eventually, I exited that place that encapsulated so much of my pain. But one does not exit such a space without wounds and deep wounds. I had endured for ten long years. And those ten years were present on my mind, my body, and my spirit. During that period, I began to associate with violence, harm, and torment. And so, I retreated into me. Eventually, I would find therapists, Black therapists, that understood the violence associated with racism and how Black women experience such violence. They offered me the help I needed to gain perspective on all that I was trying to desperately manage—the swamp. I found Black therapists who heard me, saw me, and held the space I needed by giving me a language to express my experiences with race-gender violence. These therapists invited me back into my feeling body. They told me I was suffering from race-based trauma and resulting posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

## PTSD

It still seems so foreign when I think or speak of PTSD. The acronym does not easily slide off my tongue. But I try to make it real so as not to be consumed by it all. And so, I fought—weekly therapy sessions, journaling, yoga, speaking—telling my story of race-gender violence, resisting, and, more importantly, finding a way to live with it all. I had to find a way to feel and live my truth despite my experiences with race-gender violence. It was not easy then, and it's not easy now. But,

*I entered  
a journey from trauma,  
to now learning to live with trauma.  
I called on “the Black mother within each of us”<sup>12</sup>  
And entered into  
A sensual, spiritual, and political project of self-recognition  
and self-actualization.  
Entering into that space,  
that space that anchors me/us against oppression.  
Opening me/us up to “the affirmation of the particulars of  
[our] lived experiences”<sup>13</sup>  
I found my way  
to my erotic.*

Entering into my erotic has been and is a process. A process of deep joy, pain, self-reflection, and learning how to be in community. I have had deep conversations with myself about what it means to be a Black woman, a citizen of a previous British colony who migrated to the US at the age of sixteen, who mothers, who is a professor, who was once married, about how I engage in capitalism, my work, Christianity, and life in general. As part of my process of entering my erotic, I read a lot of the words of Black women and use these words to ask myself to think critically of how I engage in work.

“Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision—a longed for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered.” (Lorde 1984, 55) I wanted my work and not just my work in a capitalist sense, but my being, my “aesthetics of existence” that Toni Cade Bambara (1983) talks about, to allow me to

rise up feeling empowered. I wanted the words, my writing, to deeply reflect my interior, that place of truth.

*Why? Because  
our definition of self  
is sharpened  
“by exposing the self in work.”<sup>14</sup>  
The act of self-definition  
is a part,  
a crucial part,  
of the liberating practice that is central to Black feminism.<sup>15</sup>*

I did not simply want to write about Black feminism. I wanted to practice Black feminism.

I did not simply want to write about Black feminine self-articulation. I wanted to practice Black feminine self-articulation.

I did not simply want to write about freedom and Black women’s freedom. I wanted to practice freedom.

I wanted all of me to be reflected in all I do.

I wanted to be “wild” in all I do. I wanted to create me in my truth and have it underlie all I do. This, to me, was how I would approach race-gender violence and the resulting trauma. I long for all of this even in a context where “the opportunities for Black women to carry out autonomously defined investigations of self in a society which through racial, sexual and class oppression systematically denies our existence have been by definition limited” (Hull and Smith 1982, xviii). Writing became my way of living—for carrying out my investigations of self.

I cannot pinpoint the turning point at which I was able to come back to writing. I thought my days of writing were long behind me. And to some extent, that is true. The nature and being of my writing have changed. My sense of myself as a writer has changed. How I practice writing has changed. And I cannot always speak to these changes in a tangible manner, and I have come to accept that what rests on the interior need not always be defined tangibly. But the things I have written since exiting that space and being diagnosed with PTSD seem different—the style, the organization, the tone, and tenor of it all is different. I can tell you that once I had a language of what I was experiencing—race-gender violence and PTSD—I had to find a way to express it all.

Tamika Carey's analysis of Black women writers, expresses how writing becomes that conduit that affords Black women with maps, imaginative maps, to healing and as a source for writing oneself free. Through writing, I was able to "enact [my] agency in resisting or repairing the conditions that wound" me (Carey 2016, 27). *Erotic Testimonies* is, in part, my testimony of how I put all of the pieces of me back together in the face of race-gender violence. It is a spiritual, sensuous, and political project that seeks to see Black women and our truths.

### Truth Telling: Black Feminism and Poetic Inquiry

*epistemology creates the methodology*  
as methods have politics.<sup>16</sup>  
*i lay bare my politics.*  
*a politics*  
*resting in and birthed from*  
*my experiences,*  
*the experiences of those who came before me*  
*and the experiences of those who will come after.*  
*a politics of truth-telling.*  
*these are mine.*

*Erotic Testimonies: Black Women Daring to Be Wild and Free* is a Black feminist autoethnographic, ethnographic, poetic inquiry study of Black women's interior. I rely on Black feminist theory because,

"Unlike any other movement  
Black feminism provides the theory."  
*A theory that*  
*"clarifies the nature of black women's experience."*<sup>17</sup>  
For me, it is  
a theory of resistance.<sup>18</sup>  
*A theory and a way of being that allows me/us*  
*to challenge*  
*narratives of Black female inferiority.*  
*Exposing the cracks in movements that*  
*see only race or gender and not both,*<sup>19</sup>