

Sweat, Display, and Blackness

The Promises of Liquidity

ABSTRACT This essay analyzes two African artifacts—a nkisi and a bieri—in order to parse the utility of liquidity as a Black feminist analytic. Enlarging the concept of media to incorporate these artifacts, the text links diaspora, blackness, and affect to the violence of colonial rupture, while also using an analytic of sweat to explore forms of expressivity that escape capture. Sweat becomes a way to think between two axes within Black feminist thought: the pornographification of the racialized body that Hortense Spillers and others have described, and the joy and critique embedded in Audre Lorde’s erotic, especially in relation to formations of diaspora and spirituality. **KEYWORDS** Black feminism, blackness, diaspora, liquidity, sweat

First, the provocation: What can a pair of “sweating statues” on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York tell us about mediation and feminist possibilities? One is a nkisi, made in the nineteenth or twentieth century in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo as part of a religious practice to communicate with ancestors and ward off misfortune (fig. 1). The nkisi I am referring to stands thirty-nine inches high and is made of wood, metal, feathers, and other materials. Curatorial notes highlight its spiritual dimension: “Songye nganga (religious specialist) endowed this carved figure with spiritual powers by inserting symbolic substances—animal, vegetable, and mineral—into its head, abdomen, and shoulders, and by attaching bundles of similar ingredients to its chest, neck, and feet. Offerings to ancestral spirits who bestow fertility and provide protection against disease and misfortune are still visible in the sculpture’s mouth. Owned by community members who consult it at public ceremonies.”¹ The second is a Fang reliquary figure, a bieri (or byeri), made of wood and metal in the shape of a woman and standing twenty-five and a half inches tall (fig. 2). According to the curators, it “embod[ies] the qualities that the Fang admire most in people—namely, tranquility, vitality, and the ability to hold opposites in

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FIGURE 1. Songye peoples, male (nkisi) community power figure, 19th or 20th century. Wood, copper, brass, iron, fiber, snakeskin, leather, fur, feathers, mud, resin, 39 × 10 1/2 × 11 in. (99.1 × 26.7 × 27.9 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310453>.

balance. These qualities are conveyed in this figure through the juxtaposition of an infant's large head with the developed body of an adult, and the contrast of a static, symmetrical pose and passive, expressionless face with the tension of bulging muscles on the arms and legs.² It was carved in what is now northern Gabon in the nineteenth or early twentieth century.

What I am naming "sweat" is technically what happens when wood metabolizes palm oil—even centuries after its ritualistic applications. Though currently enclosed in glass, the nkisi secretes oil (mixed with other substances) in large drops that hang from its chin and other parts of its body. This



FIGURE 2. Fang peoples, Okak group, seated female figure (bieri) from a reliquary ensemble, 19th or early 20th century. Wood, metal, $25 \frac{3}{16} \times 7 \frac{7}{8} \times 6 \frac{1}{2}$ in. ($64 \times 20 \times 16.5$ cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310870>.

sweating is a tangible, material reminder that we might consider the nkisi within a history of media—as something that connects generations, species, and spirits. I see the nkisi as mediating multiple sets of relations in addition to enlarging perceptions of what media can do by offering lubrication against misery (disease or misfortune). Like the nkisi, the bieri also mediates familial relations—between Fang people and their ancestors. In its case, the connection is more literal, in that bieri serve as guardians for the boxes that contain ancestral bones. In order to communicate with these ancestors, the bieri were, as Jessica Levin Martinez writes, rubbed with various liquids: “One key

response was to rub a mixture of palm oil, powdered charcoal, copal, and red padouk powder and to splash medicinal plant waters on the sculpture and skulls, in part to activate their powers of communication.”³

These mixtures of ritual and belief mean that I prefer to keep the source of sweating ambiguous. Palm oil is but one ingredient in the *mélange* of spirituality and ancestor worship. As Elias Bongmba writes, “Ancestral spirituality is also a dialogue between the living and the ancestors. Like any kind of communication between human and supernatural beings, dialogue with ancestors is an activity of faith. Making objects, constructing shrines, offering sacrifices—everything that goes along with ancestor veneration—is an attempt to stay in touch with the ultimate source of power. Ancestors communicate with their relatives through dreams, visions, or even misfortune and catastrophic events.”⁴ Monique Allewaert might connect this to a larger African-based onto-epistemology where people and objects are not so strictly separate; she describes this expansive formation as a type of ecological personhood. The entire assemblage containing (at least) spirits, ancestors, wood, palm oil, practitioners, and interiority is distributed throughout: “Far from being wordless or mute, [these objects] could be conceived as dense interiorities or constellations of force that could store, process, and actualize information and that were also crucial to the production of the collectivities, or assemblages, through which personhood was articulated.”⁵ A person is not an insular being distinct from “external” entities and forces, but an ecological being whose components are diffuse and not self-same. This dispersal of personhood is why I am not referring to the *nkisi* and *bieri* as statues, a term that usually refers to a state of inanimate objecthood.

Sweat, too, is a somewhat contested term in this context, since it usually refers to a human mechanism of thermoregulation. But I am interested in how sweat indexes a metabolic process. It is both internal and external to flesh, inseparable from sensation and affect, and in this way offers its own version of mediation. More specifically, I use an analytic of sweat to parse the violence of the colonial rupture, while also thinking about the ways that sweat might index forms of expressivity that escape capture. In this way, I am using sweat to think between two axes within Black feminist thought: the pornographification of the racialized body that Hortense Spillers and others have described, and the joy and critique embedded in Audre Lorde’s erotic, especially in relation to formations of diaspora and spirituality.

MEDIATION, THE MODERN MUSEUM, AND THE OBJECT OF "AFRICA"

One way to look at what the nkisi and bieri are doing vis-à-vis mediation is to think about the work they are performing in the African Art section of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The modern museum serves several purposes simultaneously.⁶ It is a place where people can congregate. It is an archive. It is a space where objects are classified. And it is a place where people learn. What they are learning, more specifically, is what counts as civilization. As such, the modern museum is one of the tools that the nineteenth century produced in its commitment to classification and discipline. The museum, however, also perpetuates the subject-object divide. Reading the nkisi and bieri as art is part of a current of racialized spectacularity, which itself speaks to a specifically racialized and colonial form of objectification.

For example, Sarita See makes explicit the connection between museums and projects of colonization and empire in her analysis of the Filipino archives at the University of Michigan's Museum of Anthropology. In addition to arguing that what counts as knowledge itself has been produced through an extractive relationship to the Philippines and Indigenous Filipinos specifically, See argues that the logic of accumulation that undergirds the museum (and its archive) is reliant on the production of the racial primitive: "Primitivity first was used as a justification for scientific conquest, which preceded genocidal conquest. The settler colonial fantasy of *terra nullius*—empty land by way of the genocidal emptying of land—is accompanied by what I propose to call 'knowledge *nullius*,' the American quest for knowledge that putatively was accrued about (rather than stolen from) Filipino primitives. I moreover propose that this concept of knowledge *nullius* demands that we reconfigure the study of representation."⁷ What See is asking us to understand is that the concept of a colonial archive relies on and produces otherness as something to be studied, something to be objectified. In this way, racial difference becomes stabilized and knowledge is structured hierarchically. See's analysis helps us consider the subject-object binary through the simultaneous prisms of knowledge making and racialization.

Racialized others become "objects"—an ontological status that implies a racialized formation of nonlinear temporality that I call temporal stagnation.⁸ This overlap between objectification and stasis also tightly tethers racialized others to objects displayed in museums through the language of artifacts, with the difference between people and objects becoming increasingly narrow. In this suturing of people and things, we also find another form

of stasis beyond the temporal—one that speaks to the cessation of movement or engagement with these objects. The museum severs the connection of these objects with communities and spirituality, and value now accrues to the knowledge that the objects allegedly contain. This accounts for the museum’s aura of preservation as well as the presence of museum guards to protect the art (though their job has many other components). What I want us to see, however, is that these series of assumptions tell us something about the presumed status of objects. Instead of thinking with possibilities of animacy, objects fall under a logic of possession. See’s narrative shows us how this logic of possession is central to the logic of settler colonialism. From the perspective of the history of objects we see that this logic of possession severs possibilities of agency from objecthood and narrows perspectives on objects. We see a compression in modes of relating to objects, specifically a flattening of possible sensory orientations and intimacies, and a furthering of the gap between people and things, thereby doubling the violent impact of racialization’s objectification.⁹

This constricted version of intimacy, which relies on a separation between people and things, finds resonance with Lisa Lowe’s argument in *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015) that “there is also a colonial division of intimacy, which charts the historically differentiated access to the domains of liberal personhood, from interiority and individual will, to the possession of property and domesticity.” While Lowe argues that this delineation is constitutive of liberal subjectivity and modernity, I am interested in her use of these affective contours to show us how they produced the idea of race, understood as that which is not white, and therefore distanced from liberal subjectivity but knowable through its consolidation into various constellations of objecthood. Lowe writes, “*Race* as a mark of colonial difference is an enduring reminder of the processes through which the human is universalized and freed by liberal forms, while the peoples who created the conditions of possibility for that freedom are assimilated or forgotten. The genealogy of modern liberalism is thus also a genealogy of modern race; racial differences and distinctions designate the boundaries of the human and endure as remainders attesting to the violence of liberal universality.”¹⁰ What Lowe draws our attention to is the other work upon which these processes of categorization rely: the naturalization of the idea of the human as interchangeable with that of liberal subjectivity, the emphasis on freedom in relation to movement and change, and the imagined universality of whiteness, produced,

of course, through suppressing forms of non-whiteness. Race in this way becomes imagined as a tangible, knowable object.

See's and Lowe's theorizations of race in relation to objects complicate our understanding of the relationships between representation, race, and objectification in the museum. Conceptually, museums organize our orientation toward objects, introducing separation and hierarchy. This, of course, overlaps with the hierarchies solidified through various forms of racialization, colonialism, and understandings of liberal subjectivity. When we grapple specifically with the nkisi and bieri as tools to conceptualize "Africa" (and blackness more distantly), we see the consequences of this division very clearly. Since they are displayed as evidence of African life, their relationship to other material-based modes of devotion, for instance to other reliquaries, goes undiscussed. Interestingly, *Eternal Ancestors*, a Met catalogue on their collection of nkisi and bieri, does discuss them in relation to several categories so as to highlight their role within these cultures and to mitigate their exoticization, but I will return to this point later. They also are separated (in the museum) from the artworks of those who collected them because of the early twentieth-century European investment in form. Removing the bieri and nkisi from these conversations preserves the idea of an "Africa" that is timeless and untouched by geopolitical currents while also removing the colonial and racial fetishization that explains their presence in the museum.

Nkisi and bieri entered Western consciousness in the aftermath of French incursions into central Africa. They attracted intrigue first for their presumed difference from European ritual objects, and later for their formal qualities. Louis Perrois writes, "When they first came to light, the ancestor statuary of these two peoples—the Fang's made of dark wood slathered in oils and lotions . . . was viewed in Parisian artistic and literary circles as portals to secret, forbidden things. The shudder provoked by this descent into a 'primitive' and 'savage' universe, so completely alien to the values of bourgeois Belle Epoque Europe, delighted those who were hungry for alternate forms of expression."¹¹ The nkisi were especially interesting given the European fascination with African traditions, while the bieri's formal qualities were of great interest to modernist collectors and artists. Pablo Picasso purportedly described the specific bieri I am discussing as more beautiful than the Venus de Milo. She is even part of the origin story of Primitivism, having flitted through the hands of André Derain and Jacob Epstein.¹²

This appetite, however, propelled its own form of cultural destruction. Fang and Songye people proved quite willing to trade nkisi and bieri for

materials that were more useful in the context of colonialism—glass beads, cowrie shells, and perhaps rifles and gunpowder.¹³ Eventually, however, they stopped producing nkisi and bieri, either because it felt clear that their protective measures were not working or because modern colonial culture was moving toward Christianity and away from ancestral spiritual practices: “In this context, the older byeri (bieri) practices were increasingly viewed as witchcraft and discouraged by members of the new cults. Interestingly, it is this shift in Fang perceptions that account for so many byeri (bieri) figures being relinquished to Western collectors.”¹⁴ The bieri and nkisi museum encounter, then, also occasioned a profound cultural shift in what they mean for Fang and Songye people. Jessica Martinez notes that this exportation, in turn, produced a myth around the bieri in current urban populations where they are present only in memory and no longer actively circulating. As museum objects, the nkisi and bieri mediate multiple points of attraction to the idea of central Africa but, if we follow Allewaert, as dense interiorities they also confound the possibility of transparent transmission. This, I argue, is where sweat comes in. It is a holdover from their functional roles within Songye and Fang society, but is not part of their commodification.

LIQUIDITY, PORNOGRAPHY, AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF SWEAT

I insert sweat—I’m not sure what else to call this process of excretion—into the story at this point because it allows us to think beyond a subject-object binary to the category of liquidity. The way the nkisi and bieri sweat in the museum may have a lot to do with cycles of climate control, such as air conditioning and heat from bright light. But that they sweat in the first place is because of ritual. The nkisi is an amalgamation of *nganga* and spirit, who together select the tree; the carver, who provides anthropomorphic form; and villagers.¹⁵ The defining characteristic of each nkisi is what is inside—“the magical medicines of natural substances assembled by the *nganga* or diviner/healer, which was intended to activate spirit forces according to prescribed ritual proceedings.”¹⁶ Dunja Hersak argues that nkisi “represented the collective identity, the corporate body of the community, and survived for generations.” They were commissioned in order to unite the community and as such “became the focal point of collective ritual behavior,” one example being the fortification of the nkisi with “the sacrificial blood of a rooster and all polluting or weakening elements were prohibited.”¹⁷ Hersak is invested in

showing that both the iconicity and the ritual associated with the nkisi were important because nkisi were part of communities for generations:

Thus far I have tried to point out two facets of community *mankishi*: their visible, iconic stature and the symbolic dimensions that mobilized their use within the magico-religious system. I believe that these two aspects of statement and process may be seen as compatible and viable through the creation of the object. This creative process may be viewed as an initiation, a tripartite sequence of separation, liminality, and integration. Through these three phases the nkisi came into being and was socially validated. It was personalized, mystified, and ritually embraced into the life of the community.¹⁸

For the Fang, the *bieri* is part of a collective formation insofar as it guards specific ancestral bones, an especially important role since these remains are transported frequently to new living spaces. In this way the *bieri* provides both protection and connection. Its physical qualities, in turn, are meant to reflect this collective, specific identity. Its saturation in palm oil, then, is not necessarily part of a village ritual but an outcome of a more private set of familial ceremonies in which it is purified with palm oil or palm oil is presented to it as an offering.

Palm oil is a red oil made from the flesh of the palm tree's fruit; it is solid at room temperature and melts when heated. In the rainforest geographies that the Fang and Songye traditionally inhabited, such fruit is plentiful because the trees thrive in humidity and heat. In its entanglement with Fang and Songye societies, palm oil is used as a form of medicine, but what this means is complicated. The ethnobotanists Marta Gruca, Tinde R. van Anel, and Henrik Balslev do not distinguish between using palm oil for ritual application versus ritual offering; instead, they describe its usage as occurring on people's bodies, as offerings to spirits, and in symbolic ritual.¹⁹ Given that something continues to be excreted by the nkisi and *bieri*, I want to think about this palm-oil-induced sweating as offering a dense transfer point for spirits, ancestors, and presence. The palm oil is both material and not, and the manner of application (ritual lubrication) is devotional and continuous, leading us to ask, when does medicine or belief involving spirits or ancestors ever end? This is to say, even if they are not currently used in a ritual, is the time of those rituals or processes of mediation done? The heat and friction between palms, palm oil, wood, and these other entities offer a way to think about mediation in tangible and intangible ways. Most specifically they bring

us toward thinking about them in relation to a form of channeling, a sensual extension of being into multiple dimensions enacted in and through liquidity.

Liquidity, to my mind, is something that emanates from flesh and is therefore inseparable from processes of racialization. In her iconic essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (1987), Hortense Spillers articulates the relation between flesh and rupture. Flesh is what bodies become through the violence of the transatlantic slave trade; she describes narratives of flesh as adhering to the voyage itself in “its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard.” The tears in the flesh become scripted as pre-cultural, rendering blackness vestibular and spectacular in its difference. Importantly, the rupture of enfleshment happens in and through the body, through familial relations, and through psychic interiority. Spillers gives this process a name: pornotroping: “(1) the captive body as the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; (2) at the same time—in its stunning contradiction—it is reduced to a thing, to *being* for the captor; (3) in this distance *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of ‘otherness’; (4) as a category of ‘otherness,’ the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general ‘powerlessness.’”²⁰ Spillers thus uses pornotroping to capture the mixture of erotic excitement and violence produced not only by rendering the bodies of others as flesh, but by claiming access to these bodies.

It is this torn flesh that allows us to uncover the affective dimensions of the pornotrope, the space where relations between racialization and gendering become written on the body not through the whip, but through emotion. In *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (2014), I argue that the rendering of the Black body synonymous with pain mobilizes white sentiment in addition to Black objectification.²¹ Race, I argue, is a social phenomenon of power, sentiment, and spectatorship. The specter of the Black body in pain mobilizes structures of empathy and sympathy, which are, following legal scholar Anthony Farley, two of racialization’s pleasures of comparison.²² When we add race to these structures of sentiment, in addition to Black objectification, we get white liberal guilt, which is bound up in the dynamics of passive spectatorship. This spectatorship, which produces sentiment rather than action at the sight of Black bodies in pain, is what I describe as a “racialized performance of passivity” because it “simulates the powerlessness of circumstance through masochism, [which] cloaks the fact that one *could* act in the face of another’s suffering and produces a discourse of

innocence.”²³ In this convergence of understanding race through visual dominance, a reification of the subject-object binary, and temporal collapse that suggests that racialized subjects have never been modern, a dynamic of inter-raciality is produced in which blackness is related to woundedness and whiteness is linked with passivity and spectatorship. This is where the museum brings us. But there is something else, namely liquidity.

Liquidity, that which emanates from flesh—perhaps even *is* flesh in motion—offers another analytic. It challenges epistemologies of containment by gesturing toward flesh’s expressive possibilities. This is the analytic space I delve into in *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (2018) when I describe brown jouissance as emanating from the violence of pornotroping but offering an inroad into elsewhere.²⁴ Liquidity draws attention to the always already porous boundaries between interiority and exteriority, but it does this without reifying racialized interiority as always already compromised; even the concept acknowledges surrounding violence. This is the difference that we can imagine through the sweat of the bieri and nkisi. This sweat moves us to a space beyond staring at the wounds of displacement and dispossession by offering a glimpse at other possibilities of interiority.

Liquidity is also related to Luce Irigaray’s meditation on fluids and the challenge they offer to Western phallocentrism. Analyzing the subversive nature of fluids, Irigaray writes, “What is left uninterpreted in the economy of fluids—the resistances brought to bear upon solids, for example—is in the end given over to God. Overlooking the properties of *real* fluids—internal frictions, pressures, movements, and so on, that is, *their specific dynamics*—leads to giving the real back to God, as only the idealizable characteristics of fluids are included in their mathematicization.”²⁵ Irigaray’s suggestion that fluids adhere to their own physics, achieving a version of internal perfection and logic that she likens to godliness, is an act of reclamation. It operates against the charge that femininity contaminates through its inability to contain bodily fluids—especially blood and milk. The valorization of fluids, then, is an elevation of femininity and a logic that has been deemed irrational. Of course, fluidity more generally is a charged term, associated with the trivial and the uncommitted. But it is not about agency—rather, difference and possibility. Yet thinking with the possibility that Irigaray gestures toward, that fluids have their own onto-epistemologies, allows us to dwell in what liquidity permits.

It is the transformative possibilities of liquidity that interest me. If sweat is on/of the flesh, it shows us how to move between subject and object through

multiple dimensions all at once. In this way it resists the epistemological constraints of objectification, which attempts to produce coherence and flattening, and restores possibilities of connection and interiority. Through the nkisi and bieri and their relationships to spirit, ancestors, activated through the sensuality and friction of liquid once and again under bright lights, we see how liquidity can lie in the space between subject and object, abjection and pleasure, individual and collective.

Further, the hydraulics that underlie the flesh remind us that we are dealing with a more fluid world than we might want to acknowledge. Flesh is produced on a sea voyage in the waves that separate continents and countries when bodies become excess. It is in the violence of the whip that extracts blood, which renders people closer to animals than humans. It is in the tears that accompany the severing of families, and the sweat of heat and work. Most tellingly, Spillers's infamous beached whale of Black female sexuality is the animal deprived of its life-sustaining liquid.²⁶ Making processes of racialization and gendering central to the destabilization of the subject-object binary suggests possibilities to be found in movement between abjection and fleshiness. I position this destabilization alongside recent work in new materialisms that aims to articulate the specificities of fleshiness in terms of race and gender and to find ways to work with difference without falling back into the difficulties of inclusion and wounded subjectivity. Here, I suggest we think of Mel Chen's use of animacy, Uri McMillan's theorization of avatars, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins's analytics of eating as pointing us toward incorporating movement into thinking the flesh.²⁷ The verbs and adjectives that these theorists offer bring us toward the particular forms of desire and spectacle that liquidity allows us to probe.

BLACKNESS, LIQUIDITY, AND SENSATIONAL DIASPORAS

Despite the promise I find in theorizing liquidity in relation to spirituality, it is important to return to the museum to think anew about how else the bieri and nkisi function as Black media, which is related to but different from their function as representations of African art. Here, we will also find another dimension of liquidity and sweat. Some of the same issues—their presentation as context-less and timeless—are operational, but thinking about blackness's relationship to Africa moves us toward Stuart Hall's analysis of the persistent mythologizing elements of diaspora. Here, the Met's situatedness in the United States, where the entirety of the history of blackness is assumed

to be contained by the transatlantic slave trade, is important. In this context, Africa functions as the space “before” the event of enslavement. Hall writes:

It is, in this sense, an *origin* of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could in any final or literal sense return, is more open to doubt. The original “Africa” is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is, in that sense, irreversible. We must not collude with the West which, precisely, normalizes and appropriates Africa by freezing it in into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past.²⁸

This suturing of blackness to an idealized version of “Africa” is exacerbated by a Black longing for a past. The event of slavery having made tracing ancestry challenging, it is rare to be able to identify specific ancestors. The nkisi and bieri register all the more poignantly in that space. Additionally, the lack of space in museums given to Black artists more generally means that the “African art section” serves as a repository for more examples of Black experience and expressivity than elsewhere in the museum—a problem of scarcity that redoubles the effect of mediation. In this context, it can feel potentially flattening and threatening to the breadth of Black life to have the nkisi and bieri register through the lens of spirituality, especially since spirituality itself is often the catchall category for theorizing racialized excess, which Hall describes as all that has been disavowed: “*Présence Africaine* is the site of the repressed. Apparently silenced beyond memory by the power of the experience of slavery.”²⁹

I want to argue, however, that liquidity, especially when theorized in relation to Audre Lorde’s version of the erotic, offers us a way to think with some of the invitations of spirituality and diaspora while also enabling us to acknowledge and grapple with some of the contractions of both concepts. Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic” was first delivered as a paper at the Berkshires Conference in 1978. Though I will not dwell on her essay, I offer a brief gloss here to give a better understanding of the appeal of her theories. In addition to arguing that the erotic can be found within each of us, Lorde is explicit about her desire to develop solidarity and community. Difference is the bedrock for this framing of community, as is affect: “The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.”³⁰ The erotic does not dismantle difference as much as open space for its examination

within the context of community. While Lorde emphasizes the importance of individual selfhood vis-à-vis the erotic, her version of the erotic is also a space where community is formed. Lorde describes the erotic as a space of mutuality and collaboration, one that “provid[es] the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person.”³¹ Importantly, the erotic is based on communal affective bonds—specifically joy—outside of the parameters of identity. In this way, we can see how spirituality might become a way to conceive of the affective communities solicited by the erotic, something that produces diaspora as spiritual by inviting in nonreligious but ancestor-based attachment.

Indeed, these forms of connection are indebted to Lorde’s travels to West Africa—Senegal, Togo, Ghana, and Benin—for the first time in 1974 and moving to Saint Croix toward the end of her life. Her biographer, Alexis De Veaux, describes these trips as spiritual voyages to reconnect with her homeland: “Leaving Dahomey, and Africa, saddened her, and she wasn’t ready to go. But Lorde took from Africa what she needed: a spiritual location; the knowledge of original ancestors; a corporeal reality that was unique, timeless, and complex, and a lust to operate upon the world’s stage. When her time in Africa was over, Africa in Lorde had just begun.”³² Instead of simply grafting Lorde’s formulation of the erotic onto her investment in African practices, histories, and mythologies, I want to suggest that the erotic reveals a complex set of understandings of geopolitics and individual situatedness—these are, after all, the source of the differences that the erotic can forge into solidarity. In this way, it is not necessarily the specifics of an Africa-based spirituality that compel Lorde as much as an understanding of the erotic as an internal commitment to dislodging the flattening effects of Western, phallogocentric, racist epistemologies. In other words, a commitment to what I am describing as liquidity.

Through this lens we also can see the erotic’s (and liquidity’s) force of critique. Through the erotic, Lorde speaks very specifically about the imbrication of sensational and affective dimensions of power. The erotic is sensational in that it emerges from the materiality of joyous practices and experiences, and affective in that it offers a way to grasp the connective tissue that enables solidarities through difference. By describing the connective potential of freedom in this manner, however, Lorde also gives us a way to understand fine-grained forms of violence. This emphasis on critique is what we see in Sharon Holland’s parsing of the erotic: “The erotic, to echo Lorde, refers to women’s power—a power located not just in an aroused body, but

through a body made whole in connection with physical, spiritual, and discursive selves. As a twist on the erotic, the pornographic reminds us that we are also entering the realm of the taboo—a moment where the unspeakable utters its own name, where sameness sleeps together.”³³

There are several ways to read Holland’s invocation of pornography. While our conventional understanding of pornography is part of it, a more expansive version returns us to the subject-object divide and the violent, stagnating effects of objectification. These dual actions of the erotic prevent us, I think, from getting too attached to any specific idealization of joy. While emphasizing that something else can emerge from violence, it also gives us ways to see how violence is enacted on affective and sensational registers. Here I am thinking of the descriptions of this specific *bieri* in relation to the *Venus de Milo* in which shininess, a by-product of the ritual application of palm oil, is part of what increased its desirability as a collectible object: it makes the specifics of form more visible.

Through liquidity, we can understand Lorde’s theorization of the erotic as a technology of mediation or metabolism. Though the term does not appear in “Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde was fond of the idea of metabolism—specifically the metabolizing of hatred and racism into something else. In response to the anti-Black violence that accompanied civil rights struggles of the 1960s, she wrote, “One of the most basic Black survival skills is the ability to change, to metabolize experience, good or ill, into something that is useful, lasting, effective.”³⁴ This emphasis on transformation is central to thinking about the liquidity at work in the concept of the erotic and in sweat. It does not negate violence, but offers a way to see that this violence is not totalizing. It offers a way to suture the sensational and the affective so that the creation of joy is expansive yet rooted in fleshy processes of transformation—whether that is movement or spiritual connection. This is the promise I find in the sweat of the *nkisi* and *bieri*. It is the possibility (even idealized) of Black connection that exceeds the usual mandates of representation. The erotic also provides insight into how to think with the complexities of diaspora and the violent forms of dispossession that underwrite its formation. Sweat in this context connects the colonialism that haunts the *nkisi*’s and *bieri*’s display to the severing of Black histories and traditions such that myths of “Africa” are produced and spectacularized through presumed relations of unreason.

What holds the *bieri* and *nkisi* in conversation with each other? It is not a question of relatedness. The *Fang* and the *Songye* in the nineteenth century inhabited different geographies and performed distinct rituals. Yet now they

are connected through a transnational and transhistorical project of identifying blackness and making it speak. Liquidity offers some routes around that mandate of transparency by offering an investment in thinking the self collectively, and soliciting connection not through literal lineages of kinship but through sweat that brings together pain and joy. Here, the nkisi's and bieri's sweat might find particular resonance with the increased sweating wrought by climate change, which disproportionately impacts people throughout the Black diaspora, and even the hypoxic sweat of COVID-19.³⁵ ■

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NOTES

1. This quote is taken from signage in front of the nkisi when I began thinking about it in 2015. The Met has since updated its information: Yaëlle Biro, "Community Power Figure: Male (Nkisi)," Metropolitan Museum of Art website, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310453>.

2. Alisa LaGamma, Met placard. See also Alisa LaGamma, "Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female," Metropolitan Museum of Art website, n.d., <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310870>.

3. Jessica Levin Martinez, "Ephemeral Fang Reliquaries: A Post History," *African Arts* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 30.

4. Elias K. Bongmba, "Ancestor Veneration in Central Africa," in *Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary*, ed. Alisa LaGamma (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), 82.

5. Monique Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 119.

6. For more on the history of museums see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013).

7. Sarita See, *The Filipino Primitive: Accumulation and Resistance in the American Museum* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 2.

8. Here we can think, for example, about the different articulations of nonlinear temporality vis-à-vis blackness in Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

9. There are interesting parallels to be drawn between this form of disciplined relationship to objects and the fear that circulates around *objectum sexuals*, people whose sexual orientation involves objects.

10. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 17–18, 7.

11. Louis Perrois, "The Western Historiography of African Reliquary Sculpture," in *Eternal Ancestors*, 72.

12. Wyatt MacGaffey, "Magic, or as We Usually Say, Art: A Framework for Comparing African and European Art," in *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa*, ed. Enid Schildkrout and Curtis Keim (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 217–35.

13. MacGaffey, "Magic, or as We Usually Say, Art," 217–35.

14. Kairn Klieman, "Of Ancestors and Earth Spirits: New Approaches for Interpreting Central African Politics, Religion, and Art," in *Eternal Ancestors*, 57.

15. Most important and revealing in all of this was the role and integration of the different participants, namely the carver, the *nganga*, and the villagers. Here I provide an extended description from Dunja Hersak: "The chief, elders, *nganga*, and often the villagers accompanied the carver into the bush, where he chose an appropriately hard, durable species. Despite the fact that only the carver's technical considerations were emphasized, the selected species often had curative and/or toxic properties and were associated with certain ancestral contexts. This clear distinction points to the central role of the chief and villagers at this stage. It was the chief who specified his intention to the ancestors, a white chicken was offered to them whose feathers were worn by the villagers to show the 'purity of their hearts,' and the scene was animated by singing and dancing. Also significantly, it was a member of the community, not the carver, who undertook the felling of the tree. The second phase involved the carving process, which some claimed was conducted in secret while others described a more public event. In either case, although the carver's skills were clearly recognized and appreciated, he and the sculpture he fabricated existed in a transitional, liminal space. He did not verbalize his intentionality and made no appeal to spirit agencies, though he may well have taken precautions at this potentially dangerous time by wearing white as a protective color. The sculpture he produced had no meaning; it was simply a piece of wood, an empty receptacle and an incomplete cultural artifact." Dunja Hersak, "Reviewing Power, Process, and Statement: The Case of Songye Figures," *African Arts* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 44.

16. Hersak, "Reviewing Power, Process, and Statement," 40.

17. Hersak, "Reviewing Power, Process, and Statement," 41.

18. Hersak, "Reviewing Power, Process, and Statement," 44.

19. They write, "In Gabon, the Masango used the leaves of *Hyptis lanceolata* mixed with palm oil to apply on the body as medico-magic. Palm oil is still offered to a variety of *vodun* spirits in Benin. For the annual yam celebration, the guardian spirit Legba receives yams, palm oil, chicken blood, and other offerings. Throughout coastal Benin, palm oil is also used in *vo*, which are sacrifices or offerings used in daily problem solving. An example of *vo* is a calabash containing kola nuts, palm oil, and other items indicated by the diviner. It is placed in the center of a paved road, and by end of the day it is run over by cars, so the problems are destroyed. In Benin near almost every door there used to stand the Legba-pot, filled every morning and evening with cooked maize and palm oil. For another *vodun* called the 'Vulture's Dish,' passers-by used to deposit a little food or palm oil, to bring luck or ward off danger." Marta Gruca, Tinde R. van Anandel, and

Henrik Balslev, "Ritual Uses of Palms in Traditional Medicine in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review," *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, July 23, 2014, <https://ethnobiomed.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1746-4269-10-60>.

20. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," (1987) in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.

21. Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

22. Farley argues that the production of the suffering Black body "is a process by which whites exorcise their own demons, and is, therefore, a pleasure in itself"; the Black body is what the white body is not and the ability to conceive of both is predicated on the specter of the Black body in pain. Anthony Paul Farley, "The Black Body as Fetish Object," *Oregon Law Review* 76, no. 3 (1997): 475.

23. Musser, *Sensational Flesh*, 102.

24. Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

25. Luce Irigaray, "The Mechanics of Fluids," trans. G. C. Gill, in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974; repr., Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 109, emphasis in original.

26. Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" (1984), in *Black, White, and in Color*, 152-75.

27. Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

28. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 231.

29. Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 230.

30. Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (1984; repr., Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 53-59.

31. Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 56.

32. Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 151.

33. Sharon P. Holland, "To Touch the Mother's C(o)untry: Siting Audre Lorde's Erotics," in *Lesbian Erotics*, ed. Karla Jay (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 212.

34. Audre Lorde, "Learning from the 60s," in *Sister Outsider*, 137.

35. See for example Amber Jamilla Musser, "Sweat," *Social Text Blog*, April 27, 2020 https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/sweat/.