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CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY AND LEANING INTO THE SENSES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

This project reveals the ways in which contemporary women poets return to and embrace the senses. Sensory expression has long been a source of shame, especially for women. Our fear of embracing our bodies and their situation in the world is symptomatic of misogynistic tropes and the phallogocentric order. By prioritizing the body, poets like Jorie Graham, Carolyn Forché, and Morgan Parker subvert the patriarchal order and make space for women in the literary canon. They also challenge us to recognize sensuality as a valuable facet of poetic expression, a locus of untapped information, and a great source of power. Taste, touch, smell, sight, and sound offer glimpses into spirituality, mortality, heredity, fear, pain, and love. By incorporating theorists like Audre Lorde, Hortense Spillers, and Helene Cixous, I support these poets in their mission to treat the senses like stepping-stones for self-discovery or self-actualization. It is through this expression that women succeed in what Cixous calls “writing women”—a process that is radical, deconstructive, and always political.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|------|
| TITLE PAGE | 1 |
| ABSTRACT | 2 |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS..... | 3 |
| CONTEMPORARY WOMEN’S POETRY AND LEANING INTO THE SENSES..... | 4 |
| BACKGROUND LIST..... | 30 |

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project is dedicated to my thesis committee—a trio of brilliant writers, thinkers, and teachers. First, I would like to thank Dr. Maya Hislop for introducing me to Morgan Parker’s work and for providing thorough feedback on my drafts. This project would be severely lacking without the inclusion of black women poets and black scholars. I would also like to thank Dr. Jamie Rogers for exposing me to feminist and critical race theorists. A paper cannot contribute to the world unless it recognizes the hard work of its predecessors. Finally, I owe a great deal of gratitude to Dr. Walt Hunter. His insight, guidance, and empathy were crucial to my intellectual and mental well-being. Even in the midst of a global pandemic, you all dedicated your time and energy to ensure this project’s completion. For this reason, I submit this paper for you.

CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY AND LEANING INTO THE SENSES

Patterns of sensuality have emerged in contemporary women's poetry. Poets like Carolyn Forché, Morgan Parker, and Jorie Graham return to and embrace sensuality in a way that subverts the patriarchal order, thereby forging something new altogether. Their attention to the senses emphasizes the importance and relevance of the body as a locus of untapped information. Within the body are unspoken, even invisible realities, histories, and traumas. In this way, women's poetry moves not only within and around the body, but beyond it. The personal, as expressed within a poem, then, becomes collective, even political. For instance, a scribbling hand comes to represent mental illness, aging, and family trauma in Jorie Graham's poem "Mother's Hands Drawing Me." An exploration of celebrity and blackness unlocks a deeper desire to assimilate in Morgan Parker's "Magical Negro #89: Michael Jackson in Blackface on a Date with Tatum O'Neal, 1970s." These sensual snippets move past individuals to something expansive and widely felt. This process, attending to the senses and accessing the political through the personal, is what challenges our expectations of women, poetry, and women in poetry.

Literary scholars have long grappled with the senses and their place in poetry. Critics like Susan Stewart, Fiona Macpherson, Rodrick Ferguson, Kevlin Low, and Michelle Coghlan believe the senses and intellect are inextricably linked—like two halves of the same whole. This issue is muddied when accounting for gender. It is true that some male poets faced backlash for supposedly over-indulging in the senses. It might have seemed frivolous, even kitsch to explore bodily experiences as valid components of poetry. Women writers, however, had to contend with more insidious obstacles like the

“sensuous woman” trope and the misogynistic shame that surrounds sexuality and inevitably results in its repression. Feminist scholars like Hortense Spillers, Helene Cixous, Joan Morgan, and Audre Lorde argue that this repression is reversible. When scanning poems from Carolyn Forché, Morgan Parker, and Jorie Graham, I will attend to what Lorde terms “the erotic” and what Spillers describes as the “hieroglyphs hidden within the flesh.” These theories will allow me to showcase how these contemporary women poets participate in this reversal and do what Cixous calls “writing women.”

Understanding the senses as they apply to women’s poetry requires careful consideration of sensual and feminist fields. Susan Stewart’s work, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* is liberally cited in most articles I’ve encountered. My work builds on her research by way of focusing on the situation of sensuality particularly in women’s poetry in the present. Michelle Coghlan’s “Tasting the Archive” complicates Stewart’s analysis by considering taste seriously. Many have argued that taste and smell are the inferior senses, but Coghlan argues otherwise. For Coghlan, taste and gustation represent women’s labor as domestic servants. Women in popular fiction prepared food as a kind of peace offering for abusive husbands. They also reflect historical movements of temperance and prohibition, as well as southern cultural shifts. This poses the question: “What does history taste like?” (Coghlan 18). Here she’s given us some food for thought (pun intended). For some, taste is what links us to heritage. It might unlock familial ties, black culture, southern society, romantic connection, or spirituality. It is also a location of serious pain as it reflects the pressure to conform to patriarchy and white America.

Cynthia Wolff's work, which indexes stereotypes of women in literature gives us a glimpse into the breadth of stereotypical portrayals of women. Her piece, "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature" catalogues the various tropes that have been prescribed to women. These images, although dated, have residual ties to the present. Patterns in contemporary women's poetry show us that, whether negative or (less likely) positive in nature, these images have their uses. For instance, Sarah Kay, a spoken word poet whose fame on platforms like YouTube and Twitter proves there is a new need for poetry in the present, contends with the "sensuous woman" trope. Her poem "Private Parts" relies on images of asexual body parts like elbows and eyelashes to formulate that indescribable feeling of being young and in love. This, coupled with her dramatic gestures and vocalizations, challenges the notion that women must smother our desires (sexual or otherwise). Her focus on images like clementines and ivy further subverts understandings of sexuality. These natural images work in tandem with her narrative, as if to say my body swells with pleasure just as ivy reaches for sunlight.

Woman's pleasure, then, is self-actualized and articulated, in part, through nature. This is true of Jorie Graham's poetry. She often uses natural landscapes, and the body within those locales, to reach something spiritual, familial, or artistic. "Tennessee June," is a work that personifies the Tennessee heat as an entity or spirit. She blurs the lines between the speaker, the reader, and this heat in a way that forces us to notice and feel every sense— an experience she names "blossoming." She urges her readers to connect women's bodies with nature. She says, "Imagine / your mind wandering without its logic, / your body the sides of a riverbed giving in..." (7-9). The body yields to and works with

the heat in a way that is not regretful or shameful and the mind parts with its logic. The speaker lowers the walls around her mind. These walls were a kind of barrier, built of and by social limitations imposed on women. By rejecting logic, she can finally experience the pulse of the world around her. This act is a reclamation of her bodily importance and spirituality. Lorde speaks to this spirituality in her piece “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power.” She says, “The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic - the sensual - those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings” (Lorde). Not only does sensuality merge the personal with the political, it also unlocks something spiritual.

Graham’s exploration of spirituality as a reclamation of her autonomy is just as palpable in her poem “The Errancy.” In a series of natural images and artificial landscapes, Graham reveals the ways in which travel is synonymous with contemplation. The interplay between the senses and the natural landscape emphasizes how our innermost desires manifest physically. When describing the travelers, Graham writes, “Here we stand with our hands in our pockets, / quiet, at the end of the day, looking out, theories stationary,” (18-19) The positioning of the hands in pockets is a passive stance, one that signifies the speaker is waiting for something unlikely to occur. It is as if they hold their hope in their hands, protectively, uncertainly. What they hope for is suspended in this moment and is “stationary.” As the speaker endures more of her journey, she expresses these feelings through art: “her putting down now the sunset onto that page, / as

an expression of her deepest undertowing sentiment, / which spidery gestures, tongued-
over the molecular whiteness, / squared out and stretched and made to resemble
emptiness, / will take down the smoldering in terms of her passion” (60-65). Just as
Graham expresses the futility of the moment through poetry, her speaker projects her own
feelings of insignificance through painting. The act of “putting down the sunset on the
page” is an act of claiming the world and the moment. It is entrenched in power, but it is
also an act of giving into something larger like “emptiness” or “passion.” Graham shows
us, at the end of her piece, that feeling is all we really have. The journey promises, the
destination does not deliver, but we remain. She says, “How little we’ve found—aren’t we
tired? Aren’t we/ going to close the elaborate folder / which holds the papers in their
cocoon of possibility, / the folder so pretty with its massive rose-blossoms, / oh perpetual
bloom, dread fatigue, and drowsiness like leavening I / feel—” (90-95). The voyage here
represents life. The travelers assume that their new locale will change them somehow.
The resulting reaction is to “close the folder of possibility” and ease the burden of “dread
fatigue.” In the last line, Graham seems to urge her audience to take a different approach—
to feel everything. The intense spectrum of emotion that women experience is precisely
what makes us human. Through its articulation, “The Errancy” celebrates sensory
experience in life and in art.

The act of creation, of recognizing the capability of our bodies as vessels for
making art and life, is a process that also has ties to motherhood and heritage. The body
often takes over when the mind falters. In Jorie Graham’s poem “Mother’s Hands
Drawing Me,” we are offered a glimpse into the decaying mind of her mother. This is

offset by descriptions of the mother's hands, which seamlessly continue what they've always been able to do in spite of her mental disposition. The speaker says, "the fingers are deepening / curling, bringing round, the mind / does not– I don't think – know of this / but the fingers, oh, for all my life / scribbling open the unseen / done with mere things, not / interested in appraisal" (45-51). These descriptions hinge on the mother's hands and their ability to operate despite the state of her psyche. They work independent of her mind and reveal something particular about her past. Although the mother's mind is deteriorating, her fingers and their proficiency remain intact. They are these access points of remembrance, celebration, and life. Her mother, in this moment, is a reversal of the "blind seer" archetype in that her mind is clouded, but her body is not. The psyche might be lost, but the senses remain. To be a woman is to navigate this gray area of being too much body and not enough mind or vice versa. It is an utterly confusing and undeniably ambiguous space to inhabit, but it is a space of great possibility and love. As Cixous writes, "To love, to watch-think-see, to despecularize, to dehoard.. is what nourishes life" (893).

Carolyn Forché's poetry, especially that which appears in *The Country between Us*, also illustrates how the senses produce ambiguities. She marries straight-forward language with stark, vivid images to reclaim women's subjectivity and embrace this ambiguity. Writing is the means through which she considers traumatic events and oppressive realities in a war-torn country. Forché's style allows her to process pain and to be political without "betraying the millions of mouthless dead." Through her writing and its attention to the physical body, Forché makes attainable the memories that are always

available in this flesh, but are, for the most part, invisible to the dominant group. Often it is the case that the body remembers what the mind tries to forget.

This theory is taken from Hortense Spillers' *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*. In this essay she articulates the means through which black bodies have been abjected. Her notion of the "flesh" helps us understand Forché's poetry as it calls attention to this damage of abjection. Spillers says of the flesh: "These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually "transfers" from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiation moments?" (Spillers 67). The discursive function of hieroglyphics is that they are hidden. No one can understand the story on or of the flesh. They are unintelligible to dominant culture because they are hidden under skin, under a trait that holds within itself all of that historical baggage of slavery, colonization, and pain. This is felt particularly by black women, whose trauma is continuously reproduced and ignored.

Forché employs the senses, the body, and the mind. Although her experience as a white woman changes her perspective and motifs, she does work with and around the complexity of being a woman. I bring Spillers into conversation with Forché here, because Spillers' theory of the flesh reveals how Forché's poetry uncovers the hidden traumas that reside in the body. It also speaks to Forché's power and privilege as a white woman— she is neither directly affected or personally afflicted by racism, she is merely a witness. Her poem "Departure" is indicative of her ability to tie physicality to

unconsciousness and to illustrate how sensations conjure emotions. This poem centers on two people who are traveling on a train from an unknown starting point to an unknown destination. Time in this poem, as with many of Forché's poems, seems to be suspended, hinging on a frozen moment between persons. The past is as uncertain as the future and our understanding of linearity is thrown out the door. Forché effectively creates this cyclical, ambiguous nothingness with intimate physical exchanges and metaphor. She writes, "Your hand / cups the light of a match / to your mouth, to mine, and I want / to ask if the dead hold / their mouths in their hands like this / to know what is left of them" (8-13). This interaction forces the reader to pay attention to the connectedness between speaker and companion or speaker, companion, and the dead. Forché's focus on mouths as vehicles for smoking (or vessels for holding) reveals something more about a moment on a train. Their mouths stand in for mortality, complacency, inevitability—for Forché, it poses the problem of death as a silencing act. The dead hold their mouths just as the speaker holds hers, but their mouths are voiceless, silent, thoughtless. Their bodies, and the stories that reside in the flesh, are all that remain. Where Spillers' flesh speaks to histories of black trauma, Forché's exploration of the body can never fully articulate this personal pain. She is a witness to abuse, rather than its victim. The act of writing, for Forché, works to break open the boundaries of the body and recover her silent fears and simultaneously reveals her own privilege as a white woman, as a voyeur, as someone who can ultimately step away.

"Departure" also speaks to the ways in which bodies are often objectified. She says, "Between us, a tissue of smoke, / a bundle of belongings, luggage / that will seem to

float beside us, / the currency we will change / and change again” or “emptied your eyes, whose eyes / were brief, like the smallest / of cities we slipped through” (23-27). These two excerpts hinge on four important words that are indicative of the speaker’s own insignificance or recognition of her bodily unimportance. The first set includes “belongings” and “luggage.” Forché situates the two in close proximity so as to emphasize their sameness. These worldly possessions are actually inconsequential and unimportant when one considers the breadth of human history, the short span of life, and the ever-looming threat of death— hints the correction from belongings to luggage. It is a subtle rhetorical shift, but it illustrates how easily the body can be reduced to an object. The second set of words is made up of “eyes” and “cities.” Similar to the first set, eyes are likened to cities to emphasize their shared briefness. Whatever sees and is seen through those eyes is never fixed, but rather, represents life in all of its fleeting glory. The speaker, like the dead, is as soon relegated to the past as she experiences the future. The realization of her own mortality, as well as yours, mine, and Forché’s, can only be actualized through one’s presence in the present. The clear comparison between body parts and objects arises lines “woman whose photograph / you will not recognize” (24-25) we see that there is a clear muddying of the boundary between women and photographs of women. Similar to the connection between “eyes” and “cities” or “belongings” and “luggage,” the reader must reconcile these objects’ difference and their sameness. What Forché ultimately does here is reveal the ways in which women are often treated more like objects than subjects. We are hardly, wholly known past the surfaces; merely considered at arm’s length. Not only this, but it also challenges us to see the

speaker as a part of this system. She, too, partakes in a kind of objectification when she writes about the death and destruction of El Salvadorian citizens. This poem is concerned with the intersection between womanhood and mortality and feelings of insignificance. It challenges us to see ourselves as disposable and impermanent.

Uncertainty in Forché's writing is also expressed in dualities. Her deck is largely stacked with pairs— cards that ask us to consider the spectrum of numbers and colors that exist outside and between selected faces. These oppositions work to affirm the tension between difference as well as the stability of both sides in and of themselves. Her poem, "Selective Service" functions on the basis of duality as it depicts a speaker who's seen pain and felt love. She seems to address a younger person who possesses no knowledge of the past, death, or trauma. The speaker vows to teach this young one about life and death, even if it must be through means they can comprehend. What is of particular interest is how these tensions produce an illusion of choice in spite of life's actual unpredictability. When the speaker says "There is a man / I've come to love after thirty, and we have / our rituals of coffee, of airports, regret. / After love we smoke and sleep with magazines, two shot glasses / and the black and white collapse of hours" (7-12) she suspends our certainty and emphasizes the importance of numbers. For one, it is unclear whether the speaker finds love for this man after encountering 30 other men, or if she finds love for this man after her 30th year. They then sleep and smoke which are two heads of the same coin in that both actions are grounded in escapism. The noxious effect of smoking works in tandem with sleep to numb the body and cloud the mind. This is juxtaposed with two shot glasses and magazines, or two objects that force one's head

above the surface to face the bleak morbidity that sleep and smoke strive to stifle. These vices represent their romantic relationship, a partnership that we are told is full of “regret.” The act of consuming both uppers and downers reveals the tumultuous nature of their relationship. One can infer that “the black and white collapse of hours” represents the mingling of these two states: waking and sleeping, “living” and dying, or loving and hating. Certainly it is the case that the space between these states is fragile, bendable, and always on the brink of collapse. It is this space, the in-between, gray area, that Forché and other women poets urge their readers to inhabit. To be a woman is to feel the world and simultaneously crave its escape. It is how we reconcile our need to fit into society, to be agreeable, and our need to create something new altogether (Cixous).

Carolyn Forché further muddies our understanding of the physical body when she likens people to fractions. When the speaker addresses the young subject, who could potentially stand in for the younger generation or her future offspring, she says, “We’ll tell you. You were at that time / learning fractions. / We’ll tell you / about fractions. Half of us are dead or quiet / or lost. Let them speak for themselves / We lie down in the fields and leave behind / the corpses of angels” (21-26). This splitting up and breaking apart of persons pushes the aforementioned notion that death is ubiquitous. It also follows this poem’s tendency to quantify, rather than qualify in that Forché numerates human experience. One could argue that this move is a distancing act. It desensitizes the speaker to this pain. Perhaps these categories include the speaker, pinning her down in this pie chart of experience. As with her other poems, Forché employs objects as stand-ins for human experience. Either way, life seems quite bleak and the morbidity of it all weighs

heavy on this poem. The speaker wonders “In what time do we live that it is too late / to have children? In what place / that we consider the various ways to leave?” (13-15).

Children usually represent potential, or new hope. When society’s supposed last saving grace is no longer possible, when the body stops production (especially in a Capitalist context) and embraces the nomadic, there is not much of a chance for a prosperous future. It also begs the question of women’s fertility and what it might mean to reject our physical contribution to the life cycle. The speaker implicitly calls attention to the pressure of procreation, especially for women.

Forché relies on color, specifically black, blackening, and darkness to elucidate girlhood and womanhood. Her poem, “As Children Together” acts like an open letter to her estranged childhood best friend, Victoria. It catalogues their interactions with men and the ways in which these exchanges shaped and solidified their womanhood. This too relies on bodies, sensations, their different colors and textures, to explore the myriad manifestations of womanhood. The speaker begins by describing the two as young girls: “Holding each other’s / coat sleeves we slid down / the roads in our tight / black dresses, past / crystal swamps and the death / face of each dark house” (9-14). This pleasant image of female friendship, of holding on and sliding down, is interrupted first by the enjambment in line 11 with the word “tight.” A word that has often connoted virginity and innocence is then interrupted with the word “black.” Forché’s move here was intentional as it signifies a kind of death of innocence and a shift to maturity (whether sexual or not). She sets off another hue with enjambment between lines 13 and 14. The line ends with “death” and falls over onto the next word, “darkness.” This is significant

because it not only implies confrontation with death, but with darkness (or blackness) as reflective of this changed perspective. Darkness has long represented death, but it has not always stood in for maturation or growth. In this way, Forché points to the death of their girlhood and frames the next bulk of her poem.

Death and darkness, then, are the gateways to physical attributions to womanhood. They also signify a shift from personal, emotional independence to physical, economic, and emotional dependence on men. The flesh here is totally demarcated to the patriarch, especially in Victoria's experience. She seeks and finds validation from sexual or romantic conquests with men. The speaker says,

“Your mirror grew ringed with photos of servicemen who had taken your breasts in their hands, the buttons of your blouses in their teeth, who had given you the silk tassels of their graduation, jackets embroidered with dragons from the Far East. You kept the corks that had fired from bottles over their beds, their letters with each city blackened envelopes of hair from their shaved heads” (41-54).

This stanza as a whole illustrates the ways in which, through conditioning or internalized misogyny, women believe their only value resides in their ability to please men. Victoria is like so many other women who've been taught to uphold the patriarchal order. Forché proves this not only through the straightforward descriptions, but through darkness and enjambment. The enjambment between the first and second lines emphasizes “ringed,” or more specifically the prospect of attaining a “ring.” Moreover, the enjambment between lines 47 and 48, with the emphasis is on “graduation.” Here Forché reveals Victoria's buried desire to have that certification and its subsequent

stability. Both enjambed lines show how her body becomes a vehicle to please men, to satisfy her need for fulfillment (one that could have been attained cerebrally), and to uphold the dominant order. Forché's employment of "blackened envelopes" drives this point home. The envelopes are no longer fresh or alive. They've been damaged, but not altogether destroyed just as Victoria's flesh has been scarred, but her body remains intact.

The attention to sexual touch solidifies its importance not only to patriarchy, but to developing her own sense of herself as a woman. It is a growing into the self or a signifier of her becoming. Later in this poem, she recalls her own experience with one of Victoria's suitors. She says, "and when one of the men who had / gathered around you took my mouth / to his own there was nothing / other than the dance hall music / rising to the arms of iced trees" (65-71). In this moment, and in many others that follow, Victoria finds fulfillment, where Forché finds nothing. Her satisfaction is rooted in cerebral, intellectual stimulation and fulfillment. Perhaps this is because she matured later than Victoria or because she did not search for someone to craft her fairytales, she was the maker of her own story. What is tragically realized at the end of this poem is how Forché attains the very ideal Victoria lived for (to travel to Paris and "wake to wine") without compromising her sexual integrity or personal freedom. This is not to say either experience is less valid, quite the contrary. By exploring and expressing these alternating and converging perspectives, Forché partakes in the mapping of womanhood and sexuality.

Forché recognizes the strong pull of sexual desire and its hypnotic hold. Through a series of images, "Reunion," depicts a romantic relationship that seems to exist outside

of time and space. In typical Forché fashion, she skillfully plays with temporal certainty to illustrate something greater. The poem begins with the following lines: “On the phonograph, the voice / of a woman already dead for three / decades, singing of a man / who could make her do anything” (1-4). The woman’s voice fills an intimate moment between two lovers and although the speaker does not realize it, her story will later become an integral part of their memory. Perhaps this is because it reveals something about the speaker and her heterosexual desire. The aforementioned image is repeated in the final lines: “I can remember it now as I see you / again, how much tenderness we could / wedge between a stairwell / and a police lock, or as it was, / as it still is, in the voice / of a woman singing of a man / who could make her do anything” (34-40). Here the speaker recalls the voice of the woman and its relevance to her own relation to this man. When she reunites with him it seems indistinguishable from the first time, as if all that has changed outside of their bond is insignificant. Forché’s use of enjambment in these lines between the words “could” and “wedge.” This poem, like the relationship itself, seems outside of time. It is fitting that Forché forces us to stop, to wedge ourselves between could and wedge. What is also interesting here is how she likens herself to the singing woman. She too sings of a man who could make her do anything. Song, then, becomes this kind of expressive, romantic force. It is the vehicle through which pain, angst, and love release. The only difference is Forché’s song manifests in poetry on the page, not in vocal reverberations. Her poems serve to portray women, women’s bodies, and the memories that reside in their flesh in a way that forces us to question our

understanding of the world and ourselves in that world. It is how she confuses physicality and interiority.

Morgan Parker's poetry works in conjunction with *Spillers*, in conversation with Lorde, and alongside Forché and Graham. Where Forché deals with ambiguity and Graham thematizes heritage and spirituality, Parker's poetry is an exploration of power and racism. She relies on sound, touch, and taste as vehicles for empowerment. Lorde's article, too, reveals how the erotic (or the senses) are powerful. She demonstrates on a macro level what my thesis intends to do on a microscopic one. She says "When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (Lorde). For Lorde, the erotic is not limited to sexual pleasure. For example, she describes massaging a sack of margarine as particularly sensual, but not necessarily sexual. In this way, I'm interested in poetry's ability to uniquely tap into the senses and make lucid the unknown histories that exist within the body. Morgan Parker's book *Magical Negro* embraces women's bodily experiences, their sensuality, in a way that challenges white patriarchy. Parker's poetry addresses the cruel ways in which our culture boxes in black bodies. Through sensualism and symbolism, her poems represent the myriad expressions and explorations of black womanhood. The depth of these expressions is also illustrated through her lack of transparency. I intend to catalogue Parker's use of the senses: taste, touch, as well as her representations of black women's bodies, to see what exactly she's trying to present to her readers. In her article "Tasting the Archive: Nineteenth-Century

American Literature and the Sensory Turn” Michelle Coghlan says, “Poesis as figuration relies on the senses of touch, seeing, and hearing that are central to the encounter with the presence of others, the encounter of recognition between persons” (Coghlan). Coghlan’s formulation builds on other critics’ work to take seriously the issue of taste and appetite as valuable locusts of information. Many have argued that taste and smell are the inferior senses, but Coghlan argues otherwise. For Coghlan, taste and gustation represent greater societal issues. Again, it is asked of us to consider “What does history taste like?” (Coghlan). Morgan Parker’s work might offer an answer to this question. Her poetry relies on taste, consumption, body, and metaphor to present her readers with an alternative reading of white, male dominated society and its history– a new reading that recognizes the ways in which black women’s subjectivity has been misunderstood, ignored, and erased.

In her poem “Magical Negro #217: Diana Ross Finishing a Rib in Alabama, 1990s” Parker describes a famous image of Diana Ross in a way that complicates America’s perception of her. In the image, Ross is wearing an elegant silk dress, paired with a fur coat. She’s sporting an afro and a face of makeup. Her classy appearance juxtaposes her setting, which looks like an impoverished street. In her hand is the bare rib bone. This is the perfect setup for one of Parker’s bouts with ambiguity. She uses taste and touch to confuse and connect the acts of eating and intercourse. She says, “men/ I suck their bones until they’re perfect” (Parker 4). This mudding of men and pork poses the question who is being devoured here? The enjambment between the words “men” and “I suck” confuses the object, verb agreement in such a way that one could read it as

Diana sucking pork ribs or men's bones. The bones come to resemble men- who she swallows whole. Sex, then, comes to represent a kind of domination or consumption, but it seems to function in other ways too. In her book "Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century (America and the Long 19th Century), Kyla Wazana Tompkins explores the ways in which consumption, appetite, and gustation are political acts. In the summary of her book, she says, "The act of eating is both erotic and violent, as one wholly consumes the object being eaten. At the same time, eating performs a kind of vulnerability to the world, revealing a fundamental interdependence between the eater and that which exists outside her body" (Tompkins). This interplay between vulnerability and dominance can be seen at work in "Magical Negro 217." Parker's representation of Ross does not stop at the "man-eater" trope. It actually emphasizes Ross's loneliness and sadness. She says, "All my friends are sisters and husbands I'm afraid / to be uncharted I want an empire in my teeth" and "I'm in the world I'm in the world / nobody cares where I came from" (5). There is a certain hopelessness in her tone that signifies dissatisfaction. Although she does suck men's bones, take them into her body and consume them, she also exposes her body, herself, and her pain. Eating (or intercourse) then, is a combination of weakness and power, submission and domination. Both parties lose something from the participation in sexual interaction, but women's is twofold.

"Magical Negro #3: The Strong Black Woman," is a poem that "hold(s) familiar figures up to new scrutiny" while also "inviting readers to consider and then reconsider what they think they already know and what they might still have left to learn" as Rooney posits in "Why Do You Feel Comfortable?: On Morgan Parker's 'Magical Negro.'" This

poem challenges the Strong Black Woman trope through its handling of the black body. Parker focuses on the physical body to emphasize how this trope has no interiority (or white people do not see her as having any). She says, “She likes it rough. When you open her up through the / mouth hole, the dumb / cunt hole. You could stomp around in there. It’s fine. She / won’t feel nothing” (8). She describes the woman’s mouth as a mouth hole, rather than describing her lips, her tongue, or the mouth itself. The rhetoric here emphasizes this woman’s lack of interiority, she is hollow, holed out, and empty. It is reminiscent of the power dynamics of consumption in the Diana Ross poem and others. Society views the strong black woman as powerful, but this power only exists on the surface. Parker forces her reader to see the ways in which the strong black woman trope leaves little room for authenticity. She gives and others take from her, but her desires mean little to the masses. She is the embodiment of suppression and impossibility. Audre Lorde describes this in her piece “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power.” She writes, “We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance” (Lorde). This formulation reveals the ways in which suppression is a response to a fear of being in and feeling the world. The strong black woman trope was undoubtedly a form of social and sexual control over black women— yet another way in which they’re boxed in. It is a trope that gives the illusion of strength and dominance but in actuality, reflects white people’s need to control and maintain racial power dynamics without considering consequences.

Explorations of consumption and taste continue in Parker's poem "Magical Negro #89: Michael Jackson in Blackface on a Date with Tatum O'Neal, 1970s." The speaker of this piece does not seem to be Jackson or O'Neal, but rather, an embodiment of both. She's grappling with issues of race and youth in a way that reflects the controversy surrounding Jackson and O'Neal's relationship. Both individuals gained stardom at an early age and experienced the scrutiny of the spotlight. The speaker relays this when she says, "Grown-up / is when the other you eats you, when / what you allow is a monster" (69). This is interesting because it points to their struggle as adults living in the shadows of their youth, but it also follows Tompkins theories about consumption. The act of taking on a new persona, through skin bleaching like Jackson or drug addiction like O'Neal, is both liberating and exasperating. The growing up Parker points to here is a kind of assimilation or conformity. One must abandon the authentic self in order to become the expected self. This is Parker's point here. White supremacy requires black men and women to sacrifice authenticity, history, and culture. This takes shape in the lines "I imagine / telling my dad I'm buying parsnips / and laugh at the way he would say Girl / don't you know you're a Negro? What/ in the hell? A confession is: in this moment I do not know precisely how parsnips taste, only that I've had them before— some dinner party" (68). The speaker subconsciously buys and consumes an unfamiliar fare— one that she does not particularly enjoy, but it reminds her of power and privilege. As if buying, tasting, and consuming parsnips will translate into a life of affluence. Taste takes a backseat to the symbolic here. A parsnip does not please the senses, but it represents something particular to the speaker—something more systematic and troubling.

It is troubling because this feeling reflects the hunger and desire to fit into the white, patriarchal mold. Parker explores this experience in her poem “Preface to a Twenty Volume Joke Book,” a piece that centers on hunger and taste not only as they relate to eating or sexual intercourse, but as they relate to black women navigating the world. The speaker craves validation from the world, a type of positive reinforcement that it refuses to give her. She says, “And dream about a life of tasting/ And get so hungry I could die” (80). The life of tasting is a life without fear, apprehension, or oppression. It is the privilege of being white and by extension, safe. It also refers to a desire to be desired. She continues “No one tells me I’m beautiful / I dream about tasting” (81). Hunger is mentioned in several poems peppered throughout Parker’s book. Even if the speaker were stuffed to the brim, this hunger would persist. This is because the craving can never be satisfied so long as men and white people dictate and legislate black women’s lives. Through themes of hunger, this poem also challenges readers to recognize the ways in which women are objectified. Parker situates the female form in a way that illustrates this point. She says, “I butter my skin / A curse I drink and drink” (81). Parker describes moisturizing the body as “buttering,” a verb that might seem relegated to culinary pursuits, rather than self-care. This portrayal might depend on cultural perspectives, but the rhetorical decision in this context reflects the sentiment of the poem, which hinges on taste, appetite, and desire. The speaker treats her body as an object, as an extension, rather than embodiment of her.

Parker objectifies the body for rhetorical purposes through rhetorical means. The body is often symbolized by a question mark. In both “Preface to a Twenty Volume Joke

Book” and “The History of Black People” Parker uses this punctuation mark to emphasize the uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity that surrounds blackness. Parker’s continued use of this metaphor explains and explores the ways in which black women experience their bodies. In “Preface to a Twenty Volume Joke Book” she says, “Literally my body / shaped like a question mark / I am trying to get lower to the ground / I am trying to breathe the soil” (82). Here Parker describes the body as leaning towards inquiry. She couples this description with the sensory experience of trying to “breathe the soil,” or become one with the earth. The uncertainty between the speaker, her body, and nature is indicative of her sense of alienation. Here, Parker is getting closer to what Spillers described as “the flesh.” The speaker uses the question mark in place of her body to reconcile her ancestors’ past and all that has transpired in its wake. Spillers uses the flesh similarly, “If we think of the “flesh” as primarily narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or “escaped” overboard” (67). I believed Forché compared to Spillers in that she, too, uncovered stories hidden within the body, but Parker addresses the specific tragedies that have only been experienced by black people and how those histories manifest in the present. Spillers shows us that the flesh can only accurately articulate trauma that is felt by and resides in black bodies. Parker is a woman, but more importantly, she is a black woman. This distinction is important to make here because she cannot subvert the phallogentric tradition without also contending with the white feminist forces that uphold racism, and by extension, patriarchy. This is why it often feels as if the speaker (in this poem and others) wants to return to the beginning, before enslavement, colonization, or systemic racism. These

feelings derive from an upbringing in a colonial culture that is more keen on maintaining its reputation than explaining and making reparations for its evil history. One step toward reparation lies in the bending of logic and comfort, question marks and flesh.

This is further proven by Parker's poem "The History of Black People." In the fourth section of this prose piece, the speaker says, "On the first page of every library book / there's a question mark for us, backs bent out of exclamation. We don't know any of your words / but our children have licked them up in pools / of sweat" (28). These lines, too, call back to slavery and the purposeful ways in which white settlers forced African slaves to assimilate to their culture. Parker uses library books and question marks to illustrate how white settlers in America and missionaries in Africa forced their language, so-called knowledge, and religions onto Africans and African slaves. She then takes a sensory turn, naming this assimilation a "licking up pools of sweat" because not only were they thirsty, or hungry, from slave labor, but they craved a past that had been stolen from them. These layers of feeling and symbolism reflect Parker's attention to the senses as a means of shattering the shell of the past. As Coghlan says, it is "The intersection of spacial memory and gustatory experience," (13) via the senses, that explains something not easily attainable through language. The pain and trauma from the past cannot necessarily manifest in thoughts, but rather, can be found in feeling.

Morgan Parker's book asks us to "...consider the way sensuous experience is or isn't shared, can or can't be felt in common, and more to the point, which senses do or don't come to matter when we're reading" (Coghlan). It also poses the question of whose senses come to matter when we're reading. *Magical Negro* urges its readers, whether

explicitly or implicitly, to value black women's bodily experiences. Their senses matter. Through the senses, particularly taste and tasting, Parker taps into histories, traumas, and pain that is not easily articulated. The body holds onto suffering in a way that the mind does not. It is through the senses and through the body that Parker reveals the ways in which black women are continuously disenfranchised. This is evident in Parker's use of hunger, a craving that signifies lack. Yet, as Cixous posits, there is no shame in this lack: "We're stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end: we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing: and we're not afraid of lacking" (878). The interplay between sexual intercourse and eating, as acts of dominance and weakness, or the body bending like a question, do not weaken Parker's portrayal of women. In fact, quite the opposite. Women have been socialized to stifle the resulting pain from these practices, to face it as a stranger or foe. This act of suppression, as Lorde posits, does not eliminate its existence, but rather, makes it stronger. By prioritizing the senses and the body, Parker uncovers the truths of the world and of black and whiteness. She challenges the patriarchal order through this prioritization and through reclaiming black women's subjectivity.

Feeling, whether registered by sight, smell, taste, touch, or sound, is valid in its own right. It is, as Lorde claims, how women recover the joy, love, and pleasure that has been suppressed. It is also the method of reclaiming the yin to our pleasure's yang— the pain that we've buried. Morgan Parker, Jorie Graham, and Carolyn Forché emphasize the

ways in which bodily experiences reveal internal struggles like existence, spirituality, sexuality, history, and trauma. Negative emotions are equally valuable to this analysis. A close social worker friend recently urged me to “lean in.” She was not just referring to the positive moments of feeling that we might encounter, but she was also advising me to lean into the painful ones. Women live lives that are fraught with pain. We have been socialized to stifle this pain, to face it as a stranger or foe. This act of suppression does not eliminate pain’s existence. Negative emotions do not evaporate or lift off into the breeze— they become displaced. The body holds onto this suffering. The access point resides somewhere in poetry, somewhere in the motion of women writing for women. By prioritizing the senses, women uncover the truths of the world and of ourselves. Women challenge the patriarchal order through this prioritization and through reclaiming our subjectivity. Creation in and of itself is a powerful, sensory act. It relies on the merging of the physical with the psychological, or the inner with the outer. To discount sensual literature, then, is to ignore the disparate, collective experiences of women and the power that comes from listening to our bodies and the world.

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