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Letters to Ourselves: Literary Representations of Intersectional Resistance and Radicalizing Collective Healing

Brenda Martinez
Lehigh University

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Letters to Ourselves:
Literary Representations of Intersectional Resistance and
Radicalizing Collective Healing

by

Brenda Giselle Martinez

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

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in

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Intersectional Resistance and Radicalizing Collective Healing
Brenda Giselle Martinez

Date Approved: May 4, 2017

Thesis Director: James Peterson

Co-Director: Omaris Zamora

Department Chair: Dawn
Ketley

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	1
Anne Spencer's Intersectional Poetics	2
Anne Spencer's Letter to Lutie Johnson and All Sisters in <i>The Street</i>	18
The Letters to Ourselves: Sisters In Conference	36
Works Cited	38
Vita	40

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the plight of being a woman of color in America through a Black feminist lens particularly as these experiences are depicted in Anne Spencer's "Letter to My Sister" and Ann Petry's *The Street*. Written as a love letter to other women of color, Spencer contends that intersectional resistance is vital in dismantling intersectional oppression. This thesis engages a deep understanding of the physical, spiritual, and mental violence that terrorizes women of color throughout generations. Almost twenty years after Spencer writes her poem, Ann Petry presents Lutie Johnson, a black woman whose life is contained within white capitalist patriarchy. Some of the power built into intersectional resistance is the knowledge that must be passed down in order to disrupt intergenerational trauma and dismantle the system that gives birth to it. Finally, this thesis is a call to readers, to build a collective resistance in the 21st century grounded in the experiences of women of color.

Anne Spencer's Intersectional Poetics

In the early 1990's Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in order to conceptualize the multiple structures of domination shaping and constraining women of color. In 2016 Patricia Hill Collins reminds us that women of color have, for over a century, been developing the kind of analysis, that Crenshaw, Collins and others have come to call intersectional. Intersectional theory, in its recent form, is derived from the longer history of Black women's activism as well as their literary and political writing. By drawing from activists and thinkers like Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, bell hooks, Anna J. Cooper and Angela Davis, Collins reaches back to trace a longer lineage. Intersectionality is a way of understanding how the political, structural and representational aspects of power work together in our lives and in the world we navigate. It is an analytical tool that allows us, women of color, to explore how our experience is shaped by institutional structures and matrices of domination. In this essay I will explore a poem by the brilliant but understudied Harlem Renaissance poet, Anne Spencer, who was performing precisely such work in the 1920's. In her 1927 poem "Letter To My Sister" Spencer directly addresses the dynamics of patriarchal domination with which Black women had to contend even as they resisted the reality of white racism. The second dimension of Spencer's intersectional poetics was the insistence on the need for multiple practices of resistance for women of color confronting these twin structures of domination. Despite her significance, Anne Spencer remains an understudied poet even among scholars of the Harlem Renaissance. In the last decade, some significant criticism has begun to address the feminist dimension of Spencer's poetry but they have not fully grasped the richness of her intersectional analysis. I will argue that "Letter To

My Sister” enacts an intersectional poetics that requires various aspects of the critical work done by Crenshaw and others in order to fully appreciate the complexity of the poem.

This reading of “Letter to My Sister” focuses on its poetic practice of self-definition as resistance to internalized oppression. This concept anticipates Collins’s model of the emancipatory practice of intersectionality. When women of color define themselves it validates their power to change the world. Spencer creates a safe space by writing to her “sisters,” exploring the patriarchal oppression with which Black women must contend and making a call out to her sisters to affirm multiple strategies of resistance. First, I showcase how Spencer undermines the religious ideology that is utilized to support white patriarchy and exposes the fantasies of both masculine and white superiority. Second, I carefully explore how Spencer contemplates different strategies for resistance, including speech (that counters dominant deployments of racialized sexuality), chastity and the politics of respectability, sexual manipulation, and supplication to the gods. Finally, I conclude the essay by suggesting that Spencer champions a form of resistance that involves Black women speaking to each other (as the form of the letter shows), helping each other to redefine their sacred value, and working together to speak out against the false gods.

The poem “Letter To My Sister,” originally published as “Sybil Warns Her Sister,” is a powerful example of lyrical resistance to the ideology of gendered and racialized dominance. Spencer’s use of both titles highlights the value of her wisdom gained through her personal and political experience as a Black woman. Collins argues

that wisdom is key to Black women's survival: "Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate" (Collins 136). As a Black woman poet in the Harlem Renaissance, Spencer invariably experienced disapproval of her work because she was writing in a white male tradition. Spencer deployed the literary/poetic styles that silenced, caricatured, and exoticized Black women writers and highlighted how the experiences of Black women were poetically positioned to challenge the blindness of such discourses. By writing the poem and directly addressing it to women in epistolary form, a productive genre for writing about private matters between sisters, Spencer initiates an intimate conversation with other women of color in a public sphere. Despite the poem's intimate tone, Spencer underscores the importance of having this conversation in public with the purpose of provoking a larger audience beyond that intimate sisterhood to pay attention to her public protest. Her activism and politics as an educator, a poet, a wife, a mother, and a civil rights activist working in local committees to improve social, economic and legal facets of the African American community, informs her art. Her lived experience allows her to speak strategically as a female prophet who counsels other women, warning them of the oppression they experience and have yet to experience.

Earlier critics have acknowledged Spencer's identity as a Black woman writer, influenced by her political work, but it is critical to deepen that understanding by centralizing her poetry in the traditions of black feminism. In "Anne Spencer's Feminist Modernist Poetics," Jenny Hiest critiques the lack of recognition for Spencer as an innovator of American modernism. Hiest provides a detailed analysis on Spencer's

modernist articulation of her feminist aspirations. Although Hyeast acknowledges Spencer's work on racial equality she fails to analyze her poetry through an intersectional lens that recognizes Spencer's effort to challenge both racialized and gendered subjugation. Hyeast writes that Spencer's "poems deal frequently, and most explicitly, with questions of gender" (Hyeast 132). She reads Spencer as "explicitly" dealing with gender but her reading obscures the reality that Spencer always addresses gender through her consciousness as a Black woman. Although I agree with Hyeast's claim that, "Spencer's preferred mode of political engagement was to provoke," her interpretation of "Letter to My Sister" wrongly privileges one form of protest over others. She claims that Spencer calls for all women to "assert themselves publicly" otherwise they will succumb to their oppression and participate in their own destruction. I argue that Spencer is not provoking her sisters. Instead, she is provoking the "gods," a metaphor for men and the white supremacist patriarchy, and using an epistolary poetic form to assure women of color, in particular, that they must resist in any way they can. This essay offers another reading of "Letter to My Sister" as an explicit and implicit form of resistance to racialized and gendered forms of oppression simultaneously and at the intersection of these categories. Spencer recognizes the delicate balance in negotiating tools of survival and understands that "information must be directly targeted to [women of color] in order to reach them" (Crenshaw 1250). Through this poem she is publicly defying the gods by writing an open letter inviting other women to find their own strategies of resistance.

Through the use of the lower case "gods" in the poem, Spencer attacks interpretations of Scripture that support violence against Black women as well as the

subordination, exploitation, and devaluation of Black women's bodies. For her, religious justification for abuse is sacrilege and she spends time outlining the violence of the "gods" in order to denaturalize both sexism and racism. Spencer reveals the violence of the gods and their ideologies of righteous supremacy to be sin, which in turn devalues the divine and sacred bodies of Black women. By denaturalizing racist and sexist ideologies, she is able to poetically explore forms of resistance that can counter their hegemony. In this way, Spencer calls for her sisters to engage in "self-definition," anticipating Collins' work. This self-definition is important, because in dominant cultural discourses, religion mandates the subordination of Black women. By turning inward and toward each other, Black women can come up with new definitions of self and community that value their bodies and lives as sacred. In the opening stanza Spencer begins by warning her readers of the danger in defying those who have power and authority, "the gods." The repetitive reference to "the gods" emphasizes the danger of looming violence that certain religious ideas inflict on women, particularly on women of color. She introduces a metaphor that becomes explicit over the course of the poem.

It is dangerous for a woman to defy the gods;
To taunt them with the tongue's thin tip,
Or strut in the weakness of mere humanity,
Or draw a line daring them to cross;

Spencer begins by insisting that it is dangerous for women to "defy" the gods, to resist openly and disobey those who have the power to inflict violence and death. She strategically punctuates this first line with a semicolon to call attention to the kind of defiance that is dangerous. In the rest of the poem, she offers warnings in a poetic code that only women can decipher within the sacred bond of sisterhood. When a woman

“taunts” the gods, she teases them without any intention of being discreet. When Spencer writes about taunting the gods with the “tip” of the tongue, she emphasizes that women have the ability to taunt the gods with their words. Spencer reinforces the idea that language is a site of resistance and she is by the very act of writing this poem resisting “the gods.” Spencer writes this brief poem, consisting of three stanzas, with palpable conviction, displaying the power of her own “tongue’s thin tip” as she employs different forms in her poem and delivers messages of resistance and protest in each individual stanza. In this sense, the poem enacts a central irony: Spencer describes women as having only a “thin” tongue and yet the poem demonstrates how powerful this method of resistance truly is. She uses the western poetic tradition to protest the exclusion of voices like her own and expose it to new possibilities.

In Spencer’s poem, women of color who dare defy white patriarchy attain their own god-like power. Not only do women have the ability to taunt, but they can do so by “strut[ting] with the confidence in the weakness of mere humanity.” The “gods” who assume the positions of powerful and dangerous tyrants reflect “the weakness of mere humanity” that are vulnerable to a woman’s “strut” – literally a more grounded form of power. Spencer calls attention to the power to “draw a line daring them to cross.” For the narrator of the poem, women define the limits for the gods. Spencer also draws a tangible line in this poem daring the gods to decipher the meaning and power of her words. Simultaneously, the poet paints a picture of a bold, seductive, and sensual Black womanhood that purposefully defies the gods. This womanhood “taunts” and “struts,” boldly aware of and in defiance of the danger that the “gods” present. The kind of woman

portrayed in these first few lines uses her sexuality as a tool of defiance rather than male gratification. Black women have a longstanding history of being hyper-sexualized for the purpose of providing pleasure and amusement to men. Black women's sexuality can be seen as a specific site of intersectional oppression. According to Collins, sexuality is also a site of resistance and this first stanza outlines this strategy as one form of opposition. "Studying Black women's sexualities reveal how sexuality constituted one important site where heterosexism, class, race, nation and gender as systems of oppression converge. Black women's sexualities can become an important place of resistance" (Collins 138). Spencer punctuates her threat to the gods, daring *them* to defy women by making an attempt to "cross" the line and in turn she decodes the message that she is delivering to other women of color. Spencer is paving the way for their liberation and directing the provocation at the oppressive "gods."

In the final lines of the first stanza, Spencer turns her attention to the "gods" themselves, emphasizing just how powerful their physical and psychological oppression is. She writes:

The gods who own the searing lightning,
The drowning waters, tormenting fears,
And anger of red sins...

Here, the poet portrays the gods as violent and inescapable. They own "searing lightning," "drowning waters," and "tormenting fears" that they use to abuse women. Men's power over women is so great that they assume godlike status and behave as if they can command the "searing," violent power of nature. The gods also own "drowning waters" that suffocate women with an intention to kill, both literally and psychically.

Patriarchal oppression is also psychologically destructive, consuming bodies and minds. The gods create in women “tormenting fears” about dangers yet to come, adding to women’s already agonizing experience. For this very reason, Spencer begins the poem by revealing this truth and taking away from the gods’ power over her sisters. Spencer concludes this stanza with the language of “red sins,” indicating that it is the gods who are the violent ones who sin. It is, they, in this sense, who represent the true “weakness of mere humanity.” The gods indulge in unwarranted and unwelcomed sin that ironically “angers” them, because they are the root of the problem. They are angry that women draw the line and attempt to defy them but women *have* to draw a line against oppression. Seemingly omnipotent men oppress women for their own sins and the resulting consequences they themselves have created. Spencer thus criticizes their misguided anger and challenges their power.

After exposing the false notion that women are powerless and inferior to men, while exposing the possible dangers, Spencer goes on to address another strategy with its own nuances. She makes a distinction between different kinds of womanhood- those who remain “celibate” and those who “kneel” and rely on their sexual capital. Both choices can serve as strategies of survival but the poetic voice suggests the importance of understanding that these strategies may still fail to protect women from the dangers of open resistance. Spencer outlines this distinction because of Black women’s historicized dilemma in ensuring their physical survival while also being expected to navigate the sexual politics of Black womanhood. Although celibacy and subscribing to the politics of respectability, in regards to their sexuality, may ensure their physical survival it comes at

the high cost of their own emotional destruction. Another strategy is to employ self-definition, which challenges their oppressive situations even if they may not physically survive (Collins 198). By asserting themselves, women of color will come to understand the complexity of the collective, the telling of each other's narratives, and the delicate balance in negotiating tools of survival.

Despite the dangers, Spencer encourages her sisters to confront and resist oppressive conditions. By shifting from her exploration of provocative defiance in the previous stanza, she then creates a duality between provocation and modest resistance.

She writes:

Oh, but worse still if you mince along timidly—
Dodge this way or that, or kneel, or pray,
Be kind, or sweat agony drops,
Or lay your quick body over your feeble young;
If you have beauty or none, if celibate,
Or vowed—the gods are juggernaut,
Passing over...over...

Here, Spencer warn her sisters about the danger in being subservient to these gods. She insists that whether or not women fight, the oppression will continue. Submission and surrender is much “worse” because the gods terrorize with a false sense of power that can only be gained when women stop resisting; women of color must find ways to survive and resist ultimate bondage from the “juggernaut gods.” The gods themselves are not what women should be weary of but rather the system of white racism and patriarchal dominance that works to “pass over” them. Above all, women should not diminish themselves, behaving as if they are delicate and fragile beings when in fact they can maneuver and create agency in multiple ways. Women can refrain from “dodging” the

gods and making themselves unthreatening. But there is no need to fuel the gods' false sense of godliness or confuse their tyranny with divinity. Instead women need to recognize their own divinity. She warns them against "kneeling," and "praying," because in doing so they unwillingly worship the men, who attempt to violate them, as gods. Women should not be martyrs to a false faith in gods who commit "red sins." Spencer directs women not to be "kind" to something that torments them. Part of the strategy Spencer urges for her sisters is to keep their suffering hidden from oppressors. She writes that women must not allow the gods to know they are suffering by "sweating agony drops."

Sweating makes fear visible on their bodies and allows the powerful to see the suffering they inflict on her sisters: "Oppression is not simply understood in the mind—it is felt in the body of myriad ways" (Collins 293). Appealing to the gods by asking them to see their suffering and to stop inflicting it does not necessarily lead to the end of injury. The "gods" may enjoy such suffering creating another avenue for the gods to torture them. Spencer reminds her readers that women cannot escape the dangerous gods; even the most "beautiful" or "celibate" cannot rely on the politics of respectability because it cannot protect them from oppression. Spencer calls for solidarity between "celibate" and "strutting" women. Liberation is possible only when they collectively resist their struggles and oppression by forming coalitions that do not exclude women based on standards of respectability. Solidarity among women of color is necessary for resisting oppression because Black women's objectification as "the other" denies them the protections that white skin and maleness grant. White patriarchy not only seeks to

dehumanize and eradicate women but also to oppress their offspring. Yet, women should refrain from sacrificing themselves to “lay their bodies over their feeble young.” In the end self-sacrifice doesn’t protect the young. It only leads to their erasure, leaving future generations vulnerable to the same systems of oppression. Women can also be “vowed” and dedicate themselves to worshipping the gods or choose to marry them, yet these strategies will fail to save them from oppression. Ultimately, “the gods are juggernaut”: they are huge, overwhelmingly powerful in their dominance of women.

The final line in this stanza challenges the reader with an initially obscure distinction concerning how women of color experience patriarchal oppression differently from white women. Spencer implies two levels of oppression experienced by Black women. The “gods” gendered and racialized dominance of women of color can be seen as they “pass over,”: “- the gods are juggernaut/Passing over...over...” The absence of language by Spencer’s use of the ellipses suggests a muteness that speaks volumes to other women of color who understand the experience of being silenced. The repetition of gods passing over *and* over again signals their attempts to silence, marginalize, and erase women of color. White patriarchy works to oppress both Black men and Black women. Yet, Black women are in a distinct position where they must work alongside Black men for racial liberation even when they are exploited on account of their gender. Women of color run the risk of being exploited not just by white men but by men of color who are involved in finding ways to profit from their bodies (Collins 155). If the Black woman is able to find freedom within the context of her Blackness, a Black man’s male privilege allows him to “pass over” her denying her full liberation. Returning to the title of the

poem, “Letter to My Sister,” readers will recognize that Spencer is speaking in first person and in solidarity specifically with other Black women. We must read her work as consciously as possible and understand what she is saying as a Black female poet within the margins of a white literary tradition (Karapetkova). For the poetic narrator the Black woman often has to negotiate her race and gender in the fight for liberation; she is the one passed “over” twice between the ellipses.

Even within this intimate message for women of color Spencer addresses a public audience of all women to create a call for coalition and intersectional resistance within a Black feminist sphere. Collins speaks to the power found in collective survival,

Whether as individuals or as members of organized groups, U.S Black women’s activism has occurred in two primary dimensions. The first, struggles for group survival, consist of actions taken to create Black female spheres of influence within existing social structures. This dimension may not directly challenge oppressive structures because, in many cases, direct confrontation is neither preferred nor possible. Instead, women craft Black female spheres of influence that resist oppressive structured undermining them (Collins 219).

Women of color have to create spaces where they may or may not directly challenge their oppression and Collins argues that direct confrontation may not be possible for some. The alternative is to “craft Black female spheres” that still resist their oppression while undermining them as Spencer has demonstrated by constructing a Black feminist consciousness that is intersectional through writing. In this stanza, Spencer opens up the space to show her Sisters what intersectional resistance looks like. Spencer writes:

This you may do:
Lock your heart, then, quietly,
And, lest, they peer within,
Light no lamp when dark comes down
Raise no shade for sun;

Breathless must your breath come through
If you'd die and dare deny
The gods their god-like fun.

She insists that another effective way to protest is to deny men pleasure in their domination. Her sisters must employ their silence by “locking their hearts,” quietly to protect themselves from further exploitation. If they cannot avoid the risk of calling attention to themselves and the gods happen to “peer within,” Spencer illustrates other forms of protest by “lighting no lamp” when darkness consumes. The gods will not be able to see and navigate within Blackness/darkness as easily as women of color are able to. Black women must also deny the gods “shade” by continuing to withhold resources, including the evidence of their own suffering, that will aid in their own oppression. The gods’ dominance can manifest itself in different forms whether it’s through darkness or light. Individually, women cannot escape from oppression, but, collectively, they can resist and find new pathways towards liberation. Women should not provide light for the darkness nor trust the darkness to protect them from the “searing” light. They must be alert in order to hide their suffering and deny the gods any satisfaction or “fun.” Spencer continues to describe resistance with an eerie description of the type of “passing” they must subscribe to by ensuring that their “breath” be “breathless.” The gods are driven to violate and ultimately erase them by death. Once a woman dies, she stops breathing but by breathing in a “breathless” way women deceive the gods as seen throughout history.

According to Collins,

U.S Black Feminist thought as specialized thought reflects the distinctive themes of African-American women’s experiences. Black feminist thought’s core themes of work, family, sexual politics, motherhood, and political activism rely on

paradigms that emphasize the importance of intersecting oppressions in shaping the U.S matrix of domination. But expressing these themes and paradigms had not been easy because Black women have had to struggle against White male interpretations of the world (Collins 269).

In order to express these themes, women of color had to navigate the margins of their own realities while remaining “breathless” in the ongoing struggle to survive in a white patriarchal world. Women of color have found ways to survive and navigate in spite of the gods. Spencer does not ignore the fact that the gods may win and succeed in killing a sister, but she insists that in this situation a woman must still protest until her very last breath and defy the gods by “denying” their pleasure. In warning her sisters of danger, she also emphasizes the risk of death but places greater emphasis on the power of disobeying the gods until their last breath. Among all forms of resistance, Spencer’s preferred form of protest is language because through writing her poetry transcends death and lives on to guide a coalition amongst women of color. The poem is an embodiment of a breathless breath. Through “Letter to My Sister” she invites other women to author their own narratives of how they chose to resist and protest oppression – which denies the gods their “god-like fun.” Spencer’s vision of collective work through the conception of sisterhood is, “One of the inventions of solidarity, an alliance, a political necessity that is not the given name of every female with dark skin and a colonized tongue, but rather a choice about how to resist and with whom” (Collins and Blige 72).

By foregrounding Black women’s experiences, Spencer advocates for a full range of women of color’s strategies of resistance to their oppression. As such, she is an important figure to include in a history of intersectional thinking in the U.S. as well as a key poet, educator, and activist for contemporary readers interested in coalitional politics.

Spencer (like Collins) calls for self-reflection and personal narration in community with other Black women as a way to counter overwhelming dominant discourses of Black women's assumed inferiority, excessive sexuality, or need for domination. The poem alludes to several possible strategies of female resistance, including both explicit and implicit defiance. We should not read this poem as upholding one kind of resistance over others. To do so only further polices Black women's already limited agency. Spencer does assert her preference for protest and open defiance. But she never denies other methods. Lacking the opportunities and resources to confront directly oppressive institutions, U.S Black women have struggled for group survival and used a variety of strategies to resist their oppression. Spencer's work (like Collins's) calls for personal and communal narration of experiences of oppression to challenge naturalizing discourses. To find solutions against violence toward women, it is imperative to understand that multiple axes that influence each other as opposed to a single axis shape their lives.

Intersectionality rejects the idea of pitting the individual against the collective (Collins and Bilge 83). The poem argues for the importance of allowing other women, especially her sisters, the freedom that white patriarchy attempts to deny them. Liberation from male dominance is achieved through a collective, feminist and intersectional resistance, which is why she speaks explicitly to other women. There is true power and divinity in unity among women. Yet, sisterhood should not erase the voices of Black women and their distinctive experience. Instead radical sisterhood should be rooted in the resilience of Black feminist thought and intersectionality to survive and eventually overthrow white patriarchy. For Collins, "Strategies of everyday resistance have largely consisted of trying to create spheres of influence, authority, and power" (Collins 225). Anne Spencer

creates this sphere of power through writing and that's one form of resistance that women of color can use everyday. Spencer's poetic intervention, in "Letter to My Sister," inspires us to continue the work of addressing the intersectional nature of oppression in the 21st Century especially for an expansive and expanding global community of women.

**Anne Spencer's Letter to Lutie Johnson and
All Sisters in *The Street***

Ann Petry's 1946 novel *The Street* depicts the life experiences of protagonist Lutie Johnson as she struggles to create a life for her son against the social circumstances that eventually consume her. As a single mother and a Black woman, Lutie confronts multiple "gods" who are determined to see her crushed by their power. She defies all the men who lust after her including her Super, Mr. Junto, and Boots. She also resists other women who seek their own refuge by exploiting Lutie, such as Mrs. Hedges, who hopes to make a profit and survive off Lutie's body. Although she strives to maintain a level of respectability and dignity, she cannot escape the gaze of white women who view her as a threat; the gaze of black and white men who view her as a conquest, and the gaze of black women who view her simply as a means to an end. Lutie is surrounded by people who are also being swallowed by the street – by its all consuming poverty – and a combination of socioeconomic circumstances that made characters like Mrs. Hedges and the Super who they are. Although Lutie finds herself in the same predicament she refuses to accept the same fate and believes that she can control the outcomes as long as she resists. Lutie's grandmother warns her about these "gods" and their "evils" but without having her grandmother present in her life, she is unable to fully harness her prophecy. Petry provides us with one Black woman's experience and successfully showcases what happens to women of color who don't have community. Lutie employs a range of survival strategies, not unlike those explored in Spencer's "Letter to My Sister" but unfortunately her last act of survival binds her to a life of criminalization.

Lutie Johnson ultimately becomes a victim of the juggernaut system of white patriarchy and capitalism, and Petry does the work of writing a story that gives a voice to women of color suffering at the hands of this institution and of society's foul treatment of and disregard for black women. As Petry demonstrates throughout the novel, there is a clear disadvantage for women of color who have low socioeconomic status. They experience intersectional oppression via racism, sexism, and classism. Lutie is fully dehumanized throughout the novel as others only place value on her body and see it as a means of currency and profit. Lutie is an example of poor women of color who are oppressed by the law and the justice system that is meant to protect, even as she struggles to provide the best life possible for her and her young son, Bub. Bub eventually enters a correctional facility accused of a crime he does not commit, he inherits the oppression because he is a product of a poor single mother of color who is subjected to various institutional injustices. Petry successfully demonstrates how their environment- the street- becomes what criminalizes her and Bub. Lutie is preyed upon by the white patriarchal and capitalist system and her son Bub inherits the generational trauma and criminalization.

Lutie's subjugation in the story world of the street is intersectional; she experiences racism, sexism, and classism throughout and Petry cognitively maps the interconnectedness of these matrices. The experience of Johnson and her son alludes to today's most pressing human rights violations taking place in America's most impoverished cities and how the system affects women of color at a higher rate than their male and female counterparts. Patricia Hill Collins makes the comparison of being an African American woman in the United States to being in prison: "The absence of

political rights under chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation and the use of police state powers against African Americans in urban ghettos means that Black people could be subjugated, often with little discourse” (Collins 89). Yet, even with the lack of discourse Lutie is able to conceptualize her own narrative and she begins to grasp the juggernaut system all the “gods”, such as Boots and Mr. Junto, who have a hand in it.

Lutie is able to theorize her lived experiences because of the knowledge that her grandmother, Granny, passes down to her. Granny warns Lutie about the multiple “gods” she encounters through her life, including those within her family institution “Granny would look at [Pop] coldly and her lips would curl back as she rocked and frowned, saying, ‘Men like him don’t get nowhere, Lutie. Think folks owe ‘em a livin’...’” (81).

Lutie recalls these warning through interspersed moments in the novel when she anticipates danger. Lutie and Bub live life in the ghettos of Harlem where the routine practices of dehumanization in the street make the characters feel vulnerable, powerless and ultimately imprisoned in their social and economic circumstances.

By using black feminist theory as a methodology one can come to understand how Lutie is imprisoned within her socioeconomic circumstances. By applying a paradigm that acknowledges the intersectionality of gender, race and class as systems of oppression we are better able to understand the ways in which women like Lutie experience this world daily. Lutie’s exploitation reflects the research findings in the work of Patricia Hill Collins, especially in her analysis of black women’s labor. A single black mother desperately looking for a means to feed and shelter herself and her son, Lutie is only able to afford a small apartment on 116th street in Harlem and she is forced to settle for the apartment. She has hopes of achieving the American dream that she has

witnessed other people achieve. Once she moves into the apartment she encounters other characters that are also trying to survive the street—and in the spirit of survival they attempt to use Lutie to sustain themselves rather than building coalition for their collective liberation. Mrs. Hedges, a fellow tenant, knows Lutie is struggling financially so she tries to persuade Lutie to sleep with one of her clients Mr. Junto for extra money. Mrs. Hedges, the Super, Boots, and Mr. Junto try exploit Lutie’s body and suffering but she refuses to succumb to their acts of violence. She is constantly vulnerable to sexual abuse at every turn of her day-to-day routine. Mrs. Hedges owns a brothel in her apartment and wants to exploit Lutie for profit; Boots Smith seeks to give Lutie financial stability in exchange for sexual gratification; and the superintendent desires Lutie’s body in exchange for living in the apartment. Lutie could not explain her “instinctive” and “immediate” fear of the Super but she did know that it was rooted in Granny’s wisdom, “Granny would have said ‘Nothin’ but evil, child” (20). Lutie is sexually harassed and exploited through out the entire novel, emphasizing a reality in which black and white hyper-masculinity suffocates black womanhood. In the end, an accumulation of her experiences causes Lutie to kill Boots in an attempt to break the oppressive cycle. The super befriends Bub in hopes of luring in Lutie but when Lutie denies him this satisfaction he decides to endanger her son as a form of revenge. Granny’s warnings appear to remind readers that intergenerational knowledge has been passed down to Lutie in the form of tales, “...All those tales about things people sensed before they actually happened. Tales that had been handed down and down and down...And Granny had them all at the tip of her tongue” (16). These messages fall short when Lutie is unable to share them with her son.

Although Bub lacked the discourse to express himself, he felt the same desperation as his mother. Without fully understanding his decision he was determined to work for the super and alleviate some of the financial burden by stealing letters. The super, angry that he failed to overpower Lutie, leads post office investigators to believe that Bub has maliciously been stealing mail. Bub is taken to a children's shelter until his day at children's court. This poor black child is further engulfed in the system while, "...the little Henry Chandlers go to Yale, Princeton, Harvard and the Bub Johnsons graduate from reform school..." (389). Granny's own lived experiences as a black woman allows her to anticipate the evils that her granddaughter would encounter:

Granny would have told her what to do if she had lived. She had never forgotten some of things Granny had told her and the things she had told Pop. Mostly she has been right. She used to sit in her rocking chair. Wrinkled. Wise. Rocking back and forth, talking in the rhythm of the rocker. Granny had even foreseen men like this Super (76).

Although Granny had spoke to Lutie and warned her about the evils of the patriarchy she still desired to form community with her Granny "if she had lived". Although Lutie no longer has her grandmother she still holds onto the instinct that she inherits, "She started humming under her breath, not realizing she was doing it. It was an old song that Granny used to sing...The humming increased in volume as she stood there thinking about the apartment" (17). Her grandmother uses oral story to produce knowledge that will disrupt further trauma from "foreseen men" like the Super. Petry underscores the importance of passing down wisdom to future generations as well as the necessity to build coalition with this knowledge.

Lutie loses her son to the street as soon as the Super took advantage of Bub's innocence. She fails to protect Bub from the dangers he encounters and fails to protect herself as she works within the system to gain his freedom. Capitalism exploits her vulnerability even as she attempts to navigate the situation within the legal bounds. Hoping to provide the best opportunity for Bub she searches for a lawyer, an advocate that could mediate the situation. Yet the lawyer, an officer of the law, leads her astray and withholds crucial knowledge from Lutie. She does not need a lawyer for Bub's case and he preys on her lack of awareness, "'My fee'll be two hundred dollars.' He saw her anxiety, defeat, replace the hope, and added quickly, 'I can practically guarantee getting him off'" (392). The lawyer works to solidify the foundation of oppression that the Super has begun to build for Lutie. He coldly calculates that the cost of a young boy's black body is worth only \$200. He chooses to exploit Lutie just as others previously had.

Lutie begins to recognize that the street remains powerful through the complicity of others such as Mrs. Hedges and the lawyer and she understands her own social condition and begins to theorize: "It wasn't just this city. It was any city where they set up a line and say white folks stay on this side, so that black folks are crammed on top of each other – jammed and packed and forced into the smallest possible space until they were completely cut off from light and air"(206). From what she's witnessed, the American dream is only afforded to rich white people while poor black folks are crammed into marginalized spaces completely cut off from access to the dream. Lutie understands that she is not the only one in her situation, there are other black people trapped within the same oppressive system. "All through Harlem there were apartments just like this one, she thought and they're nothing but traps" (73). These traps have been

built systematically for poor people of color in urban communities across America. Even so, it is not until this trap represses Bub that she begins to speculate a more universal framework:

She had been wrong. There were some white mothers too- three foreign-looking women near the door; a gray haired woman just two seats ahead...and over on the side a young, too thin blond girl holding a small baby in her arms...Perhaps she thought, we're all here because we're all poor. Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with color (409).

In this moment Lutie recognizes that all women from old to young, white women, black women, and mothers are trapped by similar social conditions. Lutie recognizes that the street preys on all of the women because of their socio economic status. In this scene women assume interlocking identities as mothers, poor women, and women color to demonstrate that the systems of white patriarchy and capitalism subjugate everyone. Even so it's important to acknowledge the different experiences of each of these women, especially Lutie's.

Lutie performs and relives the trauma for black women and mothers experienced in the history of enslavement. In order to sustain a livelihood she travels out of Harlem to work as a maid for the Chandler family, in a luxurious country house. Consequently, she spends more time in the Chandler's home taking care of Little Henry Chandler than she does in her own home taking care of her own son. She begins to internalize the guilt of not spending time with Bub and the frustrating anxiety of never being able to escape the street. According to Davis in the article "Surrogates and Outcast Mothers: Racism and Reproductive Politics in the Nineties," for many mothers who were slaves, motherhood was a limited opportunity for them because of the labor and time intensive fieldwork or housework forcing them to leave their children vulnerable to the violent conditions of

slavery as well. When enslaved women gave birth to children it was only beneficial if it meant that their children too could provide labor, “Pregnant women were often kept at fieldwork up to the last few weeks of pregnancy and were expected to return to work no later than three weeks after delivery” (Slimani 86). Lutie experiences similar struggles reinforced by her intersectional identity of being a poor black woman, “[b]ecause American presence operates even in the places of its absence- in this instance, the street- Lutie struggles to escape a hostile economy that immolates her at virtually every turn” (Barret 210).

After she stops working for the Chandlers she is able to theorize her position as a single Black mother living on the street:

Streets like the one she lived on were no accident. They were the North’s lynch mobs, she thought bitterly, the method of the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place. And she began thinking of Pop unable to get a job, of Jim slowly disintegrating because he, too, couldn’t get a job, and of the subsequent wreck of their marriage; of Bub left to his own devices after school. From the time she was born, she had been hemmed into an ever-narrowing space, until now she was very neatly walled in and the wall had been built up brick by brick by eager white hands (323-324).

The street she lives on is one manifestation of the system created by white patriarchal capitalism. She begins to understand why the people in her life are unable to wage war against the street. Lutie identifies as one of the “Negroes” snared by the street and acknowledges that Bub inherits this intergenerational burden. After working for the white upper class family the Chandlers, she subscribes to the idea of the American dream only to find out that her blackness keeps her from gaining citizenship as an American and keeps her from ever achieving this dream. Lutie and Bub have to exist in their oppression in order for the Chandlers to exist in their privilege. She reminds herself, “ You forgot

you were black and you underestimated the street outside here” (389). Lutie’s blackness, as well as her class and gender, reminds her of her specific positionality within her experiences through out the novel.

The final scene in the novel demonstrates how the “gods” subjugate women of color physically, mentally, and spiritually. Out of desperation to save her son from the Super’s trap, Lutie views Boots as viable support and ignores his dangerous desire for her, as a survival tactic. Before she meets with Boots, Lutie senses danger because of her grandmother’s prophecy and she begins to utilize the tools that have been passed down to her, “She was smelling out evil as Granny said. An old, old habit. Old as time itself” (413). Yet, she must take the risk in order to save Bub. Unfortunately, she provides Boots with another source of exploitation, “...he looked as though he has suddenly seen something he had been waiting for, seen it spread right out in the front of him, and it was something that he wanted badly” (400). Unfortunately for Boots, someone more powerful than him, Junto, also desired Lutie and Junto wanted Boots to convince Lutie to sleep with him. Since Boots depends on Junto for his livelihood he was forced to devise an underlying plan for his own conquest. Boots had decided, “Sure, Lutie would sleep Junto, but he was going to have her first” (423). He did not recognize that his own oppression as a black man was interconnected with that of Lutie’s as a black woman. Instead he was focused on defeating Jones at the cost of another person’s freedom, he wanted to shift the power relations with a white man turning Lutie into a “black man’s leavings.”

Boots suffers from patriarchal oppression just as Lutie does and his decision to exploit Lutie leads to their downfall. The problem is that his obsession has transformed

into his desire to take something away from the white man, that something being the black female body. ““Let him get his afterward. I’ll have mine first”” (428). He tries to overpower Lutie in order to combat the lack of power he has over his own life. He fails to recognize the opportunity to build coalition with Lutie to resist Junto. Both Boots and Lutie understand Junto to be the representation of institutionalized oppression. Lutie is convinced that Junto is the reason she is stuck on the street, “In every direction, anywhere she turned, there was always the implacable figure of a white man blocking the way, so that it was impossible to escape” (315). This white upper class man has enough mobility that keeps him away from the street while Lutie and Boots depend on him to achieve their own social mobility. Boots believes that by completing Junto’s orders, convincing Lutie to sleep with him, and by ensuring that he sleeps with her *first* he can defeat his oppressor. Once Lutie becomes aware of Boot’s plan she loses hope in the idea of pulling herself up by the bootstraps. She becomes keenly aware of yet another trap within the street but still believes that Boots will help Bub, once she removes Junto as a threat. Unfortunately Boots poses another threat to her and only sees Bub’s situation as an opportunity to prey on Lutie.

In the end Lutie realizes that white capitalist patriarchy is the interlocking systems that has the power to subjugate anyone in different forms. One must choose to be a resister just as one chooses to perpetuate the system of domination. Unfortunately, the street does not present any resisters because it represses those who reside in it. Boots attempts to seduce her one final time and when it fails he decides to rape her. Lutie starts out defending herself but it soon transforms into an act of liberation, “She wanted to hit

out at him....she could get at him and in getting at him she would find a violent outlet for the full sweep of her wrath” (428). Lutie stops fearing for her safety and instead sees Boots as an opportunity to channel her wrath that has been accumulating since her encounters with Mrs. Hedges, the Super, the lawyer, and Junto. All along she has fought hard and rejected degrading offers of prostitution and yet the street still claimed her son. It was in this moment of fear that her rage manifested itself in an accumulation of all that she had experienced up to that point, “And reality for a moment has overtaken illusion: the reality of the dirty street, of hostile white women and lecherous men, of a white world which has built a prison for Blacks” (Lattin 70).

Boots decides to perpetuate patriarchal oppression by inflicting violence and psychological terrorism on Lutie. Lutie has consistently rejected Boots but he refuses to be denied any longer and he perceived her as an attainable conquest,

Soft skin and pointed breasts. Straight slim back and small waist. Mouth that curves over white, white teeth. Not enough. She did not weigh enough when she was balanced against a life of saying ‘yes sir’ to every white bastard who had the price of a Pullman ticket (265).

Lutie is reduced to an object of conquest and still she is ‘not enough’ against his own life of subjugation to Junto and every other manifestation of white patriarchal and capitalistic domination. He too seeks liberation from the white man he must answer to with ‘yes sir’, yet he expects Lutie Johnson to say ‘yes sir’ to both Jones and himself. Her social status as a woman makes her inferior to men, and her blackness further devalues her humanity in (black and white) men’s eyes. Lutie decides to quit her job as a singer in Junto’s club realizing that she will never been compensated for her work forcing Boots to dismiss her.

By quitting this job she has accomplished a small semblance of freedom that Boots has not. Although she continues to struggle financially she resists further exploitation but it does not save her from Boot's wrath.

Lutie murders a black man in self-defense and runs away from the scene convinced that if she stays she would further victimize and harm her son. Lutie is not allowed to act in self-defense without consequences. She is not allowed to advocate for herself even when the system fails to advocate for her. When she flees, she also leaves Bub struggling with his own dilemma that will lead him to reform school and making him vulnerable to the patriarchal and capitalistic system. Lutie ultimately trusted Boots, another poor black person surviving day-to-day, assuming he would sympathize with her plight. She had hopes that he would financially assist her with Bub's problems (in the system), but instead she finds herself trapped in a violent situation. Whether she chooses to degrade herself in sexual exploitation or defend herself she cannot win the fight against him or the path designed to contain and exploit her. She could have chosen to sell her body in exchange for money to survive but she refuses to give up this last source of agency. She continuously attempts to find other avenues of decent work to provide for her family, although at every turn men sexualize her in an attempt to oppress and dominate her. For Lutie, the murder is more than an individual experience; it is an accumulation of all she has endured in the street. In Boot's eyes Lutie became the target of his pent up frustration of navigating the streets as a black man in America and for Lutie, Boots became the fear and anger of spending her life losing to the streets. He attacks her and she kills him. The oppression she had been facing all her life manifested itself in another poor black person's body. Her fear and anger in that moment blinded

spills over and transforms itself into violence. Although Lutie acted in self-defense she chooses to run away because she already knows that all “systems” have failed her, even those that were meant to protect.

Through Lutie, Petry shows how black female bodies are exploited in the labor force and vulnerable to sexual abuse. Lutie attempts to provide for Bub amidst her time intensive work and avoids “easy money” by declining work at the brothel or giving into the advances of her authoritative male figures. The reason Lutie is vulnerable to these situations stems from what Collins refers to as: “[b]elieving the unquestioned assumption of Black females’ promiscuity [that] influences how poor and working class Black women are treated” (Collins 104). The assumption that Lutie is promiscuous makes her vulnerable to both black and white male oppressors, “Black and white rapists, Petry knows, are part of the same American system” (Lattin 75). In bell hook’s, *Ain’t I A Woman*, hooks provides a historical context for the particular experience of Black women in the institution of slavery “The nakedness of the African female served as a constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability”(18). This context helps contextualize the kinds of conditions to which Lutie is exposed to in *The Street*. Even in environments that are supposed to be ideally free of sexual abuse and harassment, such as her work with the Chandlers, Lutie still encounters these challenges every day.

The impoverished socio-economic environment separates Lutie from her young black son which is ultimately what the street was designed to do, so dismantle forms of community. Lutie had to take up work as a maid which forced her to create a home for others in order to take care of Bub and ironically it stopped her from creating a sanctuary for her own family. While she performed this work she could not afford to be a mother to

Bub. Black male bodies are no less vulnerable in Petry's account of 1940s Harlem—the reader encounters several scenes of violence against black boys and men—but what is perhaps most illustrative in *The Street* are the ways in which Petry's black female and male characters turn on each other in response to structural injustice. This lack of responsibility to one another can also be traced back to times of enslavement. Rather than an uplifting tale of communities of color rallying together against oppression, then, Petry offers her readers a narrative that suggests that U.S. individualism and the ideal of the American dream makes resistance to oppression less likely when individuals of color are fighting for any small amount of power they can acquire instead of collective liberation.

As a black woman Lutie was born into oppression and Bub is meant to inherit her history, “The negro woman is unprotected either by law or public opinion. She is the property of her master and her daughters are his property,” bell hook's argues in her chapter “Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience”. Similar to female slaves, Lutie Johnson is unprotected by the law or public opinion. She is property of the street that personifies the system working against her and the other characters living in the street. The hyper segregated, poor, inner cities with no job opportunities, incriminating public schools, lack of health care and social services create a war zone that often leads to an oppressive cycle of poverty and violence. Lutie and Bub are trying to survive in America, a place where black bodies are only seen as useful for the labor they can provide. Lutie does not have the right to mother her son or seen as capable of mothering, because as a poor black woman, she is not seen as fully human.

Lutie begins to conceptualize her position in a white patriarchal and capitalist society when she's at the zoo with Bub observing the tigers. Lutie identifies with the

tigress. “There was a moment before the great hunks of red meat were thrust into the cages, when the big cats prowled back and forth, desperate, raging, ravening...They were weaving back and forth, growling, roaring, raging at the bars that kept them from the meat...” (325). She is becoming aware that she has been ‘growling’ since her former husband lost his job, ‘roaring’ since she found him with another woman and ‘raging’ since she became a single mother trying to keep her son off the streets, not realizing that the streets had successfully trapped her. The meat that Lutie desires is the ability to progress towards the American dream of owning her own home and gaining freedom from the street. Lutie wants the opportunity to earn enough money to buy her family a real home, one where Bub can have the opportunity to freely experience his childhood. She wants the same opportunities that were afforded to the Chandlers. The Chandlers sold her the American dream, the false idea that if you worked hard and self sacrificed you would reach the dream they were living. Lutie begins to realize that the American dream wasn’t created with her in mind.

Lutie recognizes the fear that registers in people when they watch the lions and tigers fight for survival. She silently observes them watching the caged animals, “They were at the bars that kept them from the meat, until the entire building was filled with the sound...until the people watching drew back from the cages, feeling insecure frightened at the sight and the sound of such uncontrolled savagery”(325). The same bars that keep the animals caged and enslaved are the ones that keep everyone watching safe and free to be entertained. The lions and tigers have been taken from their natural habitat and contained for peoples’ pleasure and entertainment. When the animals become desperate for food they instill a deep fear in their attentive audience and they begin to project the idea of

“uncontrolled savagery” onto the real victims- the caged. Similar to the lions, Lutie is imprisoned by the physical boundaries of her apartment, her mentally and spiritually draining job, and her own body. The white and black male gaze dehumanize her and transform her into a piece of meat to be devoured for other’s sexual consumption. It doesn’t end at the white male’s gaze because the gaze of white women that label her a sexual deviant also dehumanizes her. White women see her as a threat that they must protect their white husbands from so that they are not seduced by her sexually deviant body.

Through this process of dehumanization they fail to understand that she is also a mother who has a son that needs more attention than the children whom she looks after. Lutie Johnson’s blackness denies her access to be seen as fully human in the company of her white female and male counterparts but she is also not fully human in the eyes of her black male counterpart. Lutie’s motherhood is challenged and made invisible because of her socioeconomic status. Likewise, her Blackness is not recognized for the same reason. She is not fully woman because she is black and not fully black because she is a woman. Lutie understood how others viewed her, “It was like the Chandlers and their friends in Connecticut who looked at her and didn’t see her, but saw instead a wench with no morals who would be easy to come by” (199).

The street serves as a cage for black and brown people with lack of opportunities and a lack of social, economic, and political mobility. “This is the exact climate that breeds a culture of violence” (Collins 90). The rage felt by poor people of color often results in violence that is aimed at each other rather than the oppressor and the source of the actual problem. They become desperate in what seems to be a replica of the zoo. The

streets keep Lutie from opportunities to move upward and onward. She comes to understand that Bub's age does not protect him from being a poor black person in America. "All he wants to do is crawl out of sight and lie down, not moving, not thinking. She knew how he would feel, because that about summed up what had happened to her..."(314). They are both trapped in a cage unsure of how to free themselves. Lutie feels that she is the one who is responsible for her son's pitfall. However, the system was constructed in a manner that was meant to determine not only her fate but her son's as well. The street imposes the myth of American individualism onto its prey and encourages victims to persecute one another the way the Super preyed on Bub and Boots on Lutie.

Not only must Lutie fight off several predators but she must also suppress any signs of vulnerability unless she wants to relinquish further agency. She becomes fully aware of the need to resist when she encounters Boots, "[B]ut she knew by the eager way he was bending toward her across the table, by the intentness with which he was studying her, that he was seeking to discover the degree of her disappointment" (306). Lutie knows that Boots would feed off the fact that she was depending on *his* money, on the meat, in order to protect her so she refuses to show any signs of weakness. Lutie and Boots are caged in a system designed to pin them against one another; a system that encourages them to internalize their oppression. When they fail to build solidarity they transform each other into the source of their oppression and they choose to extort each other intent on their individual progress.

Lutie Johnson commits murder in self-defense and her son was trying to help his mother pay the rent but ultimately they were both punished for trying to survive. What

Johnson and her son need, cannot be found in reform school it can only be organized through coalitions that can resist the system that entraps all. Crime is often a response to social conditions and “criminals” are often victims that experience the worst levels of oppression from this patriarchal system. Lutie fears for her son’s safety and decides that she is not fit to be his mother. She was already trapped in a cage unable to escape her social conditions. The long withstanding history of portraying black women as promiscuous sexual objects helps to justify their abuse. Lutie and her son had already been denied humanity. Bub is now left motherless and fatherless and could potentially be directed to a reform school. Although the novel, *The Street*, features fictional characters, Lutie’s trials and tribulations speak to the war being waged on poor women of color and their struggle to survive. Liberation can be found when women share knowledge of their lived experiences and form communities to resist white capitalist patriarchy. We must do the necessary work to dismantle such a system where the streets can no longer perpetuate the intergenerational trauma as seen through Lutie and her son, Bub.

The Letters to Ourselves: Sisters In Conference

Through writing the poem “Letter to My Sister” (1927) and directly addressing it to women of color, Anne Spencer initiates an intimate conversation in a public sphere. The title underscores the epistolary form, which is a productive genre for writing about private matters between sisters. Spencer writes within the frame of Black feminism and intersectionality and in doing so, she has created a space where resistance takes a different form allowing a subversive, sisterly voice to exist (Crenshaw, 1991). Spencer’s writing is a form of resistance and it speaks directly to the power of the collective. Women of color experience oppression that is both intersectional and distinct from other women as they are oppressed on account of both their gender and race (Collins, 1998). Lutie Johnson reminds us the dangers of isolation within our own oppression and the necessity of community needed for liberation.

Spencer’s call for a collective resistance inspired me to organize the inaugural “Sisters in Conference: Self- Care, Self-Love & Collective Healing.” This free annual conference strives to create a space for women of color to build community, focusing on the holistic development of women of color in the United States. My goal is to engage in strategies of feminist praxis by accepting knowledge production at the community level that informs feminism in the academy. By carving out a space within the ivory tower, we as women of color are creating a safe space with radical self-love and collective healing against our shared oppression, but it is also *a shared celebration*. Spencer’s poetic intervention, in “Letter to My Sister,” inspires us to continue the work of addressing the

intersectional nature of oppression in the 21st century and to foster strategies and spaces designed to combat that oppression through radical love and healing.

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VITA

Hailing from South Central, LA Brenda G. Martinez is currently pursuing her M.A. in English after earning her dual degree in English & Journalism from Lehigh University. Although she is a first-generation college student she has left a legacy at Lehigh with the LUSI program (Lehigh University Summer Scholars Institute) and Sisters In Conference. As she continues onto UT Austin's Ph.D. program in English, she is committed to exploring transnational feminisms and the pursuit of social justice in oppressed communities. Her scholarly objective is to encapsulate the transnational intergenerational feminist narratives of Salvadoran mothers and their Salvadoran-American daughters.