

## WHEN WISHES ARE HORSES: MY LIFE AND THE POETRY OF DE LA TIERRA AND LORDE THROUGH A KALEIDOSCOPIIC LENS

*I HAD A DREAM.*

*I was running through the streets of Duhaney Park with my shirt off and my feet free from shoes. I was flying. I was weightless and speeding, gender-free, but only half naked, no breasts to hold me back, but a prepubescent pudenda that was hidden inside my shorts because it should never come out and play this freely. I was floating on the wave of my own careless laughter, the wind feathering my skin. I was free. At home.*

*And then my mother, big as life, drops like a bomb in front of me, an explosion of “what you doing running bout like some let go beast, makin’ the neighbors think I don’t know how fe raise girl pickney, lookin’ like you don’t belong nowhere to no one? You is somethin’ else. Go home and learn fe behave before you send me to a early grave.” Her face is shine and red from the heat in the streets, and her eyes burn with anger. I rage like an infant: all fire in my chest and powerless protest: I open my mouth and silent fear echoes out. She could beat me. I could end up doing the very thing I don’t want to do: I could break her heart. The heat is an inferno swelling in my chest, making my eyes then my cheeks hot then wet.*

*My freedom floats away from me like ashes on heat waves.*

*I have a dream that I am Stephen King’s Firestarter.*

*I’m dressed like a lady in my sixth form Immaculate Conception uniform: white bra and panties, beneath full white slip, beneath white A-line skirt and blue button-front jacket. My feet sit quietly in a pair of brown socks and brown penny loafers. I look covered and contained. I would have been the picture of Immaculate decorum, except I’ve shaved my head and am sitting in the office of Sister Maureen Clare Hall from The Order of St. Francis, on the edge of being expelled. The discovered diary sits on her brown polished wooden desk, by itself. The little book seems bigger than all of us and, when it is opened, it swallows everything in the room, including me. Poems and prose about “messing with girls, about girls messing with me, about wanting to just kick their toothy faces in, wanting to watch them hurt harder than I ever hurt” swallow us whole. We seem to sit in the*

*belly of my beast. My parents sit together there, still as tombstones, marking the death of a dream.*

*I am consumed by the rage on the page and the fire blazing in my chest. I am afraid this will destroy me. The fear feeds my anger and my heart burns: is this how the witches went?; is this what it feels like to be a faggot in the fireplace, but a person too, not dead wood at all? I stare at the scene before me and dream that the fire shoots out of me. The habits catch first and burn an orange blaze, the Sisters beat themselves to kill the flames and their hands catch second. Their flesh burns blue then white, like an immaculate conflagration.*

*I blink in disbelief and feel the reality of water leaking from my eyes. I've been expelled. My world explodes and my future appears to go up in flames.*

*I had a dream that my rage, my pain, my fears, all the things that threatened to devour me, became a source of supernatural power and protected me. I feared it would always be just a fantasy.*

I open this exploration of the writings of tatiána de la tierra and Audre Lorde by weaving a bit from my childhood and coming of age in Jamaica. Through this kaleidoscopic lens of my own dreams, I view and query these poets/philosophers' renditions of ways of being, ways of being a lesbian, ways of being an activist, ways of being a dreamer. In de la tierra's *For the Hard Ones: A Lesbian Phenomenology*, I see poems about dreaming, about "butterflying" and about flying free. In Lorde's *Undersong* and *Sister Outsider*, I see insightful explications of what it means to live in the face of oppressive forces and fight them tooth and nail. As I read them both, I discover that dreaming and activism, that fantasizing and the work of transforming reality can be symbiotic. In a sense, wishes can be horses that those of us who demand a different reality can ride.

tatiána de la tierra's project comes out of an enacted desire. During her first semester of graduate school, she was asked to "research literary criticism about a piece of contemporary Mexican literature and to write an in-depth survey of these critiques" (57). However, as a creative writer she wanted to "experiment" more with her own "writings in Spanish," a desire that had brought her to the University of Texas at El Paso in the first place (58). She convinced her professor to allow her to write a creative response to the readings and crafted *For the Hard Ones* as a "lesbianizing" of

Dante Medina's *Zonas de la escritura*. And, so it is, that in and of itself, *For the Hard Ones* was born out of a wish, a desire made real.

de la tierra's linking of lesbianism and living as a dreamer is not only apparent in her explanation of the her impetus for writing this project. It is clear in the first poem of the collection, "Being." Here she describes ways in which lesbians are sometimes silently recognized as they go through the world and, as she comes to the end of the piece, she asks "but why are they lesbians?" only to answer with another asking: "why do clouds navigate the sky and why do dreamers wander on earth?" (11) This series of queries harkens to a naturalness to lesbian sexuality; it is as natural as clouds moving through the sky. And it is also a sequence of questions that parallel lesbianism with dreaming.

This linkage between lesbianism and dreaming is replayed in several poems throughout the text. In "Dreaming of Lesbos," she states, "I can enter the morning with traces of an eternal dream: to live on a planet of women. we sing in the fertile forest, caress on lavender hills, bathe beneath cascades of clear waters. and just like that, nude and wet, we mount each other's bodies. our desire is a whale that searches for calm in the depth of the sea./ I smell sex in my hair when I awaken./ the dream perfumes all of my days" (15). It is a dream born out of her knowing that "we are in a world that is not ours," one in which we must sometimes fantasize, dream up, or let ourselves give in to wishful thinking in order to experience an alternate reality (15). Yet even more, this dreaming changes the very air we breathe when we wake. It leads her to "the post office" where she goes to "look for stamps with etchings of flowers and fruits so that I can send letters to the women who loved me in my sleep" (15). From this dream, she awakes to a different thinking and feeling, and, as a result of these thoughts and feelings, she is prompted to act. "Dreaming of Lesbos" is, therefore, not just about dreaming a fantasy, but also a call to be moved by your dreaming. Indeed, she asks, halfway through the piece, "what do we do with the dreams that touch our consciousness in the nude each night?" (15).

Yet, even with such calls to action following the "paradise" of fantasy and dreaming, de la tierra's poems often read like just a fantasy: a dreaming about a dream world and an effortless floating through a reality scented by these dreams. A world in which, as she says in "Pathway to Lesbianism," lesbians renounce the "path that was already written" and "everything that you should be and do is replaced with what strikes your fancy" (25). Her poems sometime float above reality, depicting "a place that is not a

place at all” and a lesbianism that invents its own laws, gods and constructs, as well as inhabits its own separatist tribe in the midst of a “society that is not ours” (53).

It’s easy to see this as dreamy, literally and figuratively. With the sheer power of my desire and my mind, I escape. In the apparent absence of oppression and, consequently, without the hard work of coalition building and resistance, I form a “sisterhood” in which I find belonging and where “we create our own version of paradise.” In such a place, we “form a society apart./ ...we speak another language, worship our own deities or none at all, invent laws proper to ourselves” (53). Here we “circle upon green valleys, dance to undiscovered music, [and] perfume the air with our wild scent” (53).

*I am free.*

*I am home.*

*I am it, ungendered. Free to run and find what’s hiding in the garden, in my remembered childhood. This garden is my playground.*

*I sit with daydreams in sunshine; I find a warm space. I am washed in sunlight.*

*In my remembered childhood, there is a place for me.*

*This garden is small and in the front of the house, but even though it is out front, it is secreted by high hedges all around its edges. People walking by on the sidewalk can’t see me sitting on the carpet grass, sucking the hibiscus dry, topless in broad daylight. When I am done, I can lay down flat on my back and feel the prick and tickle of each blade of grass against my skin, smell the stain of sticky sweet flowers on my lips and stare at the sparkling sun shining through the high green hedges standing guard over me.*

*In my re-remembered childhood, I bask in the sun and live in a dream.*

I am seduced by *For the Hard Ones*. I readily escape into its prose, happy to wallow in a world of lesbian-filled dreams where orgasmic joy flows unabated. Here lesbians aren’t enmeshed in a web of oppressions; we are “the ones who invent the laws, who own the press, who impose economic systems, who determine the procedures allowed with our bodies, who penetrate without permission, who judge” (33). It is a dream come true to see someone else voice fantasies that feel so similar to my own; a dream come true to sense the existence of others like me, other women who love women, other women who want to feel free to be and do whatever they want—except that when I close the book, I am not in that dream world. I am still where I

started: seeking a real life homespace where I feel free and am free to be all that I am and ever want to become.

For me being a lesbian is not enough to make me a part of a fantastic tribe, a “tribe as large as all of us everywhere” (de la tierra 53). For me being a lesbian in a conservative Christian family in a small Jamaican town was enough to make me feel out of place in my childhood home, in my homeland and even in my own skin. My place in that particular place in the world was isolating and I hungered for the company of others like me. I dreamed of a world of women who could live freely in a world like the one I lived in. I felt uneasy at home, but I had no desire to be apart from my home in my search for greater personal freedom. So I lived in the fear that I might be found out by my friends and family and that I might be expelled/cut off/ ostracized. In my dream world, my family, my black post-colonial culture and my sexuality are not in conflict and do not compel me to conform in a way that denies or denounces any part of who I am. In my paradise, I am whole and happy and free to follow my fancy, all within my lived reality.

As marvelous fantasies, de la tierra’s poems in *For the Hard Ones* move me emotionally and offer me a kind of escapism. However, they do not transport me to concrete understandings of how I can achieve and eventually experience this amazing flight of fancy in real life. I would like to imagine that I have all the power I need to do whatever I please, but that doesn’t mean that I won’t be hurt by hate crimes, fired or not even hired for being black, or maybe for being a lesbian, or maybe for being an immigrant or a woman or all of the above. Imagining myself as free from all these identity markers and social constructs does not deliver me from the concrete consequences of racism, classism and sexism. *For the Hard Ones* offers me a free floating lesbian paradise, but, when I exit its pages I am still just dreaming of liberation and am no closer to imagining its realization. I value its bold and beautiful celebration of lesbian sexuality and treasure how much it highlights the joys of being a lesbian. However, the same lack of locatedness that allows me to imagine myself in her dreamy lesbian utopia also leaves me questioning if this unbelievable sense of power and freedom can truly be achieved. Or is it all just a dream? Is this fantastic fantasy nothing more than a wish? Is feeling free and fanciful in a dream world “sufficient for butterflying” (19), sufficient for me to enact my metaphoric flying free in the real world? Does fantasy get me anywhere?

In a sense, fantasy, especially the kind that celebrates things about myself that are often denigrated/devalued in real life can be helpful in the formation of a transformative psyche. This logic is extremely attractive: it allows me to free myself through the workings of my mind. I can be anything I want to be as long as I believe and feel it to be true. In “Feeling and Living” de la tierra explains that “the ones who think that first they ‘are’ and later believe in what they are do not take into account that one does not exist apart from the feelings that accompany being” (45). In this sense, even such fantasizing and dreaming, as she writes about her in poems, play a role in creating a self and changing a reality.

But is this thinking and feeling all that’s necessary? Shouldn’t thought and action go hand in hand; aren’t they both equally necessary for liberation? Like Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the formation of a new psyche, a new self-image, is necessary if one is going to enact an effective resistance and achieve personal and social freedom, but it must be in union with “action... with respect to the real source of the conflict, i.e., towards social structures” (100). In this sense the psyche has to free itself from already existing identity constructs in order to think and feel a world and an ontology that is liberated/liberating. And the subject has to act in accordance with this transformed self in order to bring about the actuality of this freer world. Here, it is not enough to fantasize, feel fanciful, psychologically butterfly and feel free; existing may require nothing more than feeling, but living to the fullest requires the integration of thought and action, feeling and doing.

Audre Lorde delivers this poetic promise of a visionary resistance to real oppressions. She produces the kind of revolutionary poems that simultaneously inspire and indicate ways to find liberation from a lived psycho-social location. The difference and similarity that I see between her work and de la tierra’s is that she evokes a way of being that is grounded in her existence in and resistance to a world of racism, sexism and homophobia. Her work exemplifies not only a resistant thinking and feeling, but also concrete ways in which this thinking and feeling can be deployed in the fight to love and live freely.

Like de la tierra’s call to butterfly, Lorde, in her poem “For Each of You,” instructs me to “Be who you are and will be” (80). Unlike the fantastical flight of fancy and disembodied metamorphoses I read in “The Art of Butterflying,” Lorde’s poem warns against living in a dream world even as she advocates for the usefulness of dreaming: “Respect whatever pain you bring back/ from your dreaming/ but do not

look for new gods/ in the sea/ nor in any part of the rainbow” (Lorde 81). In Lorde’s vision for transforming reality, dreams are not useful if they only offer escapism and impractical solutions.

“For Each of You” goes on to instruct me to use the pain and fear, things that could and are meant to cripple my dreams and curtail my freedom, as a source of resistance: “When you are hungry/ learn to eat/ whatever sustains you/ until morning/ but do not be misled by details/ simply because you live them.// Do not let your head deny/ your hands/ any memory of what passes through them/ nor your eyes nor your heart/ everything can be used” (Lorde 80). Nothing in me should be tossed aside in my resistance: my head, my heart and my hands (my thoughts, my feelings and my actions) are all useful—and necessary—as I try to soar to greater heights of freedom, joy and happiness in life. The struggles of living day to day can be as useful in formulating resistance as the dreams that live in your heart. The important thing to remember is not to lose myself to any of them—or lose sight of any of them—as I envision and enact my resistant and liberating “butterflying.” Getting bogged down by the details of a lived reality is just as harmful as only focusing on those things that live in my heart.

*There is ground to stand on in those places that live in my heart.*

*I am situated in multiple locations. I migrate from homelands and am born into new psychic spaces, some times without leaving who I was and where I came from. Don’t get me wrong. I am not schizoid. I am not occupied with warring voices. I am whole and balanced with both feet on all the grounds I cover. I am complex and complete.*

*Labels? They roll easily off my tongue: lesbian, Jamaican, teacher, student, black, young, middleclass... you get the picture? This tells you nothing about who I am. I may not inhabit the spot(s) you’ve charted for me. My interior spaces evolve faster than the speed of discovery and cartography. I spend my days navigating multipliCity. I’m always there.*

*Power? I am constantly negotiating how much I wield and how I can use it. As a teacher, I struggle with the power to teach subversive lessons to raging students. As a student I worked to meet class assignments as well as thwart the privileging of the professorial perspective. As a lesbian I seduce my lover to give in to me, knowing that her surrender only leads to my abnegation of power. Equality ebbs and flows as power relations fluctuate, as my subject positions shift and morph, as my psychosocial locations defy even the most thoroughly thought out maps.*

*“Visualize, remember, and sense” a self that constantly complicates, contests, and concedes to “a map that has been drawn by power in its many guises and directions” and where there are several spots for me (Lugones 8).*

*Visualize a me who sees this map and her social location as a source of resistance. From my place, I can remain grounded and still find ways to fly free of boundaries.*

I still have dreams of a fantastic freedom and now they are another source of power. By keeping my dreams alive and by using the ground out of which they grow as a foundation for a fantastic resistance, I can use wishes to guide my destiny, dreams as a tool in the “service of my vision”—to quote from Lorde (*Cancer Journals*, 13). Indeed, wishes can be a guide for building our destinies. Like the “Uses of the Erotic,” dreaming may be seen as “a longed-for bed which” one enters gratefully and from which [one awakes] empowered—but only if one sees these “dreams that touch our consciousness in the nude each night” (de la tierra 15) as grounds for a fantastic resistance in our waking hours.

*I wake to find myself, a woman rising.*

*I’ve travelled years to this place, to this space, and I am a woman, rising from the bed she makes for herself each day – and that she dreams in at night.*

*I’ve travelled with each breath to this, and wake to find the life I have made for myself, and the woman I have entered into love with.*

*I think of her, the me I was, the girl, the child, the fear, the self that saw no home except in dreams, in dreaming.*

*I see her: photos, passport snapshots, candid and posed shots, frozen in frames throughout my house. I see her captured and still, there in a wish-filled past I know remains. She is a self that reminds me always of where I’ve been and who I was.*

*I wake and see my self as I was, looking on from lens of my lived experiences to the woman I now am; I rise to the reality of the life I’ve built from my dreaming.*

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