Authorizing Desire
Erotic Poetics and the Aisthesis of Freedom

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oppression/makes us love one another badly/makes our breathing mangled/while i am desperately trying to clear the air/in the absence of extreme elegance/madness can set right in like a burnin gauloise on Japanese silk. though highly cultured/even the silk must ask how to burn up discreetly.

--Ntozake Shange, "a photograph: lovers in motion"

In Simone de Beauvoir's The Ethics of Ambiguity, Beauvoir characterizes oppression as having at least two characteristics: 1) it aims to reduce the oppressed to the status of an object (thereby regarding the oppressed as pure facticity), and 2) it excludes the oppressed from the community of those regarded as having the capacity and the authority to make meanings and establish values (thereby diminishing prospects for transcendence). Beauvoir specifically identifies manipulation of desire as the chief mechanism through which oppression is exercised and finds its most destructive effects. If desire, or passion as Beauvoir and Sartre describe it, is important for the realization of our freedom, incapacitating it--destroying desire or mutilating it in some way--would have severe consequences for the pursuit of the creation of a life of meaning and purpose. Similar ideas are advanced and further developed in the work of Drucilla Cornell, who makes the case for what she describes as imaginative agency. This paper develops the outlines of a theoretical framework for considering the relation between freedom and desire, to be utilized in investigations of artistic practices of resistance that aim at producing transgressive expressions of desire and what I shall describe as the aisthesis of freedom.
To illustrate a couple of cases in point, I shall open a discussion of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem "Spell #7"^{4} and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Both works exemplify concern with the problem of revaluing what oppression denigrates. Both seek meaningful agency emerging out of a situation that is affectively incapacitating. I shall read Shange's work as endeavoring to open different possibilities for loving—as producing an erotic poetics, and I look to Morrison's work for insights relevant to moral psychology and for an invitation to contemplate the *aisthesis* of freedom.

I. Desire and freedom in Beauvoir

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir casts her own light on the situation of human existence—neither god nor thing, we live as liminal creatures who often find themselves drawn to one or the other end of this pole. Sartre, of course, names that desire—longing to be either god (for Sartre, pure transcendence, absolute subjectivity) or thing (pure immanence, absolute objectivity)—bad faith. For Sartre, the temptations of bad faith are numerous, nearly ubiquitous, and it becomes difficult to see how we are anything but damned, or how a meaningful social existence is possible. Beauvoir is similarly wary of bad faith. Her *Ethics of Ambiguity* operates within a Sartrean ontological framework, but for her the trap of bad faith is not inevitable: she distinguishes the desire to disclose being from the wish to possess or coincide with the object of desire.

According to both Sartre and Beauvoir, projects of bad faith fundamentally aim at fleeing our freedom. We pursue it in order to mollify anxiety in the face of freedom and to avoid the metaphysical risks involved in what Sartre describes as making ourselves a lack of being, or exercising transcendence. Beauvoir also recognizes this tendency, which she describes as a
desire to flee freedom that stems from our nostalgia for the security and cheerfulness of childhood. The child's world is a serious one, but it is one for which s/he bears no responsibility. The serious world, characterized by what both Sartre and Beauvoir identify with the "spirit of seriousness," is one comprised of ready-made values. The child in the serious world considers the world as given, values as inherent, and the adults who structure their lives as having pure being. One may live in such a world playfully because "the domain open to his subjectivity seems insignificant and puerile in his own eyes" (EA, p. 35). And one may pursue some measure of freedom within it only insofar as one seeks the realization of those values and traverses the path toward being that is worn by those beings one takes to be complete. This is not to say that children live in bad faith, of course, since children are not yet aware of their subjectivity and do not have a sense of inhabiting the world in any other way. (Beauvoir thinks it is conceivable that eighteenth-century slaves and "the Mohammedan woman enclosed in a harem" [EA, p. 38] have a similar existence.) However, once one matures in one's subjectivity and becomes acquainted with one's freedom, then the nostalgia for the serious-but-carefree world of the child, the desire to trade freedom for security, and the resignation or outright denial of one's responsibility, constitute bad faith. If Sartre sees this desire as ultimately damning, Beauvoir does not. It is not the desire itself that is dangerous, but rather the mistaken notion that such desiring is terminable, that it aims at a satisfaction of completion. It is not possession of the object itself that desire genuinely seeks, Beauvoir claims, but rather the process of disclosure itself. What it celebrates is the disclosive character of human existence, an idea more akin to Heidegger's than Sartre's. In other words, she sees human beings as realizing their existence in disclosing possible ways of being and bringing forth their meanings. Beauvoir herself puts it thus: Human existence has its
being in "vitality, sensitivity, and intelligence," which are not themselves "ready-made qualities, but a way of casting oneself into the world and of disclosing being":

Every man casts himself into the world by making himself a lack of being; he thereby contributes to reinvesting it with human signification. He discloses it. And in this movement even the most outcast sometimes feel the joy of existing. There is vitality only by means of free generosity. Intelligence supposes good will, and inversely, a man is never stupid if he adapts his language and his behavior to his capacities, and sensitivity is nothing else but the presence which is attentive to the world and to itself. The reward for these spontaneous qualities issues from the fact that they make signficances and goals appear in the world. They discover reasons for existing. They confirm us in the pride and joy of our destiny as man (EA, pp. 41-42).

Beauvoir describes our living out this destiny as "living warmth," or passion, and she associates it with love and desire. It is a kind of loving that invests human activity with meaning, a kind of loving that bestows human existence itself with value. Such desire is directed by ends, no doubt, but its pleasure is not sustained by acquiring those ends. The pleasure of desire, desire's delight, unfolds in the perpetual pursuit and recreation of those ends. And this is what grounds our pursuit of freedom for others, according to Beauvoir. We desire the freedom of others to multiply these possibilities. The freedom of the other provides an opening to the social in which the meanings that we make take on their significance.

These ideas become somewhat clearer in Beauvoir's discussion of oppression, which emphasizes the significance of the freedom of others for us and elaborates the crucial role of desire in the exercise of freedom and the realization of its ecstasies. In the situation of oppression, the oppressed is both reduced to pure facticity, regarded as an absence of human transcendence, and explicitly denied opportunities for meaningful transcendence insofar as the oppressed is excluded from participation in the production of social meanings. Obviously, a person cannot be stripped of her metaphysical freedom since human existence is radically free according to the existential framework. But it can happen that in the situation of oppression, the
possibilities of the joyful exercise of freedom can be diminished insofar as the prospects for meaningful transcendence are minimized or eliminated. Beauvoir writes: "As we have already seen, every man transcends himself. But it happens that this transcendence is condemned to fall uselessly back upon itself because it is cut off from its goals. That is what defines a situation of oppression. Such a situation is never natural: man is never oppressed by things" (EA, p. 81). In other words, there is a social reality that provides the context in which one's ability to make meanings, one's participation in the production of values meaningfully occurs. Excluded from that community, incapacitated for that participation, one is unable to make the movements of desire that freedom requires. Beauvoir continues:

As we have seen, my freedom, in order to fulfill itself, requires that it emerge into an open future: it is other men who open the future to me, it is they who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future; but if, instead of allowing me to participate in this constructive movement, they oblige me to consume my transcendence in vain, if they keep me below the level which they have conquered and on the basis of which new conquests will be achieved, then they are cutting me off from the future, they are changing me into a thing. (EA, p. 82)

And one need not be actively and repeatedly excluded from this process in order to be oppressed. Perversions of desire that draw one toward fruitless endeavors and mechanical gestures are sufficient for getting the oppressed to will their own exclusion from the meaningful creation of the future. Beauvoir continues:

Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying, and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation; a life justifies itself only if its effort to perpetuate itself is integrated into its surpassing and if this surpassing has no other limits than those which the subject assigns himself. Oppression divides the world into two clans: those who enlighten mankind by thrusting it ahead of itself and those who are condemned to mark time hopelessly in order merely to support the collectivity; their life is a pure repetition of mechanical gestures; their leisure is just about sufficient for them to regain their strength; the oppressor feeds himself on their transcendence and refuses to extend it by a free recognition. The oppressed has only one solution: to deny the harmony of that mankind from which an attempt is made to exclude him, to prove that he is a man and that he is free by revolting against the tyrants. In order to prevent this revolt, one of the ruses of
oppression is to camouflage itself behind a natural situation since, after all, one can not revolt against nature. (EA, pp. 82-83)

Diminish desire and the oppressed effect their own exclusion since they do not want to participate in the pursuit and recreation of ends that afford the ecstatic life, the life of metaphysical risk, of "being thrown dangerously beyond" ourselves, the stakes of which are the very meanings of our lives.

For Beauvoir, the world that oppression erects is one plagued by the spirit of seriousness. It affirms the oppressive order as "a natural situation," a world that one cannot change and against which one cannot hope to successfully revolt. One cannot know the joy of the "destiny" of human existence caught within the serious world, or the world of the child. There is a kind of existential retelling of the story of the Fall at work in this idea. Just as the mythical first human beings traded paradise for the pleasures and pains of knowledge, the existentialist sees the human condition as characterized by a brokerage of the pleasures of child's play for the anxieties of subjectivity and its joyful possibilities. The only escape from the serious world is revolt, a thoroughgoing rebellion. We cannot merely make modest modifications in such world: "the oppressed can fulfill his freedom as a man only in revolt, since the essential characteristic of the situation against which he is rebelling is precisely its prohibiting him from any positive development; it is only in social and political struggle that his transcendence passes beyond to the infinite" (EA, p. 87).

II. The dilemma of Revolt: Fanon's Case

But precisely how does one go about such a revolt? The logic of rebellion that Beauvoir heralds appears to require a revaluing of precisely that which founds the oppression of the other. It demands that "the essential characteristic of the situation" (EA, p. 87) be challenged. In his Black
Skin, White Masks, Fanon contemplates his possibilities for revolt within an existentialist framework, and he struggles to apply it to the particular situation of the colonized, who are subjugated and marked by "the fact of blackness".6

Fanon scrutinizes Sartre's assessment of the attempted revaluation of "blackness" in the poetics of "negritude," which aims to affirm and positively define the very difference that serves as the basis of exploitation for the colonizers. In his 1948 preface to Black Orpheus, Sartre claims:

In fact, negritude appears as the minor term of a dialectical progression: The theoretical and practical assertion of the supremacy of the white man is its thesis; the position of negritude as an antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is insufficient by itself, and the Negroes who employ it know this very well; they know that it is intended to prepare the synthesis or realization of the human in a society without races. Thus negritude is the root of its own destruction, it is a transition and not a conclusion, a means and not an ultimate end.7

But Fanon himself had not "know[n] this well," and he questions whether any movement can be authentic if regarded as merely a turn in a larger historical process. How can one possibly regard one's sense of one's own worth in such terms? When one's very life is on the line, when what one endeavors is the poetic transformation of the meaning of one's very own existence and future possibilities, how could one simultaneously hold the new valuation as a mere means to yet another end, the "real" or legitimate one that differs from what one had taken as one's poetic aim? Sartre essentially claims that a poetics of blackness, insofar as it seeks to valorize the fact of blackness, simply reverses the very terms against which it aims to rebel. It inverts the content (i.e., what was bad is now good) without obliterating the form, and hence it fails to escape what it aims to overthrow, the terms of valuation itself. If this is so, what remains for the colonized to do; whence comes liberation from oppression of this sort? Whence comes a legitimate black identity? Can there be a black voice that authorizes meaning and writes its own significance?
What direction of desire will be liberating? What should the colonized want? Fanon laments, "I wanted to be typically Negro--it was no longer possible. I wanted to be white--that was a joke. And, when I tried, on the level of ideas and intellectual activity, to reclaim my negritude, it was snatched away from me. Proof was presented that my effort was only a term in the dialectic" (BSWM, p. 132; emphasis added).

If the poetics of blackness cannot help but fail, what is to be done to escape what physically cannot be fled, namely the facticity that serves as the basis of the oppression, the fact of blackness? The revaluation of blackness seems the only available way out. Fanon writes immediately following Sartre's assessment cited above, "When I read that page, I felt that I had been robbed of my last chance" (BSWM, p. 133). He later explains, "And so [as Sartre sees it] it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me. It is not out of my bad nigger's misery, my bad nigger's teeth, my bad nigger's hunger that I will shape a torch with which to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for that turn of history" (BSWM, p. 134). He continues, "my shoulders slipped out of the framework of the world, my feet could no longer feel the touch of the ground. Without a Negro past, without a Negro future, it was impossible for me to live my Negroid. Not yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned" (BSWM, p. 138). If the poetics of negritude are destined to failure, at least in cases in which they constitute reversals of the values they aim to reject, at least when they valorize a kind of facticity without simultaneously enabling new possibilities for transcendence, what then can serve as the basis of revolt in situations of racialized oppression? Perhaps, one might claim, Fanon's account better reveals an inherent contradiction in existential thought than it does a fatal flaw in black poetry. Perhaps we can resolve the dilemma articulated by Fanon by simply rejecting the existential

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account of meaning and human existence. Fanon himself is not wholly willing to do so, and I do not think this contradiction that Fanon forcefully illuminates necessarily requires us to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

The existential framework sketched above from Beauvoir's work fails to account for one very important idea. In my summary of Beauvoir's discussion of the frivolity of the child in the serious world, I indicated that Beauvoir claims that one who is child-like lives playfully in the serious world until one becomes familiar with the nature of human subjectivity as fundamentally and radically free. Beauvoir indicates, without elaborating, the importance of imagination for envisioning a possible future when she writes, "the goal toward which I surpass myself must appear to me as a point of departure toward a new act of surpassing. Thus a creative freedom develops happily without ever congealing into unjustified facticity" (EA, pp. 27-8). But what propels me toward the taking of those goals, what enables me to see as I must in order for "a point of departure toward a new act of surpassing" to in fact appear (EA, p. 27)? It seems that what is necessary, as Beauvoir claims, is "an apprenticeship of freedom" (EA, p. 37). Precisely how does one become apprenticed in freedom? What leads us to that knowledge such that it animates an entire form of life? *What makes freedom our familiar?* Without an account of this, it seems to me, a tremendous chasm is left in the existential view. To describe it merely as consciousness-raising does not seem sufficient. Even after I become aware of injustices in the serious world that would keep me its subject, how do I acquire the sense that there is something to be done about it, and that I'm the one (perhaps together with others who share my situation) to do it? *What directs my own way out of the serious world?* And if the serious world is the only one I have known and the only one I have previously thought possible, whence comes my direction for conceiving its alternatives?
III. Openings to Otherness: The Imaginary Domain

Although she is not writing in response to the question as I have posed it, Drucilla Cornell's conception of the imaginary domain and its fundamental significance for the realization of subjectivity is relevant. Cornell articulates a conceptual space in which one exercises the freedom to do the work of conceiving the world as other, of imagining a world one wants as one's own, of pursuing other modes of disclosure and of revealing other forms of reality. What Drucilla Cornell describes as "the imaginary domain" is "that psychic and moral space in which we […] are allowed to evaluate and represent who we are." Cornell discusses the imaginary domain specifically in terms of sexual desire and sexuate being, but it could apply to desire generally and other specific ways of being. Cornell further describes the imaginary domain as what "gives to the individual person, and her only, the right to claim who she is through her own representation of her [sexuate] being. Such a right necessarily makes her the morally [and legally] recognized source of what [the] meaning [of her sexual difference] is for her." Having access to the imaginary domain is supposed to activate the possibility for change and hence enable a more rigorous exercise of our agency. Cornell writes that "the imaginary domain is the space of the 'as if' in which we imagine who we might be if we made ourselves our own end and claimed ourselves as our own person." Simply put, the imaginary domain is that space in which not merely what we desire--or what we take to be the good--is derived but also the shape of desire is given its form. Cornell describes the kind of freedom exercised in the imaginary domain as "freedom of personality." It "is valuable because it is what lets us make a life we embrace as our own."
Cornell's work significantly enhances and fills out the framework of freedom and desire I've drawn from Beauvoir and troubled alongside Fanon, but it would be useful to see it in action, to get a sense of a concrete application of the utilization of an imaginary domain, and to see what other resources one might need to flourish there. For that, I shall turn to Ntozake Shange whose choreopoem "Spell #7: geechee jibara quik magic trance manual for technologically stressed third world people" explicitly thematizes the nature of poetic power and considers how one might tap it.

IV. Acting Out: The Ecstasies of Shange's Erotic Poetics

Shange's "Spell #7" focuses on the lives of a group of black actors and their friends who struggle to negotiate their oppressive situation. One of the actors, Betinna, describes her experience in the (white) world that determines and constructs her as "being black" when she says of herself, "I am theater". To be black is to be already defined, to already have a role, to be a reluctant actor on a white stage. Betinna recognizes that her possibilities for transcending that role (living out the "fact" of blackness) lie in acting out of it. At best, she and the other characters in the play are socially invisible, unrecognized as legitimate candidates for living a human life; at worst, they are despised, devalued, and even physically and mentally destroyed. Their possibilities for acting out are limited, since access to many of the ordinary means of transcendence is prohibited to them.

What they need is magic, "blk magic" [sic], that will enable them not merely to be satisfied with themselves but to be loved--to become the subjects of what others have called "loving perception," a perspective that invests what it perceives as potent and full of possibilities, possessed with the capacity for transfiguration. They need a magic space in which they can conjure the creative energy necessary for exercising meaningful agency. And they need
an opportunity to *practice* magic, to be enabled to engage in transforming the negative values they have been given by others into those they can affirm as beautiful and significant.\textsuperscript{14}

Poetry and dance are the means through which they attempt to bring this work to fruition. One of the characters, a poet named Eli, claims, "whoever that is authorizing poetry as an avocation/ is a fraud/ put yr own feet on the ground".\textsuperscript{15} Creating poetic expression is described as "authorizing"--drawing on senses of both "authoring" and "authorizing." Being a creator is simultaneously granting power, sanctioning, and providing sufficient grounds for the values and worldviews it establishes. To do so in a way that considers the activity as merely a hobby, to write poetry recklessly, is fraudulent. Grounding the significance of one's life is a fundamental endeavor and requires a kind of serious energy, but some things break a spirit of that capacity and diminish its capacity for *poiesis*. As the choreopoem unfolds, the characters strive to reach the place in which that rift can be transcended, in which magic, specifically "blk magic," can happen. The choreopoem represents Shange's effort to conceive a formal structure specific yet flexible enough to offer those transformative possibilities.

In her foreword to the collection in which "Spell #7" was published, Shange indicates that her work aims to provide an alternative to the "artificial aesthetics" of a "european framework for european psychology."\textsuperscript{16} She is specifically concerned to amplify possibilities for communication beyond the verbal, claiming that in her choreopoems, "music functions as another character."\textsuperscript{17} The choreopoem is a poetic amalgamation that draws its elements from choreography, theater, and a variety of meters and musical rhythms. It is a novel dramatic, poetic framework aimed at generating and giving shape to alternative forms of creative expression and producing transformative manifestations of desire. In these works, the "person/body, voice & language/ address the space as if [they] were a band/a dance company & a
theater group all at once, cuz a poet shd do that/create an emotional environment/ felt architecture." Shange's use of language, which some have seen as an effort to destroy the English language as such, is more creative than destructive. Although Shange does regard "the King's English" as a straight-jacket that supports oppression and limits creative expression, she is not merely seeking to destroy it by using it recklessly. In an interview Shange claims, "language will allow us to function more competently and more wholly in a holistic sense as human beings once we take hold of it and make it say what we want to say." And a number of her characters struggle to achieve precisely that aim. The language that Shange's characters use reflects not only their attempts to make it speak their own voice, but also the fact that they are "constricted" and "amputated" characters, whose movements and musical vocalizations both mirror their dismemberment and mark their efforts to poetically transform and transcend them. Shange claims that "literature, if it does nothing else, should stimulate one's imagination to know that there is more--maybe not more 'out there,' but more inside of us that we can use for our own survival." Shange's choreopoetry aims to engage that imagination. It seeks to provide openings for the direction of imaginative re-membering and the circulation of affirmative desire. It opens new and different circuits for loving--in the sense of valuing--that enable the transformation of desire that has been distorted by oppression.

Similar conceptions of poetic power and its political applications are advanced in Audre Lorde's well known "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power". And one finds in Toni Morrison's work, particularly Beloved, connections between the feeling of power, the development of human agency, and the materialization of freedom. I conclude by briefly drawing on both of these works in order to elaborate how the aisthesis of freedom--the feeling of
oneself as free and rich with possibilities--is linked with the creative power of being a maker of meaning and pleasure, and how erotic poetic practice--the engagement of desire enabled for authorizing--affords the creative resources for transgressive resistance.

V. Poetic Power and the Aisthesis of Freedom

In her well-known "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde articulates and distinguishes a sense of the erotic as a form of loving that draws one out of oneself. It is tied to the creative power of producing meanings and determining worthy goals, and it provides a significant form for resistance. She recognizes that one of ways in which oppression operates and incapacitates its victims is through the manipulation of desire: "In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change."

Lorde vividly describes the relation between the erotic and a sense of power connected with expressive feeling (contrasted with mere sensation). She explicitly connects this desire to creative production (e.g., writing poetry, dance) and aesthetic experience in everyday life (e.g., "moving into the sunlight against the body of the woman I love"). She describes how the erotic opens aesthetic possibilities and creates a "clearing" for joy: "Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea." Lorde envisions an erotic poetic practice that affords transgressive resistance. It is transformative, and forms the basis of political resistance that is not merely reactionary. What Lorde's erotic poetics aim at is an
activation and engagement of the *aisthesis* of power—a capacity that is not contingent upon the
collection of power over others but which is bodied forth in the world.

Art reflects a way of organizing the world (or a part thereof). As we experience the work
of art, we experience that structuring, that organization. Aesthetic experiences similarly organize
us by taking us through a variety of organized structures. Art effects how we experience
ourselves (our own form and its possibilities), our relations with others, and our worlds. Our
experience of the *shaping* that happens in art *shapes* us. Our engagement of different aesthetic
qualities in art makes us different, too—it *enforms* us with a sense of shaping itself, of what it
means to be a giver of shape and form. Works of art *work* in and through us. Aesthetic
experience, in other words, is transfiguring and transformative.23

The words "transfiguration" and "transformation" both indicate reshaping, remolding,
reranging. They suggest a further development, an imposition of a new form, a stage or a
process of forming. Insofar as aesthetic experience provides opportunities for transformation
and transfiguration, it provides (quite literally) an exercise of imagination that is vital not only
for our appreciation of art but for projecting ourselves as other than what we are at any given
moment. Dewey thinks this very aspect of art is what makes it "the chief instrument of the
good," "more moral than moralities."24 Citing Shelly, Dewey describes the significance of the
power of imaginative projection thus: ""The great secret of morals is love, or *a going out of our
nature* and the identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or
person, not our own. A man to be greatly good must imagine intensely and comprehensively."25

Imaginative projection, ignited by Eros, aims at *ekstasis* and allows us to step out of ourselves, to
transgress the boundaries that appear to be drawn between ourselves and others. To imagine
ourselves as other is absolutely crucial for our growth as individuals: for setting goals, imagining
the kinds of persons we want to become, and devising a route to get there. And imagining ourselves as other is an important way in which we build communities. Such imagination leads us out of ourselves, enhancing our capacity to set aside our own particular interests in order to recognize the needs of others or what would be required for us to pursue a common ideal. Dewey identifies this power as unfolding in the redirection of desire and purpose, the first intimations of which are of necessity imaginative.\(^{26}\) That redirection of desire and purpose potentially presents us with opportunities to pursue new and different possibilities, opening up what Homi Bhabha calls "liminal spaces," which are sites for the production of cultural hybridities.\(^{27}\) Such imagination facilitates dynamic manifestations of social agency, garnering the resources to participate in the production of political, cultural, or ethnic identities.\(^{28}\) It enables us to better understand how our actions and our decisions affect others, to see ourselves in-relation-to-others.\(^{29}\) And it heightens our capacity for compassion in the sense of feeling with others, what Kundera describes as "the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy […] which] in the hierarchy of sentiments … is supreme."\(^{30}\)

Aesthetic engagement potentially activates imaginative resources that enable the realization of agency. This strikes me as crucial at a time when it is argued not only that one must become a moral agent in order to be free but also that one must at least play a role in determining the means and meaning of that endeavor as such. It seems to me that this is the very predicament faced by the characters of Toni Morrison's Beloved: they are (eventually) "free men" before the law but are at sea when it comes to realizing how that freedom might meaningfully animate their lives. Lacking what I describe as the felt quality of freedom--the feeling of themselves as free, or what I designate as the aisthesis of freedom--they are without
the imaginative resources to envision lives of meaning and purpose that they might seek as their own.

The experience of the enslaved body generates a mutilated aesthetic. The theft of slavery commits a dual crime--not merely a temporally confined robbery of the property of one labor, slavery also manipulates and disciplines the slave's erotic resources to serve the master's material interests. Bodies whose senses are anesthetized by an economy that treats them as commodities to be bought, bartered, and broken by others struggle to see themselves as human beings with possibilities to be sought, shaped, and shared. They emerge from slavery with transmogrified desire and an impaired sense of the erotic they might otherwise engage in a bringing forth of beauty, of a world imbued with meanings and pleasures they participate in defining.

In *Beloved* we encounter a story about a community of former slaves and their children. Some of them had their freedom from slavery purchased for them, others escaped, and others were literally born in the passage between. Part mystery, part history, part psycho-biography, *Beloved* depicts of the specters of slavery, its perversions of desire, and the struggle to realize freedom when emerging from a condition of bondage. It poignantly illustrates the crippling effects of a mutilated aesthetic resulting from the experience of the enslaved body. Much of *Beloved* focuses on attempts (most of which fail) to engage that sense of the erotic and to become aesthetically empowered. Consider, as merely one example, Baby Suggs' "call" in the clearing in which she endeavors to enliven those gathered there by a sense of the erotic that is explicitly tied to seeing one's own body as a source of meaning (loving and lovable) and value (in social and aesthetic, not merely economic, terms). Such enlivening aims at making a new perspective possible--it facilitates "loving perception," a way of seeing the world such that one seize upon and finds one's ecstasies in the *possibilities* of what one perceives.
Shortly following Sethe's escape from slavery, her former master finds her at the house she is sharing with her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, in Ohio. When he arrives at the house, designated only by its number "124," Sethe retreats to a shed. There she decides that she and children would be better off dead than be slaves. Before she can take her own life, the master bursts through the door only to find one child dead and the others lying crying nearby. That she would murder her own children is evidence enough that Sethe is "tainted," and she is viewed as unfit even for life on the plantation. She spends a little time in jail and then returns to 124.

But things are not the same. Once a place where former slaves met, laughed, talked, and tried to heal, 124 is now as anesthetic as its name. Years later the space, no longer invested with the significances of a place, becomes haunted by a baby-ghost. The ghost has violent outbursts and mercilessly taunts the inhabitants until a fellow ex-slave from "Sweet Home," Paul D., takes up residence with Sethe and kicks the ghost out of the house. The ghost then assumes the form of a live human being. "Beloved" is all crave: for sugar, for complete attention, for life. We are told that "Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes."33 She had "A touch no heavier than a feather but loaded, nevertheless, with desire. … The longing [Sethe] saw there was bottomless" (Beloved, 58). Beloved is quite literally the personification of exorcised desire, and she can find no satisfaction.

And Baby Suggs has lost her will to live: "Her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse twenty-eight days after her daughter-in-law arrived" (Beloved, 89). It is as if at the very moment that Sethe, Baby Suggs, their family, and their friends finally began to experience the first moments of genuine freedom-- described earlier by Baby as a kind of self-granted grace--the shadow of slavery darkened the sky. Before Sethe's ruinous encounter with the master in the shed, Baby Suggs occasionally presides over a
gathering of former slaves in a clearing in the wood near her home, issuing a "Call". The Call is not a sermon, we are told, rather it brings the people together as a community and draws them toward pursuing a hitherto unknown love. She tells them "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard." The love she evokes is a kind of erotic that would enable them to have the imaginative resources for grace: "She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it" (Beloved, 88-89). Desiring a route to revaluing their bodies the former slaves laugh, cry, dance, and weep.

Cynthia Willett, in her recent book The Soul of Justice, describes this event as a chiefly cathartic moment. I am less inclined to see it as a purging of something that has been constrictive in the past. Baby Suggs' "calling" is a creative exercise or communal practice aimed at the imagination of self- and communal-making; it seeks not a release from the past but a reaching toward the future. The difference, as I understand it, is potentially significant. My claim is that freedom in the sense of the removal of impediments (or catharsis) is insufficient for understanding what the meaningful exercise of freedom is. In identifying freedom with a communal practice, as Willett does, rather than seeing it as an accomplishment of an autonomous subject, I also wish to investigate the resources required to engage that practice. My argument is that these are significantly, if not exclusively, aesthetic, hence my emphasis on creative and imaginative appropriation rather than purgation. Wendy Brown's work on identity seems relevant here, too. Brown contrasts identity politics organized around (and resubjugated by) perceived injustices (identified by Willett passim in her work as the 'hubris' of slavery) with a kind of identification that "reopens a desire for futurity". I am not suggesting that Willett is playing identity-politics-as-usual or that she is engaging in the sort of political maneuvering that Brown
thinks is essentially structured on the model of Nietzsche's conception of *ressentiment*, but I do think that her emphasis on catharsis risks losing sight of expressions of desire (and its failures) to engage a most imaginative and creative activity as it is expressed in Morrison's work. It is the *dis*-orderings and attempted re-orderings of desire that seem most vividly at play in *Beloved*.

In *Beloved*, we witness the poverty of aesthetic experience in the lives of many characters. "Color" literally and figuratively evaporates from their lives. Baby Suggs, for example, "was so starved for color. There wasn't any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout. … In that sober field, two patches of orange looked wild--like life in the raw" (*Beloved*, 38). Sethe doesn't notice, but color disappears from her life, too: "the last color she remembered was the pink chips in the headstone of her baby girl. After that she became as color conscious as a hen. … It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it" (*Beloved*, 39). Being severed from a kind of desire that would enable them to creatively and imaginatively engage their lives as free and full of possibilities, the characters repeatedly exhibit failure and frustration.

They seem to be disabled in ways that their ancestors, who were born in Africa but were enslaved in the United States, were not. What Sethe remembers of her childhood was watching those other slaves transform themselves, if only temporarily. They became enraptured not with fantasies of becoming like white people and not with a kind of nostalgia that can lead to paralyzing resentment. Rather, transported by dancing and singing, they practiced *shape-shifting*. Sethe recalls:

"Of that place where she was born (Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana?) she remembered only song and dance. Not even her own mother, who was pointed out to her by the eight-year-old child who watched over the young ones--pointed out as the one among many backs turned away from her, stooping in a watery field. […] Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they
danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma'ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other." (*Beloved*, 31)

It is the capacity to imaginatively project oneself as other, to envision one's body as a live, creative, dynamic, and powerful form, that slavery seems to have stripped from most of the characters in *Beloved*, and it is the legacy the characters of "Spell #7" endeavor to overcome. Without such power--lacking a form of desire that authorizes and facilitates imaginative transfiguration--they are unable to envision a future that does not resemble the past, unable to sketch before themselves possibilities that differ from the present, unable to give shape to lives that they can come to think of as their own. They love--each other, themselves, and their possibilities--badly. Morrison's and Shange's works provide profound examples not only of how we can become severed from the erotic that draws us into transfiguration but also of how vital it is that we gain access to it in order to see ourselves as free, loving and loveable, and full of possibilities. *Beloved* ends with the collective forgetting of Beloved's miraculous apparition and subsequent disappearance (*Beloved*, pp. 274-5). She is "disremembered," which calls to mind the difficulties of "rememory" Sethe experiences. One of the stories "laid down" in that work and in Shange's "Spell #7," perhaps one that is to be passed on, is the story of *Eros* (rather than Prometheus) bound, the story that shapes the many stories witnessed in these texts that mark the binding or constriction of the very desire that is necessary for the pursuit of meaningful freedom.

Making significances and goals appear in the world, discovering reasons for existing, manufacturing joy--these are the goods of the passion that animates human existence. Our acquaintance with these activities is what the space of the imaginary domain is supposed to enable. It provides entrée to an apprenticeship in freedom insofar as it serves as a place we make our own through the imaginative refiguring of our relations to others, ourselves, and our
capabilities. It is precisely that facility that is required to make the movements of desire that Beauvoir associates with human vitality and joyful possibilities: to see each goal of our desire not as an end in itself but rather as an opening, "a point of departure" (EA, p. 28), to new possibilities. It is what enables one to cast oneself into the world in such a way as to disclose its possible meanings and bring forth its desirable qualities. Fanon, Lorde, Shange, and Morrison explore how such bringing forth, or poiesis, is relevant for the realization of freedom. For Fanon, the passion Beauvoir describes needs to be able to burn if it is to sufficiently fuel revolt against the serious world: it must enable one "to shape a torch with which to burn down the world" (BSWM, p. 134). That flame is to be utilized not simply to destroy in the name of vengeance or to be destructive for its own sake. Rather one raises such a torch to blaze a trail out of the serious world that fixes the significance of "the fact of blackness" and determines the horizon of goals that follow from it. At the same time, this fire can be used to ignite a passion that stimulates others to burn.\footnote{Ntozake Shange, "a photograph: lovers in motion" in Three Pieces (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).} It is the multiple ways in which poetic power is a propellant and accelerant that I have emphasized in the works of Lorde, Shange, and Morrison. Loving, in the form of willing, and authorizing in the sense of creating and sanctioning, are what erotic poetics seek to exercise and make available to others. Aesthetic experience can draw us into this process and help us make it our own. It provides us with a tangible experience of the aisthesis--the felt quality--of freedom.\footnote{"Authorizing Desire"--22} Thus enlivened we are enabled to claim and exercise our authority as makers of meaning and pleasure with others and for ourselves.


4 Ntozake Shange, "Spell #7: geechee jibara quik magic trance manual for technologically stressed third world people" in *Three Pieces*. Also see her award-winning, *For colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem* (New York: MacMillan, 1977).

5 It seems to me that this is somewhat like Ann Ferguson's conception of desire as social and bodily energy in her *Blood at the Root: Motherhood, Sexuality, and Male Dominance* (London and Winchester, MA: Pandora Press, 1989). See especially pp. 73f and 77-99.

6 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967). This work is hereafter cited in the text as *BSWM*, followed by the relevant page number.


9 Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom*, p. 10; the brackets are my own.

10 Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom*, p. 8.

11 Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom*, p. 62.


14 In the context of existential literature, magic appears to be significantly related to desire. We might say that magic seeks the transformation of the impossible to render it within the realm of possibility. It aims at the conversion of facticity to transcendence, to open as a candidate for otherness (as a candidate for legitimate longing-to-be-other) what has been confined to the realm of brute facts. I think Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* provides a rich basis for a more thorough exploration of how the desire to practice magic constitutes an effort to conjure "an imaginary domain". But such desire is not always creative, not always truly enabling as one witnesses in the case of Pecola. In Shange's "Spell #7" "blk magic" is also risky: the play opens with the magician lou recounting how his own father retired from magic when lou was just a child. One of lou's young friends asked his father to practice his magic by making him white. "all things are possible," lou recalls, "but aint no colored magician in his right mind/ gonna make you [sic] white" (p. 8). Lou and his father practice magic for the purpose of "fixin you up good/fixin..."
you up good & colored" (p. 8). They aim at making black life good and desirable. When asked for whiteness instead, lou's father's entire practice was undermined.

15 Shange, "Spell #7," p. 25.
16 Shange, Three Pieces, p. ix.
17 Shange, Three Pieces, p. x.
18 Shange, Three Pieces, p. xi.
20 Shange, Three Pieces, p. xiii.
21 "At the Heart of Shange's Feminism," p. 729.
23 My discussion in this paper is intentionally focused on the relevance of aesthetics for the meaning of our freedom and how that opens possibilities for the full realization of our subjectivity. But I am also interested in how the exercise of imagination that aesthetic experience affords is relevant for our ability to conceive the world and perceive reality. On this point, I am particularly drawn to John Dewey's conception of the relation between art and civilization in which he sees art as working at the edge of and opening new perceptual possibilities. See his Art as Experience: From John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 10: 1934, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987). I also think more could be said about how this relates to the work of Michèle Le Doeuff, particularly her discussions of the relation between imagery and knowledge in her The Philosophical Imaginary, translated by Colin Gordon (London: The Althone Press, 1989).
26 Dewey, Art as Experience, p. 352.
27 See Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994).
28 This contrasts quite markedly with the conception of identity as linked to some essential or static entity. On the way in which linguistic community and autonomy of expression are relevant to this process, see Drucilla Cornell, Just Cause (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), chapter 8. Also see Gloria Anzaldúa, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" in Borderlands/La Frontera (Spinsters Ink Books, 1990).
31 The phenomenon of "slave breaking" bears witness to the necessity of the transformation of desire in the maintenance of the institution of slavery.
32 About this act, Toni Morrison says, "It was absolutely the right thing to do, ... but it's also the thing you have no right to do." (New York Times, August 26, 1987 [C17])
34 Beloved, p. 177.
See Willett, *The Soul of Justice*, chapters 7 and 9.


After Sethe kills her child and goes to jail, Baby tells "Stamp Paid" that she's just going to lay down and think about color for the rest of her life (*Beloved*, p. 177).

On the connection between the erotic and freedom in the case of Paul D., see *Beloved* p. 162, in which freedom is conceived as being free to choose what one loves. The connection between willing and loving is explored, albeit leading to different conclusions about social life, in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Paul D. recognizes that an anti-black society doesn't just exploit labor and physical resources but also "dirties" a person, "Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up" (*Beloved*, p. 251). It fosters an anti-aesthetic relation to self that renders it impossible to recognize the beauty in one's life or to imagine one's life taking other possible shapes.

Willett emphasizes what happens when the erotic core at the heart of a person is assaulted. The cases she cites strike me as ruptures, breaks in the social bonds. I wish to also investigate erotic perversions, the ways in which slavery effects a kind of incapacitating desire, desire organized for hatred and self-loathing (e.g., that which is exemplified in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and theorized in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*) or rendered impotent through direction toward the impossible or other-worldly (e.g., what Baby Suggs resists and what Beauvoir discusses in her *The Ethics of Ambiguity*).

This is not to say that the characters completely fail to attempt or even have marginal successes in transfiguration. As an example of Sethe's aesthetic revaluation, see her conversion of the scars she has on her back into "her tree". Paul D. will see the same as "the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (p. 17), while Amy (the white indentured servant Sethe meets during her escape) will see the marks as "tiny little cherry blossoms" (p. 17). Willett argues convincingly that the modern conception of autonomy is ill equipped to "protect the person from violations of his meaningful relationships" (*The Soul of Justice*, p. 210). I would add that this includes aesthetic meaning--the felt quality of experience as such. The aesthetic is the ground upon which, with which, and out of which the symbolic order is organized, reformed, and shaped anew. Although Willett emphasizes the fact that the assault on the erotic self in the case of slavery aims "to humiliate through the element of touch" (*The Soul of Justice*, p. 213), she does not draw the connections to the relation between the erotic and the aesthetic. My work aims to articulate those intersections.

Cynthia Willett draws interesting and illuminating comparisons between the tragedy of *Beloved* and the conception of tragedy in ancient Greek culture. See *The Soul of Justice*, chapters 7 and 9. In support of her comparisons one might contrast the ambivalent story of the hybris of Prometheus with the alternative that could be forged by casting Eros in the role of the tragic hero. In this case *Beloved* would be a tragedy of "Eros bound," in which what causes and results in tragedy is the binding of eros--of erotic exercise--and that toward which it strives, aims, is bound in the realization of erotic freedom. *Beloved* seems to illustrate a kind of erotic dismemberment that perhaps "rememory" is meant to address. Willett emphasizes that Morrison's tragic story reveals hybris striking against "the libidinal core of the soul" and she contrasts *hybris* conceived by "the Greeks" with that reflected in Morrison's work. The chief distinction is supposed to be the fact that boundaries drawn by Greek hybris are meant to protect the economy of glory and honor circulating among individuals through contests whereas in
Morrison's narrative there is an erotic core, which is essentially social, that suffers the insult of arrogance. I do not think we have a rigid distinction between individual and social interest in these examples. Although the ancient Greek conception of *hybris* is tied to the commission of impropriety in contest, its assault is not against the honor of the individual with whom one engages. Rather, *hybris* is a failure to understand and/or respect the (human) relational nature of contest and its social rather than merely egoistic priority. The outrage is shared communally, and the community does not simply take on the insult vicariously through the contestant with whom the guilty party was engaged. One way of reading the whither and wherefore of *agon* in ancient Greek culture is that such contests constituted particular manifestations of an erotic channel in the social libidinal economy. For such a view, see Friedrich Nietzsche's "Homer's Contest".

42 For a much more thorough and highly illuminating discussion of the erotic in Beauvoir's works, see Debra B. Bergoffen's *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

43 Although there is a long and somewhat checkered history of linking moral and aesthetic imagination in the same western tradition that is subject to suspicion in theories of oppression, I think the literature still warrants investigation. In particular, I am grappling with Kant's claim in *The Critique of Judgment* that beauty is the symbol of morality. Kant's assertion is quite incomprehensible outside of the framework for cognition and subjectivity detailed in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, since it is the freedom experienced in play of the imagination within and among cognitive faculties that Kant claims is analogous to the freedom we require for moral agency and respect for others. But art does more than remind us of our freedom. For Kant, the experience of imaginative play activated by beauty has a felt quality, an *aisthesis*, which supplies content to a concept that generally lacks a sensible intuition--freedom. Beauty renders tangible the concept of freedom, and it thereby activates our moral reasoning. Although we might not take Kantian philosophy as a whole to provide a framework for resistance to oppression, I think this particular facet of Kant's aesthetics is relevant.