
I do believe not until every woman traces her weave back strand by bloody self-referenced strand, will we begin to alter the whole pattern.

—Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*

It is clear to me the nineteen aliens have a much better story, one that does not require twenty years to mature, to reveal its nature. They have provided instant death, multiple ministries, countless funerals, many hundreds of father-or motherless children. No one has to sit at a typewriter and try to prove something.

—Candida Lawrence, *Fear Itself*

In Audre Lorde's poetic language, the strands of the self can be understood as part of the weave of history, culture, economics, and power; tracing those strands constitutes an act of black feminist consciousness-raising. But Lorde's account in *The Cancer Journals* is, appropriately, much more visceral than the term *consciousness-raising* would imply. The "bloody self-referenced" strands testify that
the self is corporeal, woven into a larger fabric of history, culture, and power. In fact, Lorde's famous call to transform silence into "language and action" may be much more substantial than is usually presumed. She asks: "What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies that you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?" (21). Notwithstanding the potent metaphorical resonance of "swallowing" tyranny, the swallowing—and the death that results—is also quite literal, since it alludes to the ingestion of carcinogenic foodstuffs. This particular chapter from The Cancer Journals, which appears in many women's studies anthologies, is often read as a generalized call to refuse to be silenced. (I have taught the essay that way myself.) Even as this refusal endures as a political principle, transforming it into an abstraction disentangled from the context of Lorde's breast cancer deflects attention from the pernicious practices of agribusiness, making her struggle more personal and psychological and less political and systemic. Fixing upon an accepted abstract principle may detract attention from "the words we do not yet have." Some of the words that we still do not have, I contend, are the words that can evoke the materiality and trans-corporeality of the human self.

Memoirs of Unrecognizable Subjects

Lorde's unflinching memoir, published in 1980, is the predecessor of what I'm calling the "material memoirs" of Zillah Eisenstein, Susanne Antonetta, Sandra Steingraber, Candida Lawrence, and others, which were published roughly ten, twenty, and twenty-five years later. Rather than dismissing Lorde's insistence on the actuality of her own flesh as essentialist, it may be more revealing to examine how she traces her bodily immersion within power structures that have real material effects. As Marcia Jane Knopf-Newman contends, Lorde's politicization of breast cancer takes "bodies and the environment into account. Cancer is political not because either subject—bodies or environment—is inherently political, but rather because of the silence and secrecy surrounding the overlapping intersections of these subjects" (134). Lorde's Cancer Journals is remarkably prescient in its insistence on the interconnections between body and environment, which poses cancer as a feminist, antiracist, and environmental justice issue. She refuses to make breast cancer a merely "cosmetic" problem, scorning that infamous puff of lamb'swool in the process; she condemns the American Cancer Society for not "publicizing the connections between animal fat and breast cancer" (58); and she excoriates the psychological theories of cancer, noting, "It is easier to demand happiness than to clean up the environment" (74). Against the cancer establishment, which continues to downplay the environmental causes of cancer,
Lorde displays her scars: she sees them as "an honorable reminder that I may be a casualty in the cosmic war against radiation, animal fat, air pollution, McDonald’s hamburgers and Red Dye No. 2, but the fight is still going on" (60). Against the American Cancer Society’s focus on treatment rather than prevention, she contends: "We live in a profit economy and there is no profit in the prevention of cancer; there is only profit in the treatment of cancer" (74). As part of the larger feminist health movement that generated Our Bodies, Our Selves, Lorde urges women to do their own research, to amass "an arsenal of information" (72). She herself cites the British Journal of Cancer, as well as less mainstream sources. In short, epitomizing the feminist maxim that the personal is political, Lorde takes on sexism, racism, capitalism, and the medical establishment within a genre—the "journal"—that has been a site for private self-reflection.

Such genre bending is indicative of the contemporary material memoir, which incorporates scientific and medical information in order to make sense of personal experience. Whereas Joan Scott argues that "experience" cannot be understood apart from the discourses that constitute subjects, thus making the question "how to analyze language" (34), in the material memoir, the question becomes how to understand the very substance of the self. In other words, material memoirs emphasize that personal experience cannot be directly reconciled with, not only because discourse shapes experience, but also because an understanding of the self as a material, trans-corporeal, and always emergent entity often demands the specialized knowledges of science. If, as Susan Squier explains, genre "regulates and it brings into being; it shapes how we can enter and engage in a preexisting social practice, and it constitutes that social practice, giving us ways of understanding it, as well as the conventions that make such practice possible" (262), then material memoirs forge new ways of knowing our bodies and our selves. Squier explains that "genre's regulatory function collaborates with a major strategic function of reflexive modernity: the construction of 'expert' knowledge, as distinct from nonexpert, 'lay,' or popular knowledge" (265). Material memoirs critique such divisions, offering up personal experiences as "data," as the author examines her own life story through a scientific lens. Departing from the quintessentially American, quintessentially Enlightenment life story of Benjamin Franklin, in which "man" is free to create himself through acts of principle, intention, and will, and, departing as well from Maxine Hong Kingston's postmodern masterpiece, The Woman Warrior, in which the self, à la Judith Butler, is constituted by the tangle of (in this case, multicultural) discourses, these trans-corporeal autobiographies insist that the self is constituted by material agencies that are simultaneously biological, political, and economic.

Such material agencies are not easy to capture, discern, or unravel. Although The Cancer Journals is a predecessor to more recent material memoirs, the differences between the Lorde epigraph above and that of Lawrence are striking. Can-
dida Lawrence, who was exposed to radiation and lost a breast to cancer, is worlds apart from Lorde’s confident proclamations. Lamenting that “nineteen aliens” have a better story than she does, Lawrence worries that the “twenty years” it can take for cancer to result from an exposure may make her story seem not only dull, but unbelievable. Why, indeed, should one write such a memoir, when “no one has to sit at a typewriter and try to prove something”? She herself is “all too aware of hidden, unseen, unsmelled, unproven, lurking dangers denied so often by those who claim knowledge” (185). And yet, the very invisibility of these threats impels her to illuminate them: “I must see the invisible and conjure up signs of environmental damage from repeated above ground bomb tests” (169). Lawrence emphatically doubles the material embeddedness of her epistemological quest by self-reflexively addressing the two “selves” of her memoir, each of which is strikingly corporeal:

When I left Candida the year was 1956 and she was thirty-one. She was slowly—in first person, present tense—trudging through the years, and she’ll continue advancing towards us, but at a much faster pace now. I must accelerate her dogged pursuit of information about her egg pouch because I have been arm wrestling with Mother Mortality: a chaotic thyroid, a raging pulse, a rock-and-roll heart beat. (116)

Both Candida, the subject of the memoir, and Lawrence, the writer, pursue an understanding of the substance of their selves by investigating books and articles, some of which are included in the memoir itself, such as the long excerpt that follows the quote above, entitled “U.S. Acknowledges Radiation Killed Weapons Workers Ends Decades of Denials” (117). The image of the personal—and oddly phrased—“egg pouch” reminds us of the enduring material effects veiled by the sweeping journalistic language of the sources she interrogates.

The most important difficulty for the material memoir, a difficulty that is simultaneously political, epistemic, and generic, is that autobiography by definition surfaces from one individual person, yet at present it is not feasible to trace the exact causes of cancer or other environmentally generated illnesses within an individual. There are no shortages of epidemiological studies and animal studies that demonstrate the carcinogenicity of various substances. The science exists, and it is staggering. But there is a chasm, a vast lack of proof, between these scientific facts and the murkier realm of the individual case history. (Even the new and prohibitively expensive biomonitoring techniques, which quantify the levels of many different toxins in an individual’s blood and tissues, do not usually determine the source[s] of the chemicals.) Thus, material memoirs manifest the epistemological/political difficulties with what Lawrence Bullel terms “toxic discourse.” Bullel argues that, although toxic discourse “rests on anxieties about environmental poisoning for which there is often strong evidence, it is a dis-
course of allegation or insinuation rather than of proof. Its very moralism and intensity reflect awareness that the case has not yet been proven, at least to the satisfaction of the requisite authorities" (Writing 48). Buell contends that the "climate of scientific and legal complexification calls toxic discourse into question even in advance of its utterance, yet also calls it into being and argues for both its social and ethical import" (ibid.). Buell exposes a sticky quandary: how does toxic discourse retain a potent sense of "social and ethical import" if its truth is always in question?

Conjuring material memoirs from within this miasma of skepticism requires that one risk writing a self that is barely recognizable as such. Judith Butler, discussing Foucault, argues, more generally, that critique "cannot take place without [a] reflexive dimension," since "any relation to the regime of truth will at the same time be a relation to myself" (22). The reflexive dimension of critique, then, involves risking oneself:

[S]elf questioning of this sort involves putting oneself at risk, imperiling the very possibility of being recognized by others, since to question the norms of recognition that govern what I might be, to ask what they leave out, what they might be compelled to accommodate, is, in relation to the present regime, to risk unrecognizability as a subject or at least to become an occasion for posing the questions of who one is (or can be) and whether or not one is recognizable. (23)

As a mode of critique, the material memoir undertakes this sort of self-questioning, which risks unrecognizability. But what makes these selves even less recognizable is the extent to which they undertake investigations not only of norms, principles, and genealogy but of their own materiality—a materiality that must often be understood via scientific knowledge. The self of the material memoir—a self that is coextensive with the environment, transcorporeal, and posthumanist—is a self that epitomizes the larger scientific and popular movements of environmental health that have arisen in what Ulrich Beck terms a "risk society."

Environmental Health, Risk Society, and the Ordinary Expert

Convery Bolton Valencius, in The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land, discusses the surprising emphasis on the "health of the country" in nineteenth-century settlers' writings:

Assessments of the health of places fill newcomers' letters and journals, the columns of local newspapers, the reports of physicians and scientific observers, the adventure stories of hunters and trappers, the tall tales of regional humorists, and the floridly written pages of the myriad travel and emigration