

QUEERING THE SOUL: HOMOEROTIC SPIRITUALITIES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN
LITERATURE

By

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This project is dedicated to all the dykes, faggots, sissies, punks, bois, bulldaggers, unwiseable women, bitches, butches, hoes, infidels, heretics, witches, heathens, conjurers, healers and any indecent, uncouth folk who know they got soul.

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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Queering the Soul combines African American literary theory, feminism/womanism, and black theology to argue for a black queer aesthetics that is in conversation with the broader culture in regard to issues of the afterlife, metaphysicality and theological notions. *Queering the Soul* examines 20th-century narratives of the black experience—some famous, others obscure—that entwine notions of God or spiritual pursuits with prominent characterizations of same-sex desire. This cultural terrain has been, indeed, a site of politicized struggle for decades, and I will show how this literary tradition, “queering the soul,” works to dissolve the sinner/saint binary in discourses that pit people with LGBTQ identities against so-called “people of faith”; and the good/bad binary inherent in many descriptions of the spirit-body division. To that end, *Queering the Soul* investigates the narrative strategies in the fiction of James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Alice Walker, Becky Birtha and Jewelle Gomez as they demonstrate the ways representations of homoerotic spiritualities can serve as tools of resistance to such polarizing discourses.

CHAPTER 1

THE WHY & WHAT OF QUEERING SOUL

Why

In *Spiritual Interrogations*, a fascinating study of 19th-century African American women's writing, Katherine Bassard claims, "Significantly, the struggle for empowerment, agency, and subjectivity within a cultural and communal frame of reference is nowhere as evident as in black women's negotiations with prevailing *religious* discourses (21, original emphasis). Her analysis focuses on four women, Rebecca Cox Jackson, Phyllis Wheatley, Ann Plato, and Jarena Lee, who used their writing to transform white and male supremacist rhetoric into reflections of their material realities and spiritual journeys. Bassard explains the empowering aspects of their appropriation of Christian terminology and their seizing upon conversion discourse in a context of slavery. "For individuals socially 'cursed' with a racialized and othered subjectivity, conversion represented one of the few discourses, and certainly the most prominent, holding the promise of a radical change in subjectivity. If one could move from 'sinner to saint,' she/he could also move 'from slave to free,' [and] 'from bondage to freedom'" (Bassard 23). The authors in Bassard's research subtly refashioned the rhetoric and applied their own interpretive lens to the power and promises of religion. Through the gift of salvation they were able to claim a liberated identity and perform a type of freedom in religious rituals.

Rebecca Cox Jackson is an especially interesting subject because she not only used her writing to transform discourse in the manner described, she embodied a critique of a "woman's place" in the church hierarchy through her visibility as an itinerant preacher. Bassard's title of the chapter about Jackson's writing, "Rituals of Desire: Spirit, Culture, and Sexuality," echoes the holy trinity at the center of *Queering the Soul*, but for different reasons. Jackson practiced celibacy independently for twelve years before she discovered the Shaker community, a radical

Christian sect within which celibacy was a theological pillar. She believed that God called her to celibacy as a rejection of the ‘sins of the flesh.’ This stance made of her an outcast from the black Christian community because her message of celibacy was disruptive of the patriarchal construction of family *vis a vis* the woman’s responsibility to regenerate the race. Meanwhile, her race alienated her in the traditional white congregation. In her autobiography, Jackson decries her spiritual and social isolation:

The Christian Church would be set before me, with all their Bishops and Elders, all living in the works of the first Adam. I saw nobody lived the life I was called to live. I then entreated to the Lord to tell me why it was that I was called to live a life that nobody lived on the earth. Then in answer to my request, “I have a people on earth that live the life I have called you to live.” (qtd in Bassard 112)

Her reference to the “first Adam” is a way of saying that her contemporaries were following Old Testament creeds that had been superseded by Jesus, who is called the “last” or “second Adam.”¹ Jackson critiques their sexist practices as the result of misguided interpretation. Also, her message of celibacy is so roundly rejected that she imagines no one else “lived the life.” So she goes to God—it is he, after all, for whom she lives—seeking affirmation and a fellowship community. He grants her both.

“After leaving the AME denomination… Jackson met Rebecca Perot, and the two moved to Watervliet [New York] to join the Shaker family. [They] lived together for over thirty-one years, the rest of Jackson’s life, and Perot was often referred to as ‘Rebecca Jackson, Junior’ (Bassard 114). What I notice first about the list of events is the sequence. First Jackson rejects the masculine hierarchy of “bishops and elders”; then God promises her ‘a people’; she finds a black female companion; together they move into the Shaker family where they share a life until Cox’s death. If a memoirist illuminates a particular memory to create a sense of identity through

that image (Murdock 11), what are we to make of these series of events? Cox uses her spiritual autobiography to map and justify the controversial religious choices she made. It has been suggested that, had they lived in a later period, Cox and Perot's relationship would have been interpreted as lesbian. Bassard finds the evidence "inconclusive." I raise this issue not to argue for or against a lesbian reading of this couple. Perhaps their racial isolation in an otherwise all-white community was enough reason for them to create a sanctuary in which their shared blackness was privileged. Rather, I want to use their story to demonstrate how a queer space of interpretive possibilities is opened up when their religious bond, or their practice of "spirit, culture and sexuality," is considered in a nonheterosexist paradigm. In short, I want to queer Jackson's soul.

The verb "to queer" comes from the movement within lesbian and gay studies to reclaim the pejorative 'queer' as a term of empowerment and is defined as the taking up of the notion of queerness as a serious subject, object and technique of critical inquiry. For its proponents, queer is a more inclusive term for describing nonheteronormative sexualities and identities; for it moves beyond the hetero/homo binary and opens up liberatory discourses to include bisexual, transgender and intersexed populations. As a critical lens, queer is informed by post-structuralist theorization of identity as both provisional and contingent; as such, it challenges and critiques the finite definitions of sexual identity around which lesbian/gay politics is organized. So queer emerges as a politics of difference and ambiguity. And as an intellectual model, it opens up the semantic field and allows multiple and sometimes contradictory impulses, desires, and articulations of sexuality and gender. "Both in culture and politics, queer [theory and identity] articulates a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive

sexuality and the family” (Smyth 42). To queer Cox’s text means to open it up for broader inquiry in relation to concepts such as desire, celibacy, and female separatism.

In that light, when confronted with the fact that Cox and Perot lived together for thirty-one years in a cultural context in which ‘spiritual families’ were privileged over biological ones, a queer analysis would ask: What if Jackson’s 19th-century perspective lacks the tools with which to interpret or articulate her absence of desire for heterosexuality other than as God’s will for celibacy? Folks in their community responded to their intimate mentor-protégé relationship by calling the younger woman the “junior” version. What if she and Perot shared an erotic bond that was only viewed through a religious lens? Was there some sensual interaction that was not interpreted as “sex” and, therefore, allowed a continued claim to celibacy? What can we glean from Cox’s descriptions of Perot and other women? Is there an eroticization of the Shaker’s female deities or the other cultural markers in Jackson’s visions and dreams?²

For some people, this is a “reading into” the text, a topical digression from the interlocked systems of race, class, gender and religion clearly articulated in Cox’s recollection. But feminist studies of language, womanhood and identity have shown us that sexuality is embedded in and fashioned by each of those systems. Theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid asserts that religion is especially obsessed with what is considered decent sexuality. “Based on sexual categories and heterosexual binary systems, obsessed with sexual behaviour [sic] and orders, every theological discourse is implicitly a sexual discourse...” (Althaus-Reid 22). So what can our contemporary knowledge contribute to an analysis of a 19th-century relationship between two deeply religious women? I wonder what we miss, what is skimmed over in a feminist analysis that is not transgressive? Queerness is the iceberg tip that breaks through the watery surface of culture.

A queer analysis would be a reading of Jackson's journals as a ritual space that calls for a redefinition of early African American women's spirituality and cultural performance (Bassard 9) and one that refuses to overlook the possibility that community, spirituality and homoeroticism could be fused into Cox's transformative use of language. This is the interrogative essence of *Queering the Soul: Homoerotic Spiritualities in African American Literature*. I introduce my interpretive framework this way to indicate that the act of queering, that is, connecting sex and eros to conventional definitions and engagements of the soul, is not necessarily a brand new concept (does not Jackson embody a religious queerness?) and, simultaneously, to insist that my analytical angle brings newness to an interrogation of black spirituality. Like Bassard's text, *Queering the Soul* reveals the struggle for empowerment, agency, and subjectivity through negotiations with religious discourse.

This project began as a search for James Baldwin's (1925-1987) literary progeny. Baldwin's attempts to disentangle the knotty dilemma of the black, sexually queer, Christian-identified subject make him a transitional figure in African American letters. His work highlights what previous black literary politics (Uplift and New Negro ideologies) had obscured: that same-sex desire and homosexual identities exist in African American communities. He often situated this desire in religious families. For example, in his 1953 novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, Baldwin transforms the "laying of holy hands" on the threshing floor of a Pentecostal church into a moment of homosexual realization. Critics have highlighted the vast modes of spirituality in African American literature since the Harlem Renaissance but, Baldwin scholarship notwithstanding, few literary studies have observed the homoerotic versions of this trope. So this project grew from the question, who since Baldwin is writing about the ways black LGBT people think of themselves in relation to notions of the sacred, God, and the afterlife?

Along with queer theory enumerated above, I use gay/lesbian criticism as the entry point in my study of 20th century African American literature. Particularly, Charles Nero's essay, "Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic" (1991) has paved the way for my work. Nero highlights how black gay writers in the 1980s critiqued heterosexism and homophobia by signifyin' on the black church, among other rhetorical devices. "How have black men created a positive identity for themselves," Nero asks, "and how have they constructed literary texts which would render their lives visible and therefore valid?" (229). In the same vein my research asks, how is black queerness represented? Where is it affirmed? What do black writers who identify as queer/les/bi/trans contribute to our understanding of black identity, spirituality, and community?

Contemporary religious-political discourse still assumes a mutually exclusive binary in which "people of faith" are set apart from gay/lesbian communities; it is an antagonism that situates queer sexual identities in the inferior ideological position. For a person whose sexual activity is not strictly heterosexual or whose desires, sexual identity and/or family structure is not heteronormative, the negative effect of being considered 'evil' or 'unnatural' can be profound and totalizing. People either internalize this negative image or, as Baldwin did, struggle against it. *Queering the Soul* is concerned with those artists whose work struggles to casts off those classifications and re-figures the relationship between faith, spirituality and sexuality.

A cursory review of black gay literature reveals that it has, understandably, always been concerned with these themes. In 1986 Joseph Beam published *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* to fill the racial void in the gay literary scene and because, as he states in the introduction, "visibility is survival" (14). *In the Life* brought together writers who would continue to impact literary culture, such as Melvin Dixon, Essex Hemphill, Samuel Delany and Assotto Saint. One compelling essay in the book is Rev. James Tinney's piece entitled, "Why a

Black Gay Church?” Tinney lists three core needs this kind of church can meet: the development of the black gay spiritual community, the possibility of shared power in relationships with other Christian churches, and the realization of authenticity. The opening paragraph on the “authenticity” discussion merits full repetition here:

The development of Black gay churches will make it possible for Black gay Christians, for the first time, to hear the gospel in their own ways, and reinterpret the gospel in their own cultural context – taking into account both race and sexual orientation at every step in this process. In a socio-political sense, this is called contextualization; in a psychological and existential sense, this is called authenticity; and in a biblical sense, this is called conversion. (76)

Again, the reader is confronted with the socially and racially othered subject who negotiates and transforms religious discourse into a means for community building, empowerment and reinterpreted subjectivity. Beam’s anthology was soon followed by the self-published success of E. Lynn Harris’ *Invisible Life* (1991), which foregrounds religious homophobia and the impact of AIDS. On its heels appeared James Earl Hardy’s urban homo-thug novel, *B-boy Blues* (1994). My focus on the masculine lineage is not to suggest that there were not representations of female homosexuality being published in the “black gay renaissance,” as it has been called. Ann Allen Shockley created the first African American interracial lesbian romance in *Loving Her* (1974); Octavia Butler’s debut sci-fi novel, *Patternmaster* (1979), contains a healer who has been interpreted as bisexual; Gloria Naylor’s *Women of Brewster Place* (1980) features a lesbian couple; and Alice Walker’s Pulitzer prize-winning *The Color Purple* (1984) continues to inspire.

Nonetheless, black gay literature dominated popular culture in the 1980s and early 90s, while the feminist movement was the main platform for advancing black lesbian literary contributions.³ Particularly, the nonfiction writings of Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, Alice Walker and Barbara Smith are known for their refusal to privilege heterosexuality in their anti-racist, anti-patriarchal politics. Their representations of blackness weren’t acceptable at first

either. “In the forties and fifties,” Audre Lorde reminisces, “my lifestyle and the rumors about my lesbianism,[sic] made me persona non grata in Black literary circles” (qtd in Hall 73). Undeterred, she produced work that continues to challenge those gatekeepers who seek to narrowly define blackness and womanhood. “The love expressed between women is particular and powerful,” continues Lorde, “because we had to love in order to live; love has been our survival” (Hall 73). As Joseph Beam’s sentiments above and Lorde’s echoing statements here reveal, survival is a dominant theme in the earliest cultural productions of gay-, lesbian- and bisexual- identified artists. While gay and lesbian-themed novels, poetry and short stories have flourished (relatively) in the publishing industry since the 1980s, the focus in nonfiction genres has remained, necessarily, on narratives of the closet, silence, shame, coming out, violence, and civil politics. *Queering the Soul* shifts the spotlight to narratives of living out (of the closet) and stories of spiritual fortitude.

Because of the themes of spirituality and liberation, the critical framework that I use is also strongly influenced by various writers within Black Theology, an academic discipline within religious studies developed from the political tenets of Black Power. The earliest work in this field was guided by a political investment in proving that black American Christian religions are indeed theologically based and relevant to the struggle for racial justice.⁴ The doctrinal shift in Black Theology represents the move away from integration politics of the civil rights era; emphasizes the independence from white controlled church hierarchies; and is committed to a Black Aesthetic. At its inception, the paradigm broke most connections with white Christian norms as they related to biblical interpretation, the role of religion in social change, and worship practices.

So during the cultural shift to an emphasis on black power politics, seminary students and religious scholars began to affirm their folk traditions and African origins. These scholars also searched their religious history for a tradition of political commitment to freedom. They found much historical support , such as: Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal church who spread the abolitionist message in his church's pamphlet; David Walker's 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* in which he distinguishes between the pseudo-Christianity of American slavery and true Christology, which promises liberty to all believers; Harriet Tubman's claim that visions and prophetic messages from God assisted her on the Underground Railroad; and similarly, preacher and slave Nat Turner's 'confession' that it was the voice of God that told him to slay his enemies "with their own weapons" when he led the uprising against white slave owners. Ultimately, the black theologians found that the struggle for political freedom had always been located in the black church, including those invisible institutions during slavery, in which enslaved people met in secret, or prayed into holes in the ground to muffle the sound.

The Black Theology of the late 1970s and early 80s marked the rising influence of the feminist movement. Black women were entering seminary school in larger numbers than ever before. This generation of ministers and religious scholars introduce the notion of a Womanist Theology, an adaptation of Alice Walker's extensive definition of womanist consciousness. The aim of their work was to define a "womanist liberation agenda" that is distinguishable from the Eurocentric, middle class focus of white feminism and the male supremacist myopia of the first generation of Black Theology. Prominent voices include Renita Weems, Kelly Brown Douglas, Cheryl Sanders, and Delores Williams. There are three important strategies that they introduced to black religious studies: 1) the use of women's roles in the bible to challenge conventional

views of women in ministry. 2) the advocacy of holistic theology with an emphasis on folk culture and 3) the use of black women's novels as primary sources for locating theological concepts.

The latter, feminist-inflected school of Black Theology is the most influential to my work in *Queering the Soul* because literature is understood to be a reflection of the black community's central values and cultural experiences. Katie Canon, the first black female ordained Presbyterian minister in the US, is someone who has been prolific in her study of ethics and spirituality in black women's fiction. She explains why black women's literature is such a rich source:

As creators of literature black women are not formally historians, sociologists, or theologians, but the patterns and themes in their writings are reflective of historical facts, sociological realities and religious convictions that lie behind the ethos and ethics of the black community. (57)

In other words, this literature may not present hard facts but it can represent lived truths.

Building upon Canon's exploration of literature for "ethos and ethics," my work in *Queering the Soul* is a search for similar elements in gay/lesbian narratives.

Furthermore, the most recent discourse in black theology (early 90s to present) is a move to transform the conservative stance in black religious communities concerning sex and sexuality. This generation's focus is on lessening the restraints on female sexuality in general and includes the voices of gay/lesbian/bi -identified clergy that have identified a need to acknowledge multiple sexualities and calls for recognition of them as sacred. It is within this subset of Black Theology that I locate the most radical integrations of spirituality and sexuality. These concerned scholars, parishioners and ministers challenge religious attitudes towards sexuality, the occlusion of sexual variability, and the affect these factors have on individuals, families and communities. James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore anthologized some of these

dialectical essays and reports in *Black Theology: A Documentary Anthology* (1993). For example, Elisa Farajaje-Jones outlines an “in the life” theology which “grows out of the experiences, lives, and struggles against oppression and dehumanization” (140) of nonheterosexual religious folk. In *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (1996), Michael Eric Dyson makes the case for a “theology of eroticism” (91) that resists “extreme self-denial that has little to do with healthy sexuality” (93). He argues that “mere repression is not the proper perspective. We’ve got to find a mean between sexual annihilation and erotic excess. Otherwise...[Christians] will continue to be stuck in silence and confusion” (101). Dyson’s message stresses the links between spirituality and sensuality and advocates an inclusive liberation theology. Kelly Brown Douglas also broadens the scope of spiritual liberation in *Sexuality and the Black Church* (2003) by asserting that an anti-homophobic “sexual discourse of resistance” is necessary to “disrupt the terrorizing manner in which black people have used biblical texts in regard to homosexuality” (107). Other advocates include Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins, who co-edited the anthology, entitled *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (2004). They encourage their readers to see that “liberation must not only involve the restructuring of socioeconomic, political, and cultural space, it must also involve an appreciation of the body and the pleasuring of the body (6). G. Winston James and Lisa Moore bring these notions further along in *Spirited: Affirming the Soul and Black Gay/Lesbian Identity*(2006) by featuring spiritual narratives of diverse spiritual perspectives and sexual identities that serve as “counter voice, text and knowledge” (xiv) from within the black experience. Despite the subtitle, *Spirited* actually moves beyond affirmation; indeed, it renders spirituality as a matrix of erotic schemes, soul-deep knowledges, and sacred bodies with circuits

that intersect, overlap and crisscross. In its entirety, this literary lineage enacts a powerful queering of black culture by creating fissures in heteronormative discourses of spirituality.

This project relies on that literary lineage of religious studies and sexual discourses as it attends to homoeroticism and spirituality in literature. Hence, the first definition (of two) of the term “soul” in *Queering the Soul* is “spirit”: that which is understood as an immortal essence within living beings and is believed to be a separate entity that thrives after physical death. The soul is understood as the place from which intellect, emotion, intuition, prophecy, and talents all spring forth. It is the ultimate Self encased within the outer shell, the physical self. My work is concerned with the conventional belief, in Christian interpretations in particular, that these selves—the spiritual and physical—are always in conflict. According to most interpretations, once the soul is converted, the body still makes demands that threaten the soul’s well-being. Most famously, Jesus is quoted as saying “the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” This construction of conflicting selves creates a good/evil dichotomy in which the body pulls a person towards petty, selfish, primal urges, which implicitly are not sacred; so the body is always already evil and must be overcome for the sake of the soul—which belongs to God.

The second application of “soul” is an understanding of soul culture that emerged during the Black Power Era. It is an expression of black consciousness—a recognizable black identity politics. Portia Maultsby characterizes it best in the anthology *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*:

Therefore, soul has both sociopolitical and cultural functions and meanings. From a sociopolitical perspective, it advocated awareness, Black empowerment, and a Black identity. From a cultural perspective, it identified expressions symbolic of a Black style or a Black way of doing things, as well as a range of traditions unique to African Americans...Black behavior...a unique cuisine...Black cultural institutions...and creative expressions. (270)

Soul bespeaks aesthetics, ideals of cultural unity, and African heritage. Although it cannot be completely excised from turn of the 20th-century iterations, such as Dubois' *Souls of Black Folk*, the “black” in black queerness has politically and historically specific connotations. Ultimately, soul in *Queering the Soul* is meant to evoke African American cultural specificities. Both meanings of soul apply simultaneously. It is both the racialized, phenotypic category assigned to people of African descent in the US, and a conceptualization of an immortal, inner self.

Lastly, my work is framed by literary theorists that invoke dialectics and multi-vocality as critical tools for understanding African American literature. Namely, Mae G. Henderson's essay, “Speaking in Tongues: Dialectics, Dialogics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition,” (1989), Audre Lorde's “Uses of the Erotic,” (1984) and Barbara Smith's call to consciousness, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977) are theories and cultural perspectives that undergird my arguments. Another important influence in literary studies is Bahamian scholar Melvin Rahming, who coined the term “spirit-centered” as a way to describe those texts which foreground human interaction with spiritual forces. In his essay “Theorizing Spirit” (2004), Rahming charges that traditional critical approaches lack interrogational depth when confronted with the “non-Western concepts of reality” (2) particular to Africana fiction. A text is spirit-centered “[w]hen its ideological and aesthetic structures consequently have as their primary function the dramatization of spiritual conditions and spiritual activity” (5) and, as such, require a spirit-centered criticism which can qualitatively assess a text's potential for spiritual enrichment or cultivation. That is to say, we need to properly recognize when spirit *is* the story and is a possible manifestation in the reader's response. Rahming's “exploration of the relationship between spirit and literary criticism” has been useful for illuminating the symbolism, cosmological tenets and other cultural politics that propel the narratives in *Queering the Soul*.

So the methodology in *Queering the Soul* derives from and operates within multiple traditions and related discourses that all have an underlying liberation agenda. My contribution to this epistemology is a concentration on homoeroticism within the illustration of the spiritual dimension. This project offers but a sampling of the narratives that entwine notions of God or spiritual pursuits with prominent characterizations of same-sex desire. In fact, some of the fictional representations of spirit/spirituality discussed in *Queering the Soul* parallel the sentiments put forth in contemporary religious discourses. In some cases, a writer moves beyond sanctioned doctrines into visionary fields of the afterlife and the transcendent mysticism of “unauthorized” mythologies. Also, there is much appropriation and subversion of the Christian bible and, at times, a reveling in African or Native American constructs of holiness and ancestral intervention. What strikes me most about this group of artists is that their narratives treat the body-spirit relationship not as a conflict between good/bad desires or sacred/profane expressions, but rather, they depict it as the sensory experience in concert with the soul. Each writer works to dissolve the sinner/saint binary or, the more general, good/bad binary inherent in many descriptions of the spirit-body division.

What

This project is an expression of queer soul, as the chapters are arranged thematically rather than chronologically. This structure functions more like a topographic map—illustrating grooves and peaks in the landscape of tradition—rather than a historical tracing of phenomena. Each chapter features close readings of one or two representations of a singular trope within the queer soul theoretical umbrella. I identify the tropes by their rhetorical work: the “duplicitous use” of sacred music; the articulation of “ungodly theology”; a “homoerotics of talk”; and “erotic communion.” By the end, it becomes clear that these strategies of anti-homophobic resistance

overlap in some places and critically diverge in others. Overall these depictions of blackness in the spiritual realm share a politics of undoing, appropriating, or outright rejecting the condemnational aspects of Christian rhetoric.

My examination begins in Chapter Two with examples of queering that manifest as the duplicitous use of sacred music. I employ the DuBosian concept of black double-consciousness along with Roderick Ferguson's assertion that queer racial formations present "ruptural possibilities" to support my readings. Just as enslaved people used Spirituals to code their yearning for freedom or to announce the plan for escape, 20th century writers create a double-meaning in religious songs to illustrate homoerotic desire. Langston Hughes' short story "Blessed Assurance" (1963) provides the first example. It is a tale of competing masculinities within the black church: working class patriarchy, the black preacher, and the black sissy. Hughes' focus on the "choir boy" character queers the black church because it highlights the gay subculture that exists within gospel choirs. The second example of duplicitous use of religious music appears in James Baldwin's last novel, *Just Above My Head* (1978). I analyze the gay romance between members of a gospel quartet. Hughes and Baldwin enact a queering of the soul through *double entendre*, wherein erotic desire is inserted into religious musical expressions without negating the religious meaning of the song.

Chapter Three explores the articulation of an "un-godly theology" in Becky Birtha's short story, entitled "In the Life" (1987) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1984). The spiritual concepts in Birtha's text are ungodly precisely because in their rendition of how the universe works, God is either not mentioned or is not a centralized, static construction. Also, ungodly is used here to connote its colloquial usage: indecent or immoral. In the second section of the chapter, I build upon Angela Y. Davis' arguments in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998)

to posit *Color Purple*'s Shug as a blueswoman evangelist. This chapter argues that ungodly theologies shatter the ideological barriers between nonnormative sexuality and access to the sacred realm. They also struggle to undo philosophical divisions between bodily pleasure and spiritual ecstasy.

Chapter Four combines Audre Lorde's ideas in the essay "Uses of the Erotic" with Karla Kaplan's notion, called an "erotics of talk," for a reading of *The Gilda Stories* (1996) by Jewelle Gomez as a black female "homoerotics of talk." The protagonist's development into an ethical vampire and her African American cultural accoutrements combine to critique racial and gender oppression, as well as explore the politics of black lesbian desire.

Chapter Five is a study of Alice Walker's lesser-known novel, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. Like Gomez, Walker uses speculative fiction to represent the eternal soul-force of black queerness and to instruct readers through the spiritual principles at work in the text. To that end, *By the Light* lays plain Walker's philosophical aversion to Christianity. Essentially, hegemonic Christianity is blamed for the psychospiritual damage that manifests in the lives of an African American family. *By the Light* enacts a queering of the soul by maintaining that African American Christians suffer from a false consciousness, depicting black female sexuality as potentially fluid, and insisting upon an erotic connection to the spirit world.

On the whole, *Queering the Soul* proposes a way of reading. It offers up these artists, theorists, and characters as the presence of counter-knowledges, counter-visions and counter-schemes, and as a community that is otherwise scattered about in the discursive winds of "gay rights" or "lesbian fiction." I propose that we reconsider our understanding of black strivings against emotional and sexual bondage. For these irreverent, indecent, heretical ministries

worship the rising spirit of desire. They convey a sense of community and wholeness derived from the love of sensuality, self, humanity and soul.

NOTES

¹ Paul refers to Jesus as the “last Adam” in 1Corinthians 15:45. “Second Adam” is a common—and contested—variation of this phrase. Paul’s teachings also refer to Jesus as the “end of the law” in a manner that is interpreted to separate the Mosaic Law (Ten Commandments and book of Leviticus) from the teachings of Jesus (see Romans 10:3-5).

² There is scholarship that addresses Cox’s lesbian sensibility. My point here is to demonstrate the limitations of a study of Cox’s “rituals of desire” which mentions but does not address the homoerotic nature of her dreams and visions. This is important because Cox believed that visions were manifestations of God’s voice speaking directly to her soul and eventually founded a separate black female Shaker community. I am pointing out the possibilities that Bassard chose to ignore so as to segue way into a discussion of queer as a critical lens.

³ I am referring to material platforms, i.e. feminist presses, bookstores and publications.

⁴ Black theologians were responding, in part, to their white counterparts who were debating in religious journals and conferences about the role of religion in the Civil Rights Movement.

CHAPTER 2

SANCTIFIED SISSIES AND SACRED MUSIC: “BLESSSED ASSURANCE” AND JUST ABOVE MY HEAD

In the last two decades, hundreds of essays and books have been published with “queering” in the titles, such as *Queering the Renaissance* and *Queering the Canon*, which illuminate, challenge, or deconstruct heterosexist assumptions in traditional analytical approaches to classic European and American literature. This publishing flurry indicates the taking off of the movement within lesbian and gay studies to reclaim queer as a term of empowerment and the taking up of the notion of queerness as a serious subject, object and critical lens. For its proponents, queer is a more inclusive term for describing nonheteronormative sexualities and identities. But like any politics that privileges one aspect of identity or a single perspective of consciousness over others, queer studies often lacks significant engagement with intersecting systems of power, and therefore fails to recognize multiple sites of oppression and resistance that can mutually exist within one person’s daily existence. So queers of color began to fill the theoretical gaps. Recent texts such as *Aberrations in Black: Toward A Queer of Color Critique*, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory* and *Black Queer Studies* bridge queer studies and black studies. They represent critical formations in academia concerned with the multiplicity of black identity and invested in queerness as a lens and politics that can open up possibilities of subversion, empowerment and freedom. *Queering the Soul: Homoerotic Spiritualities in African American Literature* contributes to that formation by illuminating the intersection of black institutional power, black identity politics, and lesbian/gay liberation.

Queering the Soul is a study of moments in African American literature in which protagonists, narrators, and authorial techniques reveal a queer-affirming philosophy of the spirit.

That is, they present counter discourse to the dominant narrative of homosexual condemnation. Importantly, it is also an exploration of transgressive sexual identities, sex acts and gender performances *within* those same texts. This project meditates on the intertwining of blackness, homoerotics, and spirit in a narrative, so as to identify any theological/spiritual perspective it constructs. This particular chapter pinpoints moments in which the expression of unsanctioned erotic desire is inserted into religious/theological reflections. I call it “sanctified sissies and sacred music” to relay that the major characters are participating members of an organized religion. Sanctified is defined as the opposite of sinful and, in African American communities, is used to designate a Christian lifestyle in which a person abstains from many typical secular activities and wears conservative clothing styles. More generally though, it means a person “of the church.” The person of the church under analysis in this chapter’s two texts—“Blessed Assurance” by Langston Hughes and *Just Above My Head* by James Baldwin—is an effeminate gospel singer.

The spirituals and gospel music tradition have been established as sites of resistance as much as they are black cultural expressions. As Mary Allison reminds us,

The spirituals were far more revolutionary than most people, until recently, have imagined. Close examination shows just how subversive they were, and it is not surprising that so many were used as ‘freedom songs’ by the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Songs like “Go Tell it on the Mountain...” were all spirituals being used a second time to stir up a spirit of resistance.
(qtd in Scott 166)

The characters in this chapter claim this spirit of resistance through their songs and in their refusal to conform to a “straight” performance of masculinity in their religious service. The cultural context is a black institution and the struggle is to define their experience in their own

terms. The oppressive context of that experience necessitates subterfuge and subversive use of an already coded language.

The Spectacle of Sweet Masculinity in “Blessed Assurance”

For the poet, politics in any country in the world had better be disguised as poetry...Politics can be the graveyard of the poet. And only poetry can be his resurrection.... Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country. Therefore, how can a poet keep out of politics? Hang yourself, poet, in your own words. Otherwise you are dead.

—Langston Hughes, qtd in *I Dream A World: The Life of Langston Hughes Volume II*

Langston Hughes advises the writer who delves into politics that it may cost him his audience. He knew only too well. By 1964 he had suffered through New Negro politics, communist and socialist sympathies, and the US House Un-American Activities Committee. His desire to be “with and for his people” often drew the ire of his critics and eventually limited his publishing opportunities. The epigraph is from an unpublished manifesto about the role of the artist in society that was discovered after his death. The manifesto was written a year after he published “Blessed Assurance,” which is his only short story to deal directly with black male homosexuality. The appearance of this tale might seem significant simply because it could offer insight into the rumors that Hughes lived a closeted ‘gay lifestyle.’ His love life seems mysterious mainly because, although he never identified as homosexual, Hughes never married or publicly partnered with a woman. Yet, “Blessed Assurance” is not mysterious or closeted in dealing with black queer masculinity. Instead Hughes creates a politicized spiritual space for addressing black queer masculinity in a church community by offering a tale of an aging father, John, struggling to accept his son’s homosexuality. Arnold Rampersad, Hughes’ biographer, characterizes the narrator as a “sophisticated voyeur” (334) who “neither criticizes nor endorses the son or his organist-admirer” (334) but the gender politics conveyed through black fatherhood and black worship are anything but neutral. It is this cultural milieu that allows Hughes to hang himself in his own words. His text engages the intersection of religious expression, sexuality,

sensuality and ecstasy. With humor, sarcasm, and the poet's keen ability to capture truth in tiny snippets, "Blessed Assurance" illustrates how "the body is the one organizing site of multiple and competing signifiers within the black church service" (Johnson, "Feeling the Spirit" 92). Indeed, the spectacle of Delmar's queer body signifies the multiplicity of black identity, resistance and spirituality in his performance of sacred music.

Religion professor Johari Jabir supplies part of the analytical foundation for the queering of soul in this story. In a panel presentation, entitled "Preachers and Punks, Sissies and Saints: Constructions of Black Religious Masculinity in the Climactic Moment of Black Worship," Jabir argues that in the theater of traditional black churches, the performances of the male preacher and the male musician construct a hierarchical masculine/effeminate binary, which privileges the preacher by placing him in the masculine space. "In the context of black worship, these two masculinities cooperate and collaborate to construct each other's masculinity through two of the most essential material aspects of black worship—the pulpit and the Hammond B3 organ" (4). Jabir's formulation identifies the literal space of creativity and authority each man occupies but oversimplifies their duality. In theatrical terms, the musician, also called the Minister of Music, is the opening act. The title can comprise as many roles as choir director, lead musician, vocalist or songwriter. The production of music or song in the service of God is considered a type of evangelism, for he surrenders to the Spirit and serves as its vessel; his talent is an instrument of God. The minister's ability to compose, arrange, or sing is his service and worship of the holy giver. Still, in the greater scheme of the church program, he is the sub-minister. Spatially, he is the director in the orchestra pit who provides the soundtrack to the preacher's center stage monologue. Although men and women serve in this position, it is feminized because it is historically a woman's supportive 'place' in the church (along with teaching, while men are

conventionally pastors and deacons). So as it is with other feminized occupations—hair stylists, fashion designers and dancers—a male pianist/organist is always already sexually suspicious. Because of the musician’s feminized masculinity, the preacher is the alpha-male almost by default. Even so, the intrinsic role of music and singing in the (traditional protestant) black worship service places even the most flamboyantly gay and gifted musician upon a high pedestal in the community.

Jabir’s commentary also points to the conflict within the ‘preachers and punks’ dynamic. The words from the pulpit rise and fall against the piano’s music, each in dramatic pursuit of the audience’s emotional/physical/spiritual release, until the “sermonic climax” is a moment “simultaneously cooperative, collaborative, and contesting” (Jabir 4). The call-and-response pattern of the piano and preaching is a collaborative effort, and the rhythmic vocals of the preacher cooperate with the swaying chords played by the musician. The sacred nature of the pursuit is unquestioned. But in their separate aesthetics and performances of black religious masculinity these actors disagree, Jabir explains, “not about the goodness of God but about the meaning of what it [is] to be a man” (4). Jabir’s queering of the ideological tensions that can exist between sermon/song and Preacher/Minister of Music sets the stage, so to speak, for Hughes’ short story. “Blessed Assurance” expands and revises the ‘preacher and punk’ dyad into a triangulated, overlapping connection of relational forces: black patriarchy, black gay men and the institution of the black church.

The first point on the masculinity triangle is John, who represents black patriarchy. John is coming to terms with the fact that his only son, Delmar, is gay. The narration seems sympathetic to John’s homophobic resignation that “to [his] distrust of God [,] it seemed his son was turning out to be a queer” (58). Not only is Delmar a queer, he is also the most controversial

representation of black male sexuality. Delmar is a sissy. The early passages supply a catalogue of Delmar's "sweet" characteristics: he performs his chores without complaint, washes dishes too easily, does not antagonize his younger sister, played with dolls in his childhood and wears "exaggerated ornamental" glasses. His preferred sport is tennis, not his father's game of football, and he is a member of the glee, French and drama clubs. We are given this list, ostensibly, as proof of Delmar's sweetness, his failed masculinity, and of John's rightful parental embarrassment. But we soon learn that these passages are not really about Delmar, they are about John's failure as patriarch.

John has fathered an intelligent, talented and likeable son. He is described as a brilliant queer because as his social resume reveals, he is well-rounded and excels in his high school studies. He is on the honor roll, is ranked highly in his class and has avoided the allure of the street life. "No juvenile delinquency, no stealing cars, no smoking reefers, ever" (58). However, Delmar's brilliant queerness is, for John, testimony of his inability to transmit a socially acceptable masculinity to the next generation. Delmar is also a "brilliant queer" in terms of his physical appearance and mannerisms. As is expected of him by society, John has attempted to guide his son towards what he considers more appropriately gendered behavior. In the quote below the author tags the synonyms for 'sweetness' or 'queer' with italicized emphasis:

That Spring he asked, 'Delmar, do you have to wear *white* Bermuda shorts to school? Most of the other boys wear Levi's or just plain pants, don't they? And why wash them out yourself every night, all that ironing? I want you to be clean, son, but not *that* clean.' ... Another time, 'Delmar, those school togs of yours don't have to match so perfectly, do they? Colors *blended*, as you say...The boys'll think you're sissy'... Once again desperately, 'If you're going to smoke, Delmar, hold your cigarette between your *first* two fingers, not between your thumb and finger—like a woman.' (59)

Here his brilliance is physical; his is a shiny masculinity, marked by its flawed motion among other black male bodies. Delmar's brilliant queerness highlights his nonconformance to working

class masculinity: his affinity for white(ness) or bourgeois sensibility, a level of cleanliness usually associated with women, a keen sense of fashion, and the cigarette reference suggests he imitates movie starlets. In other words, Delmar lacks a “cool pose,” a mask of tough posturing defined, in part, by restrained and aloof masculinity associated with African American men, constructed to hide sensitivity and express power (Majors and Billson 5). John’s explanations for his criticism tie into his desire for Delmar to be read as “cool” by other men. He wants Delmar to meet a particular standard set by him (“*I want you to be clean*”), his male peers at school (“the boys’ll think”) and societal norms (“not...like a woman”).

Assuming the plot is set in Hughes’ contemporary moment of the 1960s, John may represent the black Power paradigm which generally views sexual queerness as incompatible with the building of a black Nation. In this nationalist framework, an effeminate man is often regarded as the weakest link in the fight against white supremacist mythologies that have naturalized black sexual deviance since slavery, and since this is a father-son relationship, Delmar represents a generational shift away from those values.¹ While historical context is always an important aspect of understanding literature, further suppositions about the Black Power Era’s influence on Hughes’ anti-homophobic project will not substantially change the reading of this text or add greatly to Hughes’ possible motivations. Heterosexism, homosexual taboo in black racial politics, and the constant suspicion of Hughes’ homosexuality all predate the 1960s. Throughout the post-emancipation history of black people in America, there has been cultural pressure to properly represent the race. Sissies and punks—and dykes for that matter—have always been positioned rhetorically outside the bounds of ‘proper’ black representation. E. Patrick Johnson describes this constant imposition of heteronormative pressure as “hegemonic

blackness,” wherein maleness, strength and overall leadership ability are qualities equated with hetero-butch masculinity:

The representation of effeminate homosexuality as disempowering is at the heart of the politics of hegemonic blackness. For to be ineffectual is the most damaging thing one can be in the fight against oppression. Insofar as *ineffectiveness* is problematically *sutured to femininity and homosexuality* within a black cultural politic that privileges race over other categories of oppression, it follows that the subjects accorded these attributes would be marginalized and excluded from the boundaries of blackness. (51)

In other words, the feminized man is generally an unacceptable representative of black leadership and strength. Hegemonic blackness leaves little room for gender and sexual transgression, as is evidenced by Hughes’ own sexual ambiguity. His sexual history remains shrouded in mystery, presumably to maintain his respectable position as folk laureate of black America.² In a similar cautionary vein, the narrator states that John is more concerned about his son’s transition into adulthood because “the boy is colored [and] Negroes have enough crosses to bear” (58). John is aware that black men’s dreams can be thwarted by the obstacles of racism alone, without the additional fallout from the homophobic surveillance of sexuality in and outside of black communities. To be black and identifiably queer is to be marked for social (and sometimes physical) crucifixion. So John is concerned about the weight of the homosexual stigma for Delmar and, more crucially, for himself because Delmar’s improper performance of masculinity reflects directly upon him as the patriarch. In spite of his efforts to dull it with normative correctives, Delmar’s queerness remains radiant.

John is also a failed husband. He lost his wife to “another man who made more money than any Negro in their church. … Owned a Cadillac. Racket connections—politely called *politics*” (59; original emphasis). That John is unable to maintain a cohesive family unit is another mark against his manhood. The mention of the other man’s political and financial clout

suggests that John may have lacked in his role as breadwinner or simply that the new man's income dwarfs John's. He also calls his wife's new lover "burly," revealing that he is also physically larger than John. In patriarchal symbology, these features combine to construct the new man as the alpha-male and John as the punk. Clearly, John's issue with Delmar's masculinity is intertwined with his own sense of displacement and deficiency. He finds some relief in Delmar's wish to attend the Sorbonne in Paris. Like many parents, he had hopes his son would attend his alma mater, Morgan State University in Baltimore but that, too has changed. Now he simply wants Delmar out of the way because John will soon host a reunion with his fraternity brothers. The historically black college and the black fraternity are enclaves of hegemonic blackness that will not easily accept Delmar.

"[I]s the Sorbonne like Morgan?" John ponders. "Does it have dormitories, a campus?" (60). He considers Delly's future and well being, but the admission of his probable homosexuality never firmly settles in his mind. To acknowledge to himself the motivation behind his sudden advocacy of the Sorbonne, is to acknowledge the other truths as well. As John meditates, the narration tumbles into garbled stream-of-consciousness to demonstrate his ambivalence. "In Paris he had heard they didn't care about such things. Care about such what things didn't care about what?"(60). Time and again John struggles with denial. In the most provocative passage, as he seems to come to terms with Delmar's sweetness, his mental process begins to break down:

"God, don't let him put an earring in his ear like some," John prayed. He wondered vaguely with a sick feeling in his stomach should he think it through then then think it through right then through should he try then and think it through should without blacking through think blacking out then and there think it through? John didn't. (59-60)

The repetition of the phrase “think it through” is significant. What will happen if John can think this situation through to its logical conclusion? Can Delmar be queer and a legitimate extension of John’s manhood? As the symbol of black patriarchy, John clings to a self-destructive macho ideology that insists he expel Delmar from the community. The other embedded question is, should he (and we) think this through “without blacking out?”

Blacking or blocking out is a mental self-preserving mechanism in which the brain’s subconscious protects the conscious from painful realizations; that is, information is literally set ‘outside’ the reach of memory to prevent further trauma. John’s attempt to ‘think it through’ launches him into vertigo. In order to avoid the implications of the truth, his inner voice gets stuck like a needle on a scratched record, jumping back to its starting point or skipping so that the same word is repeated without progression: “with a sick feeling in his stomach should he think it through then then think it through right then through should he try then.” “Blacking out” also symbolizes the African American politics of extracting, obfuscating or otherwise suppressing information of possibly ‘deviant’ behavior of its brightest and most influential members. “Black sexuality is considered politically, morally, and spiritually correct if it expresses itself in patriarchal, religious-based constructions of family, politics, art and culture [, and] any variance or transgression can cause one to be burdened with shame” (Hemphill 182). Barbara Smith highlights these ‘blacking out’ campaigns in her examination of black historians’ treatment of lesbian subjects. Smith found “The themes of uplift, of social validation, and of prioritizing subject matter that is a ‘credit to the race’ have burdened and sometimes biased black historical projects” (89). John is the voice of old guard politics as it confronts the shifting landscape of black representation that emerges in Delmar’s generation. He must choose whether to ‘think it through’ or ‘black out.’

John's desire to keep Delmar hidden from black institutions illustrates the nexus of contradiction that is the sissy's existence: his sexuality renders him unseen in the landscape of black male-authored masculinity; yet his feminized presence in black communities, albeit despised and perceived as emasculated, is hyper-visible. Delmar must be removed because his sweet masculinity is spectacular and therefore alienating. Yet there is another dimension to John's hope for Delmar's future in Paris. Paris holds symbolic and historic freedom in the lives of many African Americans. At one time it was an "American colony in France" where many generations of black artists (of all sexual orientations) and white homosexuals fled to escape the tyranny of racism and sodomy laws in the US, including Josephine Baker, James Baldwin, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Richard Wright. Hughes first encountered Europe as an impoverished dishwasher aboard a ship, but he would eventually return several times as a famous author in search of sanctuary. To suggest it as a site of particularly gay refuge evokes Baldwin's tragic romance in the novel *Giovanni's Room*.³ More important is Delly's unwillingness to exercise caution in the face of this cultural pressure to deny or suppress his difference. On the contrary, Delly, with the aid of his church's Minister of Music, acts out his queerness in a particularly Christian spotlight.

Manley Jaxon is the Minister of Music at Tried Stone Baptist Church and Delmar is a member of the choir. As discussed earlier, in this profession his queerness is overdetermined. It is a space marked as queer, even if the male occupant does not exemplify any tale-tell signs. Hughes relies on this assumption; he expects his readership to know that he is marking Jaxon as queer simply by having him occupy that space. Perhaps with this connotation in mind, Hughes names the minister Manley. This could be read ironically or as a hint that Jaxon's masculinity should be distinguished from Delmar's (he's manly as opposed to girly). This is supported by the

fact that Delmar's nickname is Delly, a clear evocation of Dolly or Nelly (a colloquialism for sissy).

Manley is positioned as the black gay site (with Delmar) on the competing masculinities triangle. He introduces Roderick Ferguson's "ruptural possibilities" into Jabir's 'preachers and punks' scenario. Ferguson convincingly argues that queer characters disrupt heteronormativity by supplying an oppositional voice that expands the construction of blackness within the narrative. The presence of these nonheteronormative racial formations serve as discursive "ruptures, critiques and alternatives" (Ferguson18) to regulatory discourses. As a sub-minister in the church, Manley competes with John in the shaping of Delmar's manhood. Thus, it is meaningful that as part of his masculine instruction he composed a song based on the Christian Bible's *Book of Ruth*, dedicated it to Delmar and, "without respect for gender" (Hughes 60), assigned Delmar to sing lead. The decision to have Delly sing Ruth's song provides the first ruptural and critical act. It disrupts the religious reinforcement of proper gender binaries.

The bible story they musically reenact establishes Ruth as Jesus' ancestor through her celebrated relationship with her mother-in-law Naomi. Ruth and Naomi simultaneously lose their husbands to some unnamed catastrophe and, according to Hebrew law and custom, are expected to separate and find new husbands to support them. However, instead of moving back into her father's house until she can remarry, Ruth defies tradition by moving with Naomi to Bethlehem and supporting her "better than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15). Her loyalty is exemplary because she chose to leave the family, culture, and religion of her birth for Naomi. In *Lethal Love*, Mieke Bal observes that the verb used to describe Ruth's attachment, "to cleave," is the same one used to refer to the matrimonial bond in *Genesis* (72). Ruth pleads, "Entreat me not to leave thee...for where you go, I will go...your people will be my people, and your God will be my God." This

moment is heralded as the greatest proof of Ruth's love and devotion to Naomi and, in a larger sense, towards the Hebrew God.

When Manley assigns Delmar to quote these words as lead vocalist, he asks Delmar to perform as Ruth in the musical (imagine a man singing of Eve's experience with the serpent). The affect of having him do so transforms the church into a queer space in which two men can vocalize their devotion to each other. Meanwhile, "As the organ wept and Delmar's voice soared above the choir with all the *sweetness* of Sam Cooke's tessitura" (61, emphasis added) Manley fainted. When the music stops unexpectedly, "Amens and Hallelujahs drowned in the throats of various elderly sisters who were on the verge of shouting [and] swooning teenage maidens suddenly sat up in their pews..." (61). By fainting, the musician interrupts the women's pleasure—the "sisters" and "maidens"—as he succumbs to his own. The sweetness of Delly's voice creates a male-on-male connection that supersedes that of male-to-female communication implicit in his role as musical foreplay to the preacher's soulful penetration.

It would be a disingenuous stretch to imply that men do not faint or respond with emotional exuberance in church, yet it is more commonly depicted in literature as a feminine reaction to the 'touch of the spirit.' Poet Pat Parker illustrates it thusly: Daughter of Ham lies on a church floor/ filled in orgasm with her Maker / a spent lover ignorant of a hard bed (55). Similarly, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* narrates "the writhings and weepings of the feminine portion [of the congregation], which seemed to predominate" (141). Larsen's protagonist Helga Crane observes,

Behind her, before her, beside her, frenzied women gesticulated, screamed, wept, and tottered to the praying of the preacher... The women dragged themselves upon their knees or crawled over the floor like reptiles, sobbing and pulling their hair and tearing off their clothing. (141-42)

In terms of literary representations, Hughes' portrayal revises the heteronormative scene into a spectacle of queer disruption. Manley is a sight because he 'gets happy' so quickly and in so feminine a manner. Still the program is far from over; conversely, the energy of the show is further channeled into and onto the continued queer spectacle of Delly and Manley. When Manley collapses, their duet (the sweet voice accompanied by the "weep[ing]" organ) becomes Delly/Ruth's serenade.

When the organ went silent, the choir died, too—but Delmar never stopped singing. Over the limp figure of Dr. Jaxon lying on the rostrum, the "Entreat me not to leave thee" of his solo flooded the church as if it were on hi-fi. ... Finally, two ushers led [Manley] off to an anteroom while Delmar's voice soared to a high C such as Tried Stone Baptist Church had never heard." (61)

Delmar in the lead role is the first transgression in the conservative church space. The second is that they display a homoerotic spirituality. They are able to express an unsanctioned same-sex love through their holy worship. Rather than choosing unambiguous sides in the "punks/preachers or sissies/ saints" conflict, they blur the lines and become sissified saints and preaching punks. The text queers the soul by allowing black gay bodies to become sanctified vessels of nonnormative religious performance.

As in the slave's routine of dual coding, their song is duplicitous for it as much a spiritual as it is a love song. Delmar as the singer is the soul's mouthpiece, the passageway through which the soul's desire is manifested as breath, tongue, and vocal chords. Manley, in his role as the organ(ist), is a natural accompaniment to the lyrics. When the mouth moves, the organ surrenders or, as Delmar's sister explains to John: "Some of the girls say that when Delmar sings, they want to scream, they're so overcome, but Dr. Jaxon didn't scream. He just fainted" (61). They utilize the space in religious rhetoric for queer transgression and subversion. We know that Delly and Manley have a close relationship because, besides the song dedication, it is

mentioned that they broke away from the group to visit Greenwich Village together during a choir trip to New York. If we believe that Manley and Delly are romantically involved, the religious song can then be interpreted to serve dual rhetorical purposes. First, when he sings “over” Jaxon, the lyrics declare his emotional loyalty. In light of his possible departure for France, Delly may be using the song—already understood as a same-gender sentiment—to express his desire to remain close to Jaxon. Second, in his role as soloist he is also the vessel through which The Word as lyric is projected into the world. His song refers to family loyalty as analogous to the Christian devotion to God. A traditional reading might assert that the gender of the lead singer should be overlooked and the moment understood only in terms of his role as a Christian singer, but the narrative makes clear that this exhibition, for John at least, is “perverse.” Together they raise a praisesong to the heavens and to each other. They expand the traditional interpretation to vocalize that if Ruth and Naomi’s “cleaving” is a worthy, holy celebration so, too, is theirs.

The preacher’s reaction is to assume control of the service, at which time the triangle of competing masculinities comes sharply into focus. The pulpit masculinity is at odds with the singer’s masculinity, whose performance, in turn, scandalizes the patriarch. “Dr. Jaxon has only fainted, friends,” Pastor Greene assures the startled crowd, “We will continue our services by taking up collection directly after the anthem” (61). It is unclear if he is directing the choir to finish the song without Jaxon or announcing the end of the anthem. But John believes it is a signal for his son to continue his indecent lyrical drag show and tries to intervene. Five times he orders Delly to “shut up.” For a moment there is silence and the next voice is Reverend Greene’s. “We will now lift the offering… Deacons, raise a hymn. Bear us up, sisters, bear us up!” (62). The pastor wants to put the derailed program back on its heteronormative track so he

enlists other, more traditional men to take control and the women to assist in their long-established secondary function. While “Christianity is not the sole source of Western gender-role ideologies for black Americans, it is a major one...[it] is certainly the case that patriarchy is a protected modus operandi, a visible if unacknowledged tradition, and one of the most cherished and tenacious values in the Black church” (Cole 160). The choice of language is telling, for it is couched in terms of physical labor. Hegemonic blackness toils to veil or close the fissures through which nonheteronormative formations emerge. Deacons are told to “raise” a hymn, to lift a song over any remaining echoes of Delly’s high C, while the women are instructed to “bear up”—carry, endure, hold—the men. Even the change in the musical genre from the improvisational spiritual to the contained compositions of the hymn book suggests an effort to control the environment. It is not enough.

The next voice is not that of a deacon or a woman. It is Delmar’s. His voice boomed through the cultural pressure to return to the group’s idea of natural order. He does switch to the hymn, “Blessed Assurance,” from which the title of the story is taken, but it is in the spirit of resistance. He refuses to be silenced by the voices of normative masculinity. In fact, the hymn further demonstrates the space in religious rhetoric for dual coding and double-consciousness. Delmar sings the first two lines alone: *Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!* Following his lead, the congregation “swung gently into song”: *Heir of salvation, purchase of God, Born of the Spirit...* When Delly transgresses the restrictions of patriarchal gender performance, he “negates [Christianity’s] attempt to censure his presence, to erase his body, to deny his legitimacy as a child of God” (Dyson 235). More conflict follows. At that moment, during the pause between lines, John’s voice bursts through with an irreverent ad lib. “God damn it!” he cries twice. Hughes places this outburst immediately after Delmar claims to

be “born of the Spirit” because this is precisely what is contested. Can Delly be ‘unnatural’ and a holy heir? The long held interpretation of the Old Testament is that God condemns men who “lay with men,” and in his frustrated shame John cites this wrathful decree. “God *damn* it,” he repeats with emphasis, as he is still unable to “think it through” beyond the implications of his own masculinity.

Fortunately, Delly gets the last word, as he sings along with the other saints that he, too, is “born of the spirit and washed in His blood...” (62). The story ends with Delly’s triumphant claim over John’s and Reverend Greene’s dispute. Yet the ellipses at the end of the last verse signify the unfinished or omitted ending of the actual song. The lines that follow Delly’s lyrics comprise the chorus, the meaning of which deserves attention. *This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.* Whose story is this really? The narrative begins with John’s depressed interiority but it is quickly hijacked by Delly’s sweet expressions of individual will. We are never allowed inside Delly’s head, perhaps because Hughes’ project is to engage and dismantle the homophobic perspective. Delly does not produce a counter-argument via conversation or interior monologue; he embodies a disruption of normative discourses. He is the singer and the song that queers black church culture.

Whose song? Is it the author’s, whose autobiography is described among other things, as “a tour de force of subterfuge” in which “deeper meaning is deliberately concealed” from the reader? (Rampersad xvii). Ultimately, this line of analysis raises more questions than it could possibly answer. What we do know is that Hughes’ sissy successfully transforms his gender transgression into a critique of heterosexism and hegemonic blackness, while he claims validation through the same Bible whose prohibition his performance defies. If we are to believe the epigraph in which Hughes implies that his most dangerous politics are embedded in his art,

we can say with some surety that he is invested in unveiling and antagonizing the cluttered contradictions and ironies that exist in the triangulated relationship between homosexual men, black patriarchy and the historic institution of the black church. Delly's Christianity and his queer masculinity exist within and are articulated through one song, one lyric, one belief system. As we will see in the next section, James Baldwin makes very similar rhetorical moves in a text that also queers the soul through sacred music.

Baldwin's Sacred Sensuality

James Baldwin's contentious relationship with his upbringing in holiness culture, from his experiences as a child evangelist to his eventual rejection of Christianity as a false consciousness as an adult, is the source of copious scholarship and is, perhaps, the subtext of all of Baldwin's literature. The most definitive discussion of his loss of faith is *The Fire Next Time* in which he says "I remember feeling dimly that there was a kind of blackmail in [religion]. People, I felt, ought to love the Lord *because* they loved Him, and not because they were afraid of going to Hell" (347). Baldwin connects his disillusionment to his maturation as a reader and writer. His consciousness of the creativity required to write his sermons led him to reconsider the authors/authority of the Bible. He knew "far more about divine inspiration than [he] dared admit" at the time (346).

I knew how I worked myself up into my own visions, and how frequently—indeed, incessantly—the visions God granted me differed from the visions He granted to my father. I did not understand the dreams I had at night, but I knew that they were not holy. For that matter, I knew that my waking hours were far from holy. I spent most of my time in a state of repentance for things I had vividly desired to do but had not done. (346-47)

This passage hints at the synthesis of the sacred and profane (presented here as states of consciousness/unconsciousness and wake/sleep) that will fully bloom in Baldwin's novels. What

he means is that his desires were not holy according to his religious paradigm. His emotional development was mired in conflict: even as he was called to preach, he was also being confronted by his budding sexuality. When he reflects upon his teenage years in *Fire*, he conflates sexual fantasies with holy visions. The implication is that his spirituality and his sexuality spring from the same place. When seen in this light, it becomes clear that his conflict begins not with God but with his religion, with the differences between his beliefs and his reality, with what he has been taught and his self-discovered truths. It is an overwhelming struggle that ends in his casting off the cloak of the ministry and, eventually, organized religion altogether:

[W]hoever wishes to become a truly moral human being...must divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him. (352)

In spite of this seeming outright rejection, Baldwin never fully gets rid of God or escapes the pulpit. He wrestles with the “prohibitions, crimes and hypocrisies” in every text, from essays and book titles to his characters’ dialogue. While his numerous texts are filled with the influence of holiness culture—its songs, rhetorical style, and tropes—this discussion will focus on a few passages in *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin’s last novel. The passages encapsulate how Baldwin queers the soul through his duplicitous use of sacred songs, a queering which reconceptualizes Christian notions of the body’s relationship to its spirit. “Gospel music is represented as a coded expression of an oppressed community, but—most important—in Baldwin’s work it is also represented as a coded expression of sexual desire” (Scott 144). In a novel “awash with sexual baptisms” (Harris 169) Baldwin portrays spirituality, the ways one expresses a connection to the divine, as an erotic connection between men of faith.

According to linguist Kenneth Burke, religious expressions are imbued with a sacred aura because they represent the ethereal, and then are used among secular terminologies to apply that sacredness to the secular experience. According to him this is a “linguistic paradox”:

For whereas the words for the “supernatural” realm are necessarily borrowed from the realm of our everyday experiences, out of which our familiarity with language arises, *once a terminology has been developed for special theological purposes the order can become reversed*. We can borrow back the terms from the borrower, again secularizing to varying degrees the originally secular terms that had been given “supernatural” connotations. (7 italics added)

So the paradox is that a word that conveys a sacred notion is set aside—borrowed—in the consciousness as metaphysical or supernatural and then, for effect, is moved back into the realm of the natural, even though it is always the language of the physical world.⁴ These words inherently represent the physical because this is the limit of human experience. Still, the psycho-social weight of its supernatural status is real. In semiotic terms, a sign that represents the heavenly or godly sphere can bestow its sanctity or supernaturality upon other signs in its discursive system. Once considered “holy” or “sacred” words, they are borrowed back into secular speech for an intensifying affect. Language of the sacred, when used to modify the language of the everyday, can raise that word or phrase the level of the sacred. Baldwin employs this borrowing back technique in a candid scene by interposing his description of eroticized flesh with lyrics from a spiritual. He creates an aura of sacredness around that which is deemed abominable and unholy, and transforms a moment of “sin” into one of transcendent carnality.

Just Above My Head is the story of a gospel-singer-turned-soul-artist, Arthur Montana. It is narrated by Arthur’s brother as a eulogy for the artist who “lost his song” shortly before he died. Among several other subplots and characters, it recounts his coming of age during the Civil Rights Movement and chronicles his romantic life and international crossover fame. This

analysis focuses specifically on the teenage romance between Arthur and Crunch when they were members of the Trumpets of Zion. The lyrics of the gospels and spirituals they sing are often included in the depiction of their performances alongside descriptions of their facial expressions and interaction with the audience. The spirit-filled service springs from the page: the organ, drums and piano; *amens*, *hallelujahs* and *yes lords* fill the gaps between verses; the bodies sway, writhe, or tremble to the rhythm; hands clap or shake the tambourine in syncopation. Religious rhetoric is scattered throughout the narrative to express a gamut of the characters' other emotions, including fear, doubt, love, lust, and remorse. Very quickly then, the reader becomes accustomed to the religious lens through which the characters perceive the world.

The teenaged boys fall in love during their time together in the group. The first hint of Arthur's non-hetero leanings appears when an adolescent girl from a church gives him special attention. While "he does not want to take Sister Dorothy Green into some dark corner [like the other boys have done with girls]," he does indeed want to do *something*, the narrator explains, for "a need is growing in him, a tormenting need, with no name, no object" (180). When Arthur finds himself alone with her, his body responds to her closeness, while his mind continually drifts to Crunch. "He is both comfortable and uncomfortable. He likes her. ... He wonders where Crunch is, and what he is doing, and he feels his prick twitch again..." (181). He kisses Dorothy and is aroused by their contact but things end there. Later, he names his "tormenting need" in a church performance.

Gospel music is his most natural form of expressing emotion, so that "almost everything goes into the song" (180). Perhaps a more precise phrasing would be to say almost everything goes *through* the song. When he and Crunch kiss for the first time, "something like terror leaps in Arthur: something in him sings" (190). To capture the ambivalence of each moment of

transgression, Baldwin often triangulates fear, joy, and (the problem of) voice in his narration; and always the lexicon is performative, for it transmits the body into a sacred orbit. For example, to describe Arthur and Crunch's reticence in sharing their budding relationship with the other boys, we are told, "They cannot shout *hallelujah!* dare not cry *hosanna!*—yet a tremendous, hurting joy wells up from the belly and the loins" (191). To say that they "dare not" cry *hosanna*, defined as a loud cry of praise and adoration to God, is a way to convey their understanding of the disapproval they would receive from their community. However, this censure is quickly eclipsed by the insertion of "yet" into the sentence structure. The narrator disrupts the normalcy of silence, a silence which threatens to also normalize their shame. Instead the reader is compelled to equate their paradoxical "hurting joy" to that spiritual experience which would make one shout "hallelujah" and "hosanna."

In another poignant moment of duplicity, Arthur yearns for Crunch from across a table. The passage enacts several levels of queering.

Crunch's smell was in his nostrils, the overwhelming image of the hair in his armpits, the basketball player's thighs and ankles, *deep like a river*; Arthur thought, insanely, his arms, his arms; then suddenly, silence dropped on him like a heavy cloud...
(193; original italics).

There is no direct allusion to a spiritual here. This time the italicized phrase alludes to Langston Hughes' 1922 poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Speaking in the persona of the Entire Negro Race and challenging the widely held racist notion that Negroes lack history, Hughes traces the African presence from the earliest Nile cultures to the banks of the largest and longest river in North America, the Mississippi River. I've known "ancient dusky rivers" the speaker concludes, and "my soul has grown deep like the rivers." The poem expands black creativity, freedom and cultures to a time "older than the flow of human blood" while emphasizing a present-day black

interiority. To have this famous political assertion emerge in the middle of a homoerotic fantasy, Baldwin implicates Hughes and enacts a blanket queering of black history: Crunch's long, black body represents ancient same-sex desires and ancient masculinity. Arthur thinks the phrase, *deep like a river*, as his mind's eye caresses Crunch's legs and arms. So "deep" in this case indicates a physical presence. Crunch's body and its sexual potential is a space into which Arthur imagines sinking. In an emotional perspective, Arthur's "overwhelming" craving is likened to drowning, for the desire rises so quickly and so "insanely" as to feel bottomless.

In an ultimate act of queering of the church space, before the boys consummate their relationship sexually, they achieve it melodically in a church performance. The river metaphor is extended as the boys moan, sweat and move rhythmically through an "unprecedented darkness" of dual coding before an audience. They affirm their desire through the song first:

Crunch's guitar began, as Arthur's voice began,
Take me to the water
Crunch moaned,
yes! Take me to the water!
He heard [another's singer's] witnessing falsetto, but he answered Crunch's echo,
take me to the water/ to be/ baptized.
He paused, and closed his eyes, sweat gathered in his hair; he listened to Crunch, then he started again. [Repeats refrain with call-and-response between group members].
He paused again...trusting every second of this unprecedented darkness, knowing Crunch and he were moving together, here, now, in the song, to some new place; they had never sung together like this before, his voice in Crunch's sound, Crunch's sound filling his voice,
So
I know
None
don't tell me, I know, I know, I know!
as though Crunch were laughing and crying at the same time
but the righteous
so true!
none
don't you leave me now!
but the righteous
[...]

*yea, little fellow, come on in!
shall see God.*

Crunch and he ending together, as though on a single drum. (199)

Arthur has already likened Crunch to the river, and now the water reference in the song allows him to verbalize his erotic desires. The song refers to the Baptist tradition in which a believer demonstrates his or her spiritual renewal through full immersion in a body of water; it is a symbolic washing away of the old way of being. So the singer directs the audience to take him to the river to act on his faith, a requirement, as the song says, to prove himself before his God. The dual meaning is Arthur's desire to fully submerge into Crunch deepness. Therefore, Arthur's experience of performing the song is keenly erotic. He is completely in tandem with Crunch's musical strides, "knowing Crunch and he were moving together, here, now, in the song, to some new place." The new place is their recognized spiritual-emotional bond, which serves as the bridge to the sexual union. Crunch's understanding of the subliminal significance is evidenced in his responses. "Don't tell me. I know! I know! I know" he exclaims, sounding as if he were "laughing and crying at the same time." His repetition implies a passionate manner, while the "laughing and crying" reproduces the "hurtful joy" described earlier. The unprecedented merging in which Arthur's experiences "his voice in Crunch's sound, [and] Crunch's sound filling his voice" foreshadows their sex acts. In fact, Crunch's submissive or permissive phrase "yeah, little fellow, come on in" will be echoed in a way that directly connects this erotic moment with their subsequent fellatio scene.

In an equally poignant passage of duplicitous use of religious expression, Arthur and Crunch have sex. This time Baldwin incorporates lyrics from the spiritual "You Must Come in at the Door" to express the final confrontation and confluence of their sexuality and spirituality:

Crunch moaned again, surrendering, surrendering, as Arthur's tongue descended Crunch's long black self, down to the raging penis. He licked the underside of the penis, feeling it leap, and he

licked the balls. He was setting Crunch free... Arthur understood Crunch's terror—the terror of someone in the water, being carried away from the shore—and this terror, which was his own terror, soon caused him to gasp ... A moment came when he felt Crunch pass from a kind of terrified bewilderment into joy. A friendly, a joyful movement, began. *So high, you can't get over him.* Sweat from Arthur's forehead fell onto Crunch's belly. *So low*—and Crunch gasped as Arthur's mouth left his prick standing in the cold, cold air, as Arthur's tongue licked his sacred balls—*you can't get under him.* Arthur rose, again, to Crunch's lips. *So Wide. You can't get around it.* It was as though, with this kiss, they were forever bound together. Crunch moaned, in absolute agony, and Arthur went down again.

“Little fellow. Baby. Love.” *You must come in at the door.* (208)

When Arthur begins to cover Crunch with kisses, he encounters the “raging penis” and they both experience terror. The terror is real: their Bible states that this behavior offends God and these boys are deeply entrenched in church culture. Together in spirit they struggle against the homophobic ideologies of hegemonic blackness. They face the terror of community judgment and, in narration that relies upon “the eros inhabiting the language of religious surrender and redemption” (Edelman 69), transform their fear into a spiritual quest, a joyful movement. As they move closer to a climax, the narrative interjects testimonial lyrics to broaden the reader’s understanding of what is happening spiritually. Baldwin uses the normalizing authority of sacred words to stake a claim for homoerotic sacredness and to make vibrant what is not supposed to be part of normalcy: the queer (Cobb 287.) Let me explain.

As Lynn Orilla Scott reminds us, “In appropriating religious song to express human desire for freedom, dignity, and love in this world as well as the next, Baldwin conflated sacred and secular meaning in a manner consistent with a long African American tradition of representation” (169). What we should not lose sight of is the first level of meaning of the religious song in the particular tradition that Baldwin’s characters represent. In a study of black

Holiness/Pentecostal culture, ethnographer Glenn Hinson evaluates the status of sacred songs among other worship practices.

Within this frame, song ranks as much more than “just another” realm of expression. Song stands apart, vaulted to the very pinnacle of heavenly favor. In the eyes of the saints, song reigns as the chosen channel of celestial expression. [...] *For the saints, pleasuring the Lord is the frame within which all sacred song falls.* Whenever one joins the choruses of a congregation, sings as a performer before a church audience, hums melodic praises in a moment of privacy, or simply listens to sacred songs on the radio, *one enters a sphere imbued with associations of celestial agency and godly delight.* Engaging with song thus entails more than just engaging in praise. It also entails...partaking of the holy.

(110-111; italics added)

Seen in this light, the interpolation of “You Must Come In” elevates Arthur and Crunch’s lovemaking ‘to the very pinnacle of heavenly favor.’ The “Him” in the song is God, whose spirit and power are omnipresent and, therefore, an inevitable force in the lives of mankind. But Baldwin borrows back this phrase to bless the carnal act being shared between these men. The duplicity is a sanctification of the homosexual act. The promise made by foreshadowing (“Crunch’s sound filling his voice”) is fulfilled when Arthur’s vocal organs envelop Crunch’s penis. As they move together in sacred sensuality, the narrative follows their emotional movement from terror to joy and finally to love. Sexual ecstasy, sealed with a kiss and the affirmation “you must come in at the door,” is imbued with associations of celestial agency and godly delight. This narrative strategy creates a metaphysical, theological space for romantic/sexual love between black Christian men. Like Hughes’s singer, Baldwin’s sissy uses the sacred song in order to have “the privileges of publicity without having to reveal anything specific” (Cobb 287) while Baldwin’s narration (separate from the gay character’s own verbiage) also imbues the homoerotic exchange with spiritual vibrancy.⁵ And though I do not go into it

here, it is important to note that Arthur's status as a soul music icon in his adult life connects to all the meanings of soul being explored in this project.

Although the entire novel is a queering of the soul, for the narration consistently equates the erotic and the spiritual, this scene is exceptional. Arthur and Crunch are dipped in body waters —sweat, spit and eventually semen—in a moment that marks the sensual initiation into their love affair. Sensuality is a necessary aspect of this construction in order to configure the pleasures of the flesh as the gateway to and indivisible from the spiritual realm. “In knowing one another through our senses, feelings, and intelligence we come to know God” (Heyward 93-4). In other words, Arthur and Crunch connect to God through shared touch, thought and emotion.

In a rhetorical step beyond rejecting the taboo of homosexuality, Baldwin’s textual technique is in dialogue with widespread practices in Christianity that require the sacrifice of bodily desires in order to gain spiritual access to God. Sexual deprivation particularly is often equated with holiness. For example, lifelong chastity through nunnery, monkship or priesthood is valorized as the highest form of spirituality; and virginity is considered a hallowed gift to be relinquished only to one’s spouse. In fundamentalist readings of the Bible, engagement of the sex act should occur exclusively for procreation. Similarly, various scriptures connect other bodily functions or body parts to Godliness in areas such as selective food consumption, avoidance of the female body during menstruation, male circumcision as the mark of faith, the covering of women’s bodies and restriction of tattoos. Audre Lorde wrote that these extremities have “reduced the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing” (56). The ascetic lifestyle is not the height of spirituality, she argues, but is the height of self-abnegation. Baldwin’s characters resist self-abnegation by expressing their bond in the public language of sacred music. In resistance to these notions of all-things-bodily as profane

and the soul as the isolated source of sacredness, Baldwin coats his depiction of eroticized flesh with the language of the sacred to create a theological space for same-sex desire. This novel constructs a homoerotic spirituality—homospirituality—which enacts a definitive queering of the soul.

¹ The themes of homophobia and sexism are well-documented phenomena in Black Power/ Black Arts expression. Some prominent examples can be found in the work of Eldridge Cleaver, Amiri Baraka and Manning Marable. Cleaver and Baraka are cited most often for equating black homosexuality with racial betrayal and male “softness” with whiteness. Specific critiques of texts and their influence on black popular consciousness abound in the work of bell hooks, June Jordan, E. Patrick Johnson, Michele Wallace, Marlon Riggs, Essex Hemphill, Phillip Brian Harper, Barbara Smith and others.

² For details of controversy surrounding the Hughes legacy and the Hughes estate, see Hemphill and Berry.

³ In *Giovanni's Room*, David, a white American, travels to Paris believing he was in love with his female fiancé, but discovers through his tumultuous romance with a man that “the [homosexual] beast which Giovanni had awakened in [him] would never go to sleep again” (111). David is able to confront his attraction to men there in ways he could not in Brooklyn. The irony is that Paris turns out to be only a pseudo-sanctuary from homophobic aggression. Giovanni’s apartment is a metaphor for suppressed emotions and a real claustrophobic space in which the majority of their secret affair takes place. So while John may be reassured by the possibilities of Delly’s (and his own) impending freedom through travel, Hughes suggests that this is only an illusion.

⁴ An example of words carrying the weight of the supernatural can be found in Jewish culture, wherein the word “God” is never completely spelled. Also, in my mother’s Christianity, “goddam” is considered the misuse of God’s name and breaks one of the Ten Commandments.

⁵ Arthur is described as effeminate in the text.

CHAPTER 3

UNGODLY THEOLOGIES: “IN THE LIFE” AND *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Chapter Two isolated a queering of the soul in which sacred songs are used to articulate same-sex desire. The stories under examination in this chapter provide a different take on the relationship between black queers and the black church. The politics in Becky Birtha’s short story, “In the Life” move beyond a mere critique of the Christian institutions and mythologies. The politics are such that the boundaries of a ‘black church’ must be redefined. I call the spiritual concepts in Birtha’s text “ungodly” because God is neither mentioned nor implied in the story’s cosmological construct. Tied into the spirituality and politics is the title, for it invokes homosexual culture. In Black Vernacular, the phrases “in the life” and “in the family” have parallel meanings to queer. When a person identifies as being in the life, she is claiming membership in a community of sexual practices, sexual orientations and genders that exists outside the normative realm of “straight” identity. It has been a moniker for black queerness for over 20 years. Therefore, “ungodly” is asserted here to also connote its colloquial usage: indecent or immoral. “In the Life” is ungodly by normative standards because it portrays a black spirituality full of haunting lesbian desire. Within a celebration of the black butch/femme working class aesthetic, it renders the mundane domestic space as the locus of spiritual activity. Sacredness, if not God, is in the details of everyday life.

The second part of this chapter pulls readers closer into Shug Avery’s philosophies about the nature of God in *The Color Purple*. Many critics have examined the feminist and holistic qualities of Shug’s insistence that God is a genderless force, an “It” that moves through all living things. This chapter builds upon those theories by supposing that if feeling the spirit of “It” is the orgasmic bliss that Shug promises to Celie, then the gateway to emotional recovery for Celie is through her spiritual connection to her sexuality. Neither tale tethers the life of the spirit to a

particular religious sect or a centralized godhead. What unfolds in these texts is a philosophy of the spirit that foregrounds individual truths and folk knowledges that, ultimately, produce a duo of ‘ungodly theologies.’

“In the [After] Life”

There are two narrative layers that comprise the focus of this analysis. The first is a spirit-narrative of lesbian love, loss and supernatural reunion. The other is an oppositional ‘retelling’ of a confrontation at church on Easter Sunday in which the presence of a butch lesbian incites anxiety in a church space. “In the Life” contains prominent traits of the spirit-narrative genre in its narrative arc and cultural politics. Harryette Mullen delineates the tradition in “African Signs and Spirit Writing” (1996). She observes that alongside the widely celebrated tradition of secular ex-slave narratives exists a

parallel tradition of visionary literacy as a spiritual practice in which *divine inspiration*, associated with Judeo-Christian biblical tradition, is *syncretically merged with African traditions of spirit possession*... [It] may be traced to narratives and journals of spiritual awakenings and religious conversions written by freeborn and emancipated Africans and African-Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries. Each of these traditions of literacy, the sacred and secular, *has a specific relation to African and diasporic orality* as well as to the institutionalized illiteracy that resulted from the systematic exclusion of African Americans from equal educational opportunities. (626; italics added)

19th- century spirit narratives, or spiritual autobiographies, were written by people denied access to formal education and who claimed to rely solely on divine intervention for their education. They also trace their emotional-spiritual journeys through this testimony from ignorance to knowledge. This characteristic in these ex-slave narratives—that literacy as a type of liberty is gained through a spiritual experience—separates them from the likes of Frederick Douglass, who marks progress from slavery to freedom through access to books and instruction. Anthologized spirit-narratives are the stories of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner, who rely on reading the

extraliterary—"things unseen" or "signs in the heavens"—for direction (Mullen 627). The first woman-authored spirit-narrative was *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel*, published in 1836. Others include Rebecca Cox Jackson, Lee's contemporary, who kept a journal that was not published until 1981; Sojourner Truth published her *Narrative* in 1851; and the *Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith the Colored Evangelist* appeared in 1893. Spirit-writing encompasses several forms, from drawings or 'scribbles' created during possession, to the autobiographical recounting of an ecstatic spiritual engagement and its material aftermath ("an angel spoke to my heart and now I can read"). Quoting Robert Farris Thompson, Mullen defines this genre as the "arts of defense and affirmation" and "arts of black yearning" for transcendence and freedom (626). Mainly, the genre of spirit writing "concerned itself not with the legal status of the material body, but with the shackles placed on the soul" (627). So the agenda was to bear witness of liberation from the spiritual and emotional tyranny of slavery, exclusionary "white ways" of practicing religion. A large part of the cultural work the women authors perform was also to define and defend their call to preach; a defense necessitated by their outcast status as 'unnatural' women who stepped out of their station in life. In the words of Richard Douglass-Chin, the women's narratives collectively enact a "profound self-fashioning [that] demystifies and challenges the performance of black womanhood prescribed and/or described as 'natural' by hegemonic discourses" (11).

In a similar defense of 'unnatural' womanhood and a claim to spiritual virtue, Becky Birtha's narrator describes her journey from loneliness and fear (of death) to a flourishing erotic connection with a beneficent, ghostly being, whose 'call' transforms the trepidation into eagerness. This connection to the spirit-narrative is the point of departure because Birtha's text is

a work of fiction and cannot be defined as a spiritual autobiography or an act of spirit writing *per se*. Yet the content, structure and cultural politics connect it directly to the tradition outlined above.¹ “In the Life” is a neospirit-narrative, a ‘speakerly text’ in the tradition of oral testimony of spiritual encounters and ecstatic experiences but is distinguished by its emphasis on sexual rather than racial exclusion.² The political purpose is to empower and affirm a black lesbian spiritual life that is locked out of conventional religious paths.³ The opening lines testify in African American syntax,

Grace come to me in my sleep last night. I feel somebody presence, in the room with me, then I catch the scent of Posner’s Bergamot Pressing Oil, and that cocoa butter grease she use on her skin. I know she standing at the bedside, right over me, and then she call my name. ... I’m so deep asleep I have to fight my way awake, and when I do be fully woke, Grace is gone. (289)

The reader may be inclined to interpret this as simply a dream, a memory of scents and sounds long held by a lonely widow. This is not the way Jinx understands it. Jinx does not say “I saw Grace in a dream”; she recalls that Grace *stood over her* while she slept. When she does manage to wake up, she makes her way down to the garden “half expecting Gracie to be there waiting for me, but there ain’t another soul stirring tonight” (289). Pun intended. Gracie has been deceased for thirteen years. We will see that Gracie is a spirit-informant whose message “I’m just gone down to the garden awhile. I be back” (289) has multiple meanings. In fact the garden, a symbol of untamed nature and the Earth’s fecund womb, is an integral aspect of the story that must be properly situated so as to facilitate the spirit-narrative claim. The garden is a metaphor for a secular mysticity that Jinx can access without institutional interference which, as such, marks the liminal space where Jinx’s corporeality meets ethereality.

The garden aligns Jinx with an African-influenced organization of the universe that differs from Anglo-Christian perspectives. African influences, especially those philosophical and

musical, flourish in African American culture and throughout the African Diaspora in the New World.⁴ Substantial differences from Anglo-Christianity are the beliefs that spiritual powers are found throughout nature, and that the cycle of life is circular: one is a spirit before birth, then that spirit is encased in the physical body and, in death, one becomes an ancestor spirit who may be born again in the same family. Ancestors are as important as deities because there is no one source of accessible spiritual power. In Yoruba religion, for example, the supreme God is a non-gendered spiritual force that operates through common creatures as well as spirits and humans. It is believed that God appeared to the world in the form of certain animals: python, viper, earthworm, snail and woodpecker. Historian Robert Farris Thompson expounds: “God, within these animals, had, according to Yoruba belief, bestowed upon us the power-to-make-things happen, morally neutral power, power to give, and to take away, to kill and to give life, according to the purpose and the nature of its bearer. The messengers...reflect this complex of powers” (6). In Yoruba culture, there are also ancestral spirits who form “the world of the dead.” The dead interact with the living through dreams, visions, and possession. They can be invoked to bless their loved ones or an entire village (Lawal 51). Non-fiction versions of how this operates in African American mythology are recorded most famously in the work of Zora Neale Hurston and ex-slave interviews conducted during the 1930’s Federal Writers Project, which are filled with folk tales of “hants” and “mother wit.”

The religion/spirituality binary is introduced early in the story when Gladys, a neighbor, cautions Jinx, “You reaching that time of life when you might wanna be giving a little more attention to the spiritual side of things than you been doing’ (293). The woman is, of course, referring to the Christian belief in eternal damnation that she believes awaits Jinx because she is not ‘saved.’ Jinx does not argue with the neighbor, but neither is she moved by the warning. “It

ain't no use in arguing with her kind" she intimates sarcastically, [because] the Lord is on they side in every little disagreement" (293). Jinx constantly mitigates the attempts to terrorize her into conversion through these kinds of comedic interruptions. When Gladys first appears in her yard, for example, she describes her self-righteous assuredness as "grinning from ear to ear like she just spent the night with Jesus himself" (293). Without Jinx's encouragement or verbal response, Gladys continues with missionary zeal. When Gladys begins to quote Bible verses, the narration cuts off the woman's proselytizing with ellipses and allows Jinx to take discursive control. Gladys wants Jinx to think about attending church soon. "Funny thing," Jinx tells us, "I been thinking about it all day. But not the kinda thoughts she want me to think, I'm sure" (293). Jinx then steers the audience into a memory that expresses views about church that she dares not speak aloud to Gladys.

To say she takes discursive control of the narrative means that rather than recounting her conversation with Gladys verbatim, Jinx fashions a counterdiscourse that disrupts, rereads and overrides the conventional story (Henderson 358). Gladys' proselytizing attempts are a familiar convention to anyone who is not a member of an evangelical community but is in constant contact with people who are. Gladys assumes a position of superior knowledge of the workings of the universe. She quotes the Christian Bible as the ultimate authority of 'the spiritual side of things' and implies that fellowship in a church setting is the gateway to proper spirituality. Convention dictates that the sinner will hear the message and comprehend her sinfulness. However, Jinx rejects this arrogance and authority on the grounds of her experiential knowledge. Rather than positioning us, too, as listeners to the religious rhetoric full of judgments, proclamations and disapproval, we are taken on a journey into Jinx's past. Her thoughts on church launch her into a humorous memory that represents the heralded institution of the black

church as more preoccupied with superficiality than in saving souls. In doing so, according to the analysis of black women's traditions given by Mae Henderson, she challenges the material and discursive elements of oppression and, at the same time, provides a model of liberation through re-telling.⁵

Thirty five years earlier, she and Grace attended an Easter service to appease Grace's cousin who accused the couple of being "unnatural and sinful and a disgrace to her family" (294). Even then there was no real conviction in their surrender: "So Grace and me finally conspires that the way to get her off our backs is to give her what she think she want" (294). They conspire to display a cultivated butch/femme aesthetic in order to defy the regulation of gender roles imposed by religion.⁶ Jinx donned a man's suit "pressed fresh" and a "brand new narrow-brim dove gray Stetson hat" (294) for the occasion. The cultural context of this 'coming out' is a crucial element in understanding this as resistance and counterdiscourse. The Easter celebration observes the death, resurrection and ascension of the Christian messiah; it is the doctrinal centerpiece of the religion. This holiday in the African American protestant tradition is second only to the Christmas celebration in terms of its heightened ceremony. Generally, new clothes, shoes, (men and women's) hats and elaborate hairstyles are on parade. Family gatherings are common and the church building, as the site of communion, is usually overflowing with visiting/returning family and friends. It is likely that Grace and Jinx participated in Easter programs as children; yet, even if they had not, they would be aware of its grandeur. So perhaps what Grace's cousin "think she want" is to overwhelm the lesbian sinners with the message of the holiday (the suffering of the Christ, his victory over physical death, and the promise of eternal life) and the scrutinizing gaze of the larger black heteronormative community who represent 'proper' black families and 'natural' gender alignment. Accordingly,

[A]s soon as we get in the door, this kinda sedate commotion break out—all them good Christian folks whispering and nudging each other and trying to turn around and get a good look. Well, *Grace and me, we used to that*. We just finds us a nice seat in one of the empty pews near the back. But this busy buzzing keep up, even after we seated and more blended in with the crowd. And finally it come out that the point of contention ain't even the bottom half of my suit, but my new dove gray Stetson.

(294; emphasis added)

The first component of Jinx's resistance is as the storyteller, for she assumes full interpretive control of the dynamics of this scene. Her version is that the commotion is "sedate" and that eventually they are "more blended in." Still something remains amiss. They learn precisely what when an elderly man in thick glasses "is turning around and leaning way over the back of the seat, whispering to Grace in a voice plenty loud enough for [Jinx] to hear, 'you better tell your beau to remove that hat, entering in Jesus' Holy Chapel.'" Jinx implies that his old age and sight impairment contribute to a misreading of her masculinity as maleness. Jinx complies. Immediately, from behind, a woman "grumbl[es]" that Jinx has "no respect at all. Oughta know you sposed to keep your head covered, setting in the house of the Lord." This woman, on the other hand, recognizes the transgressive body before her. Both are spokespersons for the church's and the broader black community's insistence upon static, normative representations of 'men' and 'women.' The commotion then, according to Jinx, is that "the congregation can't make up its mind whether I'm supposed to wear my hat or I ain't." That is to say, they cannot easily categorize her bodily performance and, therefore, cannot decide which gender norms to enforce. From then on, the entire church service is made to be a joke on the spectators. "I couldn't hardly keep a straight face all through the service," Jinx fondly reminisces, because "every time I catch Gracie eye, one or the other of us catch a sight of my hat, we off again. I couldn't wait to get outa that place. But it was worth it. Gracie and me was entertaining the gang

with that story for weeks to come” (295). On the surface this scenario is humorous, but when we consider the facts by themselves we can see that by controlling the narrative, Jinx has turned a situation fraught with anxiety, alienation, and vulnerability into a story about the folly of Christian folk.

To resist any complicity in the labeling of her ‘lifestyle’ as sinful and shameful by Grace’s cousin, Jinx refuses to tone down her butchness. This is an act of self-revelation in a procession of normative expressions of gender. Malinda Kanner’s research into the “semiotics of butch” reveals that the butch aesthetic is always interpreted as a distinctly sexual signifier. “Her sexuality is always salient” Kanner reports, “whether the context is sexual or not” (28). With Grace at her side as the site of her lesbian desire, Jinx’s butch identity is further reinforced. Such reinforcement is not necessary though. “Irrespective of the imagination of the observer, the butch lesbian has stood out as the clear, visually declarative statement of attraction to other women,” Kanner continues, “[because] the butch woman looks like who she is...” (28). That is to say, by choosing to wear a man’s suit and hat, Jinx intentionally looks like a woman who desires women. Thus when they enter the church space together, they perform a refusal to disguise the nature of their relationship.

Jinx narrates the tale in way that empowers her subject position and protects the audience from knowing the isolation she most likely experienced. Their entry was met with a bristling that rippled through the room—people were visibly nudging each other, whispering audibly, and turning in their seats. This is the epitome of alienation for the black queer: their blackness allows them full access into the cultural ceremony yet they are shunned within the group. For, as Sally Munt reminds us, “the heterosexist gaze is intended to mark [them]: the glance is a strike” (6). They are an unwelcome spectacle, even if, as Jinx retorts to soften the blow, that they are “used

to that.” Actually, the fact that they are accustomed to being stared at further underscores their general sense of self-conscious outsider status and does not necessarily diminish the weight of the church’s gaze. “Outsider status simultaneously speaks sexuality and silences it, as the protagonist is defined, and then delegitimated” (Munt 5). To detract from the feelings of exposure they must have felt, no mention is made of the actual Easter program. The church space is the ultimate site of validation for the homophobic, heteropatriarchal standpoint. Direct “quotes” of God’s repudiation of same-sex sexuality abound in this space with critical impunity. What did the minister say? Did he take this opportunity of having visible lesbians in the audience to admonish their homosexuality? The ‘blind’ old man and ‘grumbling’ woman were attempting to chastise and shame Jinx by signifying on the placement of her hat. Were there any more direct or oblique remarks made about Jinx’s deviant performance of femaleness? We cannot know because Jinx refuses to acknowledge the oppressive weight of the gaze by zooming in on the scopic exchanges between her and Grace. Her power lies in *how* the story is told. The narrative view is pulled into a tight close-up of their loving, accepting, and protective gazes upon each other, which effectively occludes and delegitimizes the master narrative and punishing gazes. This strategy denies the audience the opportunity to identify with the oppressor. It is alienation turned inside out. This is an empowering rejection of the rhetorical tools of her oppression.

Besides her counterdiscourse, Jinx made retelling this story “to the gang” a means of empowerment for her lesbian community. The church public, with its reliance on bourgeois notions of propriety and ingrained reliance on biological gender, is cast as disorientated and unsophisticated when confronted with butch femaleness, and is situated in direct opposition to Jinx’s counterpublic of lesbians who completely identify with the ‘outsiders.’ Each act of retelling minimizes the penetrating gaze of the church until finally the judgmental crowd

disappears altogether, eclipsed by Jinx and Grace's concentration on each other. This limits the audience's ability to comprehend how harsh the situation may have been for them. Although some anxiety is revealed in the statement, "I couldn't wait to get outa that place," their vulnerability is countered with the fact that they found a way to make the whole scenario "entertaining" for weeks afterward. This is a significant resistance to shame. By retelling this story this way, as (Jinx's) testimony and (Gracie's) witnessing, it becomes legend: the heroic butch/femme lesbians laugh in the face of the menacing church folk. The church is rejected as a legitimate authority on proper gender performance.

Particularly striking about this scene is that it is told from a butch lesbian's perspective, one who cannot be fully integrated into the church setting precisely because of her butch aesthetic. This feature sets "In the Life" apart from similar fictional confrontations. Ann Allen Shockley courageously conceives of a black female minister whose religious fervor is also a magnetic lesbian energy in the novel *Say Jesus and Come To Me*. Protagonist Myrtle Black is striking, elegant, poised, and a passionate orator with a "natural facility for dramatics" (78). She is "as majestic as a black queen" with long wavy hair and "in excellent shape" for her 40 years. Her love life is quite closeted, yet she has perfected a seduction technique that begins from the moment she enters the pulpit. The story chronicles Black falling in love, having the possible revelation of that relationship threaten her ministry, and her eventual coming out to the congregation using bible verses which support her point that every creation is "all made of God and accepted by God" (280). The lesbian politics in *Say Jesus* are similar to "In the Life" because Rev. Black's status as a minister threatens the patriarchal order and she uses her platform to advance feminist causes. Africanity is also a large part of Shockley's construction of Black's appearance and her consciousness. The "foot-stomping, earsplitting, body-shaking" (7)

Pentecostal enthusiasm—long established as a surviving African trait in black American cultures—is a routine part of the services over which Black presides. During one dance of “delirious holy flight,” she imagines herself “an ancient Hausa queen performing religious rites around a fire in the African thicket” (7). Ultimately though, Rev. Black intends to change the church’s posture towards homosexuals from her place within the culture. The bible is not undermined and the church remains the central site of her spiritual engagement.

Similarly, Laurinda D. Brown has published a series of “lesbians in the church” novels in which the closet narrative is the least of the drama. Brown integrates lesbian motherhood, intra-family rape, bisexuality, and same-sex domestic violence to portray fuller lesbian lives and to engage complex networks of black female oppression. The subversion of heteropatriarchal doctrine is not a central concern; mainly, it is about the women’s search for solace within religion in spite of its decrees against them. This is not the case for Becky Bertha’s lesbian character. We will see in the next section that the church’s authority on “the spiritual side of things” is displaced by Jinx’s experiences in her domestic space.

“In the Life” constructs the church space as an unusable and/or hostile environment, which amplifies the affirmative positioning of the garden as a site of secular spirituality. As such, the garden is also the crux of the neospirit-narrative. Melvin Rahming’s study of pan-African “spirit-centered literature” is supportive here. He defines such literature as “concerned with spiritual cosmology and its organic relationship to individual and cultural circumstance” (2). Rahming aptly argues that the spirit-narrative is recognizable as such because it “holds up a mirror to human and cosmic spirit and to the spectrum of possibilities that emerges from human and cosmic interaction; [and it] testif[ies] to the authors’ fecund awareness of cosmic interrelatedness, the unbounded locus of spiritual activity (2). To that end, Birtha’s narrative

upends the notion of the church as the spiritual center for all members of the black community and, especially, rejects that notion (of centrality) for the nonnormative individual experience.

Jinx' memories of church—set squarely in the middle of the present tense narrative of spirit visitation—enable a dichotomous reading of the church/garden scenes as closed/open, inside/outside, and constricted/flourishing in terms of the queer subject's spiritual strivings. The story's main frame is Jinx's developing meditation on her own impending death and, arguably, the illustration of her crossing over. Hers is a journey towards acceptance of death's inevitability and the spiritual growth that acceptance entails. When she begins, she speaks of her failing health and emotional status as analogous to the garden. "Gracie's poor bedraggled garden is just struggling along on its last legs—kinda like me. I ain't the kind to complain about my lot, but truth to tell, I can't be down crawling around on my hands and knees no more (291). The garden was Grace's project and, in her 13-year absence, it has lost some of its liveliness. It parallels Jinx's weakening abilities to produce (energy, strength, desire, etc.) and the dwindling amount of light that falls on her lot is a metaphor for her emotional demeanor. "Can't enjoy the garden at night proper nowadays, nohow," she laments, "Since Mister Thompson's land was took over by the city and they built them housing projects...you can't even see the moon from here... Don't no moonlight come in my yard no more" (291). This mulling over of the state of her being via the garden is initiated by Grace's visitation discussed earlier; in fact, she followed Grace there. Once near the garden she is enveloped by nostalgic melancholia. This is the low point in the chronicle of her spiritual journey. We get a better sense of her foreboding when, immediately after closing the church tale, she begins to speak more candidly about her thoughts on dying. Indulging in a bit of signifying she assures us,

Far as life everlasting is concerned, I imagine I'll cross that bridge when I reach it. I don't see no reason to rush into things. I know

Old Man Death is coming after me one of these days...But I ain't about to start nothing that might make him feel welcome...It might be different for Gladys Hawkins and the rest of them church sisters, but I got a whole lot left to live for. ... When you in the life, one thing your days don't never be, and that's dull. ... All these years I been in the life, I loved it. And you know Jinx ain't about to go off with no Old *Man* without no struggle, nohow."

(295; original emphasis)

Jinx's discourse and spiritual philosophy are steeped in African American oral traditions. Her semantic style relies on proverbs and plays with shades of meaning; meanwhile, it reveals her belief, to return to Rahming's theory, in a spiritual cosmology and its organic relationship to individual and cultural circumstance. To the familiar listener, "I'll cross that bridge" is an unmistakable proverb. Yet there is another adage embedded in the line "I ain't about to start nothing." She cites a variation of the saying "don't start no mess, won't be none," alluded to here to mean that prolonged contemplation of an idea/mood can manipulate the spirit world, so that the thought/act is manifested in the physical world. This is partly what Rahming means by "human and cosmic interaction." According to this worldview, focusing on death can tip the balance of the universe towards that outcome.

Jinx uses humor to mask her uneasiness, but her fear is betrayed because the act of dying is couched in the language of abduction. Death is a leering man, awaiting his chance to pounce. This construction reflects her various states of being: emotional/spiritual unwillingness to succumb to death, her physical vulnerability as an aging woman against the strength of a man, and her steadfast self-respect for her lesbian identity. Linguist Geneva Smitherman's thorough analysis of the stylistic patterns of black language further clarifies Jinx's articulation: "The speaker's imagery and ideas center around the empirical world, the world of reality, and the contemporary Here and Now. Rarely does [s]he drift off into esoteric abstractions; [her] metaphors and illustrations are commonplace and grounded in everyday experience" (65). Jinx

contrasts her everyday experience of being happily “in the life”—an idiom used to connote non-heteronormative sexual identities and behaviors—with the “church sisters” who are, presumably, more sexually repressed and considered more gender-appropriate than she. Time and again she emphasizes her lack of remorse for being the kind of sexual being she has been/is, in resistance to the contrition expected by the church community—generally, the “lost” are presumed to harbor secret shame and/or fear of meeting an angry god in the afterlife. By loving ‘the life’ Jinx simultaneously professes her will to live and reiterates the joy and love she maintains in the lesbian community.

This resistance notwithstanding, Jinx realizes that she is not immortal. “To tell the truth, though, sometime I do get a funny feeling bout Old Death,” she confides, “Sometime I feel like he here already—been here. Waiting on me and watching me and biding his time. Paying attention when I have to stop on the landing of the stairs to catch my breath (295). This “funny feeling” continues the spiritual narrative, the description of a deeper, soulful knowing, that is both physical and eerie. The phrase “been here” is what Smitherman designates a “grammatical intensifier” in Black English, as it modifies and emphasizes the preceding statement “here already.” Not only does Jinx feel death approaching because of her age and ailments, but at times it is a lurking, familiar presence—in perpetual travel and always already arrived. Eventually, Grace will displace “Old Man Death” as a spirit-companion who will lead Jinx towards a peaceful, gleeful anticipation of her metamorphosis, and the garden will reflect as much.

Grace appears twice more and, ominously, the garden/backyard space becomes a more prominent feature with each encounter. The first instance occurs on the evening of her talk with Gladys about church. Jinx is lying in bed awake when she hears sounds coming from the kitchen downstairs. Soon the sounds move into the bedroom. “Somebody tippy-toeing real quiet,

creaking the floor boards” (295) and crossing several times between the closet and dresser. When Jinx finally opens her eyes, Gracie stands before her. This seems absolutely normal to Jinx. “Where you think you going in your house coat and bandana” Jinx teases her, “and it ain’t even light out yet. Come on get back in this bed” (295). Grace replies that she is “just going out back a spell.” They engage in a flirtatious exchange about insects and weather, and Grace promises to “be back before you even know I’m gone.” Jinx waits patiently until the sun rises in her window. Eventually she becomes impatient and goes to the window to ask Grace to come back inside, only to be “hit right in the face” with two reality checks: Grace is not there, and neither is the sunlight; it is blocked by storm clouds and the housing projects. The dreary sight and realizations trigger an “awful funny feeling” and the need to “see what’s what” (296). Again Jinx is led into the garden to fellowship with nature. She spends time in the garden picking peaches and tomatoes until it begins to rain.

The final visitation occurs the very next night and, therein, all the elements of the story meld together. Jinx has spent the evening with friends who are collecting stories from “the old days” of lesbian bar culture. The rain has poured continuously since that afternoon. When Jinx returns home, she realizes the front door is unlocked. Believing that whoever had broken in was still there, she began “scooting from room to room, snatching open closet doors and whipping back curtains...flicking on lights real sudden” (299), but nothing is out of place. She finally gives up her search but remains guarded. She echoes her earlier thoughts in that, without any visible proof, she “know somebody or something done got in here while [she] was gone. And ain’t left yet” (299). Finally, she appears: “The next thing I know Gracie waking me up. She lying next to me and kissing me all over my face. I wake up laughing, and she say, ‘I never could see no use in shaking somebody I rather be kissing.’” Descriptions of this visitation are rich with

an erotic sensuality that is absent from earlier ones. “I can feel the laughing running all through her body and mine,” she gushes, “[...and] my whole body is all a shimmer with this sweet, sweet craving” (299). Jinx’s sexual arousal is punctuated by the weather. While her “blood is racing [and] singing,” the sky is “wide open—the storm is throbbing and beating down on the roof...pressing its wet self up against the window...And I run my fingers down along her breast, underneath her own nightgown...” (299-300). The church scene is mirrored here as Jinx’s night began with her in an anxious, fearful state and leads to her vulnerability being buttressed by a scopic exchange. Grace lies beneath her, “smiling up at [her] through the dark, and her eyes is wide and shiny.” The paragraph ends with ellipses, an indication of the un-narrated but continued lovemaking.

The imagery in this scene is akin to one in evangelist Rebecca Cox Jackson’s autobiography. She records a dream of her companion, Rebecca Perot:

I saw [my friend] coming in the river, her face to the east, and she aplunging in the water every few steps, head foremost, abathing herself. She only had on her under-garment. She was pure and clean...She looked like an angel, oh how bright!”
(qtd in Kilcup 54).

As it was for Jinx, Jackson’s ‘angel’ appears with water in a dream that is a projection of her erotic desire. Jackson’s vision of Perot merges the spiritual bath of baptism with the sensual pleasure of seeing her ‘abathing’ her nearly naked body. Also like Jinx, the object of Jackson’s desire is her roommate.

The story picks up again in the post-coital moment. Jinx wakes up alone and it is still dark outside. The downpour of rain is also a metaphor for sea change, for her emotional status and attitude about death have reversed since its passing. She interprets the experience as a glimpse into the afterlife, one that she wishes to join sooner than later. Death is no longer an old

man coming to steal her soul, but an erotic intermingling of the elements, the universe wrapping her and Grace in its embrace, and baptizing them in its wetness as they share in each other. “Like a flash I’m across the room,” Jinx says, “*knowing I’m going after her*, this time” (300; italics added). The “knowing” in this scene, as with the others before, is a statement of her spiritual growth. This is her acceptance, without reluctance, of literally following Grace into the earth, into another mode of being. The sensuality remains as heightened as the urgency to find Grace in the garden. “The carpet threads is nubby and rough, flying past underneath my bare feet, and the kitchen linoleum cold and smooth...I push through the screen” (300). The garden is now a luxuriant environment, no longer the “bedraggled,” suffocated lot we encountered earlier.

The storm is moved on. That fresh air feel good on my skin through the cotton nightshirt. Smell good, too, rising up outa the wet earth, and I can see the water sparkling on the leaves of the collards and kale, twinkling in the vines on the bean poles. The moon is riding high up over Thompson’s field, spilling moonlight all over the yard and setting all them blossoms on the fence, to shining pure white. (300)

Jinx is undergoing an epiphany induced by a return to her “erotic knowledge,” as Audre Lorde defines it. According to Lorde, this is “a true knowledge,” the intense psychic and emotional energy that “heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all [our] experience[s]” (*Sister* 56, 57). Jinx’s sensual contact with Gracie caused a surge of spiritual clarity that is inextricable from her wide-eyed appreciation for the beauty of the landscape. The erotic is not a question only of what we do, Lorde theorizes, “it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (54). The sky’s orgasmic fervor has settled into a gentle caressing of the earth. The air, water, and light fondle the foliage to illustrate the various stages of life, the ways separate entities work in concert to form wholeness through a cyclical, symbiotic, nurturing relationship. Jinx’s connection to the universe calms her. As the earth sparkles, twinkles, and spills about her, Jinx

becomes serene and contemplative. “I’m just gonna stay right here on this back porch” she decides, “And hold still. And listen close. Cause I know Gracie in this garden somewhere. And she waiting for me” (300). The finality of this last “knowing” suggests that Jinx may already be dead when the story closes. As Gracie’s touch moved past the layers of Jinx’s clothing, perhaps she was removing barriers of their body/spirit separation which allowed Jinx to fully open herself to the experience of dying. When considered from that angle, the lovemaking is the act of crossing over into the afterlife. In this way the story illustrates Lorde’s “erotic knowledge” pushed to its fullest extent. Jinx’s death is a return to life, a reconnection to being “in the life” with Gracie, as opposed to letting go of it in exchange for a Christian heaven.

This is very similar to another one of Jackson’s journal entries. In the account of her conversion, Jackson testifies that she was called “by lightening.” Until then, she’d had a lifelong terror of thunderstorms. She was awakened by a storm and “walked the floor back and forth wringing [her] hands and crying under great fear,” and then she heard a voice say “this day thy soul is required of thee” (qtd in Bassard 119). After a submissive prayer, her phobia is vanished and she has a completely different relationship with the elements. Jackson recalls:

My spirit was light, my heart was filled with love for God and all mankind. And the lightening, which was a moment ago the messenger of death, was now the messenger of joy, and consolation. And I rose from my knees, ran down the stair, opened the door to let the lightning in for it was like steams of bright glory to my soul (qtd in Bassard 120)

In her study of the autobiography, Katherine Bassard assesses that “some concept of the relationships among the natural, spiritual, and physical is operating here that goes beyond Christian understanding of an individual’s ‘conversion’”(121). This is also true of the conversion scene in “In the Life.” The garden also alludes to the biblical Garden of Eden, interpreted by some as an actual heaven-on-earth before Adam and Eve’s “fall from grace.” Birtha’s tale queers

the garden mythology. In Christian teachings, it is widely interpreted that Adam and Eve were immortal until their first act of willful disobedience. Their lives were shielded by God's unlimited goodness—his grace—until they sought unsanctioned knowledge (to know what God knew). Knowing meant that they became aware of each other's bodies which, subsequently, inflamed their sexual desires. It also meant a disjoining from their intimate relationship with God because disobedience is an act of betrayal. So mankind is obligated forever more to prove its loyalty to the Creator through strict adherence to (hetero) sexual roles and rules. "In the Life" flips this scenario on its head. Grace is embodied by a lesbian woman who bestows sexual spirituality upon her lover in an act of sacred union. Sexuality is the bridge to the garden and to grace/Grace—knowledge does not send one away from blissful cosmic interaction, it pulls one in deeper. Birtha's spirit-narrative constructs a critical spirituality that aligns itself with an African American orality and an insulated (from whiteness) belief system that critiques white supremacist, Anglocentric discourses. This self-centered, nature-loving, ungodly theology presents a critique of religion similar to the one put forward in the ministry of Alice Walker's bisexual character, Shug.

God is (a) Pussy: Homoerotic and Masturbatory Spirituality in *The Color Purple*

Preach the blues, sing them blues, they certainly sound good to me
Moan them blues, holler them blues, let me convert your soul

—Bessie Smith, "Preachin' the Blues"

Shug Avery is many things to many people in the novel *The Color Purple*. To Albert, she is the love of his life, an unfinished love story. To the men and women who are threatened by her sexual independence, Shug is a 'nasty' woman, a whore. For the jook-joint crowd, she is a sexy songstress, beloved for her soul stirring renditions of popular blues ballads. Most intriguing is her role in Celie's life as a spiritual guide, defined here as blueswoman evangelist. The moniker

“blueswoman evangelist” unifies the multi-layered, intersectional relationships between Shug’s private life, the public ‘ministry’ of the Blues music she performs, and her influence as Celie’s spiritual guide. Shug’s ways of seeing and being in the world—blueswoman and evangelist—is a dialectics: they form and inform the content of the other. Shug embodies a blues consciousness that liberates her from the strictures of the white normative, hetero supremacist, patriarchal, and sexually repressed teachings of Christianity. To fully describe the blues consciousness, we turn to Angela Davis’ *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.

Davis reminds us that there were three areas of African American life that were transformed dramatically in the post-Emancipation experience: the possibilities for travel, individual education and the freedom to choose sexual partners. Because of these profound changes in the life of the black masses, travel and sexuality are ubiquitous themes in Blues lyrics. So blues consciousness was shaped by and gave expression to this social transformation. Furthermore, because the Blues is an aesthetic of the psycho-emotional life and—composed of moans, hollers and a churchy tone—it is considered the secular counterpoint to spirituals. According to this logic, if the Spiritual is “God’s music,” then Classic Blues, its musical twin, belongs to the Devil. In women’s Blues particularly, the representations of love and sexuality “often blatantly contradicted mainstream ideological assumptions regarding women and being in love” (Davis 8-11). The lyrics speak of women’s frustration with cheating men, the loneliness and jealousy of being the other woman, good and bad lovers, domestic violence, homosexuality, suicide, violent revenge, drunkenness, incarceration and poverty. They often speak of romantic love but not in the idealized terms of mainstream love songs. Blues women represent unchaste, unholy, ‘nasty’ womanhood.

Walker situates Shug in the blues tradition by linking her to Bessie Smith, the first real superstar in African American popular culture. “First Shug sing a song by somebody name Bessie Smith,” Celie writes, “She say Bessie somebody she know. Old friend” (72). The invocation of Smith’s legacy is key to understanding Shug’s position among the other women in the story. Smith is known in folklore for her indiscreet romances with women and men, her high tolerance for alcohol and her fearless fighting attitude. These unwomanly characteristics in no way diminished her status among working-class African Americans. As Richard Wright poetically illustrates, she was held in highest regard by the folk:

Bessie Smith might have been a ‘Blues queen’ to the society at large, but within the tighter Negro community where the Blues were a total way of life, and major expression of an attitude toward life, she was a priestess, a celebrant who affirmed the values of the group and man’s ability to deal with chaos. (qtd in Crockett 321).

It seems that Smith’s appeal is the audience’s ability to connect to the cultural values she conveys in her songs. According to Davis “the attitudes of the female subjects in the songs Smith sang encouraged black women to be as strong and independent as they were loving and caring (143). These secular spirituals touched the emotions of its audience and expressed sentiments and situations that were often denounced by the church.

Consistent with Bessie Smith’s blueswoman lifestyle, Shug revels in the street life of a traveling musician. Although she does marry once and cohabitates with Celie for years, Shug maintains her autonomy and rejects idealized notions of motherhood. “My kids with they grandma...” Shug confesses, “She could stand the kids, I had to go” (50). This stance places her outside of normative white femininity and beyond the pathologized Strong Black Woman who may have a profession, but whose identity is absorbed into her work and whose passions are gratified by motherhood and service. Shug is unwomanly because, like successful men, she does

not allow her parental status to hinder her pursuit of the goals that satisfy her need for self-expression and individual identity. The community's moral leader, the church pastor, holds Shug up as the antithesis of Christian womanhood. Celie recounts that

Even the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery... He don't call no name, but he don't have to. Everybody know who he mean. He talk bout a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner. (44)

His diatribe against Shug hits upon every aspect of her gender transgressions. Her revealing clothes and multiple partners make her a 'slut.' Her careless attitude toward the rules of 'proper' (hetero) sexuality and femininity marks her as animalistic. Not only are tobacco and alcohol indulgence prohibited, they are sinful in the eyes of the religious community. Yet there is yet another facet of Shug's un-womanliness that Davis highlights in *Blues Legacies*. Women like Bessie Smith and—by extension, Shug—were secular ministers who "preached the blues" and therefore, represented a direct competition and contestation to the moral authority of the church. Davis put this tension in historical context:

The most pervasive opposition to the blues, however, was grounded in the religious practices of the historical community responsible for the production of the blues in the first place [impoverished African Americans]. The blues were part of a cultural continuum that disputed the binary constructions associated with Christianity. In this sense, they blatantly defied the Christian imperative to relegate sexual conduct to the realm of sin. ... But precisely because they offer enlightenment on love and sexuality, *blues singers often have been treated as secular counterparts to Christian ministers, recognized by their constituencies as no less important authorities in their respective realms.* However, from the vantage point of devout Christians, blues singers are unmitigated sinners and the creativity they demonstrate and the worldview they advocate are in flagrant defiance of the community's prevailing religious beliefs. (123-24; my emphasis)

The “religious practices of the historical community” are the African the belief systems and traditions in which songs matter-of-factly represent every aspect of life. In the United States, European traditions relocated black religious expression into the church which, effectively, created a specious separation between sacred and secular expressions in black life. Christianity hierarchizes sexualities and partitions sexual activities into the blessed/damned. The preacher’s harangue against women like Shug is representative of mainstream culture’s restrictions on female pleasure. In Blues doctrine, sexual relationships are not separated into right/wrong or good/bad—lovers are. As Wright describes it above, Blues reflects back to people, nonjudgmentally, their assorted painful and pleasurable realities, while Christianity seeks to tame and tidy up certain sexualities, while completely demonizing others. If blues promotes any worldview, it is the blurred line between pleasure and pain.

The preacher’s sermon reflects a Christian code of morality which privileges spiritual pursuits over the body’s desires. Shug, the symbol of blues discourse, promotes another ranking system altogether. In their deeply emotional and erotic relationship, Shug encourages Celie to envision God as part of herself and persuades her to revitalize her spirit through fellowship with nature. In Shug’s theology the church space is an ancillary variable instead of a requisite for communication with God. “Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me,” Shug reasons, “And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God” (193). As her lover, Shug facilitates Celie’s sexual self-discovery and, as her evangelist, she endows Celie with a pleasure-based, corporeal theology. A woman in touch with her sexuality, according to Shug, is a woman intimate with God.

Singing and dancing and fuckin’: The issue of pleasure is at the base of the sacred/secular debate and of Shug’s construction of the essence of God. The difference, as Shug

bluntly states, is that the Blues performance puts “singing and dancing and fucking together. That’s the reason they call what us sing the devil’s music. Devils love to fuck” (115). In her assertion that devils “fuck,” she connotes the wildness of the jook-joint atmosphere, and those who unabashedly bask in sexual energy are the “loose” or “nasty” women who frequent them—women who represent unfettered and, therefore, reckless expressions of desire and gratification. She highlights the rhetorical lines drawn in mainstream Christian cultures between the sensual pleasure one can experience while dancing and singing in church, and the pleasures associated with singing and dancing in a dimly lit, sexually-charged club atmosphere.

Shug’s statement reveals how sexual energy is veiled or denied in the church. “Singing and dancing and fucking” revises the church perspective in which singing and dancing and *praising/praying* go together. Yet, if one could observe the scenes of communal jubilation side-by-side, the jook-joint atmosphere can mirror the emotionalism and physical release of church. The wildness is similar in that flamboyantly dressed women in heavy make-up (looking their ‘Sunday best’) are inclined to flail about uncontrollably, as they shout and dance in the name of the Lord. Some people fall to the floor in a trance-like state and speak in “tongues.” Others flinch spasmodically, apparently in the grip of the Holy Spirit, until they are physically spent. In many churches, these scenes can begin during the “praise and worship” portion of the program in which the locus of activity is the music. Singing leads to dancing, which leads to the ecstasy of being ‘touched’ by God, a spiritual submission to the ‘bridegroom’ made manifest on the body.⁷ This does not seem to be a very far stretch from putting “dancing and singing and fucking together.” The difference lies in the discourse—erotic energy in church is not recognized as such, while the spirituality of sexual energy is presumed in the Blues. Angels and devils are both spiritual beings, after all.

The preacher and the blueswoman evangelist, with their conflicting messages, are also connected by their shared audience. That is why Celie can say with confidence that without the preacher mentioning Shug's return to town, "everybody know who he mean." This is because secular and religious music cultures are in constant dialogue. For example, the influence of blues stars Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith's performance styles turn up time and again in the memoirs and biographies of gospel-turned-secular artists. Notably, even Mahalia Jackson, who famously refused to perform jazz or blues on the grounds of her Christian convictions, cites Ma Rainey as an irresistible "indecency" she secretly indulged in when she could (*Mahalia Jackson*). It is from this context that Shug's theological perspective is formulated. Shug embodies a blues consciousness which enables her to locate a sacred plane within corporeal pleasure.

Celie's religious upbringing has taught her to think of the world as a temporary but inevitable state of suffering, and meeting God is something to look forward to in the everlasting afterlife. "This life be over soon" she consoles herself, but "heaven last all ways" (42). Shug insists on the sacredness the Here and Now and God's presence in the physical world:

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe, God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It. (195)

This pronouncement brings Heaven down from the skies into Celie's immediate surroundings and her eternity. Celie's past, present and future potential are all in the realm of the godly. If God is everything, then God is no longer The Father in Heaven, but a force, an energy that moves through and around her. This idea is expounded upon in *The Temple of My Familiar*, the sequel to *Color Purple*, where Shug publishes her version of the Beatitudes (also known as Jesus'

“sermon on the mount” in *Matthew* 5). In *The Gospel According To Shug*, she teaches: “Helped are those who *love the entire cosmos* rather than their own tiny country, city, or farm, for to them they will be shown *the unbroken web of life* and the meaning of infinity (*Temple* 288; emphasis added). So life, death and love are cyclical, self-perpetuating and non-hierarchical. If Celie can imagine a god that is not spatially above her or separate from her, she can rely on her spiritual power to become an agent of change in her own life. This type of intervention is exemplified when Celie describes the God of her imagination as “tall and graybearded and white,” and Shug insists that she must “git man off [her] eyeball before [she] can see anything a’tall” (*CP* 197). She gives Celie permission to abandon that image for a more inclusive and affirming one. In this spiritual model God is all bodies and, simultaneously, disembodied and inanimate; prayers can be directed toward rocks, trees and flowers. This gesture not only de-genders God, it releases Celie from the doctrinal pressures to please God through ritualized acts like attending church and finding ‘salvation.’ In effect, God is as present as one’s awareness of It. God is because she is. Shug’s gospel, derived from her blues consciousness, the sin/salvation and body/soul binaries do not exist. The absence of Christianity’s overarching narratives of restraint and guilt creates space for the exploration, affirmation even, of Celie’s burgeoning lesbian identity.

Shug also reconfigures the Creator as an It. In doing so, she discursively evaporates the patriarchal justification for women’s bodies and loyalties to always be under control of men, whether those men are their husbands, fathers, or the masculine Holy Trinity. “Men and their religions have tended to make love for anything and anybody other than themselves and their Gods an objectionable thing, a shame” Walker writes elsewhere, “But that is not the message of Nature, the Universe, the Earth or of the unindoctrinated Human Heart, where everything is profusion, chaos, multiplicity, but also creativity, containment and care” (*Same River Twice* 171-

2). It is Walker's interpretation of the "message of Nature [and] the Universe" that Shug brings to Celie in a way that equates sexual ecstasy with spiritual ecstasy, a message that includes homoerotic and masturbatory experiences.

God is (a) Pussy: Shug testifies that when she found It, it was on a day when she "was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, [and] it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything..." (195). It is a testimony of emotional development. The confession of being a "motherless child" underscores Shug's state of disconnection: she is "motherless" metaphorically because of her 'nasty woman' outsider status in the community. That she was "sitting quiet" suggests a meditative or prayerful state during which her connection to and clearer understanding of her inextricable link to the Universe descended upon her. Shug laughed, cried, and "run all around the house" (196), behavior that evokes the religious ecstatic moment described above, in which a person 'catches the spirit' and runs down aisles, shouts, or burst into 'tongues.'

Next, Shug echoes her "singing and dancing and fucking" association by insisting that the spiritual breakthrough (to find It inside and around oneself) feels "sort of like *you know what...* [as she is] grinning and rubbing high up on [Celie's] thigh" (196 my emphasis). For Celie, this description enables a particularly lesbian interpretation of god's presence. This becomes clear when one considers *where* Shug's hand presumably points to as she caresses the thigh, and, equally important, *how* Celie knows what the 'what' is. To be clear, this is not an argument for a reading of Shug as a lesbian character; however, Shug's analogy of spiritual ecstasy and orgasm introduces the notion of the clitoral orgasm—pleasure that emanates from the pussy—as consecrated, transcendent pleasure. This notion elevates their lesbian sex into the realm of worship.

The use of the vernacular for female genitalia, “pussy,” is a resistance tactic on two political fronts. First, it is consistent with the language of the novel, and to obscure Celie’s lower class vernacular would support a politics of respectability which the novel deliberately operates against.⁸ Second, Alice Walker imagines Shug as an “outlaw, renegade, rebel, and pagan; [with a] zest in loving both men and women” (*Same River* 35). The outlaw’s influence on her surrounding company is inherently transgressive and controversial. While “pussy” may make some readers uncomfortable because of its misogynist connotations, its usage here reflects multiple, crisscrossing features of femaleness: its soft ,firm, protruding, vulnerable, sensitivity and, to borrow Audre Lorde’s characterization, the sliding, folded, tender and deep nature of it. As demonstrated, it is Shug’s renegade nature, her willingness to love women in a woman-hating culture, which destabilizes or fully reconfigures many masculinist representations of the world. It is in that spirit that pussy is asserted here.

To return to the task of unpacking “you know what,” we examine an earlier scene in which Shug introduces Celie to the prospect of clitoral orgasm:

Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do *you know what* with somebody. It git hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lots of sucking go on, here and there, she say. Lot of finger and tongue work. (77)

This conversation marks the beginning of Celie’s journey into claiming her body for her own sexual pleasure. The homoerotic connection is already established by this point in the friendship. Celie documents a few occasions upon which her body responds to Shug’s beauty or scent, consistently couching her language in religious terminology. When she bathes Shug, where she “thought [she] had turned into a man” (49). “[When] I wash her body,” she recalls, “it feel like I’m praying. My hands tremble and my breath short” (49). Also, she becomes aroused while

watching Shug perform. “All the men got they eyes glued to Shug’s bosom” Celie observes, “I got my eyes glued there too. I feel my nipples harden under my dress. My little button sort of perk up too. Shug, I say to her in my mind, Girl, you looks like a real good time, the Good Lord knows you do” (81). With Shug’s aid, Celie has had a glimpse of what a “real good time” can look like between women and, after their first night together, she says that sleeping with Shug “feel like Heaven” (114).

Significantly, there is lesbian potential in Shug’s description of orgasm. The omission of gendered pronouns in this definition creates imaginary space for Celie to insert Shug as the “somebody” to do the “finger and tongue work” in her pussy. Yet, Celie will be the first to actually touch herself there. Later that night, Celie tearfully masturbates while listening to Shug and Albert make love (79). The first time the women actually engage in sex, the details are left out. Celie simply says they kiss and touch each other. So, for Celie, the only logical reference to “you know what” when Shug rubs her thigh is the “little button” at the tip of Shug’s fingers. In this way Shug constructs a sexualized spirituality in which the fire of the Holy Ghost melts the “little button” during orgasm. For Celie, the ecstasy of knowing God can be found through her familiarity with her pussy.

Finally, Shug’s sermon about God and pleasure elevates lesbian sex into the realm of praise and worship. In light of their lesbian relationship, Shug’s assertion that “you have to git man off your eyeball to see anything a’tall” takes on dual meanings. On one level, she is suggesting to Celie that her feelings of alienation and abandonment by God are related to her views of God as an anthropomorphic, white paternal figure. Because of the brutal racism she’s witnessed and her traumatic experiences with male domination, this is a god with whom Celie cannot truly identify. Shug’s blues ministry molds the universe to include her black, female and

her sexual selves in order to find peace in it. But this introspective “getting man off the eyeball” doctrine could also be perceived as reclaiming female sexuality from the male gaze. “It is both the breaking of taboo and the rejection of a compulsory [heterosexual] way of life. It is an attack on male right of access to women, a form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance” (Rich 239). Once Celie understands her life and her body as always already blessed by God, when she can disarticulate her sexuality from her past with men, she is free to settle into a spirituality that allows her to “praise god by liking what [she] likes.” Furthermore, by touching Celie’s thigh during this sermon, Shug invokes the sexual pleasure Celie associates with those hands and claims that pleasure as an act of thanksgiving and praise to the holy giver. This is how Shug’s blues ministry constructs praise and worship as indulging in those things that one finds delightful. This is a stark contradiction to the Christian dictum to “deny yourself” in exchange for sanctification and happiness in the afterlife.⁹ The narrative shatters the ideological barriers between nonnormative sexuality and spirituality and struggles to undo antagonisms between bodily pleasure and spiritual strivings. Shug’s blueswoman evangelism liberates black female sexuality through resistance to heteropatriarchy, it reconciles the body’s desires to the soul’s needs, and it expands the spiritual possibilities of all who seek God within themselves.

The ungodly theologies of “In the Life” and *The Color Purple* construct black queer liberation as the restoration of spiritual possibilities to the queer subject. Walker and Birtha advance a vision of human connection to the divine that reflects spiritual transformation as occurring outside of organized religion. Individual truths and folk knowledges are privileged over heteropatriarchal Christianity in a philosophical direction that moves farther away from the tradition within which the “sanctified sissies” in Chapter Two work. Chapter Four considers

matters of the soul from a different angle. It situates black queerness on the other side of mortality.

NOTES

¹ Mullen makes a similar rhetorical move by listing contemporary writers Toni Cade Bambara, Octavia Butler and Ntozake Shange and many others as part of the extensive genealogy of writers and artists “in whose works and texts it is possible to read ‘the persistence of vision’ (639). Douglass-Chin devotes two chapters to the “daughters” of spiritual autobiography: Toni Morrison, Zora Neal Hurston and others.

² Henry Louis Gates coined this term in *The Signifying Monkey* to mean a representation of the speaking black voice. The sentence structures, idiom, and sometimes spelling combine to ‘talk’ to the reader in ways that capture the sound of a linguistic community.

³ This is not to say that lesbians are not allowed to participate in traditional church communities. Generally, they may do so as long as they deny, repress, or profess to be ‘healed’ of lesbian desires.

⁴ For further reading: *Slave Culture* by Sterling Stuckey, *Flash of the Spirit* by Robert Farris Thompson and *Mooring & Metaphors* by Karla Holloway.

⁵ In her analysis of *Dessa Rose*, Henderson writes, “In flight then, Dessa challenges the material and discursive elements of her oppression and, at the same time, provides a model for writing as struggle” (359). Birtha’s narrator goes beyond struggling in her struggle; she finds a space to claim liberation from the dominant homophobic narrative.

⁶ Grace’s femme qualities are established in earlier depictions of her night-on-the-town wear: silk dresses, fur stole, pearl necklace, long gloves, etc.

⁷ The imagery and symbolism of marriage is applied to Christ and his followers. Christ, the Bridegroom, has chosen the church to be His bride (Ephesians 5:25). Her responsibility is to be faithful to Him (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:24). At the Second Coming of Christ, the church will be united with the Bridegroom, the official ceremony will take place (Revelation 19:7).

⁸ “Politics of respectability” are black middle-class values in which emphasis is placed on manners and morality deployed to counter negative racial and lower-class stereotypes.

⁹ Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23

CHAPTER 4

HOMOEROTICS OF TALK IN *THE GILDA STORIES*

The transition from slave to free woman did not liberate the black heroine or the black woman from the political and ideological limits imposed on her sexuality.

—Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*

The trope of queering the soul has been represented in earlier chapters as the duplicitous use of sacred music and as the articulation of a holistic theology. Those examples contain figurations of homosexual desire in religious rituals and are expressions of inclusive spirituality. Queering is enacted by characters whose (homo)sexual lives are guided by their spiritual beliefs or whose homoerotic ecstasy is expressed through religious rhetoric. As cultural products, those narratives reflect some of the ways African Americans locate divinity in the self without necessarily excising Africanness or suffocating their physical needs in the name of a Christian God. Now the conversation turns to notions of life *in* the afterlife and portrayals of immortality. How do writers imagine the life of the soul after it has left the body? Does the soul maintain a queer essence as is suggested in Becky Birtha's short story? How does sexuality play a role in the ancestor's function as spirit-guide? How are concepts of community and culture integrated into the discourse of immortality? These questions are taken up in this chapter through an examination of the interventions Jewelle Gomez makes in her vampire novel *The Gilda Stories*. Gomez's plot, narrative technique, and cosmological framework construct a world in which community, sexual expression and spirit are guideposts in the queer character's quest for wholeness.

As it was in the 19th-century when black women began to shift from autobiographical forms to employ the novel “as a form of cultural and political intervention in the struggle for black liberation from oppression” (Carby 61), Gomez participates in the white male-dominated field of vampire fiction in order to invent a black lesbian heroine who transcends popular

ideologies. Vampire fiction, like other forms of fantasy and surrealism, allows a writer a sense of wish fulfillment. “For Black lesbians, the wishes are larger and richer than most people have been able to imagine,” Gomez insists, and “In our speculation about the future[,] the vision of the struggle is often quite brutal, but the vision of the triumph is equally fantastic” (“Speculative Fiction and Black Lesbians” 955). Struggle, triumph, desire, fulfillment, sanctuary and threat are circulating themes that encompass Gomez’s vision in *Gilda Stories*. In the struggle against oppression, she writes the black lesbian a/into community. It is a vision of community that privileges womanhood and female bonding, and in which myth, storytelling and memory all function as history. According to Lynda Hall, the novel interrogates patriarchal discourses that presume a woman always forms her identity in relation to men.

The dominant patriarchal discourses—the bible (“she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man”), Freud (“penis envy”), Lacan (“Name-of-the-Father”), and Lévi-Strauss (“exchange of women between men”—are interrogated here by the predominance of women’s names, bodies, and voices, and by women’s active agency in creating “family” and in determining their own future. (396)

Indeed, this novel is antiracist feminist discourse of kinship, autonomy, and eros. It speaks a desire for an egalitarian society in which love, loyalty, and reverence for life are paramount. These virtues are also emphasized in depictions of the erotic bond between black women and other people of color. Gilda, the protagonist, travels through erotic relationships with three women and a man in which her conversational exchanges critique the selfishness and emotional manipulation that can occur in relationships. To extend the discussion of queering the soul, this analysis will focus on the ways these themes interact with spirituality and lesbian desire in a “homoerotics of talk.” The chapter is broken into three parts. The first section presents a conceptual framework for a discussion of black female homoerotics as liberational discourse; in

the second section, three major interpersonal relationships examined for the ways the plot constructs black lesbian desire through conversation; and the concluding section summarizes how homoerotics is a queering of the soul.

Black female homoerotics: The concept of a black female homoerotics is guided by two theoretical principles. The first is Audre Lorde's description of the erotic as an inherently political force that is the combination of emotional, intuitive, experiential, and intellectual knowledges. Lorde's views in the essay, "Uses of the Erotic," articulate and enact her lesbian feminist, warrior-poet politics. She argues that what women know/believe on their deepest levels of being is erotic knowledge, and is what compels them toward activism.

The very word erotic comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce [sic] of women; [I speak] of that creative energy empowered....
(Lorde 55)

This definition identifies a specifically female power to love herself to the point of acting with passionate agency on her own behalf. This is not to say that Lorde believes that only women can obtain and wield this type of power. Rather, she speaks from a feminist perspective that focuses on the sensuously intimate relationships that develop between women as a way to re-conceptualize those relationships as something beyond sexual indulgence. Lorde urges readers to consider how a homoerotic bond is also a useable source of political power. She advocates for an understanding of same-sex desire as foundational in feminist community building and in the formation of political alliances against oppression. Her articulation of erotic bonding challenges the dominant patriarchal narrative in which female sexual energy is benign when shared with other women; and is a source of shame when wielded too confidently; or, if acknowledged as power, is restricted to sexual situations; and is controlled through compulsive heterosexuality so

as to funnel it solely toward the pleasure of men.¹ By calling it “lifeforce,” she makes a case for the erotic as synonymous with spirit. In other parts of the essay Lorde’s discourse further disintegrates traditional divisions between the intellectual/emotional/sexual spheres and seeks to dislodge the erotic from the realm of the pornographic. The pornographic realm, Lorde maintains, emphasizes physical “sensation without feeling” (54) to the extent that it “represents the suppression of true feeling” (54) and is a “plasticized,” exploitative substitute. So that in a pornographic experience a woman can “feel” yet remain detached from her emotions, while the erotic is the lifeblood of emotion. It is spiritual intensity.

To complete her endorsement of homoerotic energy, Lorde delineates a variety of the energy’s uses and effects. When a woman allows herself to fully explore the erotic in her life, it functions in multiple ways: a bridge to “sharing deeply any pursuit with another person” (56); “a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens...experience” (57); a “deep and irreplaceable knowledge of [her] capacity for joy”; and a reason to “stop being satisfied with suffering and self-negation” (58). Her list of the uses of the erotic describes nothing less than soul-deep, consciousness-raising potential. In effect, she extends the basic feminist premise ‘the personal is political’ to include: ‘and the political is spiritual.’ So Lorde theorizes a politicized spirituality, a woman’s “creative energy empowered” that is connected to, driven, and enhanced by her knowledge of what brings her pleasure. One’s capacity for joy is, according to Lorde, the “true [self] knowledge,” a kaleidoscopic lens through which a woman can colorfully interpret her world and her role in it. In one felled swoop, she proposes a significant integration of female political, spiritual, and sexual selfhood that recognizes the possibilities wrought by pleasure, desire, and creativity in liberational work. This supposition leads to the second guiding theoretical principle of this chapter: Karla Kaplan’s “erotics of talk.”

In *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms*, Karla Kaplan builds upon Lorde's foundation as she introduces the trope "erotics of talk," a feminist narrative technique that ties pleasure, desire and liberational work together in fiction writing. One aspect of the erotics of talk is how a protagonist's imagining of and/or search for her ideal lover is also an allegory for her "finding, imagining, or projecting ideal listeners" (Kaplan 18). The ideal listener is the "sine qua non of [the protagonist's] sexual and individual desire" (18) because it is a listener who will assume the speaker is an equal, will be a fully engaged hearer and, therefore, appropriately responsive. The fictional conversation is ideal in that it contains a level of reciprocity, fairness, and justice that is lacking in the character's life and it directs the reader's attention, Kaplan argues, to what may be missing from the author's real life cultural conversations. The protagonist's talk with individuals in the narrative also speaks to power structures, social movements and other texts.

Kaplan demonstrates how Zora Neale Hurston highlights black female marginality and a desire for equity through her character, Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie's ideal listener is Pheoby, her "kissin'-friend" who, when Janie is "longing" for self-revelation, is "eager to *feel and do through Janie*" (Hurston 6, 7 emphasis added). Within the dynamic of their conversation, Janie's longing to represent her reality is met with her listener's equally intense eagerness to know the sights and sounds of the journey, to "feel and do" it in her imagination. Thus the kissing metaphor is not only a description of a deeply intimate relationship, but it also signifies their mutual cultural, gender, and emotional literacy. With Pheoby, Janie can feel the full capacity of conversational joy because there is no cultural or intellectual gap to overcome; they live in the same symbolic universe.

The main framing of the novel is Janie's sharing with Pheoby her journey wherein she struggled for self-determination and self-expression. Theirs is a conversation about failed conversations. According to Kaplan, it is a key political strategy that Phoeby is the single listener with whom Janie is satisfied because it highlights Janie' dissatisfaction with other conversations. "Insofar as that imagined ideal listener is both gendered and limited (either to one person or one instance of fulfilling exchange), finding one's ideal listener/lover works to criticize the cultural conversation these texts both emulate and disrupt" (Kaplan 18). In other words, Hurston's characters speak her racial, gender, or sexual desires into the cultural fissures so as to demonstrate that the fissures exist and, perhaps, to impact the cultural conversation through consciousness-raising.

From this point in Kaplan's analysis, our values and concerns as critics diverge. Kaplan is "discomfort[ed]" (119) by the implication in Hurston's text that Janie's ideal listener "is not someone who masters discursive fairness or learns the skills necessary to recognize the concrete particularity of someone who is different" (119) but rather is someone "practically interchangeable" (119) with herself. Ultimately, Hurston's ideal listener/lover/reader is southern, rural, black and female. Kaplan complains at length:

But remembering that Hurston allegorizes such a reader as not only Black, female, from the same background as Janie and with similar experiences, but also as operating from a position of sympathy[,] ... sensuality and erotic openness to Janie[,] ... generosity and nurturance[,]... protectiveness... and, finally discursive passivity (the willingness to remain a listener, not to demand an exchange of places, not to insist on telling her own story as well), *we must conclude that her depiction is an exaggerated idealization*, just as all objects of romantic desire and fantasy are exaggerated and idealized. (118; my emphasis)

Curiously, Kaplan attempts to tone down her rejection of Hurston's desire by describing it as equally "exaggerated and idealized" as any other romantic fantasy. The repetition of the phrase

only makes her rejection all the more obvious. If idealization is inherently exaggerated, for Kaplan to deem this particular figuration as redundantly so, reveals that as a scholar she may be able to “recognize the concrete particularity” of black women, but is limited in her appreciation that two black women who share the same socio-economic, geographic and linguistic background may find in each other a mother-lover bond in which they also may also alternate between dominant/subordinate erotic roles. It is not an uncommon ‘other as self’ model in African American women’s literature. Kevin Quashie has called this identification a “girlfriend selfhood.” The girlfriend is the “other someone who makes it possible for a black female subject to bring more of herself into consideration” (Quashie 18) and “the other who is so much the self that the boundaries between the two become fluid and sometimes collapse” (Quashie 19). Phoeby’s ‘interchangeability’ is the reflection of self that validates Janie’s formulations about southern, rural, erotic womanhood.

Perhaps for Kaplan, Hurston’s girlfriend politics are negatively “gendered and limited” whereas, from a queer standpoint, those politics construct a liberated homoerotic space. It is my supposition that while the traditional husband/wife dynamic *within* Janie’s meta-narrative leaves much to be desired for Janie, the pleasure of the oral/aural consummation of the main frame with Phoeby leaves both women satiated. This is evidenced by the following narration: “So Ah’m back home agin and Ah’m satisfied tuh be heah” (182), Janie says in conclusion, and Pheoby “breathed out heavily, ‘Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie’” (182). Their relationship is the homespace in which they both experience spiritual intensity and freedom, and are both lover and the beloved.

In this oblique manner *Erotics of Talk* connects to “Uses of the Erotic” since it reveals how Hurston—in highly sensual language—pinpoints her own desire for black female

readership/companionship, and identifies the same-sex bond as a space of egalitarianism and multi-layered gratification. For it is the profound familiarity between the women that forges the erotic bond. Hence, all of the other conversations in the novel are inferior when held to the standard of this one. It is, as Lorde surmises, the acquisition of erotic knowledge that creates such a standard because it changes one's expectations of the height and depth of all "feeling and doing":

For the erotic is not a question only a question of what we do; it is a question of *how acutely can fully we can feel* in the doing. Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness. (Lorde 55, my emphasis)

Lorde's philosophy intersects with Kaplan's feminist narrative theory in women's novels that illustrate the desire for female listener/lovers. This intersection of the political erotic and discursive erotic encoding can be more precisely identified as a "homoerotics of talk."

Kaplan provides a model for understanding the kinds of conversation Jewelle Gomez imagines she is having with her readers. What does it mean for a woman's creative work to foreground her *desire to be desired* by a black female reader? What cultural conversations does Gomez reconstruct and critique in a novel that spans 150 years in the life of an African American vampire? What are the terms by which she formulates the ideal listener/lover? What images does her desire conjure? "If desire is shaped differently according to gender and sexual orientation, then it may differ in respect to other criteria as well. As the terms multiply, so do the operations of desire" (Roof qtd in Kaplan 17). It is the various "operations of desire" that will drive this analysis. I will argue that Gomez's *Gilda Stories* queers the soul through a black female "homoerotics of talk" and an intense focus on the spiritual, infinite nature of that desire.

Reciprocity as spiritual ideology: Traditionally, the vampire character is representative of middle to upper class status. In a capitalist system they are the corrupt but admired persona. Their physical prowess is a metaphor for social and economic power. The powerful social position of the vampire, according to Judith Johnson, is no accident. “It tells us that part of the inherent metaphorical material in society’s dreams of vampire narratives is social, and involves questions of social justice, power, exploitation, race and class, as well as the more obvious gender conflict” (Johnson 75). Gomez takes up all of these issues and asserts an ethical solution to the problem of power in a hierarchized society: reciprocity. This is the core thread and major spiritual philosophy at work in the text.

My working definition of spirituality comes from Judylyn Ryan’s study, *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women’s Film and Literature*: “consciousness, ethos, lifestyle, and discourse that privileges spirit as a primary attribute of self, and that [which] defines and determines health and well-being” (23). While the vampire species as an archetype is always soul-less, Gomez infuses her undead characters with intuitive, emotional, and psychic abilities—a spiritual foundation—by which they are held to a moral code, or a politics of exchange. They insist that the taking of blood from a human need not be a murderous or purely selfish act. It is an ethical form of power. “As you take from [humans] you must reach inside,” Gilda is told, “feel what they are needing, not what you are hungering for” (50). This model of exchange that attends to the health and well being of both parties is a lesson in friendship, love, and how power relations should be negotiated. Gilda is taught to be conscious of energy/life-force/spirit and to always give in the measured act of taking. A feeding should “leave [the humans] with something new and fresh, something wanted. Let their joy fill you. This is the only way to share and not to rob. It will also keep you on your guard so you don’t drain life away” (50). To “share and not rob” is

a core value and spiritual principle that underlies all major relationships in the novel. This desire for a more ethical power relation is a basic one to understand, especially in the context of the black people's experiences in the US. The spiritual principle takes on different shapes in each of the conversations or (homo)erotics of talk between Gilda and other characters. The first few relationships identify those which lack the qualities of the ideal listener/lover. By the end, we find that Gomez/Gilda's desire do not differ much from that of Hurston/Janie.

How to love a revolutionary: Community building and kinship networks are intrinsic to Gilda's spiritual life. Her relationship with Bird, a fellow vampire and member of the displaced Lakota tribe, is not in the girlfriend aesthetic, yet Bird is the character with whom Gilda shares the most enduring relationship. Gilda was a runaway slave at age fourteen who found refuge in the brothel owned and operated by Bird and her white female lover. Bird befriended and mentored Gilda, taught her to read and write in English and French, and to speak the Lakota language fluently. "Bird had opened herself to her as she had with no one else..." (28). It was Bird and her lover who brought Gilda into their vampire family in the 1850s. The blending of who/what family means to Gilda occurs in these scenes. As Gilda is being prepared for the crossing over into a state of the undead, she "feel[s] herself opening to ideas and sensations she had never fully admitted before" (43). She is told to think of people she loves in order that she become hopeful about immortality. As she recalls memories of her biological mother, the thoughts mingle with her budding feelings for Bird.

Her mother's hands reaching down to pull the cloth up to her chin as she lay on the mattress filled her vision. Her mother's darkened knuckles had loomed large and solid. Something she had not articulated her love for. She remembered hearing Birds' voice for the first time in the house announcing the entertainment. The deep resonance sent a thrill through her body. (44)

The “deep resonance” of her desire for Bird is a vibration that Gilda will entertain throughout her life’s journey. Because Bird is the vampire to which she is bonded in blood, they are essentially committed to be together. Yet Gilda’s first lesson in the life is that being “together” has many meanings. With Bird, she learns to feel close to her lover in spirit—by remaining in sync psychically and emotionally. It marks the beginning of her developing erotic knowledge.

Bird dedicates her life to the repatriation of land to the dispossessed Lakota tribe. There is only slight mention of this political work which requires her to travel for years at a time. Bird’s extended absences create a dynamic in which physical contact becomes an elusive desire or short-lived encounter and forces theirs to become a mostly spiritual connection. After Gilda’s initial feeding/exchange which turns her into vampire, they live together for 40 years but then are separated for over 60 because of Bird’s life of activism. It is the beginning of Gilda’s separate journey into self. “Without Bird she was floating out of control on a dangerous sea. Once again she needed to give shape to a world that was beyond her comprehension, much as she had been forced to do when her mother died” (111). When they reunite, the reader learns that so far the women have not “taken each other in as fully as they could” (139). This particular feeding/exchange introduces erotic expression into their bloodletting relationship. The narrator describes Bird’s yearning:

This was a desire not unlike their need for blood, but she had already had her share. It was not unlike lust but less single-minded. She felt the love almost as motherly affection, yet there was more. As the blood flowed from Gilda’s body into Bird’s they both understood the need—it was for completion. (139)

This bloodletting occurs after they have already fed on humans. So the sharing of bodily fluids is unnecessary except to satisfy other needs. This is a decision to further expand the meaning of love and family in their relationship. Completion means they will be “cementing their family

bond” (139) through an erotic exchange as well. Their reunion creates energetic ripples as “The ancient rhythms of the Lakota and Fulani peoples vibrated the air around them as they rocked together in each other’s arms...” (137). Bird strokes Gilda’s face and neck, “sparking a tingle inside her thighs” (139). She whispers in a “mesmerizing” tone as she “spoke of her life and aloneness, her fear of being without anyone, always pushing away those she loved” (139). Bird is candid in a way that is not a required part of the physical vulnerability that is inherent during feeding/exchange. The text narrates a desire for confessions of the fragility one feels when loving another being. Bird admits to the loneliness of the migrant activist’s life and the dread/desire of needing another person.

While vampire feeding is generally an eroticized scene, in this case sexual curiosity is intermingled with the blood exchange. “Soon Gilda drank eagerly, filling herself, and as she did her hand massaged Bird’s breast, first touching the nipple gently with curiosity, then roughly. She wanted to know this body that gave her life” (140). “Life” takes on multiple meanings here—actual blood and also life-force, the integration of her political, spiritual, and sexual selves. She wants to know the woman who initiated her vampire/lesbian awakening which has allowed her to carry her fury and trauma and memories of slavery from the 1850s into this scene nearly one hundred years later. Gilda feeds from an incision made below Bird’s breast, in the fold of skin that is exposed when a woman lies on her back. As they act on multiple levels of their desire, the blending of emotions and bodily fluids is likened to the labor of birth.

To an outsider, the sight may have been one of horror: their faces red and shining, their eyes unfocused and black, the sound of their bodies slick with wetness, tight with life. Yet it was a birth. The mother finally able to bring her child into the world, to look at her. It was not death that claimed Gild. It was Bird. (140)

This scene captures their ascent into profound ways of ‘knowing’ and ‘seeing’ between the women. They have spent decades building a friendship, sharing family history, taking long walks, embracing each other, but only pondering the sexual energy that flares between them. Playfully mimicking traditional narratives of motherhood, not penetration, the vampires suck at a delicate slash just below the breast of her/his beloved, giving birth to immortality through a deliberate mixing of blood and blurring of race (Shannon Winnibst 13). Birth is also the erotic bond. For they are feeding on the energy, taking it in their mouths, allowing it to absorb into their spirits, and digesting it. The “slickness” of their bodies creates a sound, a sly suggestion of sexual friction, the gaining of carnal knowledge. The phrase, “tight with life” implies something beyond full bellies; perhaps they are also tight with lifeforce, muscles contracting and releasing, each woman nearly bursting from the energetic flow. They are seeing each other from the inside out, through openings of all sorts in their bodies, minds and spirits. As the vampires search for completion in each other’s bodies, the reader is presented with a conversation about the present-absence Bird represents.

“Where have you been?” [Gilda asked.]
“I’ve always been behind you. I returned to those of my people who survived the terrible years. Offering my knowledge and strength where it might help, relearning how to be with my own people. How to be alone. Even there on the plains I listened for you.” (141)

Bird’s listening is a key aspect of her loyalty. After this moment between them, their connection privileges spiritual well-being. In times of trouble or doubt, Gilda hears Bird’s voice or feels her presence near her. Gilda constantly yearns for her but is almost always without her. Without realizing it, she is also learning from Bird how to be alone. Still something is amiss between them. The spiritual visitation eventually is enough to ease her troubled mind, but Bird’s absences

are so sharply painful for Gilda that theirs is a cultural conversation that falls short of Gilda's ideal.

The loss of family is a major thematic in Gomez's homoerotics of talk but it is paralleled by an equally powerful focus on the erotic bind of the created family. Their relationship is a meditation on the difference between actual loss and a form of attached separation. All of Gilda's childhood traumas, the death of her mother, the leaving behind of her sisters, the near rape by a white man who discovered her in his barn were all suffered in silence and isolation. But throughout her vampire life, as she encounters deep-seated fear, faces gut-wrenching devastation, or considers entrusting someone with the truth of her vampirism, Bird sensed Gilda's need and appeared in some form to provide counsel or companionship. On one such occasion Gilda realizes that she, too, is a wanderer who has distanced herself from those with whom she identifies the most. She longs for intimacy with other African Americans. The severance from her biological family made any re-connection with African Americans an emotionally daunting option for her. But in 1955, an obvious reference to the beginning of the modern uprising for black civil rights, she finds the courage to allow deep connections with them.

'It's been my one-hundred-year journey—away from my people into the world,' Gilda said. 'Only now have I felt like I could retrieve them, touch and be touched by them as I was before. In the [beauty] shop I've grown to understand the rhythm of their lives, their desires.' (157)

Gilda's re-immersion into the black community and Bird's passionate strivings for justice for her tribe is a narrative assertion that they are not altogether each other's "people." More to the point, Gilda's alienation and isolation is more than a philosophical journey into the human condition. These women have dissimilar geographical, racial, and economic circumstances that become keen points of departure in their lifestyles. Gilda, a Fulani descendant, was an illiterate fugitive

while Bird already held a financially independent, proprietary status when they met. And since Bird is a sojourner, Gilda was left to her own financial and social devices. Their meeting place is a shared history of slavery and dispossession, as well as an understandable distrust of white humans. This mother-lover relationship leaves space for something more tangible in Gilda's life because the principle to "share and not rob" applies to them in the sense that love, time, blood, and even rescue is given and taken sparingly. Neither partner has an upper hand as it relates to their power dynamic. Bird is just as emotionally involved and lonely for Gilda as Gilda is for her, yet she also balances her time for grassroots work and self-reflexivity. She shares of herself without robbing any of her life's priorities of their deserved attention. As one friend tells Gilda, "You think of it as running away from you. For [Bird] it may simply have been running to other things that are most important" (177).

Another important aspect of their relationship is reflected in the fact that at the end of the novel in the year 2050, when Gilda is fleeing from human vampire hunters, it is to Bird that she escapes. Gilda, miserable and fatigued, contemplates suicide on the journey to Bird. In her usual fashion, Bird enters Gilda's mind and converses with her:

Ah, so finally you come to me in a place I've made home, Bird said.

And we can leave this world together. Gilda heard her response as if she'd spoken aloud.

No, my girl. I think not. I have flown from nest to nest since [the brothel]. And we've not had time enough to know this world together.

Gilda felt protest welling inside of her. The Hunters would be relentless[...]. She knew no reason to remain.

[Bird:] We remain because this is our home. We both have lost land here. Should we leave it all to them? I will not. (250)

Even in this moment it is Bird who supplies Gilda with lifeforce. Because when Bird refuses to submit, Gilda is lifted out of her depression into a more determined and resistant state of mind.

What Bird represents as a listener/lover is one who can be empathetic to other racialized communities; who can provide a sensual sanctuary in dangerous times; and can supply inspiration when a loved one is spiritually deflated. She is the mother-lover who “lingered over [Gilda] as she would a child. She whispered sweet words to her as she might a lover” (140) and who fiercely protected Gilda from the evil intent of humans, other vampires and, at times, Gilda herself. Still Gilda seeks something more.

Electric avenues: The novel constructs a remarkable conversation between Gilda and a politically conscious heterosexual man that serves to reflect true revolutionary potential. Gilda met Julius in 1971 and they bonded over memories of sit-ins and the recent death of activist George Jackson in prison. Jackson’s death is a deliberate context for their meeting, for it marks the downswing of the black nationalism’s masculinist sway in the popular consciousness. The preceding decade was the moment of The Black Man. “Now that freedom, equality rights, wealth, [and] power were assumed to be on their way,” Michele Wallace remembers in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, [the black woman] had to understand that manhood was essential to revolution—unquestioned, unchallenged, unfettered manhood” (13). This meant that the agenda to end racial oppression was defined by men and obscured any gender-specific issues that women faced. Wallace continues: “When she stood by silently as he became a ‘man,’ she assumed that he would grant her long overdue ‘womanhood’ [...]. But he did not. He refused her” (14). It was a political betrayal that fueled bitterness along gender lines in coalitions and organizations. “The result has been calamitous. The black woman has become a social and intellectual suicide; the black man, unintrospective and oppressive” (Wallace 13). By the end of the 1960s, women had begun creating segregated socio-political spaces as a strategy to combat male supremacy as well as other interlocked systems of oppression. They began to define

revolution for themselves. The seventies ushered in a new paradigm in which men were the enemy of women's liberation. This is the context, as their references to "nation-building" and "dashikis folded at the bottom of a trunk" (169) allude to, in which Julius and Gilda met across lines of struggle and distrust.

Their story begins when Gilda rebuffs Julius' sexual advances. "Gilda found her comfort with women. That's just the way it was" (174). In spite of herself, she is lured by the gravitational pull between them and is confused by it. "It was certainly not the first time a man had propositioned her," the narrator explains, "She had passed off their suggestions so easily, though, that they usually never remembered they had made them. What was upsetting her then?" (174). She realizes that even though she has constructed her private life in a way that generally excludes men of any species, she is still joined to them. As thoughts of Julius "reached out to her through the night air" (174) she opens herself to the idea of bringing him into the life. But first some ground rules have to be set.

Gomez constructs Julius and Gilda's conversation as one in which people with a revolutionary consciousness live up to the unifying ideals forged in organized resistance. Gilda makes it clear that she wants nothing more than friendship, which is an attempt to move away from his objectification of her. Julius quickly releases his initial ambition and admits that their attachment is much more valuable to him than sexual conquest. "I can't imagine life without you somewhere near me," Julius pleads, "If it's as a friend and not a lover, then let it be that" (184). As she succumbs to her feelings for him, she defines the companionship she can offer. "It is commitment as you've always fantasized it—in college dormitories when you talked of revolution, in the theater when they speak of changing the world," Gilda promises, "The reality of it can never be as one imagines" (191). The key terms in this pledge are commitment and

revolution. As a vampire she has lived many lives: slave, fugitive, activist, cosmetologist and, in 1971, a theater owner who authors and produces musicals. She has acquired wisdom beyond her apparent years. Becoming intimate with Julius brings back painful memories of betrayal and failure. Gilda recalls that

Most of the men we marched with ran out of liberation ideas. They had a big dream about black men being free, but that's as far as it went. They really didn't have a full vision—you know, women being free, Puerto Ricans being free, homosexuals being free. So things kind of folded in on top of themselves. (170)

This conversation educates Julius through a critique of the movement. What if, after things

“folded in” men began to appreciate the frustrated voices of the women who had marched with/for them? What if women, when given the opportunity to speak to a man about male domination, choose not to recede into a traditional role of silence or to rely on separatism?

Writer activist bell hooks concedes that this kind of “talking back” was never collectively undertaken by feminists. “The next stage would have been the confrontation between women and men” hooks writes, “the sharing of this new and radical speech: women speaking to men in a liberated voice. It [is] this confrontation that has been to a grave extent avoided (129). Gomez’s characters do not avoid the opportunity for confrontation and, furthermore, her rendition of it complicates the black lesbian feminist stance so that she is portrayed as openly loving a heterosexual black man. It exemplifies what bell hooks characterizes as a varied and multidimensional longing between men and women. “Whenever this longing to love exists there is present the possibility that the forms of discourse within patriarchy that estrange and alienate women and men from one another can be resisted, that a context for dialogue can be created, that a liberatory exchange can take place” (hooks 131). When Julius accepts Gilda’s proposal (for friendship and the vampire life) they become a model of liberatory exchange in that the “share

and not rob” principle negotiates non-domination and reciprocity. Also, in the act of feeding/exchange with Julius there remains an erotic layer:

She opened her eyes and her arms; Julius lay in them like a child. She ran her finger gently over his face and neck, enjoying the softness of his skin... She encircled him with her arms, kissing his eyes and nose. She felt his pulse begin to race as she passed her hand over his chest. She pressed her lips to his in a gesture that was full of the excitement she'd held inside herself for so long. It was a kiss both passionate and chaste, leaving Julius feeling like a child in her arms, yet still a man. [...] He began to suck at [her] blood insistently, *finally understanding the power that moved between them. Electricity surged through him.* (192; my emphasis)

Both characters allow themselves to fully indulge their longing for love. Gilda is full of excitement and Julius feels the surge of electricity. This is a portrait of how a lesbian can embrace a heterosexual man in a passionate, liberated exchange of power, respect, and uninhibited affection. The current they share exemplifies the synergetic possibilities of coalition building. The power that moves between them is an unlimited (and potentially infinite) space of liberated consciousness. This passage also serves to reinforce Gilda's desire for a female lover. Her insistence that theirs be strictly a platonic bond is an expression of her lesbian identity that leaves the female reader at the center of desire. As Kaplan's research proved, the quest for an ideal lover requires the failure of those that precede that lover's appearance. The narrative arc in *Gilda Stories* follows this logic and the reader is rewarded with Gilda's ideal listener/lover, Ermis, in the last few pages of the novel.

She's not heavy, she's my lover: “We must continue to insist that being a lesbian is larger than simply what we do in bed” Gomez proclaims in *Forty-Three Septembers*, “that it has pervasive social and political implications” (135). The social, political and sexual implications are intertwined in Gilda's companionship with Ermis, the black woman who emerges, finally, as the ideal listener/lover. The year is 2050 and, in a resource-drained, unhealthy ecosystem in

which all humans have low life expectancies, the immortal vampire is a vital commodity.

Humans have abused the Earth's resources to the extent that it is now "wasteland country" (234) and the wealthiest class of humans, called Off-worlders, live in space stations that hover above the planet. Those left behind must suffer through injurious ecological systems that have decreased the life expectancy of all life forms in major industrial cities and their immediate surroundings in the US. As was mentioned above, the humans have discovered the reality of vampires and pay Hunters to capture them for the regenerative powers that can be obtained from their blood. The vampire populations are in constant migration for fear of being captured for profit and forced to reproduce for/with the owner class. "There were many rumors: the life being offered was service, not servitude or destruction" but Gilda, having been the hunted game of bounty hunters before, knew "This horror was slavery come again" (235). So Gilda is again in hiding from the constant threat of patrollers "using telepathy, sonar body tracers, and decoy tricks" (238) to enslave her. Gomez's narrator articulates the perceptions of African Americans who retain cultural memories of slavery, 'pattyrollers' sharecropping, lynchings, and other vestiges of their people "having been the hunted game of bounty hunters before." She iterates a strong distrust of what is often seen as the parasitic nature of institutional services in relation to black bodies, such as the military, sports, and healthcare. Gilda's situation reminds us (in Stuart Hall's words) that "the past continues to speak to us... [and] it is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (395). One hundred-fifty years after her escape, slavery is the lens through which institutional intent is filtered.

It is in this context that Gilda flees to the thirty-sixth floor of an abandoned penthouse. As she hides, she senses Ermis in the room with her, dying from an intentional drug overdose. Ermis is an important character because she is a black woman who has given up on life. Gilda feeds on

Ermis and resuscitates her through the exchange. Her intent is to satisfy her hunger for blood but as she does so, a homoerotic desire is kindled. “She was appalled by the thrill of pleasure that shot through her at the warmth of the woman’s mouth… [A]nd her own breasts pulsed with excitement, desire, and shame” (244).

The shame is prompted by her uncertainty. Gilda has learned the lessons of her mentor(s) very well and is habitually contemplative. So in deciding to not simply feed on the body of a dying woman, she has to question her motivation for denying that woman her decision to die. What is her intent in keeping a woman alive who has every right to end her life? Is she intuitively sharing or selfishly indulging? Is she robbing Ermis of her decision to rush to death in a decaying world? Gilda acts on her erotic knowledge and once Ermis is fully revived and thirsty for blood, she “did not wait but pulled Gilda to her on the wide living room floor beneath the starless sky” (246). Their feeding/exchange is a sexual union. “This time Gilda’s lips explored the whole of Ermis’ body shamelessly before sharing the blood that gave them both life” (246).

They become lovers and partners on the run for freedom; theirs is a journey fraught with danger. Yet, it is a spiritual journey that bonds them beyond the blood. Their conversation reflects alternating periods of strength and weakness in each of them. During a resting period, they were ambushed by Hunters and Gilda was pierced with a tranquilizer gun. Ermis carried Gilda strapped to her back for several days. “Your courage is great” Gilda compliments her. Ermis replies: “I couldn’t leave you any more than you could leave me,” referring to their initial introduction in the penthouse. In these few phrases, they are acknowledging how each has rescued the other from the ultimate surrender and pledging a devotion that does not exist between Gilda and her other kindred. They represent the “other as self” in black female

homoerotics. To paraphrase Quashie, black woman loving black woman is serious, dangerous, necessary and revolutionary business (28).

They connect in several ways that idealize their coupling. The first is how the black music tradition is such an intrinsic part of their beings. Upon a visit to the opera, Gilda could only think of the “monumental rhythms and the urgency” (93) of the plantation music she left in her past. Also, one of Gilda’s personas was a jazz singer/songwriter. A few pages of the novel are dedicated to a moment in which the “piercing notes” from a cornet player “wrapped themselves around her body” (122) and induced a feeling of “oneness” with the black humans in the room and in general. “The web of music bound them through the ages, through the dark, until there was but a single future for them” (122).

For Ermis, the 21st-century African American, the sacred music tradition is the most readily available. In one of the first conversations they have, Gilda reminds Ermis that she is not obligated to remain physically close to her or to remain alive. Vampires do have the option to die. “I believe I’ll run on,” is Ermis’ reply, a reference to the gospel song made popular by the group The Mighty Clouds of Joy. More of the lyrics include:

I believe I'll run on/ See what the end will be/ I believe I'll work
on/ Find out what's waiting for me./ I see ten thousand stories /
And glories and dreams/ I see angels right here on Earth/ I see
laughing and growing and loving/ And knowing what life is worth.

Gomez signifies on the ‘eternal life’ of the vampire species and the Christian paradigm in which “the end” is the afterlife with God. Ermis quotes it as confirmation of her willingness to seek happiness in a future with Gilda. She expounds upon how much a part of her immediate heritage this use of *double entendre* is when she reminisces about her parents. They had not been religious folks but were often sighted “crooning Steal Away to Jesus, snuggled together on the front porch swing as if it was a romantic ballad” (252). Just as her parents had, the vampire

couple makes a slight interpretive adjustment to fit their context. They are the hunted species, forced to “steal away” in the cover of night, pushed further underground in order to keep the threat of (in)humanity at bay. The closing vision is a fantasy of a queer eternity. As they reach the horizon of safety, they are greeted by the silhouettes of Gilda’s circle of friends—the non-normative kinship of a Euro-American gay male couple, Julius, and Bird—the network she has created in the course of the novel. While it is not clear how long they will be safe from the Hunters, the scene suggests that homespace is constructed by the fluidity of the love bonds that have sustained Gilda, and it is now completed by her coupling with an African American woman.

Vampirism as the practice of freedom: Through an exploration of the major relationships or “talk” in this novel, I have argued that *Gilda Stories* envisions the spiritual life of the black lesbian as ultimately engaged with a love of self. Black female homoerotics articulates an ethic of socio-political and erotic solidarity with black women and black culture, and in coalition with other minority cultural movements. Gomez characterizes how religion informs but does not direct her sense of sacredness. “The passion of faith stayed with me over time even if Catholicism did not,” she explains, “The church mythology, deeply embedded in my imagination, depicted a passionate commitment to a higher power. That passion was transformed into a belief in human rights and the interconnection of all living things” (*Forty-Three* 72). These passions are conveyed through the trials and lessons in Gilda’s life. Gilda is a queer soul in search of love, community and reciprocity. In her world, morality is measured by how one values the life of others and all life is sacred. Nonetheless, the closing passages suggest that sometimes escape is the solution if one’s environment is too phobic, too parasitic, or too hostile to the marginalized subject. Gilda’s decision to flee exemplifies Jose Munoz’s “disidentifying subject”

who spends much time seeking cultural, material, and psychic survival in spite of oppressive regimes but, ultimately, cannot fly above “the atmospheric force field of [xenophobic] ideology” (161). She flees into the horizon of otherness. The black queer soul must fly free.

NOTES

¹ This is also a way to acknowledge and identify the positive potential of lesbian relationships in feminist organizations, an overt connection to women’s liberation and the gay & lesbian liberation movement.

CHAPTER 5

THE EROTIC COMMUNION OF BROWN HEATHENS, BLACK QUEERS AND ANCESTRAL SPIRITS IN *BY THE LIGHT OF MY FATHER'S SMILE*

Because our family was such a mixture of Indian, Mexican, and white, I was acutely aware of the inherent conflicts between Indian and white, old-time beliefs and Christianity. But from the start, I had no use for Christianity because the Christians made up such terrible lies about Indian people that it was clear to me they would lie about other matters also.

—Leslie Marmon Silko, Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit

This discussion is a logical extension of Chapter Four's exploration of the sources and articulations of queer soul in speculative fiction genres. Chapter Five will identify and analyze the assertions the text makes as they relate to sexuality, metaphysicality and the amorphous space of being called blackness. I will focus on two main arguments in *By the Light* that will contribute considerably to our understanding of how a writer can queer the soul. The first claim is that Christianity is a destructive, alien(ating) force in the lives of the descendants of heathen cultures. The first of the two epigraphs that frame this chapter ("Jesus might love you...") is an example of the kind of irreverent interplay of sexual language and religious critique that abound in *By the Light* and sets up the binary of Paganism/Christianity (or truths/lies) that is Walker's most apparent agenda in the novel. The second claim I will analyze is that healing is possible through a re indoctrination to the organic, erotic wisdom of paganism. Erotic wisdom, when embraced, returns a suffering person to a fuller, more sensual and divine connection to the Self and the Universe. Ultimately, I argue for a reading of this work as a declaration that black freedom hinges upon a sexual freedom that queers the soul.

From the Black Power era setting in the novel *Meridian*, to her recent collection of spiritual ruminations entitled *We are the Ones We've Been Waiting For*, Alice Walker and the scholarship on her work have well documented the influence of Native American as well as African oral traditions on the author's writing. In fact, Walker is not convinced that their

(traditional) influences are separable. While studying Cherokee folk culture, she “made the astonishing discovery that the animal tales, commonly known in North America as ‘Uncle Remus’ stories, which [she] grew up listening to as a child...could as easily be Cherokee, since the very same tales abound in their folk ‘literature’” (*Living by the Word* 43). Indeed, historical accounts of the absorption of enslaved Africans into Native cultures support this probability. Nonetheless, other historical realities have set the two cultures on different paths of absorption and assimilation in the US. In the novel *By the Light of my Father’s Smile*, Walker imagines an encounter between an African American family and an isolated Native village, an encounter that reveals which peoples Walker believes have strayed farthest from their roots.

By the Light is narrated in part by a recently deceased spirit who observes and sometimes guides his two daughters as they live out the end of their lives. On his way to the final eternity, the father-spirit is also under the tutelage of a more knowledgeable spirit, who patiently imparts truths about the world of the living. The triangulated connection of the characters’ relationships and identities—parents, children and lovers—is a chaotic overlapping of energies and experiences that is as much a spiritual journey as it is a spatial one: the narrative moves backwards in time through the recollection of memories, in between the world of spirits and of the living, Mexico, Greece and California; and rotates through multiple perspectives. This structure is also a common aspect of Walker’s literary aesthetic. Lindsey Tucker noted in her study of Walker’s *Meridian* that this formation is informed by the Cherokee concept of the circle. “The circle is not to be taken as a static configuration,” Tucker writes, “it is often better represented in a dynamic way—as a spiral” (9). An important illustration of a spiraling narrative in Tucker’s essay is a quote from Cherokee author Dhyaní Ywahoo in which she says, “The circle teachings represent the cycle of all things that spiral in the ever-moving universe, a process

of constant movement and subtle change in harmony together” (Tucker 10). Connectedness is the root and tree of Native American cosmologies and is evident in many tribal oral and literary traditions. *By the Light of My Father’s Smile* also weaves a web of layered realities that may be better explained by what Pueblo scholar Leslie Marmon Silko. Silko identifies an aesthetic in her Laguna culture in which one tells a “story within story” (50). Silko theorizes that “The idea [is] that one story is only the beginning of many stories and the sense [is] that stories never truly end...” (50). Just as all living beings, plant life, and astral beings constitute a universal body in a continuous cycle of birth and rebirth, the performance of storytelling—the extension and (re)creation of narrative—enacts the connectivity of life. This is so because storytelling “comes out of experience and an understanding of that original view of Creation—that we are all part of a whole; *we do not differentiate or fragment stories and experiences* (Silko 50, my emphasis).

Walker, a Cherokee descendent, employs this tradition to tell a story about patriarchy and female sexual freedom from a “brown heathen’s” perspective (the term taken from Walker’s essay discussed below), which is also the story of the intricate ties that bind African American and Native American (cultural and material) bodies, ancestral spirits, and ideologies. For the cosmology of interconnectedness is also representative of the Africanity in *By the Light*. A traditional West African worldview is concerned with the spiritual forces at work in the lives of people. This cosmology encompasses the belief in a kinship network of the living, dead and unborn. “[K]inship and communication between the living and ancestors are neither ruptured nor interrupted by death; [and] every aspect of human activity involves spirituality...Within this cosmology, the expression of spirituality is not restricted to religious praxis” (Ryan 24).¹ *By the Light* combines these paradigms in a way that honors and exemplifies the shared spiritual beliefs among them and constructs paganism as the natural sanctuary for brown and black people—a

sanctuary within which they are shielded from the destructive “lies” of Euro-American Christian religion.

Walker expounds upon her affinity for heathenism in the essay entitled, “The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind (Off Your Land and Out of Your Lover’s Arms),” which offers an important pre-text to *By The Light*. The lengthy title is not so much an attack on the believer, as it is a catalogue of the material/psychological brutality of Euro-American imperialism and slavery that accompanied the promise of a Christian heaven. She reminds us that African and indigenous American cultures each had “a God uniquely perceived by themselves” (16). Their belief systems were deemed heathenish by the European colonizers and subjugated in the name of Christian “salvation.” Walker believes that Christian monotheism, with its inherent racial and sexual hierarchies, and sexual restraints, is the “lie” told in the name of colonization. She argues that the subsequent generations who are cut off completely from their ancestral religions “are empty, lonely, without [their] pagan-heathen ancestors [and] have [since then] been beggars at the table of a religion that sanctioned [their] destruction” (25). In short, Christianity is not their spiritual home because it denies their true heritage and suppresses the Self in destructive ways. *By the Light* illustrates this destruction of the organic Self and offers a path to healing through spiritual re-membrance.²

If, as Toni Morrison claims, the novel has always functioned for the class or the group that wrote it, then *By the Light* blurs the spiritual and physical worlds as a strategy for confronting the “lies” at work in the lives of Walker’s audience—an audience that she imagines as a community of spiritual expatriates. “What a burden to think one is conceived in sin rather than in pleasure,” Walker ruminates, “that one is born into evil rather than into joy” (“Only Reason” 4). To ease this burden, she offers Native/African mythologies as road maps to the

homeland. To this end, the narrative wields philosophies that affirm the characters' interpretation of their lives. The stories they hear in childhood and the views constructed through community rituals provide explanations for events/observations that otherwise seem unconnected to those rituals. This is an important function of mythology for the kind of community building (or community interpolation) that Walker seeks through this text. In her study of black women's writing, Karla Holloway asserts that "Myth vitalizes language, giving it presence outside of the interpretive mode and forcing its significance to a level where *the community's shared meanings are the basis of its understandings* and interactions with both the spiritual and the physical worlds. Myth is neither one of these worlds; it is both of them" (31). For example, the myth of ancestral presence serves layered functions within and without the margins of Walker's novel, because the father-spirit is a shared mythological figure between the African American author, her Native/African American characters, and the audience she imagines. Neither alive nor yet delivered to his 'final eternity,' the father-spirit exists on the bridge between the living and the afterlife within the text, and he exists to reconnect the reader to their pagan ancestry. So following Morrison's logic, *By the Light* is a text written by and for the spiritual expatriate. It is a type of "spiritual historicism," wherein "voices of both the present and the past texture the narrative structures of the novel and culminate in a resonant confusion of mythology and reality" (Holloway 134). As I will argue later, the narration provided by the father-spirit represents the expatriated soul on the path to recovery from cultural "lies."

Importantly, black women's sexual and gender queerness are also part of this novel's righting of spiritual wrongs. Walker identifies as bisexual and, as a rhetorical strategy, often inscribes gender, sexual and physical variability into her representations of black womanhood. Her female characters range from the conventionally passive heterosexual lady, to the outspoken,

sexually aggressive woman who loves women. In a 1973 interview, Walker describes her imaginative “preoccupation” with black women: “I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women...For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world” (O’Brien 331). Each representation carries a message. For as Mae G. Henderson’s work has established, African American women writers often speak to, through and against multiple traditions and discourses. “Black women writers enter into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women,” Henderson asserts, “At the same time, they enter into a competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women” (351). To extend Henderson’s thesis, Walker converses as a queer person to other queers of color and as a bisexual to heterosexual folk. Queerness is embodied by the daughters in the African American family. They represent the “black queers” in the chapter title and their journeys offer reasons for and remedies to inhibited/subjugated female sexuality. True to all of her cultural and political affinities, Walker’s tale in *By the Light* is interwoven with testimony, refutations, (re)visions, and the assertion of paganism/ heathenism as the natural, most self-loving way of life.

Fractured spirits & bulwark bodies: Through metaphors of brokenness and dismemberment, Walker argues that the illogical restraints of hegemonic Christianity produce a psychospiritual disconnection in the believer. “In fact, millions of people were broken, physically and spiritually, literally destroyed...as the orthodox Christian church ‘saved’ them from their traditional worship of the Great Mystery they perceived in Nature” (“Only Reason” 17). The narrative landscape of *By the Light* is strewn with damaged people, each in their own

way suffering from a fragmented sense of self. Disfigurement and mutilation are physical manifestations of their spiritual condition. These broken bodies are marked as sites of ideological conflict.

The ideological conflict begins in the 1940s when two anthropologists, a married heterosexual African American couple, secure funding to study the Mundo people. This village is the last known of its kind and is important to the scientists because the inhabitants forged combined indigenous Amerindian, African and Mexican culture in which folk beliefs and other aspects of their traditional culture are still maintained. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, the anthropologists, are unable to obtain funding by conventional means, so they agree to work as Christian missionaries in exchange for support from a church. The Robinsons move their two young daughters, Susannah and Magda, with them to the mountainous region in Mexico. This is how the (male) Dr. Robinson became Pastor Robinson. The acquisition of a false persona and the ripple effect of suffering this fraudulent self creates are the co-premises and major metaphors in the text's argument against Christianity. The imposition of Christianity "manipulated [people] away from a belief in their own judgment and faith in themselves" (Walker, "Only Reason" 4). Pastor Robinson represents the 'cross and sword' approach of European colonizers who—along with brutal violence—spread Christianity through cultural genocide. His disguise as pastor and his hidden agenda as anthropologist represent religious and scientific imperialist regimes whose ideas contaminate his intuition and self-knowledge. It is his missionary work that is his undoing, his disfiguration.

One of his first lessons is that his missionary work made of him a conduit and victim of Christian ideology. "...[O]nce I took the church's money...it was as if I died to myself," he explained retrospectively in the spirit world, "I was 'sponsored' by something I didn't believe in.

I thought I could live that way. What a fool!” (155). The man was agnostic when he accepted the position; as pastor he became consumed by the costume and dogma of his role. This is the first example of an unnatural and, hence, unhealthy splitting of the Self. He recalls:

There was something in me, I found, that followed ideas, beliefs, edicts, that had been put into practice, into motion, before I was born. And this “something” was like an internalized voice, a voice that drowned out my own. [...] I thought of myself as having been spiritually neutered. (30)

The use of the term ‘neuter’ deliberately connects “ideas, beliefs and edicts” to sexuality. To neuter means to remove sex organs; and to be one is to be asexual, or to lack qualities that indicate the specific sex of a person. To say he is spiritually neutered announces a castrating affect on his whole self, the sexual self that is informed by the spiritual self. As Monique Witting has argued, discourses, despite their abstract nature, create realities; they produce ideological forces that “act materially and actually upon our bodies and our minds” (qtd in Mermann-Jozwiak 194). As he took on the role of arbiter of Christian discourse, he became more and more occupied by its power, to the extent that he felt he lacked agency and volition under its reign. Under the occupation of Christianity, Pastor Robinson is said to have been “sucked into the black cloth.” Again, the word choice is telling. To be ‘sucked in’ means to be overwhelmed by an oppositional force. The voice that “drowned out [his] own” was an ideology that dictated his stifling of his daughter’s sexual expression and curiosity; a contradiction to the sensual, animated affection he shared with his wife. As in much of Walker’s other writing, “conventional Christianity is associated with reinforcement of existing power structures and resistance to social change” (Conrad 23). Pastor Robinson does not become a believer *per se*, yet he acts as the dominating enforcer of the “ideas, beliefs, edicts” of female containment and male supremacist discourse.

From the age of fourteen, the oldest daughter Magda was learning about love and sex through her relationship with a Mundo boy, Manuelito. “We were equally brown, equally bold of dark and reckless eye,” Magda narrates, “We’d been twin spirits since the day I arrived...” (24). The narrative constructs their bond as inherently spiritual and connected to nature. “We did not speak of loving each other. No. That was not our way at all,” the adult Magda reminisces, “We instead discovered bird’s nests together, abandoned trails, poisoned wells, vulture feasts [...]. All these we shared wordlessly (24). As they roam the wilderness on horseback and into hidden caves in which they built their love nests, their ‘wordless’ understanding is described as a series of erotic vibrations, auras, and scopic exchanges (seeing and feeling seen). For example, when Manuelito “whispered [her name] like a prayer” against her clitoris, Magda felt her “whole self seen” (25); when he fingered a strand of her curly hair it “was felt as something alive, curling, electric, as far down as my toes” (24); and the “depths of trust and desire” caused her to “feel innately holy” and “worshipped” (25). All of this passion, curiosity and freedom threaten (what he believes is) Pastor Robinson’s standing in the church. Claiming her societal status as a minister’s daughter as the reason, he seeks to contain and control Magda. “It seemed to be necessary to tame her” (18), the father-spirit explains.

Pastor Robinson’s phrasing, “*it seemed* to be necessary,” expresses a lack of security (he doesn’t say “*it was* necessary”) in his views. Of course, this part of the narrative is his reflecting upon the past, when he feels quite regretful about his decisions. The pastor is led by the “external voice” to snuff out Magda’s masculinity. The heteropatriarchal logic he has adopted makes it ‘seem necessary’ to enforce compliance to gender norms. Once she began to develop breasts, the natural wildness of her childhood became a privilege only afforded to the boys in Magda’s peer group. If adolescence for boys represents a rite of passage and an ascension to some version of

social power, for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression (Halberstam 6). Her continued tomboyishness after puberty is a queer gender presentation in relation to her sister and the well-behaved Indian girls, especially for a middle class black family in the 1940s. Yet Magda remains true to her nature at first. In spite of her father's order to avoid Manuelito, she follows her own desires; she listens to her inner voice and defies him. As the symbol of coercive patriarchy in women's lives, the pastor's reaction is excessive and violent. He lashes her with a belt in a scene reminiscent of a slave whipping. Besides the visible bruising and bleeding it caused, the beating upset their entire household because the couple had agreed to avoid corporal punishment. "We had discussed it thoroughly over years..." the father-spirit recalls, "By beating her eldest daughter... I had betrayed [my wife] completely" (31). This betrayal has a ripple effect on relationships in the family.

Several types of disfiguring occur at once in this part of the story. As his daughter is finding her Self, Pastor Robinson is becoming lost. He mutates into a patriarchal male who brutalizes his family in the name of the morality his missionary status represents. The Christian bible organizes the universe hierarchically—God is supreme, man is his mortal image, and women answer to both. Robinson betrays their family law based on discussion and non-violence with the biblical law of female submission and obedience.³ Or, to use Davita Carter's characterization, Pastor Robinson is reorganizing the family through an "alpha male" perspective, which is based on his role as father of the church.

Likewise in the congregational family (patterned after Ephesians 5:53), the alpha male is the pastor/husband to whom wives must submit as the church submits to Christ. Males must identify with God as father figure who is all-knowing, all-powerful, angry, and needs to control all other members in the family. When queers infiltrate the so-called church family, they disrupt the Victorian family model, which always requires disciplining and correction. (11)

Though Carter is speaking about disruptive queer manhood, her explanation is applicable to Pastor Robinson's attempt to tame Magda through violence. This is the source of other disfigurements that occur in his story.

One such disfigurement is psychological. Violence acts as a mask that swallows the face of the father the girls had always known. He becomes for them a stranger and a monster. "Who was this man, masquerading as a priest?" Magda asks, "Who was this man, suddenly fixated on the evil in me? I did not know. Not knowing, I was always afraid (72). Susannah, the younger child, is equally traumatized. Witnessing the event of her sister's beating—and family violence for the first time—was a moment of "horror and disbelief" for her (27). Or as Magda describes it, "It was as if she'd peered into our simple, girlish bedroom through the keyhole and witnessed her gentle, compassionate father turn into Godzilla" (27). The sisters became united by the break in their relationship with their father and the twisted notions of probity and sexuality that they learn from him. So says Susannah: "[Magda's] brokenness lived next door to mine" (74).

When he beat Magda with the belt Manuelito made, Pastor Robinson turned the symbol of their love into a weapon of abuse and shame, and asserted his ownership of Magda's body as pastor/patriarch. Significantly, the beating occurred immediately after an especially ecstatic encounter between the lovers. His suppression method was successful. Magda became socially withdrawn, which is her spiritual disfigurement.

She [became] a silent, brooding young woman whose pleasure lay, almost exclusively in reading. I [her father] liked this. Not the silence, or the brooding, but the calm. Reading at her desk or in the shade of a boulder in the yard, she seemed, especially from a distance, *quite ladylike*, demure. Because she was less active she began to gain weight, and to acquire a lumbering tilt to her gait; a condition that worried [her mother] but did not particularly bother me. (20; emphasis added)

By insisting on a “ladylike” womanhood, the Pastor neuters Magda. This act is evidenced by her sudden docility, which directly contrasts the wild freedom she experienced in the mountainside with her friends. By disrupting her sexual development and controlling her gender presentation (he insists that she wear long conservative dresses), Pastor Robinson also dislocates Magda’s sense of entitlement to pleasure and being worshipped. During the painful “thrashing,” Magda “sent her spirit flying out the window” (26) so that she could withstand the beating. While the statement reflects the common occurrence of psychological dissociation as a self-defense mechanism in a time of trauma, Walker is also making a larger argument about what happens to a woman’s spiritual condition when pleasure becomes connected to shame and punishment. Magda’s state of brokenness is her estrangement from the pleasure of sexual expression and her wild self, which also means a loss of spiritual wholeness. Christian theologian Kelly B. Douglas agrees that an inhibited sexuality limits one’s ability to fully connect with God. “The quality of a person’s relationship to God, therefore, hinges in many ways on her or his awareness and appreciation of her or his own sexuality” Douglas writes, “To be estranged from one’s sexuality in all of its dimensions portends a diminished relationship with God” (85). From Walker’s pagan stance, access to the sacred can be found through interaction with the physical environment. So the cutting off of Magda’s identification with bird’s nests, horses and boys is just as spiritually injurious. Anglican ethicist Toinette Eugene concurs with this expansive view of spiritual interaction. “Spirituality is no longer identified simply with asceticism, mysticism, the practice of virtue, and methods of prayer,” says Eugene, “Spirituality, i.e. the human capacity to be self-transcending, relational, and freely committed, encompasses all of life, including our human sexuality” (108). Though Magda is emotionally bent by the experience, she is not broken. Black

queer womanhood is resilient! Magda's queer Self is not completely sublimated by her disfigurement; its energy has been redirected into her aesthetic.

Magda's clothing and hair styles represent an intersection of desire, pain, resistance and inhibition. She develops into a morbidly obese adult who inflicts suffering on her body through "compulsive piercing" (73). Contrary to feeling her "whole self seen" as when with Manuelito, the adult Magda imagines that others misconceive her as "Aunt Jemima disguised as Punk Dyke...with...thrice-pierced nose, green hair, and jelly-plump arms" (69). Magda's brokenness is illustrated here as double-consciousness. She embodies conflicting or competing aesthetics: that of the docile, servile, sexually undesirable fat black mammy; and the rebellious, confrontational, anti-establishment style, known as Punk. The invocation of the pancake icon could suggest Magda's self-loathing. Aunt Jemima emerged from the history of slavery and colonialism in the U.S. as one of the most pervasive, devalued images of black womanhood.

Before being "re-imaged" in the 1990s, "Aunt Jemima" was pictured as a fat, shiny, dark-faced woman with glowing white teeth. Her head was covered with a scarf knotted in the back, and the white collar on her polka-dot dress served as a support for her double chin. With her sparkling eyes, unpointed nose, and dimpled jaw, Aunt Jemima was said to symbolize the congeniality of the antebellum servant and the surrogate mother to slaveholders and their children, acting as satisfied slave or a satisfying mammy.
(Griffin 75)

The scarf alludes to the photographic images of the wrapped heads of slaves who worked in the "fields" (of sugar cane, corn, cotton, indigo, etc., depending on region).⁴ In the 1960s, "hand kerchief head" became a political slur against the earlier generation of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Even though Magda expresses this image as a projection onto her body via stereotype (she says, "I'm sure my students must think" this), it is arguably a confession of her internalized self-image. She carries the weight of her childhood pain in the bulkiness of her

lumbering gait. She is not unaware that her body is a visual and palpable testament to her oppression and a material reminder of her internal suffering (Shemak 88). In one scene, a doctor recommends that she lose weight. Her response: “But my memories are so heavy” (124).

While the compulsive overeating suggests self-destructiveness, her Punk aesthetic expresses a non-normative assertion of individuality, a queer resistance to ladylike behavior. Punk culture is broadly defined as one of high speed, frenetic energy, anti-authoritarian, angry, ironic, and full of anomie and disillusionment (Thompson 47). Punk began in 1970s British culture, as a class-based rejection of mainstream capitalist music, fashion, and musical production/distribution. Clothing was intentionally torn, anarchy symbols and slogans, and images of controversial European figures (Stalin and Karl Marx, for example) were prominently displayed on tee shirts. Eventually this movement caught on across the Atlantic Ocean. In an essay analyzing the mainstreaming of U.S.-based “punk rock,” the music produced in/by the subculture, Brian Cogan says “[T]he American version of punk rock can be seen not simply as a reaction against the decaying economic system of Great Britain, but also as a self-conscious attempt to identify one as outside the mainstream...” (“What Do I Get?”). Punk is social critique and a politics of self-marginalization. Punk women symbolize a critical resistance to the hegemonic discourses that regulate women’s bodies through the threat of alienation and stigma. Many rebel against stereotypical images by combining clothes that are delicate or pretty with clothes that are considered masculine. This aesthetic reflects the endurance of Magda’s rebellious nature. She is a professor at a large eastern university who stands before her classroom showcasing green hair and nose rings as a rejection of the polished professional look. Meanwhile, beneath her clothes she wears chains on her nipples and a crucifix on her labia. As

Aunt Jemima/Punk Dyke, she embodies the competing discourses. Her material body and overall sense of Self are crisscrossed with compliance, contradiction, irony, assimilation and disruption.

Susannah, the younger daughter, presents a bulwark body of a different type. By all appearances she is the ‘good’ daughter. She becomes a successful novelist, well rounded, well traveled, and is an attractive woman who enjoys romantic relationships with men and women. When Magda’s spirit went flying out the window when she was being beaten, Susannah is said to have suffered a “spirit fracture” (201) for having witnessed the brutality. If there was any wildness in her personality, it was exterminated in that moment. Susannah is “someone who left her body long ago, when [she was] quite young; that is why [she walks] with such grace and stateliness. [She is] a statue really” (62). Because she is detached from her emotions and somewhat alienated from her body, she is likened to a carved, sculpted, molded or cast representation. She stiffened herself against her father’s affection, which also kept her emotionally trapped and, therefore, unable to forgive him or to love others freely.

So the root of everyone’s problems is the alien(ating) doctrine. The anthropologists were atheists, so there was no previous religious foundation, no other ruling gods in the children’s consciousness. Christianity is portrayed as an external voice that dissuades the recognition of multiple divine truths or the acceptance of unbridled female expression. The women and their father go through their lives suffering because they moved in spiritual misdirection. The theological principle asserted by this outcome is the need for an organic spirituality that affirms rather than denies multiplicity. The counter narrative and site of re-membrance is Mundo spirituality. Weaved into their tale of suffering is the voice of the Mundo spirit-guide, who delineates the heathen/pagan beliefs, and the Americans’ own memories of Mundo folklore that eventually lead to spiritual healing and reconciliation.

Christian “Lies”

The Mundo belief system is set up in opposition to the restraints of Christianity, as well as its focus on doctrinal authority. Mundo culture advocates the acquisition of sacred cosmological truths through Nature, cultural traditions, dreams, visions, experiential revelation and trusting one’s intuition. The antagonisms in the text are concerned with the external versus internal, or the indigenous versus the imported, as it relates to self-knowledge and cosmological understandings. The Mundo people were not passive receptacles of the gospel according to Christianity. Even after decades of missionaries streaming into their village and preaching ‘what thus sayeth the Lord,’ they were always able to maintain their beliefs, which also facilitated a critical distance from each ministers’ teachings. This is evident in Pastor Robinson’s recollection of the visual contrasts in the interior and exterior of the mission building, which from the outside is a “small white chapel,”

...the inside of which startled visitors with its vivid blue and green and yellow murals. It’s starry sky overhead. Its fields of corn with rows marching into each window. Its big green watermelons painted, with red insides dripping and black seeds painted like eyes, just above the pulpit. No one ever took credit or responsibility for painting the inside of the church, which was as different from the outside as night from day. Yet the paintings were never allowed to fade. When my supervisors from Long Island came to see the state of my mission they were dismayed by it. Heathens, they sniffed. (22)

This mural is not even minimally similar to the conventional decor of a Christian church, wherein the iconography is related to biblical characters and stories. This mission is the pagan’s Sistine Chapel, a nature-worshipper’s shrine to the vibrancy of colors, textures, scents, and tastes of the living, breathing, life-giving immediate environment. The ceiling opens the imagination and the building into the twinkling stars of the visible heavens; the “eyes” of the dripping watermelon peer over the pulpit to meet those in the pews on an even plane of mutual

recognition; the “marching” fields of corn represent a valorization of the daily recompense of toil and respect for what feeds the body. The mural expresses the voice of the folk which rejects the intermediary (between humanity and divinity) represented by the minister and his “savior,” for neither has a place in the Mundo’s artistic rendition of a sacred space. For the Earth and all of its yielding are intrinsic parts of their spiritual inheritance. The Mundo people listened to the Christian version of reality but, in doing so, were not dispossessed of their own.

This representation of the indigenous resilience in the face of the relentless brutality of American colonization revises history somewhat. The late 1800s and early 20th-century is a sad record of the U.S. Government’s interference with every aspect of Indian life, especially through the missionary agent. Native religions were outlawed, and though this violated the First Amendment provision for freedom of religion, Indians were not citizens and, thus, had no such freedom. Anthropologist Walter L. Williams’ study of the impact of western culture upon Native views of sexuality found that “along with the government agent, it was the missionary on the reservation who held the real power over Indian people’s lives” (181). He goes on to say

The missionaries were characterized by a strong belief in the superiority of their own way of life. ... This meant the missionary actually went into Indian areas with two goals: to teach the Christian religion, and to westernize the way of life. In its most extreme ethnocentric form, everything Western was sanctioned as the will of God, while everything belonging to the indigenous culture was evil. ... The introduction of Western values, technology, and material culture rapidly challenged the traditional order of life. (181)

While many of the old ways of different Native cultures do still exist, forced assimilation, such as boarding schools and restrictions on the speaking of Native languages, suppressed much of the traditional beliefs. Fewer people are fluent in their ancestral language. Indian women declined in community status as their men adopted Christian patriarchy.⁵ Ceremonial cross-dressing and

same-sex coupling became shameful. According to Williams, nonwestern peoples who came under colonial control often felt disillusioned with their traditional religion. “The religion of the conqueror seem[ed] more powerful, and therefore [was] attractive as a means of absorbing some of the power of the white man” (189). More often, the old ways and the white man’s ways exist side-by-side in the life of the community. Leslie Marmon Silko recalls that in her childhood in New Mexico, she was always conscious of the Christian and nonChristian elements in her life. “The mesas and hills loved me; the Bible meant punishment. Life at Laguna for me was a daily balancing act of Laguna beliefs and Laguna ways and the ways of the outsiders” (17).

Intentionally of course, this is not the case in *By the Light*. The novel is a praisesong for the lost cultures and their subsequently lost people.⁶ The indigenous ways are kept safe within the Mundo tribe in the hills of Mexico.

The Mundo people have a critical consciousness that allows them to reflect upon and reject Christian patriarchy and misogyny. They examine biblical explanations of the natural order of human relationships in search of the main “unraveling” of the missionaries’ world:

There was a saying among the Mundo: It only takes one lie to unravel the world. And when our father, wearing his preacher’s hat, said God had said man had dominion overall the earth, *the Mundo men had declared this could not possibly be true*. Perhaps, they had said, stroking their bearded chins, it is the one lie that has unraveled *your* world. [...] They had never understood how woman could be considered evil, either, since they considered her the mother of corn. (81 my italics)

For the Mundo, it is the western culture that has lost its way. This is why they ponder—not if—but *which* lie has undone human and cosmic relations in the white world. The church mural expresses their belief in the sacredness of their immediate surroundings. So corn is represented as a sacred crop and a major symbol of sustenance for the village. To be the Mother Of Corn is to be both creator of life and dependent upon that creation for life. It speaks of humanity’s

symbiotic relationship with nature and the interdependence of male and female livelihood. These are the kinds of truths that must be realized in the lives of the Robinsons in order for them to find healing.

Heathen Truths

In direct contrast to the answers provided by the bible, the Mundo prefer to admit ignorance and imagination. “No one among the Mundo believes there is anyone on earth who truly knows anything about why we are here,” says Manuelito, “That is why, instead of ideas, the Mundo have stories” (193). Folk knowledge is as important to one’s navigation through life as the acquisition of facts and empirical data. It is the building upon previous village stories, the adding of one’s voice to the inherited imaginings of the ancestors that keep the culture alive in the people. Silko recalls a similar tradition in her community. “At Laguna, when people asked you how you had been lately, they expected to hear all the news and gossip you knew,” she writes, “then they would tell you all the funniest, most shocking, or sad news they had heard” (91). She remembers that no matter what the situation was under discussion, there was always a story from the past that could put it in its proper perspective. “The storytelling had the effect of placing an incident in the wider context of Pueblo history so that individual loss or failure was less personalized and became part of the village’s eternal narratives about loss and failure, narratives that identify the village and that tell the people who they are” (91). Community and identity are a part of the “story vs. ideas” logic in the Mundo culture as well, but storytelling is explained in more spiritual terms. Manuelito continues:

It is as if ideas are made of blocks. Rigid and hard. And stories are made of gauze that is elastic. You can almost see through it, so what is beyond is tantalizing. You can’t quite make it out; and because the imagination is always moving forward, you yourself are constantly stretching. Stories are the way spirit is exercised.
(194)

In other words, people who rely only on ideas can become as intractable as the ideas they enshrine. This is commentary on the hardening effect of the ways the outsider's ideas resulted in a stagnant imagination and uncompromising beliefs. Conversely, stories and storytelling promote openness, playfulness and reinvention. Yet not any story will suffice. Bible stories "left [them] cold" (155), for they didn't correspond to the value system or cosmology around which they organized their identities. Whereas Hughes and Baldwin stay within the narratives of black Christian discourses and Gomez's novel goes beyond and outside of it, Walker blends non-Western spiritual narratives to write against a Christian perspective. Stories that build the community exercise the spirit. The bible is full of lies.

The Mundo beliefs and the magical aspects of the plot reflect that ancestors, benevolent spirit-guides, and all the elements of Nature are direct sources from which humans should seek direction and healing. This is a reciprocal relationship in which the spirit world is affected also. For example, when the reader first encounters Pastor Robinson, he is in limbo between physical death and the final eternity because he still owes his daughters something. He cannot progress and neither of his daughters can find closure in the living world. Susannah's journey to revelation and healing is as much the spirit-father's as it is hers. In fact, it is only in the afterlife that he can access and comprehend the confusion and trauma he caused when he unleashed his reactionary violence. As a spiritual presence, he can see that having enforced a patriarchal ideology in their home "crippled [her] in a place where she should be free" (28). But unlike the Christian paradigm, he is not beyond redemption just because he is no longer in a material body. As an ancestor he continues to learn deeper truths about the universe. The dead are required to "guide back to the path someone you left behind who is lost, because of your folly; [and] host a ceremony so that you and others you have hurt may face eternity reconciled and complete"

(148). The ancestor's role is central in Walker's cosmology. Yet there are other spiritual principles in the novel that also have a reparative essence. I will discuss each principle and, when relevant, the overlapping role of the father-spirit's quest to heal and guide his daughters "back to the path."

The first spiritual principle in *By the Light* is emotional knowledge. It is steeped in the belief that accessing and succumbing to one's emotions is imperative to spiritual health. The phrase is paradoxical in western thought because emotions are treated as separate from and sometimes antagonistic to the intellect. An emotional person cannot rationalize but is moved by what "feels right" in the moment, while a rational thinker is one who depends on empirical data or complex thought processes to deal with a problem or situation. In US culture, emotionalism is treated as a feminine trait while men are presumed naturally rational. This separation of the spheres of decision-making has been the patriarchal justification for denying women leadership opportunities and the undervaluing of feminine aspects of culture. The spiritual principle of emotional knowledge does not necessarily attempt to reconcile the spheres; rather, it constructs emotionality as a vital engagement with the Self. It reflects balance and harmony within one's being.

For example, in an annual Mundo hallucinogenic ritual, the village consumes herbs in order to "lose their minds." "Instead of thoughts, we have visions," Manuelito says, "and that is how we guide ourselves...It is a way of saying you must not lie too much in your head...reminding you to stay in your emotions...It is also a way of saying craziness has its value" (93). The use of organic hallucinogens is an ancient ritual among many Eastern cultures and the Native cultures of North America as a way to connect with the metaphysical plane. Some of the known effects of hallucinogenic plants/herbs/drugs, besides hallucinations, include highly

abstract thinking, an enhanced empathy, and the plunging into either extreme joy or terror (depending on one's general state of mind). Walker sets this ceremony in ideological opposition to the Christian ecstasy of "catching the Holy spirit," which is also an altered consciousness, but one in which the believer seeks to connect with the external spirit of God. The Mundo belief that "we guide ourselves" is a paradigm in which the visionary experience is a projection of what is already in one's consciousness. One contemporary practitioner claims that during the highest height of the experience "One directly perceives the unity of the cosmos, and one's place in this unity. For all practical purposes, this is indeed seeing God" (DeGracia). Losing oneself is a way of securing unity, balance and harmony; therefore, "craziness has its value."

The Robinson daughters, despite having spent part of their childhood in Mexico, represent western reason and they did not seek to experience this particular kind of altered consciousness. Yet what happens to them is easily explained by the Mundo ritual. The Mundo perspective is the operative logic of the text and is, therefore, the reader's main interpretive tool. So when Manuelito explains the importance of the communal ritual, which foreshadows Magda's succumbing to her own 'craziness,' it opens up the text for an alternative reading of her behavior. Their conversation occurs after the couple is re-introduced as adults, decades past their Mexico romance. Manuelito is a disabled Vietnam War veteran (his limbs are literally held together by wires, nuts, and bolts) and Magda is the obese Jemima/Punk Dyke professor. Their reunion is brief; Manuelito is killed within a few days of them having made love only once. Shortly after his death, Magda has a nervous breakdown during an argumentative discussion with Susannah concerning their upbringing. Susannah blamed Magda for the emotional rift between Susannah and their father. For it was in solidarity with Magda that Susannah held back her own love from him. "You never let me forget I was sitting on the lap of a monster" she solemnly

remembers, “...because of you...I lost one half of the love that was due me in this world” (118). Grief is the portal to all Magda’s pent up pain; so when she allows herself to “stay in her emotions” she lunges at Susannah (who she believes is the more beloved daughter), chokes her, and bites a chunk of the skin out of the arm Susannah raised in self-defense. “I had plunged headlong into the tunnel of my own throat,” Magda narrates, “All that I was, was scream. I screamed and screamed and screamed” (119). Uncontrollable screaming is not socially acceptable behavior for an adult under any circumstances in U.S. culture, but from the Mundo perspective, it is a necessary loss of control that leads to a greater gain. The submission to ‘craziness’ for Susannah feels like “com[ing] home” (119) because she has unlocked the private, vulnerable self that was hidden so long beneath obesity and a rebellious, hardened exterior. It was a return to a more vocally expressive Self. It is after this incident that the sisters reach an emotionally honest plane in their relationship and when Susannah suggests that, since all the pain is out in the open, they “try to help each other heal” (123).

Susannah, whose bisexuality marks her as queer, has an emotional breakthrough via a breakdown. When she finally allows herself to grieve for the loss of her father, she “cried until she could cry no more.” She speaks prayerfully to the spirit that she feels so near to her. “Daddy, Daddy, I’m sorry, she whispered tiredly. I didn’t know what it meant to give you up...what it meant not to forgive” (171). In order to access her emotional knowledge, Susannah must first relinquish her statuesque posturing and indulge her grief. This is her version of ‘guiding herself’ to her truest desire. The repetition of “Daddy” is an intonation that invokes her father’s presence. Soon after she called out to him, “she felt Peace itself enter the room” (171). Peace is personified as a “dark-skinned man holding a bouquet of peacock feathers” (171) that glides through Susannah’s room. The feathers are rich in symbolism. In many ancient cultures, including Native

American symbology, the peacock represents guidance, watchfulness, wholeness and immortality—all important elements in this novel’s expressions of sacredness and spirituality. Peace and his bouquet symbolize Susannah’s spiritual expansion, as this is her first conscious encounter with the supernatural. Peace is also the resolution to her hidden emotional torment. By “staying in her emotions” Susannah invites an immediate reconciliation with her Self and with her father. Peace has entered her emotional room.

As a spiritual principle, Erotic Communion is the dominant discourse and overarching concept of the novel. It is defined here as an act that promotes, facilitates or otherwise recognizes the intimate, sacred bond of sexual energy between beings. Just as one’s participation in the Christian ritual of Holy Communion (or Eucharist) symbolizes a shared sense of religious identity among believers, there are acts in *By the Light* that represent the sacredness of the body’s sexual nature, as well as the purposefulness of the erotic force that draws beings into each other’s lives—acts which symbolize a shared sense of oneness with the cosmos. Erotic force is the energy that integrates all other planes of experience and existence. The notion of Erotic Communion, though not mainstream, is part of a liberation movement to empower individuals through the transcendent power of sexualized/eroticized spirituality in group settings. In “A Taste of Erotic Rites” sex educator Loraine Hutchins presents the main aspects of this movement. She argues that “the trends toward self-loving, embracing otherness, and mutual ministering are all key building blocks of the erotic community our culture needs and...we can apply lessons from these trends wherever we erotically and spiritually find ourselves.” Hutchins facilitates workshops and studies the histories of ancient “sacred sex systems” as a basis and means for enlightenment. “One of the biggest conundrums in the pursuit of feeling connected

with the oneness of the universe is transcending separation, the feeling of self and other,” she further explains,

Within the heterosexual paradigm this transcendence is taught as identifying with one’s opposite, becoming one with one’s love. But how do we get...from individuality to oneness? Identifying with the other certainly helps. So does seeing sex as the precious erotic stuff of life, whether or not it expresses through a reproductive act. (“A Taste of Erotic Rites”)

The aim of the kind of erotic community that Hutchins works to build through “sacred sex skills” is to “dissolve the self-hatred, fear, anger, and internalized oppressions that interfere with experiencing full erotic power” (“Taste”). Hutchins advocates cultural work engendered through “erotic polyamorous communities” in which queer and heterosexual- identified folk work across gender, sex, and bodily differences to locate, share, and celebrate their erotic powers. “Feminists and queer friendly forms of sacred sexualities broaden the range of possibilities by emphasizing an increased attention to erotic communion expressed through the interplay of a multiplicity of genders, and of going beyond gender, beyond intercourse” (“Taste”). Hutchinson’s involvement in sexuality studies is part of a greater grassroots effort to revolutionize the way people understand their sexual and spiritual selves. These kinds of socio-political aims align with the radical spirituality at the center of Walker’s novel.

First, Erotic Communion is expressed as a spirit-genital connection. This connection is explicit in Mundo folklore and, like the usefulness of ‘craziness,’ is also absorbed through life experiences by the African American characters. “It is understood that spirituality resides in the groin, in the sexual organs,” Manuelito elucidates, “Not in the mind, and not in the heart. It is while fucking that you normally feel closer to God” (111). Erotic vibrations are released as sexual energy into the body and spreads to the rest of the Self. In other words, sexual energy is the lifeblood of the spirit. Magda’s description of her time with Manuelito exemplifies their

spirit-genital connection. When his “feathery breath” caressed her clitoris, Magda says she felt “Everything in me, including everything in my soul...run into his arms... And the light and the mountains and bluebells...all of it was us (25). This sentence is full of movement meant to signify a transcendental state. Manuelito’s breath (a symbol of life-force) travels Magda’s clitoris; in turn, Magda’s energy flows through the genitals and extends to her lover and the landscape—light, earth and foliage—joins the union. Orgasm is brought into a communal context and is the opposite of localized genital pleasure. “All of it was us” is another way of saying that in the moment of spirit-genital connection, “we were one with all there was.”

Susannah and her lover Pauline also experience transcendence and discover parts of their innermost selves through Erotic Communion. Pauline’s memory of her first orgasmic experience involved “the kind of affectionate sex that seemed designed to reconnect me to myself, to keep me alive” (132). Once she realized her “orgasmic freedom,” she was “reborn.” It is a birth of consciousness and pleasure because she had always believed orgasms belonged to the male domain. Pauline situates her orgasm in a broader relationship with the cosmos: “I was not forgotten by Creation; it meant I was passionately, immeasurably loved” (133). “Creation,” another way of saying “all things,” is endowed with gift-giving powers that have a transformative impact on how one interprets the world. The sexual ecstatic moment is a crossing over into Life that is an alternative to the Christian paradigm of being “born again.”

Susannah’s spirit-genital narrative situates erotic bliss in a more explicit opposition to that paradigm. Communion with Pauline feels like “sitting butt naked on the earth” (110) and being kissed so hard you start to “think about Sunday school”:

Jesus might love you, this you might know, but being made love to by a woman like Pauline puts the love you fantasized about then in new perspective. Obviously Pauline is doing loving like Jesus couldn’t and wouldn’t. At least not in the version handed down to

the adoring and gullible. After being made love to by Pauline you didn't say as the hot Christian ladies do, Amen; no, you said what the wild Indians say after a powerful prayer: Ho! (110)

The descriptors "wildness" and "powerful" are contrasted with the "adoring and gullible" female sexuality endorsed by heteropatriarchal Christianity, which is represented as a repressed, 'civilized' sexuality that keeps the genitals separate from the life of the spirit. The love of Jesus is not interpreted in terms of heightened sexuality; it is supposed to heighten one's very separate spirituality. Conversely, sex with Pauline, the kind of loving between women that is condemned by Christianity, is constructed as a consciousness-raising experience. Lesbian sex is constructed as a light that reveals the notion of love that is missing from "Sunday school" and transforms it into an earthy/Earthly (as opposed to Heavenly) kind of naked truth. Significantly, lesbian sex is aligned with the "powerful prayer" of Earth-worshippers. The genital-spirit principle dissolves the false separation of the sexual self from the spiritual self, and the Self from Creation.

At times, the father-spirit's narration performs a variation of Erotic Communion as he observes and interprets his daughter's sex acts. As he hovers over their naked intertwining, he has omniscient access to their deepest thoughts and feelings. In the following scene, he watches Pauline sexually dominate Susannah:

Between Susanah's breasts sweat flows, which Pauline laps like a dog. Between her legs where Pauline has insinuated her hand there is, already, a stream of wetness. She feels Pauline's fingers, first one, then two, then three enter her with authoritative firmness. She is embarrassed to hear herself moan and shamed to hear Pauline's grunt of conquest. Susannah's body starts to move against the woman's hand. Oh, she says. And oh, and oh, and oh. (9)

At the end of this scene, as Susannah nears orgasm, the spirit realizes that "unbidden, in that moment, she thinks of [her father] and her mother..." (13). In this way, Communion is constructed as the union of memory, desire, bodily fluids, and the unobstructed gaze of the

ancestor. Interestingly, Magda's sex scene is treated much differently. When she is reunited with Manuelito, the father-spirit's narration is joyful and, yet, regretful of the pain he caused them as adolescents. As the couple walked hand-in-hand, the spirit was "shivering [with heartbreak] on the bridge over which they passed" (83). When they returned to her apartment the father-spirit is "so ashamed" of his past crimes against their love that he chooses not to witness their sex. He makes himself a barrier that prevents any further intrusion upon their bliss:

A student came to my daughter's door to bother her with work. I placed myself between her and the door. She knocked and knocked on my chest, the sound killed by the deadness of myself as space. When she left, I sank to my knees and, as wind, began a gentle breathing of apology upward and over the transom of [Magda's] locked door. [83)

The absence of the father's narration suggests that the obese body and Manuelito's complex disabilities render the writer speechless. What would the father have to say about the fatness of his daughter and the inflexible, creaky body that she was pressed against? The reader does not find out. Instead, Magda describes some of the details to Susannah later. We learn that it was difficult for them because though they were the same people inside, their bodies were strangers to each other. After some licking and kissing they "became very tired" and so "abandoned strategy." After a nap, Magda claims "it seemed to me the energy of the apartment had changed. When we left my bed hours later, both of us were satisfied" (86). The absence of detail suggests that the scene is unnarratable for any number of reasons. Still, the principle of Erotic Communion applies because we can infer that the change in energy was the manifestation of the father's apology. Peace enters this room as renewing energy, blown in as wind. The spiritual wind enables a clearing of the air between the would-be lovers, so that their bodies would know each other again, as their spirits already did. Afterwards, Magda's spirit-genital enlightenment is interpreted by Susannah as a visible "ethereal radiance" (89).

Erotic Communion is also exemplified in the birthing and mourning rituals of the Mundo. When a child is born it is kissed by both its parents in “all the places that let in the light” (162): ears, eyes, nose, mouth, hands, and groin. This is a meditation on the body that combines an awareness of its physicality and its spiritual potential. When one imagines the parents kissing these places, many of them erogenous zones, it is conceivable that outsiders, anthropologists and missionaries and such, could misconstrue this scene as an incestuous one. Within the logic of the novel, the Mundo culture possesses the purer, more authentic moral wisdom and spiritual knowledge. As such, their ritual serves to defy the boundaries in American culture that posit the genitals and groin area as always already eroticized and taboo between family members. Ultimately, though, the Mundo people render this issue moot because they do not require the absence of the erotic in order to access the sacred realm. The body is sacred in its entirety and should be treated as such, through erotic communion. When a person dies, “those who intimately love her or him will do the same” (162). This ritual is mirrored in the afterlife when those in the erotic bond are reunited. The father-spirit locates his wife; Magda and Manuelito reunite at the mountainous ritual ground of their childhood; when Susannah joins them, it is from the ethereal sidelines of her memorial service. Pauline is the only major character still living at the end of the story and she places one of her cut dreadlocs on Susannah’s dead body, suggesting that they, too, will have an eternity together.

Conclusion or, Wrapping It up in Queer Soul

In the broader context of this project, Walker’s rhetorical technique is a queering of the soul because it supposes same-sex desire and erotic bonding as transcendent and transformative experiences in the lives of black women. One critic argues that oral tradition and cultural memories embedded in the everyday are central to Walker’s project. “As far as Walker is concerned” Maria Lauret writes, “anybody who is willing to question the hegemonic Western

tradition which produced slavery and colonialism as well as rationality and scientific progress must subject him- or herself to such a process of re-education (127-8). The re-education experienced by the African American characters creates sexual equilibrium by illustrating an empowering and enlightening potential in all erotic experiences, which expands Audre Lorde's uses of the erotic.⁷ In *Living By the Word*, Walker assures us that "This feeling of being loved and supported by the Universe in general and by certain recognizable spirits in particular is bliss. No other state is remotely like it. [...] The spirit of our helpers incarnates in us, making us more ourselves by extending us far beyond" (98). Inherent in the text's thrust for justice and reparative spirituality is the necessity of sexual empowerment and erotic freedom. Trust thy Self, Walker preaches, because sacred truth is evident in (your) Nature. The necessity of a conscientious relationship with the voices of the ancestors and the sense that they can make humanity "more ourselves by extending us" is the novel's thesis. The ancestors are also benefitted by this relationship through their dutiful acts of atonement to the living. So harmony and balance flows both ways through the cosmos. *By the Light* is an exploration of female oppression, the acquisition of spiritual knowledge, and the reparative therapy of Erotic Communion—all of which queer the soul.

NOTES

¹ For a thorough rendering of native African religions and cosmologies, begin with E.B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*; Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro American Culture and Philosophy*.

² Re-membrance is hyphenated to emphasize a prior attachment of memory and physical contact to spiritual these concepts. Precedents to this usage include "Re-membering the Body: Body Politics in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" by Elisabeth Mermann-Jozeik; "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" by Toni Morrison; and "Re-membering Hispaniola: Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*" by April Shemak.

³ See Genesis 1:26-8 and 1 Corinthians 11:6-8

⁴ The head scarf actually derives from several African cultures and was reclaimed in the Soul/Black Power Era as part of the Black Aesthetic. My statement reflects the advertiser's use of the image as a nostalgic allusion to the mammy of the Old South.

⁵ The idea of a "gender equal" society in pre-colonial Native cultures has been critiqued as romanticization. Native writers disagree on the extent of the positive female-centeredness of the ancient cultures. For example, Paula Allen Gunn sees her writing a return to "God as a grandmother." Meanwhile Chicana feminists Cherrie Moraga and Gloria

Anzaldua have written about misogynist mythologies that permeate their cultural understandings of gender relations. Relatedly, anthropological studies have been under (disciplinary) fire for their role in proliferating misconceptions about institutionalized gender and sexual freedoms within reservation cultures. For more info, one could begin with the work of Sue-Ellen Jacobs.

⁶ Some Native people take offense to the characterization of “lost” to describe what for them are visibly resilient cultures. Walker’s text suggests that it is the African Americans that have lost their Pagan past. The novel offers Native culture(s) as a model or a space wherein black people can reclaim their Earth-loving selves.

⁷ While “two-spirit people” is a concept that dominates discourses of Native American sexualities, it is not represented in this novel or mentioned. None of the Mundo characters exhibit same-sex desire or discuss it.

Where Do We Queer from Here?

Rebecca Cox Jackson's record of her life of holy celibacy, which was also filled with visionary encounters with Shaker deities, racial tension, and erotic dreams of her female companion, clearly demonstrates that representations of an interlocked racial, spiritual and (homo)sexual negotiation have existed since the early periods of African American Literature. James Baldwin's treatment of this theme in the social realist genre is still a cultural landmark because his work placed these themes in a broader framework of civil rights and the progress of civilization. Baldwin's successors, in what is called the post-Civil Rights Era, continue to struggle through changing socio-political landscapes. As they do so, they also indulge in fantasy, science-fiction, and other speculative fiction genres as a way to reconceptualize ways of being and argue for justice and freedom.

Yet queering the soul is more than a literary device. It entails signifying, disidentification, and the performance of black multiplicity. It is a claim to sacredness and an invocation of spirit(s). It is a rejection of anti-homosexual rhetoric and self-denial. It is an embracing of the kinky, freaky, monogamous or nonmonogamous, orgasm-seeking, nurturing, yearning, truth-loving self. It is the manifestation of voluptuous love. As such, acts which queer the soul are evident beyond fiction genres; in fact, they exist across the landscape of black cultural production. Musicians MeShell N'degeocello and Prince; poets Lenelle Moise and Stacey Ann Chin; filmmakers Tyler Perry and Maurice Jamal; and other performance/visual artists provide fertile soil for the growth of this research. Also, pastors, evangelists, prophets and healers (from every belief system) who are in-the-life embody queer soul. Their writing, speeches, sermons, and ceremonies are all important avenues into black consciousness, identity and sexuality. Are any of those cultural agents in dialogue with or informed by the ideas and

concepts presented in this research? What knowledges do they rely on? Or produce? The work must be done to find out.

A cultural studies approach as described above would have to engage other cultural politics. For example, do articulations of “post-soul” and “post-black” contradict, ally, expand or critique theorizations of queer soul? What dimensions would a diasporic scope possibly add? Is the African diaspora not already implied in the definition of soul put forth in *Queering the Soul*? These are some of the issues that must be grappled with when one asks, where do we queer from here? Hopefully, these and other broader, more impactful concerns will be pursued in the future. In the meantime, may we all know the glory and power that is within and before us.

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