ON A PATH OF DECENT PLEASURES: SEX, SPIRIT, AND AFFECT IN LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Omari Weekes

A DISSERTATION

in

English

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

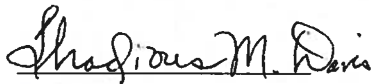
in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2018

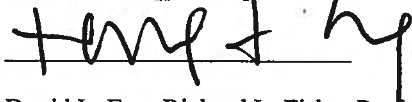
Supervisor of Dissertation



Thadious M. Davis

Geraldine R. Segal Professor of American Social Thought and Professor of English

Graduate Group Chairperson



David L. Eng, Richard L. Fisher Professor of English

Dissertation Committee

Herman Beavers, Professor of English and Africana Studies

Heather K. Love, Associate Professor of English

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Several years ago, I began this journey to receive my PhD in English Literature, a degree that I knew that I wanted after I asked my high school English teacher if I could do a senior thesis on James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. He laughed (kindly) and gently reassured me that no one had read that book from cover to cover and that, by saying no, he was saving me from myself. I took his kind no and vowed that I would continue to do what I loved to do—read and write. I went to Queens College (all of my blessed thanks to that whirlwind of an English Department), did study abroad in the UK, and committed myself to what would become some of my best years in Philadelphia.

The completion of this project would not have been possible without a number of close friends, colleagues, and family members who pushed me to the end even when I did not think that I could make it. I want to thank my colleagues in the English Department at Penn. My cohort—Aundeah Kearney, Sierra Lomuto, Don James Brown, Laura Soderberg, and Christine Woody—got me through many a tough time as I tried to figure out who I was as both a person and a scholar. I joked at my defense that I had no idea what I was doing in Jean-Michel Rabaté's proseminar during our first year in graduate school and that was the truth. Speaking with all my cohort mates and bonding with them allowed me to build up my confidence when I had none and I think I would have dropped out of graduate school without them. Very special thanks go to Mary Zaborskis, SaraEllen Strongman, Julia Cox, Julius Fleming, Marina Bibija, Sunny Yang, Ashley Cohen, and all of my fellow (now former) graduate students of whom there are too many to thank and I don't want to leave anyone out so, if you are reading this, please know that you were immensely helpful. I also want to thank Thadious Davis, Herman Beavers, and

Heather Love for being a committee that pushed me and challenged me. I do not think I could have done this dissertation with anyone else at the helm. Special thanks also to Ann Marie Pitts, Melissa Sanchez, Salamishah Tillet, Tsitsi Jaji, Deborah Thomas, Barbara Savage, and the Department of Africana Studies. Of course, I also want to thank Jasmine Wallace and Rachel Aumiller, two of my longest standing rooommates. You were always there when I needed you and I wouldn't be the thinker I am today without you.

Much of this work would also not have gotten done without several visits to Emory University's Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library. Their collections in African American Literature are vast and their archives of the work of Alice Walker in particular helped fuel a lot of my thinking about *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, a criminally underexplored text to which I hope I was able to do some justice. The archivists and librarians at that library are second to none and not only were they courteous and knowledgeable, they were kind and generous and though I may not have been able to take them up on all of their offers, I was blessed to be able to work on that beautiful tenth floor.

I am thankful to my parents, Sheila and Halgh, who pushed me the way a child should be pushed, toward their passions. Though they are parents from the Caribbean in a lot of ways, they never made me feel like I was letting them down for not choosing a more traditional path or ones that they had taken. I guess I became a doctor in my own way. Special thanks also go to my brother, Elijah, my grandmother, Ivy, my uncle Earl, my aunt Heather, cousins James and David, and all of the other family members who asked me at Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas celebrations if I had finished yet. Now I can finally say that I have. I am so very thankful to some of my best friends from

childhood and college—Gabrielle Williams, Jackie Lau, Chris Wolf, Melissa Bobe, Chris Wolf, Katy Schnur—who have watched me commiserate for so long and can now make room for the other complaints with which I will come to them.

I have a deep appreciation for my colleagues at Willamette University who have kept me going as I wrapped up one life and began a new one on the West Coast. To Allison Hobgood, Roy Pérez, Stephanie DeGooyer, Danielle Deulen, Michael Chasar, Steve Nadelson, Frann Michel, Rachel Kappelle, Ellen Eisenberg, Wendy Boring, Seth Cotlar, and so many others, thank you so much from the bottom of my heart. Transitioning to new spaces and places are never easy and, though I had a rough go at it, you always made Eaton Hall feel like a place of immense sunshine in a part of the world known for its rain.

In the spring of 2014, I went to a conference at Ohio State University. I had been there before and I was excited to share my work for a second time to commemorate what had been my first conference in 2012. This conference changed my world and my life and I am forever humbled by the experience. I met my best friend there. I don't have all (or even any) of the words for how important you have been to my life, Aaron Goldsman. Hopefully I will never have to tell you because you already know.

ABSTRACT

ON A PATH OF DECENT PLEASURES: SEX, SPIRIT, AND AFFECT IN LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Omari Weekes

Thadious M. Davis

On A Path of Decent Pleasures: Sex, Spirit, and Affect in Late Twentieth-Century African American Literature explores how queer modes of relationality have modified black religious expression in African American novels of the late twentieth century. By thinking through the category of the "queer" within an affective economy of relations rather than as an identity, my work attends to the biological and biopolitical pressures placed upon the construction of racial and social formations and collectivities. Through analyzing novels by James Baldwin, Toni Cade Bambara, Randall Kenan, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, this project illustrates the ways in which queerness has been operant in black religious space, expression, and thought in the post-Civil Rights black literary imagination. Each chapter takes a different queer modality or relational mode—queer affective attachments, queer affective mapping, queer touch, and queer hemispheric contact—in order to trace a conceptual and critical trajectory that can account for the ways in which black literature refashions the dynamic relationship between race, spirituality, sexuality, history, and memory. By mining these texts for the various ways in which black authors have imagined queerness as being not only compatible with religious expression but as being one of black religion's structuring structures, I show that these novels excavate the space for a political terrain that can be simultaneously black, religious, and queer.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT II

ABSTRACT V

INTRODUCTION: QUEERING A PATH 1

Feeling the Feeling of the Spirit in the Dark 11

What's Shame Got to Do With It? 21

Trailing A Path of Decent Pleasures 27

CHAPTER 1: "YOUR LOVE TO ME WAS MORE WONDERFUL THAN THE LOVE OF WOMEN": THE AFFECTIVE ECONOMIES OF BLACK QUEER FELLOWS(HIP) IN JAMES BALDWIN'S JUST ABOVE MY HEAD 32

Queer Affective *In-between-ness* 38

(Black) Love, A Queer Feeling 47

Freaks and the American Ideal of (Queer) Manhood 63

Queer Life After Queer Death 73

CHAPTER 2: "BUT GO THOU AND PREACH THE KINGDOM OF GOD": QUEERING THE SPATIAL CARTOGRAPHIES OF RELIGION AND POWER IN THE FICTION OF RANDALL KENAN 83

Space and the Black Queer Frontier 94

"To call up a demon you must learn its name…" 104

"Men dreamed that, once, but now it is real in another way…" 121

CHAPTER 3: BODILY ATTUNEMENTS: HEALING, TIME AND THE BODY IN TONI CADE BAMBARA'S THE SALT EATERS AND TONI MORRISON'S PARADISE 129

Technologies of the Living: *The Salt Eaters* 142

Care for it in Every Way Flesh Works: *Paradise* 162

CHAPTER 4: WALKER'S *MESTIZO* 184

Walking at the Borderland 197

Min(d)ing the Gap 204

Cosmopolitan Afrocentric Mestizo Intellectual 213

The New Black Normal 230

Introduction: Queering a Path

Langston Hughes' 1961 short story, "Blessed Assurance," features a black father negotiating between his Christian beliefs and coming to terms with his queer son. Though his son, Delmar, Delly for short, is a model youth interested in French Club, theater, and singing in the church choir, the queer shame that he brings upon his family stands to be too much for the father, John, to handle. Certainly, a portion of John's aversion to his only son comes from a deep-seated hostility toward homosexuality, but Delmar's garish sartorial choices and general distaste for sports become the last straw for a family that has been grossly humiliated over the years in the public eye of the local community. In trying to figure out why his son is queer, John wonders whether or not there is a gay gene, a biological unit of queer heredity that has been passed down either from his child's mother's side or from his own family. As he rehearses his personal history, John reveals that his family has endured a shame that has largely resulted from the sexual affairs of older family members:

> Did the queer strain come from *her* side? Maternal grandpa had seemed normal enough. He was known to have had several affairs with women outside his home—mostly sisters of Tried Stone Church, of which he was a pillar. God forbid! John, Delly's father thought, could he himself have had any deviate ancestors? None who had acted even remotely effeminate could John recall as being a part of his family. Anyhow, why didn't he name the boy at birth *John, Jr.*, after himself? But his wife said, "Don't saddle him with Junior." Yet she had saddled him with Delmar. (Hughes 231)

For John, performing effeminacy, a signifier for queer desire, constitutes a worse offense than straying outside of one's marriage, actions that he deems as "normal." Though Delmar's accomplishments should overshadow his queer behavior (if said queer behavior is going to be an issue at all), when it comes to an assessment of family members'

sexuality, John reserves the bulk of his dissatisfaction and disappointment for his son. His father-in-law's infidelities may not be ideal but at least they were in the service of fortifying the calculated narrative of heterosexuality that blackness, as a racial and ontological category, has historically clung to for support. In essence, black men may deviate from their marriages but those affairs at least act in the service of a continued heteronormative lifestyle. A black woman's deviation from her marriage may be more egregious (the narrator suggests that it is a "shame for his children, for the church, and for him, John! His wife gone with an uncouth rascal!" [Hughes 232]) but John wastes little time lamenting the loss of the other pillar of his nuclear family.

These stains on John's good name, however, pale in comparison to that which is brought on by Delmar, an intelligent boy who is at the top of his class and interested in studying at the Sorbonne. It is the ultimate shame for John when Delly sings for their church's choir. Given his soaring tenor voice that sounds remarkably like Sam Cooke's, Delmar is given the female lead in a score based on the story of Ruth, a tale in the Old Testament in which the eponymous figure speaks to the simultaneous importance of fidelity to the God of the Israelites and to female family members.[1] Whereas this traditionally sobering Northern Baptist church often partakes in spiritual melodies for

---

[1] When Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, both lose their husbands, rather than get remarried, Ruth joins her mother-in-law in Bethlehem and takes on a masculine role, supporting her mother-in-law and through this female relationship comes to God with a laudable strength. In his commentary on the Book of Ruth, Robert L. Hubbard notes that there are very few discrepancies in the Hebrew text of this volume except for one odd note that has been debated in textual criticism but to which there has been no satisfying answer: "At first glance, the text evidences a kind of gender confusion, that is, gender disagreements between verbs and their subjects, and between suffixial pronouns and their antecedents" (4). This, of course, ties into the gender-bending plot of "Blessed Assurance" and the accompanying anxiety from this that rises up in John as his son sings for Ruth in his stirring performance.

special events, Delly's singing upends what has historically been a dispassionate event. John's immediate response to hearing his son play the subversive role of Ruth shifts radically from breathless awe when he realizes that his son is singing the female lead to violent embarrassment when he realizes the effect that such a gendered twist is having on the congregation. The beauty of Delmar's voice simultaneously causes the choir director to faint and rouses a charismatic enthusiasm from parishioners that seems out of place for a church generally known for its reserved respectability. The exultation of parishioners and Delmar's sister's insistence to her father that his son's voice makes women want to scream and makes men tumble out of their seats is too much for John to handle and he is gripped by the idea that his son must be quiet in order to return the church to its rightful orientation as a holy space in which men are men and women are women.

The affective economies that Delmar participates in do more than sit behind the language of the spaces that he inhabits (at various points in the story, John exclaims "I'll be damned!" and "Shut up. Oh, God! Delmar, *shut up*!" [Hughes 234-235]). Rather, his queerness literally makes language unintelligible. Even before the end in which John pleads for his son's silence and wonders whether or not his son will pierce his ears, providing the world with a visual cue of his queerness, language breaks down making John's protestations imprecise and unclear even after his homophobia has been plainly marked as that which most impacts his relationship with his son. After hoping and praying that his son does not return home from a trip with the school choir to the East Village in New York City with an earring in his ear, "[John] 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 black through think

blacking out then and there think it through?" (Hughes 233). Here, legibility and logical cohesion break apart and the constant refrain "think it through" reveals a turning away from sense making in favor of an erratic thought process that can only offer "blacking out" as the proper method for dealing with the prospect of a gay son.

Language fails again after the choir director faints in response to Delmar's performance and John's daughter asks her father to explain why everyone around them is having such chaotic reactions to Delmar's performance. After he unwittingly utters the phrase "I'll be damned!," registering his immediate incredulity upon finding out that his queer son has taken on the figure of Ruth at the Spring Concert, John's fear of his son being outed as gay in front of respectable church folk resurfaces and registers an utter failure of language in the face of what can only be read as a queer act that will garner more shame for him:

> John had hardly gotten the words out of his mouth when words became of no further value. The "Papa, what's happening?" of his daughter in the pew beside him made hot saliva rise in his throat—for what suddenly had happened was that as the organ wept and Delmar's voice soared above the choir with all the sweetness of Sam Cooke's tessitura, backwards off the organ stool in a dead faint fell Dr. Manley Jaxon. Not only did Dr. Jaxon fall from the stool, but he rolled limply down the steps from the organ loft like a bag of meal and tumbled prone onto the rostrum, robes and all. (Hughes 234)

Though Marlon Rachquel Moore has discussed this scene of disarray within the confines of the church as a space in which black queer masculinity disrupts the conventional hegemony of heteropatriarchal norms and takes its rightful place within a social order that always already has been queer even when/if those queer structuring structures are not registered, I argue here and in the rest of this dissertation that the transgressive potential of black queerness within spiritual spaces should not only be thought through in terms of

the possibility for queer identity to take rational and discursive shape in spaces that had previously been hostile to such identities.[2] In a scene like this, one in which even the fundamental coherence of language is unsettled and made ineffectual for the purposes of describing what changes have actually occurred at Tired Stone Church, I argue that we can turn to affect for an alternative way of thinking about how queerness and spirituality inform one another for black people. By changing the methodology of perception, from language to affect, we can see a number of other material and non-material forms, intensities and impulses that organize the ways in which the people of the church associate with one another and, perhaps more importantly, how those people orient themselves around structures of power that determine those interpersonal relations (race, sexuality, religion, etc). This does not absolve a scene like the one narrated in "Blessed Assurance" of a father's potentially destructive homophobia or the unwillingness of the parishioners to perceive the queer child as a queer child, but it does open up a conversation about this scene that is not stilted by the already extant reading of spaces like the black church as being inhospitable to sexuality when it is not openly recognizing and cherishing its queer members.

I begin this dissertation with a reading of Langston Hughes' "Blessed Assurance" because this story marks an important precursor for the work that I interrogate in *On A Path of Decent Pleasures: Sex, Spirit, and Affect in Late 20th-Century African American Literature*. This dissertation destabilizes traditional conceptions of black religious expression as antithetical to queer practices and lives. I argue that there is an expansive

---

[2] See Marlon Rachquel Moore, "Black Church, Black Patriarchy, and the 'Brilliant Queer': Competing Masculinities in Langston Hughes's 'Blessed Assurance,'" (2008).

matrix of non-heteronormative social and intimate relations that make up what black spirituality looks like in the contemporary moment. In order to fully account for these relations, I look beyond identity to think about other methods by which black spirituality can and has been queered—for instance, via queer maps, queer affects and intensities, and queer familial restructurings. Though scholars like Ashon Crawley, Jacqui Alexander, and Jafari Allen have recently explored what's queer about black religion now, I suggest that black writers of the late 20th century have excavated the relationship between queer sexuality and black spirituality in their work and that the tensions between the sacred and the sexually profane have indelibly come to inform a post-Black Arts aesthetic.[3] What is at stake here is not a gesture towards a future-oriented racial politics that can be simultaneously and harmoniously queer and religious. Rather, it can be thought of as a recognition of the various ways in which black religious folk have articulated a deeply imbricated sense of self, spirit, and sexuality as a key component of anti-racist coalition building and struggle, whether or not a better future can be imagined or is even possible.

By thinking through the category of the "queer" within an affective economy rather than as an identity, my work is situated between scholarship on the biological and biopolitical pressures on the construction of racial and social formations and collectivities by Lauren Berlant, Ann Cvetkovitch, and Patricia Clough, and the theoretical writing on black queers and their relationship to the spiritual by E. Patrick Johnson, C. Riley

[3] See Ashon Crawley's Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility (2017); M. Jacqui Alexander's Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Politics, Memory and the Sacred (2005); and Jafari Allen's "Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture" (2012).

Snorton, and Emilie M. Townes.[4] By bringing an affect-oriented and new materialist approach to questions of black spirituality and black sexuality, my argument sets aside the primary cultural narrative of black religion's hostile relationship to non-normative sexuality. Instead, I account for others ways in which queerness helps to shape what black religiosity looks like from the vantage point of a discursive field that refuses a vocabulary of tolerance, acceptance, or rejection in favor of recognition of the queer presence that needs no affirmation because it is always already extant.

In what follows, I am indebted to the work of Eve Sedgwick and, though I work with both a phenomenologically-based (most often characterized by the work of Sedgwick, Cvetkovich, Teresa Brennan and Sara Ahmed) and a biologically-based approach to affect (most often characterized by the work of Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, and Patricia Clough), as both models inform one another, her pioneering work at the intersection of queer theory and affect studies has been the most foundational for my thinking about what lies beneath.[5] I find both of these traditions in affect studies to be useful for how I see affect circulating I my archive as that which can be perceived and is operational even if or when it is not named. Though this introduction will go on to describe what I find useful in Sedgwick's formulations in this field, this dissertation also

[4] Here I am thinking of work like Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011); Ann Cvetkovich's "Public Feelings" (2007) and the work that she did with the Public Feelings group at the University of Texas; Patricia Clough's introduction to *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (2007); E. Patrick Johnson's "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community" (1998); C. Riley Snorton's *Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* (2014); and Emilie Townes' *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (2006).
[5] See Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank's "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins" (1995), Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* (2012), Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and "Affective Economies" (2004); and Gilles Deleuze's *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (1990).

uses methods informed by the work of Benedict de Spinoza and Brian Massumi, precisely because I am interested in the ways in which affect circulates prepersonally—that is, before it is perceived by humans—and the effects that affect can have before it is determined as that which may be called feeling or emotion. As Massumi argues in *Parables for the Virtual*, "The escape of affect *cannot but be perceived*, alongside the perceptions that are its capture. This side-perception may be punctual, localized in an event (such as the sudden realization that happiness and sadness are something besides what they are). When it is punctual, it is usually described in negative terms, typically as a form of *shock* (the sudden interruption of functions of actual connection). But it is also continuous, like a background perception that accompanies every event, however quotidian" (36). The escape of affect here refers to the intensities that irradiate out of bodies whether or not they are then recognized and categorized as emotion. For Massumi, even those affects that do not get captured help to structure the world.

In her introduction to *Tendencies,* Sedgwick describes what "queer" as a descriptor and a category of analysis can refer to: "the open mesh of possibilities gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" (10). I am under no illusion that "queer" as a term, as a referent, as an object of study, as a practice, as a methodology, as an identity, and as a host of other subject positions and ontological/epistemological categories has not seen its own excesses of meaning. "Queer," which was once largely synonymous, or at least firmly grafted onto sexuality in some fashion has seen an explosion of usage in both academic and popular circles, often fashioning "queer" into a loosely coherent signifier

with an expansive capability. My project does not attempt to detract from the generative work that has used the fruit of queer studies scholarship in order to more broadly think about the field's implications beyond the parameters of queer life. Rather, I mark queer work on affect as operating in the open mesh of the open mesh that Sedgwick refers to in her chapter on the queer and now.[6]

I turn to affect not merely to sidestep questions about the inclusion of gay people in black sacred spaces but to provide new routes for thinking about to what inclusion even refers. If inclusion merely means the open welcoming of black queer bodies in black queer sacred spaces, this places the impetus and the burden of recognition on those in power in the church: the straight deacons, the heterosexual bishops, the homophobic parishioners. As I will discuss, however, affect can operate outside of the confines of the black body, black thought, and black consciousness. It operates when queer congregants are in tune with their sexuality or not. It operates with queer congregants' active participation in a queering of the church or not. It operates when queer congregants do not even believe in the religion(s) that arrange black sacred life. Queer affect is mobile and proliferates between queer and non-queer people alike, making it a presence that has always already organized how black religion and black religious expression takes shape. Though "queer" and "queer affect" very directly and deeply resonate in terms of same-sex desire, gay sex acts, and gay and lesbian identity, it can also take its cues from those more capacious understandings of queer as a category in order to think about what exists when we distill these sacred spaces and sift out what circulates when queer people are not recognized for their contributions or even their mere presence. As Sedgwick argues,

---

[6] Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (1993), 1-19.

affects travel even when identity does not. Affects can be autotelic and phenomenological, meaning, in my reading, that they act even when they are not seen.[7]

In an essay that attends to the black body as itself a mobile signifier that can have profoundly different implications and readings when it is in secular and sacred spaces, Ashon Crawley notes that attention must be paid to black queer populations because their fixity in public and private space cannot be taken for granted.

> I focus on the issue of queer(ed) black subjects because they *are* personal in scope but also because queer(ed) blacks occupy a peripheral space—act as selvage, 'a margin, a boundary, or a perimeter that by opposition defines the center'—in the Black Church, constantly in danger of slipping away, of being erased from memory and knowledge. And more insidiously and voyeuristically, we are gazed upon, much 'less comfortable than horror', judged for our aesthetic excesses, denied existence, vainly laughed at. Queer(ed) blacks are often invoked as a scapegoat and trump card, named as sin unabashed and uninhibited. I am trying to establish how queer(ed) black subjects, though oppressed and marginalized, contend with our quotidian existence and reality of abjection. (203)[8]

I quote this rather arresting call to acknowledge how black queer subjects face the threat and danger of active erasure from black sacred space not only to recognize the very real significance of the pioneering work of Crawley and others who have contributed to this burgeoning spiritual branch of black queer studies. Black queer lives matter and they must continue to matter in those historical spaces of renewal and recovery if black people are ever going to truly progress through an intersectional political framework. But, where Crawley aims to do the work of carving out a space for black queers to come to terms with a religion that has historically used and is presently using the queer(ed) black body as the Othered body by which black religion stabilizes itself, my work looks both to and

[7] See Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003): 19, 21.
[8] Ashon Crawley, "Circum-Religious Performance: Queer(ed) Black Bodies and the Black Church" (2008).

outside of the body to think about how those queer margins come to inform and shape the center.

On A Path of Decent Pleasures takes Crawley's note that the black queer body is threatened as it is also marked as threatening very seriously as the lived reality of black queers continues to be in peril in the dance club, in the church, and in many spaces that are ostensibly marked as safe and dangerous alike. However, this dissertation asks what happens when LGBT inclusion is not everything that it is made out to be? Neither my project nor Crawley's essay assumes that black queer people want or need the inclusion or tolerance that is at the heart of contemporary homonormative discourse. Nevertheless, this project *does* mean to show how queerness is attached to the church, black spirituality, and black religious relationalities in ways that cannot be denied as regularly or routinely as black queer people who no longer want to repress their sexuality in order to fit into a church home can and have been.

Feeling the Feeling of the Spirit in the Dark

With this, my turn to affect necessitates a return to Sedgwick. For Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, a collection of her essays that, amongst many things, deals with emotion, language, and representation, constitutes an exercise in moving away from dualistic thinking. This move is particularly relevant when it comes to sex and her initial approach to and reproach of Foucault and the repressive hypothesis that he theorizes in *History of Sexuality: Volume 1*:

> I knew what I wanted from [the repressive hypothesis]: some ways of understanding human desire that might be quite to the side of prohibition and repression, that might hence be structured quite differently from the heroic

> 'liberatory,' inescapably dualistic righteousnsess of hunting down and attacking prohibition/repression in all its chameleonic guises. If the critical analysis of repression I itself inseparable from repression, then surely to think with any efficacy has to be to think in some distinctly different way. (10)

For Sedgwick, the turn to texture and affect opens up new questions that are not about knowing but about recognizing what causes us to do what we do—in other words, she calls our attention to the impulses that largely govern everyday life. Because affects can have a purpose in and of themselves, their primacy in my readings of the archive that I have culled together attends to their circulation both inside and outside of a deliberately constructed network of emotions. Even though my grounding in affect is often mediated through a language of those same emotions, a tension in Sedgwick's work that is routed through her work on Silvan Tomkins and his magnum opus, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, affect is not bound by what is recognized as emotions. In "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," an introductory essay for *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader,* Sedgwick and co-writer Adam Frank locate Tomkins' work on affect within a theory that does not privilege language as the exclusive mechanism by which representation is constructed.[9] Though discourse certainly plays a key role in representation, a set of biologically-inflected emotional states that vary in intensity based on our reactions to external stimuli also influence how bodies respond to machinations of power. Sedgwick and Frank's reading of Tomkins lies in the interstice between affect as a pre-personal drive that operates completely outside of the realm of rationality or consciousness and affect as a biological, moldable object that lies within the body and can be read by others as it irradiates outward from that body in culturally contingent

[9] My reading of this essay comes from its reproduction in Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (2003), 93-122.

gestures (the dropping of the eyelid or the shake of the head, for instance). While some affect theorists have tried to partition affect and discourse so that affect figures as an unintelligible and autonomous force or drive, Sedgwick sees language as heightening that which can be affectively felt.[10] As Tyler Bradway suggests in his reading of Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*, "[t]he drawback of conceiving affect as autonomous from a homogenous libidinal drive is that it does not allow queer critics to expand the field of sexuality—to see culture, at large, as underwritten by sexual desire. However, it encourages us to account for how affects 'saturat[e]' aesthetic objects beyond their sublimation into linguistic content and to evaluate the qualitative force of specific affects on their own" (87). For Sedgwick, the affects that underlie certain modes of subjectivity or interpersonal relationships are just as formative in the development of those modes and relations as the discursive methods used to describe them. Just as we use language to understand how subjectivity is constructed or relationships are formed, any affects that undergird a cultural formation or aesthetic or bodily subject can be a mode of access for understanding how that object or subject is received in its circulation.

To turn briefly back to the repressive hypothesis, Roderick Ferguson also reads Foucault and the repressive hypothesis as an unsatisfying rubric for his own object of study: black sexuality. In his now canonical text in black queer studies, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Ferguson links the disciplinary formation of sociology to the continued repression of queer theorizations of sex in African American communities. Whereas Foucault's repressive hypothesis estranges a critique of sexuality

---

[10] See Brian Massumi, Parables for the Virtual (2002), 24-28; and Nigel Thrift, Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect (2007), 89-106.

from a critique of capitalism, Ferguson argues that these two critiques are inextricably linked:

> By designating exteriority instead of interiority as the origin of regulation, sociology made African American culture part of modernity's visible economy and thereby cited the body and social conditions as the locus of being for African Americans. With an epistemological gesture of this sort, the nonheteronormative would not simply lurk within the cracks and crevices of consciousness, but would traverse up and down the neighborhood. (80)

As a corrective to sociological determinations of black desire that ineluctably linked a racial group's sexual choices with how that group can be incorporated into the dominant society, Ferguson calls for a historiographical method that "must be written as a materialist history of discourses and as a discursive history of material practices. African American heteronormative formations function as a palimpsest in which the disparate genealogies of sociology, American citizenship, Western nation-state formation, aesthetic culture and capital collide" (81). Though this is a useful strategy for keeping sociological considerations of sexual deviance within black communities from being deployed as a justification for a consolidation of state power, violence, and surveillance, Ferguson's treatment of sexuality in the black church via a reading of James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain* undertheorizes the ways in which a proliferation of queer affect in that text does similar work to undermine sociology's attempts to decouple black queerness from Western rationality.[11] With this, I turn to Baldwin's first novel in order to more thoroughly make the case for affect rather than discourse as a queer method for placing African Americans within what Ferguson calls a Western symbolic economy.

---

[11] Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004), 82-109.

In the Evidence of Things Not Seen

A reading of affect in black religious spaces can be a useful tool for rethinking how identity or subjectivity (or something like identity or subjectivity) fasten themselves to places of both spiritual and political importance. Much has been said about places like the storefront churches of Northern cities and their role as important sites of struggle during the Civil Rights Movement. These spiritual centers would have been spaces for spiritual commune as much as they showcased the proliferation of capital within African American communities as Southern blacks settled in urban centers around the United States. As Frances Kostarelos notes, "since the late 1800s, the storefront church has been independently owned and managed by working-class blacks. In the early 1900s, the storefront church addressed an institutional hiatus in the 'black belt' by providing a forum in which oppressed blacks could voice social problems apart from white control. They owned the church and determined the rules that governed them there" (12). This notion of control and determination of how the church could be seen by outsiders tends to govern how we often think about the treatment of queers in African American churches. As obvious places of rampant and trenchant homophobia completely hostile to the inclusion of the queer (and here I am being at least somewhat facetious), the image of the black church bears at least partial responsibility for larger cultural considerations of the black community as intolerant of non-normative sexuality in a variety of ways. This, perhaps, makes some sense historically as the church has often been at the center of various black political movements before and including the Civil Rights Movement. If the church ostensibly walked concomitantly with bourgeois black respectability politics

towards progressive social change, it could not be seen sanctioning much of anything outside of bourgeois middle class black respectable heterosexuality.

Though purported repudiations of non-normative sexuality became part and parcel of how we read the black church's role in black politics, this is due to a willful scrubbing out of queer presence in all of its permutations. It is not as if black queer individuals found themselves unable to articulate their own civil rights politics or unwilling to be folded into the larger Civil Rights Movement, albeit with an ostensibly flattened out sexuality. Baldwin's work and, in particular, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, provides an interesting case study for thinking through how the realm of the affective or an attention to the affective processes that bind people together in the space of the church allow for a reconceptualization of the flows of sexualities that inhabit and help shape black sacred space. Affect or a recognition of the emotionalism deeply embedded in black worship as a result of spiritual genealogies that reach back and across to the African cosmologies that invest critical interpretive energy into that which pulsates beneath the surface of everyday black worship, provides critics with a useful analytical tool for approaching what is so queer about black Pentecostalism, the spiritual example that Baldwin uses most prominently in this text.

Go Tell It on the Mountain merges spiritual energies with that of a queer affective presence that becomes palpable in the moments that the novel's protagonist spends writhing in front of a congregation on the threshing floor. Within the wide matrix of affective expression(s) on display in this scene, Baldwin makes room for the possibility of queer affect, that which would influence how a marked queer body could function non-pathologically in spaces of worship. The use of "non-pathologically" is a diction

choice that comes out of Gunnar Myrdal's important 1944 sociological study of race relations, *An American Dilemma*. The text places great emphasis on the emotionalism of black religion within a series of vices that stand as symptoms of the African American's pathological condition in American society. For Myrdal, it is this emotionalism that stands at the center of the breakdown of African American familial structures:

> [The] tendency for Negro youth to abandon the church] is explainable not only because of the general trend caused by increasing education and sophistication, but also by the very "backwardness" of the Negro church manifested in its emotionalism and Puritanism. Still, as in white America, church membership confers respectability, and when young people marry and want to settle down, they are likely to join a church—though often one somewhat less attached to emotionalism and Puritanism than the one attended by their parents. (863)

This is not to say that black people do not often enjoy a more robust intellectual service as they marry and "settle down;" rather, it is that the difference between "backwards blacks" and "progressive whites" "is mainly that Negroes […] are [simply] lagging about a half century behind [whites]" (864). In addition, with emotionalism comes a (white) perception of African Americans' penchant for "excessive sexuality," a phrase that Myrdal puts in quotation marks but attributes to no one in particular (937). This designation of excessive sexuality as a marker that stigmatizes all blacks, however, is unfair according to Myrdal given the fact that emotionalism "is most common in the rural Southern Negro churches and in the 'storefront' churches of the cities" (937). Despite the fact that these churches are often African-American owned and operated as I have already suggested, the demographics of black religious people makes this emotionalism a trait more associated with lower class, uneducated blacks; as African Americans climb into higher socioeconomic brackets, the more likely he or she is going

to be more interested in the intellectual (read: emotionally vacant) brands of Christianity.[12]

Though John Grimes does not fall privy to either excessive sexuality or aggressively sterile intellectualism by the end of this novel, as one of its central characters, John does become overwhelmed with affect, writhing on the threshing floor in the novel's final act. Roderick Ferguson has argued that the inclusion of John Grimes in the text becomes an inclusion of the decidedly "queer" in the already nonheteronormative space that was Harlem in a mid-century white imagination.[13] In that reading, John Grimes' conversion on the threshing floor then comes to represent a forced confrontation with the self-hatred that he has expressed throughout the sections in the text that feature him, resulting in an expression of self-affirmation that allows him to open himself up to the homoerotic desires that at first felt shameful and, thus, had to be kept personal. This

---

[12] An interesting takeaway that seems to go beyond the scope of this introduction is Myrdal's assertion that emotionalism, while it is on the decline for African Americans by 1944, the emotionalism of the Negro's worship should have been viewed as a method for battling depression given his downtrodden state in American culture: "It is commonly said that it is the religion that 'keeps [the Negro] going.' The feeling of 'possession' is used the world over to produce euphoria when circumstances are unduly pleasant—although in most groups, drugs and drink rather than religious excitement produce the effect. Whether or not there is any relation between the decline of emotionalism in religion and the growing resentment and caustic bitterness among Negroes could not be proved, although it is plausible" (938). This "euphoria" that black religious emotionalism provided for African Americans in the early 20th century aligns well with Ann Cvetkovich's recent assessment of the role of "sacred therapies" in black spiritual practice across the African diaspora. In Cvetkovich's reading of these therapies through M. Jacqui Alexander's work, they represent a "spiritual practice [that] is thus also a profound response to the quest for self-possession and psychic integrity—the problem of knowledge takes affective form" (*Depression* 135). What stands as pathologically overemotional in 1944 becomes an effective (and apparently no longer pathological) counter to Western rationalist epistemologies that perpetuate logics of genocide, colonialism, and oppression on a global scale in the 21st century.

[13] See Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004), 100-109.

queers the reading of the ending in which Elisha, John's church friend and confidante, places a "holy kiss" on his forehead.[14] In essence, Ferguson reads the conversion moment at the end of the novel as:

> the novel construct[ing] love as the presence of […] redemption and self-affirmation. Indeed, [Baldwin] implies that love articulates a notion of blackness and homoerotic desire that end in John's own self-affirmation. As such, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* rearticulates the meaning of love, removing it from the romantic ideology of the heteropatriarchal household and the heterosexist church and placing it outside the framework of rational heteronormative regulation. (107)

Certainly, Baldwin has identified love as crucial for any sort of larger civil rights politics both here in this novel and in his non-fiction work. The first chapter of this dissertation begins with an engagement with love as a fundamental attachment between blacks and whites in *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin proffers up this particular kind of relationality as being integral for anti-racist coalition building and struggle because it breaks up the possibility for clear delineations between black people and white people along racially delineated lines of identity. However, positing that John's continued life rather than death at the front of the church represents complete self-affirmation in the form of an articulated queer identity, ignores the rather palpable fact that John Grimes continues to not *actually* articulate a queer identity.[15] Instead, the threshing floor provides a moment of reorientation, what Sara Ahmed calls "the 'becoming vertical' of perspective, mean[ing] that the 'queer effect' is overcome and objects in the world no longer appear

---

[14] James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (2000), 225. All subsequent references to this novel will refer to this edition.

[15] Ferguson goes on to suggest that this last scene epitomizes not merely an articulation of queer identity but actually a *re*articulation of queer identity: "The rearticulation of queer identity [by John] posits a new valuation of black inner-city communities as sites of regenerative nonheteronormativity, establishing a link between reconfigurations of African American queer identity and African American culture" (108).

as if they are ‘off center’ or ‘slantwise’” (65). This is a homeostatic epistemology; once the queer a/effect becomes visible, the world around that a/effect incorporates it into a newly formed equilibrium that has adjusted to account for such a difference. This equilibrium is unstable given that it can always become subjected to a new reorientation but at least the field has opened itself up the potential of the queer.

This is all to say that the field of discourse created by the novel’s third-person limited narration is markedly different from the one that would have taken shape had the novel ended with John declaring his homosexuality. With this rhetorical and perspectival strategy, John’s homosexuality figures as that which can either be ignored or embraced because the performative component of “queerness” (in effect, the sociocultural idea that one can read someone’s sexuality based on their actions and/or gestures) barely comes into play. Certainly, the masturbatory effect that male bodies in a locker room have on John moves toward the “being” of queerness but even this act is lost in the rhetoric, occluded by Baldwin’s use of the phrase, “sinned with his hands” (*Go Tell* 11). That word, “sin,” appears frequently in the novel and oftentimes provides the same kind of linguistic covering for other acts, homosexual and heterosexual alike. As an example, towards the beginning of the novel, even while the narrator states that “Father James had uncovered sin in the congregation of the righteous. He has uncovered Elisha and Ella Mae” (*Go Tell* 9), and it is clear that some form of sexual activity has taken place, that supposed process of uncovering is manufactured strictly for the benefit of the pastor. The severity of the sexual act in question and what that act actually entails is never made clear for the reader, presumably because it does not need to be; the shame that arises out of their being showcased as deviant examples sufficiently interpellates John as queer.

What's Shame Got to Do With It?

Rather than a markedly queer identity that can be called or teased out as a stable identity category, it seems to be the (gay) shame—what Sara Ahmed, in a reading of Eve Sedgwick, would call the primary queer affect—that finally finds a place within the religious community of Harlem's Temple of the Fire Baptized Church (*Queer Phenomenology* 175).[16] While some critics (including Ferguson) have focused on the salvation that seems apparent in John Grimes' being possessed on the threshing floor, I wish to keep this scene as one mired in ambiguity even as it is read as one that traffics in an outpouring of negative emotions. Here I must quote from this scene of "conversion" at length because of the density of affect, all of which lies at the center of this display of emotionalism within a space that is already congested with the palpable affective presence of a congregation in action:

> Then his father returned to him, in John's changed and low condition; and John thought, but for a moment only, that his father had come to help him. In the silence, then, that filled the void, John looked on his father. His father's face was black—like a sad, eternal night; yet in his father's face there burned a fire—a fire eternal in an eternal night. John trembled where he lay, feeling no warmth for him from this fire, trembled, and could not take his eyes away. A wind blew over him, saying: "Whosoever loveth and maketh a lie." And he knew that he had been thrust out of the holy, the joyful, the blood-washed community, that his father had thrust him out. His father's will was stronger than John's own. His power was greater because he belonged to God. Now, John felt no hatred, nothing, only a bitter, unbelieving despair; all prophecies were true, salvation was finished, damnation was real! (198)

[16] In her discussion of Sedgwick's "refusal of the discourse of queer pride" in *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed argues that Sedgwick "suggests instead that shame is the primary queer affect because it embraces the 'not'; it embraces its own negation from the sphere of ordinary culture" (175).

It is the emphasis on "unbelieving despair" amongst the joyful in the congregation that indicates a change not only in John's personal relationship with Christ (one that seems to be resolved only a few pages later with his utterance of the phrase "Yes, oh, yes" when he is asked whether he has been saved) but also in what seems possible for him within this community. It is not so much that his orientation towards other objects (in effect, his father who has been the most critical of him and his choices throughout the novel) has changed as a result of possession; rather, the interchange of emotions in which hatred evacuates and makes room for despair has allowed for self-affirmation, though not of the queer kind. Here, John recognizes that this despair plus his sexual desire for Elisha have cast him outside the realm of the holy, for "whosoever loveth [the same sex] and maketh a lie" (198).[17] John's queer identity has not miraculously been absorbed into the blood-washed community; rather, the expulsion from that community that he experienced on the threshing floor, one he intuited as he was affected, is the catalyst that allows for an easier transition into this church community. To be clear, my argument here is that the possession of John Grimes on the threshing floor does not place him "outside [of a] framework of rational heteronormative regulation" (Ferguson 107); instead, his newfound ability to interrogate his own shame finally allows for something like happiness to creep in.

I say something *like* happiness precisely because of the ambiguity that I want to keep present in this reading. As much as critics have framed this scene in terms of

---

[17] The quote here references a passage from the Book of Revelation, which, in the King James Version, has been translated as, "Blessed *are* that they do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. For without *are* dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie" (*King James Bible*, Rev. 22:14-15).

salvation or even liberation, the aforementioned moment of conversion when John answers in the affirmative to a question of whether he has been saved is mired by the fact that it is Elisha, John's male object of desire, who has asked the question.[18] Whether or not John has actually been saved is rightfully up for debate given an ending that includes a virtually unchanged relationship with a cold father and an utterance of continued travel towards a particular goal in the last sentence of the novel. The last line, in John's words, articulates a continued march towards an undefined and unknowable telos: "I'm ready. [...] I'm coming. I'm on my way" (221). If anything is settled, existing in the present of the end of the novel as an acknowledged and knowable event, it is the "holy kiss" that Elisha places on John's forehead, the one that, in the sunlight of a new day, remains "like a seal ineffaceable forever" (225). John treasures this kiss, keeping in tact a line of desire that flows from male to male in a way that traditional Christian practice continues to hope to foreclose.

The ambiguity of the novel's ending or the ambivalence that I am trying to inject into our reading of it echoes Mel Chen's embrace of ambivalence in their theorization of toxicity as a mode of animacy between bodies that operates as a kind of relationality that may be racialized or queered. Though it goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, toxicity, a potentially queer affect that, felt or unfelt, perceptible or non-perceptible

---

[18] Here I'm thinking of Ferguson's chapter and an excerpt from Joseph Brown's fairly outdated article, "I, John, Saw the Holy Number: Apocalyptic Visions in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Native Son,*" when he writes, "[Baldwin] writes of a reality disconnected from true liberation, true freedom, true wholeness (holiness). The great achievement of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is that, at the end of the novel, John Grimes has endured—come through—a revelation that saves his life and restores him to a radical wholeness that had been thwarted by the deliberate abuse of his putative father, Gabriel" (61). This idea of a "radical wholeness" that comes at the end of the novel seems to be an optimistic reading at best and a complete misreading at worst.

reaches into the fabric of sociality in a manner that resonates with the deep way in which Baldwin sees queer affect burrowing into the foundations of a socially structuring structure like the black church:

> In view of the attempts of these works to suggest a future politics, or the recommendations for politics that might be extracted from them, toxic affect is certainly not suggested as a panacea. It is a (re-)solution to the question of what to do with the ambivalence of queerness only to the extent that it does not represent a choice: it is *already* here, it is not a matter of queer political agency so much as a queered political state of the present. […] Thus, toxicity, as a queer thing or affect, both is and is more than horizon, which is unpredictable and, furthermore synchronically traceable only to the extent that we not remain ontologically faithful. Toxicity fails over and again to privilege rationality's favorite partner, the *human* subject, rather defaulting to chairs, couches, and other sexual orientations, but we might be wrong to disavow its claim to rationality altogether. If we let affect fall to object life, or to the interanimation that surrounds us, one example of which toxicity illuminates very precisely, then perhaps there is a chance to take up (not revive, as it is far from "old and tired") *queer* as something both like itself and yet also entirely different. (220-221)

It is not my argument here that the queer affect/s that I engage with in this dissertation prefer to attach to objects rather than humans, the way in which Chen thinks through an affect that queers temporality by locating a future that will be in the present of what is. Queer and racialized affects are pervasive and overlapping, extensive and ingrained, in Chen's formulation, much like identity categories in Jasbir Puar's assemblage model. In the postscript to *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar engages with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblages as "collections of multiplicities" in order to argue for attention paid to those interpersonal forces between bodies that are not marked as identity but are instrumental in group formation and cohesion. As she argues:

> There is no entity, no identity, no queer subject or subject to queer, rather queerness coming forth at us from all directions, screaming its defiance, suggesting a move from intersectionality to assemblage, an affective conglomeration that recognizes other contingencies of belonging (melding, fusing, viscosity, bouncing) that might not fall so easily into what is sometimes

> denoted as reactive community formations—identity politics—by control theorists. The assemblage, a series of dispersed and mutually implicated and messy networks, draws together enunciation and dissolution, causality and effect, organic and nonorganic forces" (211).

Puar's model of the assemblage allows for a vast array of diverse and, ultimately, messy kinds of communities that refuse the need to be united along positive lines for the purposes of constructing a coherent progressive political platform. With this in mind, whether or not an institution wishes to foreclose the possibility of certain kinds of identity, there is no accounting for the intensities that reach backwards, forwards, around, and through bodies and temporalities, especially in those spaces that so value the place of emotion in their own cultural politics.

To return to Baldwin's novel, John's time on the threshing floor, largely spent reckoning with his place in the church and conversing with spirits that force him to interrogate exactly why he has had such an attenuated attachment to the church, prompts a newfound interest in the day-to-day operations of the Temple of the Fire Baptized Church. John's concern with the daily management of the church shifts that attachment from one coming out of guilt-ridden duty to one of choice, an act of what M. Jacqui Alexander calls radical self-possession or what Ann Cvetkovich interprets as "a terminology for establishing the felt relation to body and home that (political) depression interrupts" (*Depression* 121). If we take Alexander's position that the spiritual or the sacred is itself an epistemological category that engages with secular humanism instead of standing outside of it, it becomes plausible to read Baldwin's construction of the threshing floor as an affective site that allows for the possibility for new, more radical subjectivities to emerge, especially within a Pentecostalist organization. By giving in to

emotionalism rather than rejecting it as antirational and, thus, non-productive, Baldwin uses this fundamental Pentecostalist practice as a means for ushering in new kinds of queer relationalities within Christianity that do not need to be sanctioned via discourse. The excess of emotion that seems so paramount to how the Pentecostalist movement operates problematizes the outright shunning of queer desire because such a shunning ignores how all kinds of emotions and affects are constitutive of how black religion coheres as a set of collective-making practices.

In essence, the threshing floor by its very nature allows John to work through the emotions that previously inhibited his own personal development and his civic participation in an institution that has historically been at the center of black politics in the United States. This is not meant as speculation into any one specific future outside of the chronotope of the novel. However, by constructing the foundation for a queer sense of self or a queer presence inside of the church, Baldwin's protagonist can start the process of reaching radical self-possession in a way that makes his queer desire less about himself and more about how it already fits into the erotic logics of spiritual practice in all of its forms. In her discussion of the dangers that are made manifest by segregation of all kinds (in her words, racial, political, epistemological and personal), Alexander finds deep connections between the erotic, the Soul, and the Divine that foster both collectivity and self-determination:

> There is an inevitability (which is not the same as passivity) in this movement toward wholeness, this work of the spirit and the journey of the Soul in its vocation to reunite us with the erotic and the Divine. Whether we want it or not, it will occur. The question is whether we dare intentionally to undertake this task of recognition as self-reflexive human beings, open at the very core to a foundational truth: we are connected to the Divine through our connections with each other.

> Yet, no one comes to consciousness alone, in isolation, only for herself, or passively. (282-283)

The work that Alexander argues is required in the process of finding one's whole self or, at least, the sum of all of the parts of the person as assemblage, takes place for John on the threshing floor at the nexus of the body, the spirit, and the affective. John Grimes' overinvestment in affect on the threshing floor that constructs a new sense of belonging for him in the church. Most readings of the ending of this novel that posit it as wholly positive focus on the imagery of sunshine and the conversation between John's mother and a fellow congregant about how the child is finally coming home. The "holy kiss" between Elisha and John is stripped of its eroticism and barely worth mentioning because it takes place amongst Christian males, along presumably acceptable homosocial lines. Given the ways in which African American sexuality has consistently been theorized as the non-normative, the ways in which sexuality and religion have been critiqued as the non-normative, an apprehension of the proliferation of queer affect gives black Christianity a more supple foundation to work with when thinking about the kinds of nonheteronormative attachments that have clung onto it.

Trailing A Path of Decent Pleasures

On A Path of Decent Pleasures brings this work on queer affect, blackness, and black religious space and expression to a set of late 20th-century African American texts that are more open about sexuality than *Go Tell It on the Mountain* could ever hope to be. Each chapter of this project takes a different queer modality or relational mode—queer attachments, queer affective mapping, queer touch, and queer hemispheric contact—and

shows how each has helped to fundamentally structure how African Americans express their spirituality. If black activism in the United States has so frequently aligned with religion and religious institutions, then a more open black politics must account for how its seemingly incommensurate properties of queerness and religion have harmoniously interplayed for African Americans in the near and distant past. By reading these texts for their queer attachments and against the grain of the identitarian impulse, I argue that an attention to queer intensities and drives provides us with a richer and broader range of political imaginings. By attending to these non-identity based strategies for constructing a black politics that is both queer and spiritual, my work challenges the notion that the negligible inclusion of token black queer folk makes any movement for social change radical or open. Rather, in order to find the margins of such radical openness, we must uncover and identify these other material ways in which black religious culture has been queered.

In chapter 1, "'Your Love to Me Was More Wonderful than the Love of Women': The Affective Economies of Black Queer Fellows(hip) in James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*," I turn to Baldwin's last published novel as it deftly considers the queer affective intensities that would have circulated during the Civil Rights Movement amongst protestors, performers, and activists that travelled around the American South. The relationship between the novel's protagonist, Arthur, and his band-mates adds an erotic charge to the work of producing and performing gospel music. This queer intensity irradiates outwards from the boundaries of the sonic in order to reorganize the affective field of sacred spaces. The multilayered signification of the songs as declarations of love directed at both God and a queer lover makes the space of the church a space of queer

(be)longing in which congregates actively (even if unwittingly) participate in the queer act.

My second chapter, "'But Go Thou and Preach the Kingdom of God': Queering the Spatial Cartographies of Religion and Power in the Fiction of Randall Kenan" considers affective mapping, the act of assessing how affective experiences have influenced one's sense of political selfhood within one's own built environment, as a strategy for constructing a counter archive that can allow marginalized populations within marginalized populations to make a claim on how histories are constructed. Kenan's work tells the story of Tims Creek, North Carolina from two perspectives—the institutional archive meticulously catalogued by the town's self-appointed archivist and a tortured trip through memory lane taken by a gay black teenager possessed by demons. Rather than focus on the sacrificial suicide of Horace Cross as that which prompts Tims Creek to evaluate its relationship to homosexuality, I argue that it is the archive of queer memory indexed by a child forced to relive his memories by the demons he accidentally conjures in a gesture of self-healing that compels a town to reevaluate its queer religious history. In essence, the closed circuit of memory that Cross traces and its attention to the ordinary affects of young black queer life work against an attachment to lands and histories that actively try to erase their own queer past.

Chapter 3, "Bodily Attunements: Healing Time and the Body in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt* Eaters and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" argues that the act of touch and personal attunement with the black female body amongst other black female bodies provides black women with a foundation upon which a black feminist politics materialize. Following Hortense Spillers' work on the iconography of the flesh, I turn to

the scene of healing as a specific call to action, one that places an interplay of spirituality and corporeality at the forefront of civic engagement.[19] The contact of skin upon skin that touching subjects can endure in the scene of healing extends the self and builds community upon an ethics of care that allows those subjects to make their own world or connect worlds together, across, and against traditional genealogical models. Both Morrison and Bambara make space for a form of relationality between black women that is open to various forms of reaching and touching that connect women on the deeply female and spiritual plane that, according to Audre Lorde's deployment of the erotic, endures as a remarkable source of power.[20] By focusing on both the nonmaterial and the corporeal drives that preside over each healing practice, I argue, black women recalibrate the logics of violence that historically have been imprinted onto their bodies.

Chapter 4, "Walker's *Mestizo*," departs a bit from the rest of the dissertation in that it incorporates Mexico as an important queer borderland and site of black queer presence that comes to affect black queers in and of the United States. This chapter takes Alice Walker's *By the Light of My Father's Smile* as its central object and argues that in that novel Walker sketches a hemispheric blackness that recognizes the critical importance of Mexico as a site of black queer diasporic consciousness that has been underutilized despite that country's long history of appealing to African Americans in times of oppressive crisis. By inventing a tribe of mixed-race indigenous people with their own spiritual framework that allows a black family to find their most whole selves (for better or for worse), Walker asks readers to consider how best to reincorporate

---

[19] See Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), 67.

[20] See Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (2007), 53.

Mexico into black Americans' understanding of what José Martí calls "Our America."[21] *By the Light of My Father's Smile* reorients blackness' positionality within and attachment to not only America but to freedom in all of that term's capaciousness by reinvigorating a history that may have largely been lost to the archive but does find definition through the affects that resonate behind.

In sum, this dissertation, at the very least, complicates our cultural understanding of the relationship between spirituality, race, and sex by attending to lived experience at the granular level of affect. The writers that I study here are not interested in thinking about black relationality or community without sex or spirituality and the reading methods and practices that I apply and exemplify here extend the work of scholars like Ann Cvetkovich and Jennifer Nash who see the genealogy of the affective turn in literary and cultural studies as inherently being routed through black feminist thought and inquiry.[22] As black queer studies shares a similar genealogy that is heavily indebted to if not wholly dependent on black feminism of the latter half of the 20th century, this project stands at the nexus of these fields in order to ask how we can see the queered, constitutive pieces of black belonging that always felt just beyond perception.

---

[21] See José Martí, "Our America" (2002), 288-295.
[22] See Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), 115-153; and Jennifer C. Nash, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality" (2011).

CHAPTER 1: "Your Love to Me Was More Wonderful than the Love of Women": The Affective Economies of Black Queer Fellows(hip) in James Baldwin's Just Above My Head

> Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. […] The only way [the white man] can be released from the Negro's tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power and, armed with spiritual traveller's checks, visits surreptitiously after dark.
>
> - James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross"

To any scholar of James Baldwin, the prose that makes up this chapter's epigraph should seem quite familiar—so familiar for some that the emotional gravitas behind these lines may have lost some of the luster that made this essay so radical and revolutionary when it was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1962 and then published as the second essay in *The Fire Next Time* the following year. Here, in this quote, love stands as a fundamental attachment between blacks and whites, becoming one of the central tenets that can lead to proper racial understanding. Interracial love breaks away from a white comprehension of race that relies on having a (white) intrinsic value that blacks can only strive for and never obtain. In effect, love produces a sense of identification that undermines and unsettles the power of a white/black paradigm, a binary that clearly would have held much currency in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement. I begin with this quote because for so long it has remained a cornerstone of what could be called Baldwin's radical politics of love. In Baldwin's formulation, love replaces abject fascination as the former allows white people to actually see black people not only as

their equals but also as full human beings and national subjects while the latter has made black people into spectacles of entertainment in the white imagination. For Baldwin, becoming black is less about identification of even empathy—rather, getting to know actual people rather than observing them would reveal the utter lack of envy that black people feel towards white people. If white people were willing to love black people, they would come to realize that they have twisted and projected their own zealous jealousy of black people onto black people from the perches of their power.

"Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within" has been cropped, decontextualized, and circulated as speaking to how love disarms us and allows for a true intersubjectivity that is functionally impossible in reality. Much like Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s quote in which he discusses wanting his children to be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, these lines are deployed in the context of a misguided post-racial politics, as if the totality of King's or Baldwin's philosophies could be summed up as being either racial-neutral or as placing equal burdens on blacks and whites to do the work of racial justice. By ignoring sentences only slightly removed from those quoted in the epigraph of this chapter in which he debates the successes that have come out of extracting African people from their homes, replacing the indigenous religions that replenished black bodies on the continent with the "spiritual aridity" that has taken hold for Baldwin as a former Christian, those words end up doing unintended, much more generous work (*Fire* 342). Indeed, as Bill Lyne notes, Baldwin's use of love at this point in the essay, only a few pages before its conclusion, feels gimmicky and desperate, "obscur[ing] the clear-eyed assessment of the American racial landscape that comes before it. Baldwin's bravura

faith in an abstract and hypothetical community of relatively conscious blacks and whites is inversely proportional to the evidence he is increasingly unable to muster for its possibility" (27).

Love in *The Fire Next Time*, however, ends up requiring too much of white Americans. Baldwin recognizes that those in power rarely, if ever, give up that power willfully when asked. As a result, Baldwin quickly turns to enumerating a black history that should have already been properly incorporated into what we call American history. The efficacy of a radical politics of love quickly loses some of its luster when Baldwin recalls a conversation with Elijah Muhammed, leader of the Nation of Islam. Baldwin's earnest question, "I love a few people and they love me and some of them are white, and isn't love more important than color?," is met with "bitter isolation and disaffection," characterized as being shaped by members of the religious movement that are in attendance (*Fire* 327). Muhammed's advice comes swiftly and with a staccato rhythm that powerfully portrays unwavering forcefulness and conviction: "Return to your true religion […]. Throw off the chains of the slavemaster, the devil, and return to the fold. Stop drinking his alcohol, using his dope—*protect your women*—and forsake the filthy swine'" (*Fire* 330). The aside about protecting women, embedded in a sentence mostly concerned with abstention from harmful vices that whites peddled into black communities, does little to separate black women from commodities to be exchanged between black and white men. Baldwin reinforces Muhammed's point in one of the more masculinist assertions that he makes in that essay:

> Protect your women: a difficult thing to do in a civilization sexually so pathetic that the white man's masculinity depends on a denial of the

> masculinity of the blacks. Protect your women: in a civilization that emasculates the male and abuses the female, and in which, moreover, the male is forced to depend on the female's bread-winning power. Protect your women: in the teeth of the white man's boast. "We figure we're doing you folks a favor by pumping some white blood into your kids." (330-331)

Much work has been done critiquing the heteromasculinist impulse in Baldwin's essays, particularly during the Black Power Movement and after Eldridge Cleaver's critique of *Another Country* in the latter writer's *Soul on Ice*, published in 1968. In an essay on privacy and black nationalism in the work of Baldwin, Douglas Field, alongside a reading of Stanley Crouch and Michele Wallace, describes how increasingly after the publication of *The Fire Next Time,* Baldwin would dismiss certain American intellectuals based simply on his assessment of their manhood, a decidedly heteronormative category. Field argues that despite the dismissal of Baldwin by many Black Power leaders and Black Arts artists, their judgment of his nonfiction work as appropriately defending a particular brand of black masculinist leadership "illustrates the ways in which Baldwin was viewed, as an anachronism, but also how the Black Power Movement was indebted to his rhetoric" (468).

This reading of Baldwin's rhetoric as language that could be appropriated by the Black Power Movement relies on the artists of that movement not taking a full account of Baldwin's work even after *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, and *Another Country* would mark him as a writer interested in the intersection of race and sexuality. While Baldwin's essays would continue to remain fairly uninterested in issues of sexuality until well into the 1980's, his short story collection, *Going to Meet the Man*, would be published in 1965 and would include a story like "The Outing," which had been

printed almost a decade and a half earlier and featured the same kind of muted same-sex desire between black male adolescents that could be found in an early novel like *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. 1968 would see the publication of *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, a novel that features a bisexual protagonist and the first depiction of same-sex attraction and sexual relations between two black adult males in Baldwin's oeuvre.

And yet, it is not until Baldwin's last novel, *Just Above My Head*, which was first published in 1979, that a sustained engagement with how love can be embedded in a racial politics that takes queer sexuality and religious identification seriously takes shape. This novel represents a middle ground between a body of non-fiction that would make love the centerpiece of a collaborative interracial politics and a black militarist sensibility that would become at least somewhat useful to Black Arts Movement artists. *Just Above My Head* turns love inward, focusing primarily on the effects of intraracial familial, platonic, erotic, and sexual love without deeply exploring how that love can irradiate outward to connect racial groups that, at best, have been bound together by the antipathy for and obsession with the subordinated racial group by the racial group in power. In this text, intraracial assemblages are constructed in order to be more thoughtful about how the various intersectional identities within blackness could find new ways to come together that go beyond simply tolerating the inclusion of those who also identify as "queer" or "homosexual" or "gay." It asks readers to consider what exactly about queer sexuality, queer affects, and queer intensities on their own terms could be useful for political organizing or racial collectivities. And, rather than jettison the spirituality that has embedded itself in how American racial politics emerges (for better or for worse), Baldwin accounts for what effects queering spirituality has for black Americans who

have recognized and drawn out, rather than erased, the queer resonances that scholars like E. Patrick Johnson and bell hooks have claimed have often been enfolded in black spiritual practices.[23]

Love, an affective force that irradiates between bodies, cathects to bodies, and helps to arrange bodies into groups, plays a crucial role in this precisely because, as Lauren Berlant argues, "[r]omantic love is the environment in which we can know what we know about attachment. […] Banal or sublime, love's function is to mark the subject's binding to the scenes to which s/he must always return" (439). For Berlant, romantic love is all about the possibility that it engenders, namely the possibility that no politics needs to keep optimism and reason as polar opposites. This optimism need not take the form of an unattainable horizon of queer potentiality or a queer utopia to borrow terms that come out of José Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*. While Muñoz's now somewhat infamous assertions that "[q]ueerness is not yet here" and "[q]ueerness is an ideality" are quite provocative, I am much more interested in the idea that "[w]e must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*" (1). This figuration of a then and there imbued with the affective forms behind corporeal attachments can help us alter both a present and a future unwedded from the harsh quotidian realities of late capitalism and heteronormativity. Recentering the discourse of a historical moment that the nation thinks it "knows" to focus on the

[23] Important articles and books that do this kind of work include E. Patrick Johnson's aforementioned article, "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community," and *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* along with relevant chapters of bell hooks' *All About Love: New Visions* and *Salvation: Black People and Love.*

intensities and attachments that seem to be unknowable provides us with a fuller understanding of both a particular historical accumulation and its myriad criticisms.

Queer Affective ***In-between-ness***

But, first, from where does the impetus for this gesture toward queer affect come? The recent turn to affect in queer studies has certainly been useful for thinking about the accumulation of stuff that occurs in the recovery of queer histories. It has also been interested in a reconsideration of the everyday and what kinds of attachments and intensities bring what kinds of bodies together. This chapter is very much interested in both of these projects, thinking closely about what material effects a historical recovery project like *Just Above My Head* has on how certain bodies can be represented as interacting progressively and politically. In essence, by focusing on the queer affective impulses that undergird everything from the music to the interpersonal relations behind the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin asks us to consider and evaluate why racial politics continue to ignore their queer, non-normative, and deviant drives. Rather than push further away from the indictments of pathology and the programs of respectability that he grew up reacting to as a black activist who happened to be queer, *Just Above My Head* is an exercise in exploring what exactly was (sexually) deviant about the Movement.

Erica Edwards' recent book, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, takes on a number of post-Civil Rights texts that challenge the predominant narrative of the movement in national cultural memory. She describes what she calls "black political postmodernity" as an impossible reconciliation of a loss of past charismatic leaders with an envisioning of future black leadership. It is a haunting of the present that takes on the

form of a nostalgia that "delivers us from the 'shell as hard as steel'—the rationalist order of capitalist modernity—and catapults us into eternal time through magic and/or other proof of power, just as the charismatic scenario draws us into a suspended salvational structure of affect that mediates between a past that has been glorious and a future that promises to be more so" (144). This, however, she marks as a phenomenon that really takes hold in the 1990's with satirical novels like Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*. While black feminism of the 1960's critiqued the narrative of civil rights as episodic and led by singular charismatic masculine leaders, pointing out how this narrative actively erased the contributions of women both as pronounced leaders and as a group engaged in the very important realm of everyday resistances, Edwards argues that later work used humor to defamilarize the present's relationship to this particular history. However, the "suspended salvational structure of affect" that Edwards posits as already disrupting that very relationship can be seen in much of the work that comes after the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements. These affective resonances do some of the work of filling in the gaps of cultural memory by operationalizing what may have been lost but remains buried underneath the surface.

The turn to affect and, more specifically, negative affect, in queer studies has been an integral component for constituting what Ann Cvetkovich describes as "an alternative to the model of gay pride, carving out new possibilities for claiming queer, gay, and lesbian identities that don't involve a repudiation of the affects brought into being by homophobia" (47). Here Cvetkovich speaks specifically about a reclamation of shame because it reappropriates the negative feeling that a social phenomenon like homophobia engenders and inflects it with new meanings that can be useful for a queer politics. In

essence, what was once negative can be embraced and used as a catalyst for new kinds of futurity that deviate from heteronormative models that that have historically dominated how society thinks about its own fate.

It is queer theory's recent take on history and recapturing negative feelings that makes a turn to queer affect so exciting in this moment when the Civil Rights Movement is being critiqued, contemplated, and memorialized. Many critics, including Belinda Robnett, Michele Wallace, Marlon Ross, Bettye Collier-Thomas, and Danielle L. McGuire have done the work of excoriating the Civil Rights Movement for its strategic flattening out of black identities into a monolithic black identity for the sake of simplicity and a political message that could not be cast aside as incoherent in its multiplicities.[24] I am interested in queer affect here as opposed to queer identity because it is affect that cannot be cast aside even if identity can ostensibly can. This is because whereas identity becomes that which can be stifled, suppressed, ignored, or erased from our memory, affect, according Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "is found in those intensities that pass *body to body* (human, nonhuman, part-body and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and world, and in the very passages or variations between those intensities and resonances themselves" (1, emphasis mine). Because affects circulate and because they are mobile, attaching themselves to bodies at the level of subconscious or unconscious knowing, a notion of queer affect and

[24] See Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979); Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin's edited collection, *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (2001); Danielle L. McGuire's *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (2010); and, Belinda Robnett's *How Long? How Long: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (1997).

its relation to the Civil Rights Movement can be read through and across memories even when queer identity or queer epistemologies seem noticeably absent. And, since it becomes difficult to argue that "queer affect" itself has been actively erased from these histories (especially when something like "queer affect" becomes difficult to even pin down), we can skip over censure and focus on the recuperation and absorption of how a queer and a civil rights politics intersect.[25]

The attention to affective drives allows Baldwin to narratologically make claims about what was queer about the Civil Rights Movement without attaching the queer to self-contained identities or uninterrupted selfhoods. If affect lies outside the self, even as it holds as a constitutive part of the self, and if affect moves in between bodies in a way that carves out relations that need to be accounted for, Baldwin sidesteps what could be seen as irrelevant questions about how black queer activists made sexuality central to their personal political ideologies, a question that would be sidestepped largely because many of the most visible black activists who were queer would usually call little attention, if any, to their sexuality.

Queer affect and the affective economies that it engenders become useful for the purposes of representation because, as Jasbir Puar argues, "affect [within a Deleuzian

---

[25] Though queer theory has hesitated to make broader connections between African American studies and affect studies, it can be argued that a similar kind of affective reading of the African American community is not new. In her seminal work on black feminist thought, Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, tracks the ways in which expressiveness and emotions in that community can be found in the framework of a black civil society, especially when an ethics of caring that she suggests constitutes an alternative way of knowing for African American women. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), 161-215. Most recently, Sharon Patricia Holland's new book, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, thinks through how certain affective modes contribute to how racism operates on an everyday level.

frame] is a physiological and biological phenomenon, signaling why bodily matter matters, what escapes or remains outside of the discursively structured and thus commodity forms of emotion, of feeling…as what escapes our attention, as what haunts the representational realm rather than merely infusing it with emotive presence" (207). So, affect, a drive that stands outside representation even as it "haunts the representational realm" occasions a turn away from "identity," a category that so often feels rigorously and discursively bound. When identity is not explicitly revealed, indexed, and catalogued, it becomes that which can be denied when reckoning with the burdens and accumulations of the past.

Further, when same sex desire floats outside the parameters of taking place between queer-identified persons, that desire is usually marked either by its ephemerality as a fleeting moment of weakness or as confirmation that a person is not only queer but decidedly homosexual. When she turns to José Muñoz's essay, "Feeling Brown," Puar argues that Muñoz's construction of communal ties through affect "invokes affect as always already within signification, within narrative, functioning as a form of critical resistance to dominant modes of being and becoming" (208). This reads similarly to Michael Warner's early claim in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* that for every queer person, the stigmatization of their sexuality is wrapped up in a host of other cultural and social issues and being queer 'means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences"—a rather depressive (if not depressing) position (xiii). It makes "critical resistance" a central aspect of queer identity before discourses of homonormativity challenged the relationship between the queer body and

cultural hegemony.[26] By attaching everyday resistance to affect, opposition to dominant cultural logics and discursive frameworks floats above the realm of cognition, acting outside of any conscious inclination towards participation in social justice. This does not so much disprove or disclaim Warner's positions; rather, it places the burden of everyday resistance on something other than what would be recognized as queer activism.

By shifting the discourse from queer desire to something more like a queer affective economy, I aim to take seriously how the realms of the affective and the political interface phenomonologically. In my introduction, I trace a phenomenological affect theory out of the work of Eve Sedgwick and Silvan Tomkins but, for the purposes of this chapter, my understanding of affect also comes out of a critical apparatus sketched by Benedictus de Spinoza in his 1677 treatise, *Ethics*; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's's mobilization of Spinoza in their own work on how affect plays a role in organizing and reorganizing social bodies; and, Brian Massumi's work on what he calls "the political economy of belonging." For Spinoza, affect is defined as "affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections" (70). These affects and affections lie outside of or behind rational thought or reasoned actions even as affects are central to how new knowledge and new subjectivities are produced. Affect *becomes* a focal node in the organization of knowledge rather than resting as an *a priori* piece of knowable

[26] See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (2004). In that book, Duggan describes a new homonormativity as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (50).

knowledge in and of itself. These new subjectivities are produced within social networks or scenes of what Deleuze and Guattari call "assemblages" that operate:

> [in and of themselves] in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs. We will never ask what [an assemblage] means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes it own converge. (4)

By being social bodies within a hierarchized social body, we learn and self-construct in relation to others in contact, a phenomenon that should sound very similar to the racialized phenomenology that Frantz Fanon, as a student of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty would theorize in *Black Skin, White Masks.* Though this idea of self-organization would have profound effects on Fanon's work, it is Spinzoa who theorizes in *Ethics* that "the human mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing, except through the ideas of the affections of its own body" (51). To know the other, to cross the divide produced by alterity (a body that is not the self) begins with the casual connections and experiences that occur when bodies circulate in the same geographical spaces. As bodies move and encounter one another they endure in a constant state of reorganization as they affect and are affected by other bodies. Coming to term with these affects, or the affective economies in which they circulate and affect bodies within a social field, becomes central for how any sort of organization, agenda, or social movement chooses to organize itself in terms of social, legal, and political structures.

By revealing or reencountering the affective economies that circulate within a particular social movement, we can begin to account for what had previously been

unaccountable. As Jasbir Puar notes, “while dismantling the representational mandates of visibility identity politics that feed narratives of sexual exceptionalism, affective analyses can approach queernesses that are unknown or not cogently knowable, that are in the midst of becoming, that do not immediately and visibly signal themselves as insurgent, oppositional, or transcendent” (204). By tracking the ways in which queer desire directs itself at a particular historical moment, a writer can begin to make sense of what Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie, alongside a reading of Brian Massumi, Felix Guattari, and Erin Manning call the “affective potential” of an event, which they go on to describe as the potential “for things to turn out differently, as they inevitably will (despite the ‘logic of delimited sets’). We live affective transitions, the sensations of events as they come into being. At the same time, we live the affective carriage of future potential, affect’s transversality through different temporalities—affect’s *virtuality*” (153). Perhaps this could be said of any piece of historical fiction, that it is in the nature of narrating past events that such a virtuality, an accumulation of vectors of what Massumi would call “rational potential,” should emerge. Indeed, as Massumi argues, “the virtual, the pressing crows of incipiencies and tendencies is a realm of *potential*. In potential is where futurity combines, unmediated, with pastness, where outsides are infolded and sadness is happy […]. The virtual is a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect; where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt—albeit reduced and contained” (35). Here, Massumi is attaching the adjective *virtual* to the body but it is useful to think about this in terms of a *virtuality* that rests in narration as well, precisely because of the *potential* that narrated worlds can imagine. The narrated world that Baldwin shifts and meanders through in his last novel calls to our attention the *queer*

potential that cultural memory so often posits as having been truncated by the historical events of the Civil Rights Movement. It is this very idea of *potentiality* that Baldwin is playing with here in his late career as his work begins to fall out of favor, even with literary critics.

In addition to taking note of the ways in which a queer affective presence can be drawn out of how we remember the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin must account for how the queer desire felt between black people in their communities does not simply bounce off of their spiritual longings without irrevocably changing them in some meaningful way. This embodied struggle between queer and spatial practices need not simply have an antagonistic relationship; though many accounts of queer persons who grow up in various spiritual homes, cultures, and institutions highlight the strife that marks not only being closeted within religious communities but also how that closet does not reside in a religious house, less attention has been paid to how a negotiation between queer desire and religious/spiritual identification actually plays out, particularly for black queers.

It will be my contention that Baldwin's last novel is interested in helping to carry out the affective potential of a particular history to its limits in order to gesture towards a better political future. Baldwin provides us with new modalities for thinking about black queer spirituality through an attention not only to a queer gospel singer's relation to gospel music and how that music is rearranged by and rearranges queer intensities and queer affective attachments but also how those affective intensities permeate through and affect all bodies that they come in contact with. This allows a queer attachment to spirituality to reorganize what the spiritual looks like, even in the face of those who may

have an aversion to out queer identity. So, while black queer spirituality finds its roots within a particular spiritual tradition, it settles within that tradition and alters it on a preconscious or unconscious level. Similarly, the political movements that rely on these larger spiritual traditions are changed as well. If the Civil Rights Movement has been embedded into cultural memory as a hyper-masculinist, hyper-heteronormative, hyper-religious political project, Baldwin works through the cultural nostalgia for that movement by working through the range of affects that play on the surface of our memories but rarely are seen translated into a discursive frame. These affects, then, provide for their own unique model of futurity, one not lost in a shallow model of reproduction but a different model that continues to take seriously the model of futurity provided by a Christian framework.

(Black) Love, A Queer Feeling

"...relationality is not pretty, but the option of simply opting out of it, or describing it as something that has never been available to us, is imaginable only if one can frame queerness as a single abstraction that can be subtracted and isolated from a larger social matrix"

– Jose Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia

Just Above My Head begins with the death of its central character. Arthur Montana, a queer black gospel singer of some notoriety not only for his beautiful voice but also for his involvement with Civil Rights activism, figures into the novel as its first body, one not simply in decay but in total eradication and annihilation. Less the corporeal extension of a pronounced psyche and devoid of any sort of palpable personality, the black queer body is put on spectacular display, reduced to a biological excess that, in this moment, produces death: "The damn'd blood burst, first through the nostrils, then

pounded through the veins in his neck, the scarlet torrent exploded through his mouth, it reached his eyes and blinded him, and brought Arthur down, down, down, down, down" (3). Here, the body queers temporality, making it the focal point that the narrative is always progressing toward. Mere sentences after the body collapses onto itself, Hall (who is narrating Arthur's death from his perspective an ocean away) begins connecting that body not only to Arthur's profession as a gospel singer but also the description of his craft as "emotion-filled," a description of Arthur's voice that is meant to diminish its power in the discursive space of his eulogy (3). Thus, the tripartite relationship between power, the body, and affect is not an arbitrary connection.

Once the black queer body is destroyed, it triggers a chain of memories for Hall, Arthur's brother, and the primary narrator for the novel. This traumatic event has immediate consequences and quickly places Hall in a grieving process that is erratic, mired by undulating, repetitive, and volatile language. This repetition compulsion further affects the temporal process; as Patricia Clough argues, "trauma makes the past and future meet without there being a present. The future is collapsed into the past as the past overwhelms the present—all this usually taken as pathological in the psychological sense" (13). David Kazanjian and David Eng tend to agree with this assessment when they claim that "the past remains steadfastly alive in the present [in the case of loss]. This [continued engagement with loss and its remains] generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future" (4-5). In this way, the death of the black queer body, as overbearingly inescapable as it is given its place in the narrative, provides the text with a springboard through which new futures can be

imagined, using that body as the catalyst for the evaluation of new attachments that had previously been left to the wayside as a byproduct of cultural memory loss.

In what, until recently, may have been the longest sustained engagement with the work of post-1963 Baldwin, Lynn Orilla Scott contends that Arthur's homosexuality serves as "the basis for the emotional distance between Arthur and his family" (162), especially as he explores the developing relationship between him and his bandmate, Crunch. Alternative models of kinship that do not require the formation of a black nuclear family aside, the assessment of "emotional distance" as wholly negative ignores the generative creative possibilities that arise from the family's refusal to accept homosexual identity as a viable option. The negative affect of queer shame attaches itself to the gospel song, a pivotal sonic site of protest and resistance for black Americans. With the blossoming of these cultural objects so important for our understanding of the Civil Rights Movement out of the socially dead space of homophobia, we begin to see Baldwin engaging with the healthier queer politics that can arise out of engaging with negative affects like shame and anger and fear. Reflected in the familial rejection of homosexuality and the subsequent proliferation of artistic output, we see an influential gospel singer during the Civil Rights Movement moving towards a model of thought in which "[e]ngaging with and using the experience of failure as a resource is crucial to the construction of a model of political subjectivity that we can all live with" (Love 71). The progression towards such a politics rings true even if readers are never able to step out of a future in which Arthur has to die, debased, alone, and separated from the American landscape that his and others' music has helped to shape.

Arthur's influence, however, does not remain in London on that bathroom floor. As will be clear, his affective presence saturates every part of the novel, attaching itself to objects and bodies and creating new orientations for those still being in this world, attached to him by their love for him. His death and the resonances that he leaves behind allow for the process of reparation to begin occurring on multiple levels and across multiple stories that take up the space of the text. For Hall, the loss of the loved object yields intense grief. The emotion here is excessive and leaves the body prostrate in the bathroom, at the point of seeming near death and in need of rescue. Rescue from the grief produced by the loss of queer life comes, perhaps somewhat problematically, in the form of heterosexual sex:

> With my eyes still tight closed, I clung to my woman, and her sigh, her moan, dragged me up from the deep. I was trembling. Her fingers on my back began to stroke the trembling out of me. My arms tightened around her, her thighs encircled me, her feet tickled my ass, the hairs in the crack of my ass. She opened, I entered; I entered and she opened. […] I was so grateful, grateful, I felt such a gratitude, and I clung to my wife, who held me tight an waited for me, and then after a pause, a mighty pause, I shot it all into her, shot the grief and the terror and the journey into her, and lay on her breast, held like a man and cradled like a child, released. (9)

Grief and dealing with loss (in effect, the mourning process) become a shared experience between Hall and Ruth, one that despite the vocabulary of relief or reparation that the passage indicates ("dragged me up;" "stroke the trembling out of me;" "shot it all into her, shot the grief and the terror;" "cradled like a child, released") never seems to be fully resolved, making the novel appear to be like an exercise in melancholia as it makes the past feel palpable in the present, as Eng, Kazanjian, and Clough have suggested. Countering Freud's own conclusions in "Mourning and Melancholia," that melancholia "passes off after a certain time has elapsed without leaving traces of any gross change"

(589), this alternative strategy of releasing certain affective states through the expulsion of reproductive material in an intimate yet biological process, may allow for temporary solace for the griever but never allows grief to resolve itself. The melancholia remains *and* it means to leave the impression of a gross change. It continues to mark how both the narrator and readers relate to the historical past. Rather than let go of grief, working through it by way of the narrative writ large and in this particular scene of heterosexual sex, Baldwin etches out an alternative method for chronicling the Civil Rights Movement as a project that may strive for queer illegibility but ultimately fails to deny how queerness amongst black bodies can circulate and proliferate. Though still under the banner of melancholia in its ability to keep the lost object from the past in the present, the process of working through loss in this way allows it to fester, revealing more of its inner workings.

The loss of Arthur, which, as I have suggested ends up haunting the entirety of the narrative in its evocation of the beginning of the novel and the actual death scene's emergence in its final pages, sparks the beginning of a new kind of historical track, one in which past(s), present(s), and future(s) messily enfold into one another. One of the first ways in which this manifests is in Hall's recognition of his own intimate past, one that never fully keeps to the deep grooves of black masculine heterosexual identity. Contrary to what may have been expected, Hall refuses to properly deny this queer past when it comes up in conversation. In what seems to be the first time that he has spoken to his son, Tony, about Arthur's life since his death, Hall shakily recollects the queer histories in which both he and his brother have participated:

> I know—before Jimmy—Arthur slept with a lot of people—mostly men, but not always. He was young, Tony. Before your mother, *I* slept with a lot of women"—I do not believe I can say this, his eyes do not leave my face—"mostly women, but—in the army—I was young, too—not always. You want the truth, I'm trying to tell you the truth—anyway, let me tell you, baby, I'm proud of my father, your uncle, and I'll be proud of him until the day I die. You would be, too. Whatever the fuck your uncle was, and he was a whole lot of things, *he was nobody's faggot*. (28, emphasis mine)

This admission of queer relations painfully illustrates the ineluctable forces that tether these sexually othered brothers to one another in ways that stretch beyond the bonds of kinship. For as much as so much of the relationship between Arthur and Hall is predicated on their being brothers first and business partners second, a slanted relationship in their past queer sexual practices emerges. In this exchange, the first in which Hall can actually vocalize to another individual how he truly felt about his brother, the expressed intimacy between men that they both share becomes that worth mentioning. Residing underneath these genealogies is the queer affect with which both black men can identify and, though the dashed pauses and circuitous syntax indicates Hall's stark hesitation in relating a personal queer history to his son, its ability to be articulated in this private moment reveals a deeper attachment to Arthur's queerness that might have theretofore been muted. In essence, here, the discursive formulation of a particularly queer affective tie that operates in a non-pathological way allows Hall to connect to both his son and his brother in a more open manner.

There is an accumulation of affect here that, yet again, provokes a bodily response in Hall. Intimacy attaches to nostalgia pressing down upon Hall after the memory of Arthur as "*nobody's faggot*" reopens a psychic wound. And, also again, the refolding of wounded subject into a heteronormative scene of affiliation allows that subject to heal.

As Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman suggests in her reading of this scene, "Hall's further declaration that his brother was 'nobody's faggot' destabilizes the link between sexual identity and gender performativity that is especially entrenched in African American communities. Hall's assertion finally assures Tony that Arthur was no more compromised than other African American men who are similarly besieged by the rages of American racism" (111). Though it may have been Hall's intention to flatten out his brother's experience to say that he may have been queer but he was not *so* queer that he did not share the problems of other African American men, the complexity of Baldwin's project seems to be brushed aside in Abdur-Rahman's analysis. The scene can stand in for some of what Baldwin is up to in this sprawling novel, but not because it undergirds a capitulation to the black nationalist project with slightly revised paramaters for what is acceptable when it comes to the expression of desire. Abdur-Rahman quotes *Just Above My Head* at length here but lost in the ellipsis is Hall's own unsettled admission of his own sexual relations with men. A reading of the quote without the admission still destabilizes the link between black politics and desire but, because Hall does not identify as a "faggot," such intimate relations do not figure into Baldwin's generative reading of what black intimacy looks like.

My point of contention here is that *Just Above My Head* rests on complex, shifting grounds of what constitutes intimacy between and for black people. This cannot be captured by understanding the novel as a return to familial love or a grand narrative of familial community for the black queer subject. The methods with which black queers attach themselves to such narratives is anything but straightforward. These attachments struggle alongside other attachments with queerness and desire that remain unaccounted

for in the indexing of black intimate practices. Does Hall remain the proper heteronormative subject after he admits to sexual relations to men in an unsettled fashion? Does his casual use of the black male body as a receptacle for erotic excess abroad keep him firmly invested in what Candice Jenkins calls the "salvific wish," a term that describes "a desire to rescue African Americans as a group from racist stigma through the embrace of bourgeois strictures of decorum and propriety" (67)? In other words, if gay sex happens in a foreign country, does it make a sound that can be heard back in a person's country of origin?

Because when Hall and Tony return to the scene of almost stereotypical black familial gathering, there is something that feels unsettling about how Hall reincorporates himself. Though Baldwin goes on to describe the new arrangement of objects that has taken place as Tony and Hall have their conversation outside, it is difficult to decouple the idea that the room is "now very different" with the rather heavy conversation that the reader has just witnessed. Hall himself notes that "the burden which has weighed on me so heavily and so long has begun, almost imperceptibly, to lift. I hardly know that this is what I feel; but this is what I feel. *I almost want to sing*, and the salads and the ribs and the peppers and the bread and the wine are delicious" (30; emphasis mine). Much like the previous scene of healing in which Hall must be rescued by his wife and then lose a part of himself in the deposit of his semen into her body, tensions produced by remembering the lost queer subject are allayed, albeit temporarily, by a reestablishment of intimate relations that are decidedly un-queer: heterosexual in a monogamous relationship that is endorsed by the state with a marriage contract. As Elizabeth Povinelli argues, "the intimate couple is a key transfer point between, on the one hand, liberal imaginaries of

contractual economics, politics, and sociality and, on the other, liberal forms of power in the contemporary world. Love, as an intimate event, secures the self-evident good of social institutions, social distributions of life and death, and social responsibilities for these institutions and distributions" (17). By capitulating to the logics of heterosexual sex and traditional familial gathering and their fantasies of security, Hall arguably returns to perpetuating the logics of liberal and neoliberal forms of power that continue to have negative effects on the everyday life of black people so soon after introducing the idea of acknowledging non-pathologizing queer intimacy as a method for constructing new practices of connectivity between black persons. That argument, however, breaks down when considering that unsettled feeling, a feeling that joins a queer and a non-queer brother through their intimate relationships.

In her book, *Private Lives, Proper Relations*, Candice Jenkins theorizes a notion of queering black patriarchy as a critical methodology for depathologizing notions of black intimacy in a way that does not require investment in the salvific wish, a project that empties out black intimacy of all of its complexity. For Jenkins, taking queerness seriously as a theoretical and cultural practice (in all of its capaciousness) allows African Americans to finally discard the notion of the salvific wish as a useful ideological apparatus. As she states, by "adopt[ing] queerness *as an ideology* of black sexual culture," successful anti-racist work along the lines of sexuality can be achieved (190). Though I am somewhat wary of the kind of radical openness that "queer" takes on in such a formulation, the step that would be required to distance racial uplift from an automatic demonization of anything deemed as sexually deviant would be a useful one. Hall's timid confession to his son that he has engaged in sex with other men begins this

work by destigmatizing what that means for a future generation. Though Hall does go on to speak about these men as if they are trash receptacles meant to satisfy sexual urges abroad, he refuses to actively dehumanize his sexual partners when he ultimately decides to disclose his activities. Instead, this disclosure means to help make more palpable the sexual liaisons that Arthur has had as Tony tries to make sense of what being "nobody's faggot" entails. In turn, it also helps Hall identify with the brother that he has lost on another intimate level.

What *Just Above My Head* does, as Lee Edelman suggests, is help to break down the heterosexist imaginary that produces singular, hypermasculine, male leaders.[27] This landscape of black heteronormative leadership is razed in order to build back up a constellation of new possibilities that require neither an unbroken progressive narrative nor the violence that Erica Edwards argues comes along with the construction of charismatic leadership.[28] Wholeness is replaced with holeness in the constitution of a black cultural leader who is given room to backslide and form communities in ways that differ from how Baldwin saw church communities thrive under the direction of fearless ministers and reverends when he made his rounds as a child preacher. This happens

---

[27] Lee Edelman, "The Part for the (W)hole: Baldwin, Homophobia, and the Fantasmatics of 'Race'" (1994): 42-43.

[28] Edwards writes, "charisma is founded in three forms of violence: the historical or historiographical violence of reducing a heterogeneous black freedom struggle to a top-down narrative of Great Man leadership; the social violence of performing social change in the form of a fundamentally antidemocratic form of authority; and the epistemological violence of structuring knowledge of black political subjectivity and movement within a gendered hierarchy of political value that grants uninterrogated power to normative masculinity" (xv). My aim is not to contend that *Just Above My Head* finds itself outside of the realm of violence but the novel does mean to challenge what our assumptions are when it comes to black male leaders. By narrating the queer impulses that propel some of those leaders into the spotlight, those leaders are not above violence in Edwards tripartite system; rather, they attempt to navigate the field in a way that looks and feels differently.

through the incorporation of permeability as a rather important mechanism for how bodies interact. Permeability is a capacious term for Edelman, one that goes beyond the ways in which sexual acts between men often require penetration.[29]

In a late essay published in *Playboy* in 1987, "To Crush a Serpent," Baldwin speaks candidly about what was expected even of him at a young age as a church leader:

> "I must—to be honest—add that my ministry almost certainly helped me through my adolescence by giving me something larger than myself to be frightened about. And it preserved, as it were, an innocence that, in retrospect, protected me. For, though I had been formed by sufficiently dire circumstance and moved in a severely circumscribed world, I was also just another curious, raunchy kid. […] I was able to see later watching other kids like the kid I had been, that this combination of innocence and eagerness can be a powerful aphrodisiac to adults and is perhaps the key to the young minister's force. (159)

The permeability here works in two directions; here, and in other parts of the essay, Baldwin describes the space of the church during a sermon as a field of affective excess that circulates and shapes how the congregation relates to its preacher and how the preacher can impress upon his congregation. Speaker and listeners become cathected in a way that privileges the emotions and desires that are drawn out of bodies without having them marked as queer or even as desire. When Baldwin suggests that he "hoped to love [the congregation] more than I would ever love any lover and, so escape the terrors of this life" ("Serpent" 160) that love may not be erotic but the ontologies of erotic and non-erotic love always put both in conversation with one another. Accepting this is how Robert Reid-Pharr gets away with imagining being "bathed in warm, soft light as we lay our heads on the breast of our forgiving savior, a savior who like a lover cares for us as individuals and not simply as wards or acolytes" when he talks about this novel in his

---

[29] Lee Edelman, "The Part for the (W)hole: Baldwin, Homophobia, and the Fantasmatics of 'Race'" (1994): 60.

monograph on choice and desire for the black intellectual (*Once* 105). He goes on to write that "the great promise of Christianity is that though we may now suffer, we can be assured that our savior, our lover, will attend to our most basic desires, including the desire to be caressed, protected, bathed in light" (105-6). Georges Bataille describes religious eroticism as "ambiguous […] in that all eroticism has a sacramental character, but the physical and the emotional are met with outside the religious sphere proper, while the quest for continuity of existence systematically pursued beyond the immediate world signifies an essentially religious intention. In its familiar Western form, religious eroticism is bound up with seeking after God's love" (16). Though Bataille describes eroticism as an act of violence, it is violence that is inflicted on us by the other and rearranges us at our most basic levels in a manner reminiscent of Edelman's assertion that the erotic bonds between characters like Arthur and Crunch rest heavily in the cross-permeability between their bodies.[30]

With this said, queer sex takes on two related yet disparate valances in Baldwin's novel. First, there are the queer sex acts that ostensibly take place without any intimate connection and then there are those that operate through a surfeit of personal affective material. The latter is represented by Hall's participation in unemotional queer sex as a soldier in the Korean War. As I have already suggested, however, the actual play of bodies in the throes of intercourse do not figure into his recollection of the scene. Instead, sex comes through crude diction and a series of disconnected and disconnecting affective

[30] Lee Edelman, "The Part for the (W)hole: Baldwin, Homophobia, and the Fantasmatics of 'Race'" (1994): 60.

responses. After casually revealing that he had "fucked everything" that he came across while overseas, he acknowledges the emotions that dominated after he was done:

> I had been revolted—but this was after, not before, the act. Before the act, when I realized from their eyes what was happening, I had adored being the adored male, and stretched out on it, all boyish muscle and throbbing cock, telling myself, What the hell, it beats jerking off. And I had loved it—the adoration, the warm mouth, the tight ass, the fact that nothing at all was demanded of me except that I shoot my load, which I was very, very happy to do. And I was revolted when it was over, not merely because it really was not me, but because I had used somebody merely as a receptacle and had allowed myself to be used merely as a thing. I was revolted that my need had driven me, as I considered it, so low: nevertheless, my need has driven me and could drive me there again. *And what did a woman feel?* (317-8; emphasis mine)

The immediate affective response of engaging in queer sex causes Hall to think critically about that which he desires: female companionship. Here, the ugly feeling of revulsion is less a product of homophobia and more a result of how these particular instances of sex transform the essence of the persons acting and being acted upon. There is a transactional component to sex here that reshapes the male body into a commodity with a use value. This works in both directions; just as Hall realizes that he has used certain bodies for what they could provide for him, he knows that he has also been used to attain gratification. The bidirectionality of using bodies for pleasure arouses an ugly feeling that Sianne Ngai describes as being "dialectically conjoined" with desire (333). For Ngai, disgust provokes an unequivocal response that deftly polices the boundary between subject and object while desire can traffic in ambiguities and vagueness. It is the capaciousness of desire that has made it so critically viable for the humanities writ large and for literary theory in particular. Ngai argues that the critical payoff for taking disgust seriously lies in the way in which such an unequivocally negative affect can be mobilized for the purposes of political theory and collectivizing, even as it serves to carve out space

for affects that, on the surface, may seem more politically viable—anger or excitement, for instance.

Here, the turn to negative affect that has been critically fruitful for queer studies and the field's relation to queer history resonates as useful for thinking about how non-queers can relate to queer or other histories. Rather than identify with the queer bottom or the woman who Hall sees as being passive in sexual intercourse, the boundary between subject and object that Ngai suggests is central to how disgust circulates in the social allows Hall (the subject) to finally consider how women (the object) figure into the schematic of his scenes of sexual conquest. Whereas those who have received his semen thus far in the text (his wife and his drinking buddies in Korea) have functioned largely as containers for his biological output and the affects attached to it, remembering which emotional responses accompanied sex that had in the moment seemed meaningless produces a deeper reflection about what lays behind the bodies that he interacts with on a daily basis. It is from this place of deviance that Hall is allowed to break the narrative of masculinist, chauvinistic leadership and begin to think more critically about feelings that had previously not registered with him. The subject position of the bottom finds purchase once another male can figure for him as that which is acted upon. His assumptions about sex, mainly that "*women like it as much as men*, okay, and *a stiff prick has no conscience*" (318), forecloses an engagement with the female emotions that Patricia Hill Collins has argued are central to the psychic life of black Americans.[31]

[31] The turn to emotions and feelings may have occurred relatively recently for queer studies but this kind of affective reading of the African American community is not new. In her seminal work on black feminist thought, Patricia Hill Collins, tracks the ways in which expressiveness and emotions in that community can be found in the framework of

Rather than remain in this place of bad feelings, however, Hall quickly turns inward to finally begin thinking about how women feel. Recalling the first sexual encounter between husband and wife, sex has the emotional backing of love in a way that makes the unidirectional flow of affective energy from male to female seem less parasitic than it does when Hall merely tries to find release through the exploitation and discarding of male bodies. What saves these acts (albeit problematically) is the way in which taking advantage of his drinking buddies allows Hall to reevaulate love at its core as he thinks about not only how he relates to women but also to the sacred elements of this intense feeling: "[I] wondered if I would find in myself the strength to give love, and to take it: to accept my nakedness as sacred, and to hold sacred the nakedness of another. For, without love, pleasure's inventions are soon exhausted. There must be a soul within the body you are holding, a soul which you are striving to meet, a soul which is striving to meet yours" (318). The dialectic between pleasure and the sacred raises a number of questions about the relationship between corporeality and ethereality that comes across in Reid-Pharr's formulation of the spiritual as dependent on the carnal when Arthur reveals that he could not find himself attracted to men or women in the immediate aftermath of his first sexual experience with an older gentleman who pays him after an act of sexual abuse against a minor. As will be discussed in relation to this scene with greater depth, the body and its

---

a Black civil society, especially within an ethics of caring that she suggests constitutes an alternative way of knowing for African American women. Black men adhere to this auxiliary epistemology as well because, as she argues, "they must resolve the contradictions that confront them in redefining Black masculinity in the face of abstract, unemotional notions of masculinity imposed on them" (264). Within the realm of lived experience for African Americans, she goes on to contend, "[n]either emotion nor ethics is subordinated to reason. Instead, emotion, ethics, and reason are used as interconnected, essential components in assessing knowledge claims" (266).

desires should be read more carefully as a moving component in how people relate to both their sense of spirituality and how that spirituality comes to find itself expressed through various modes of cultural production (*Once* 107).

None of this means to suggest that this moment is wholly positive; the turn to feelings here exudes condescension and contains a problematic conflation of black gay and black female experience. The desire for knowledge of female interiority itself rises up in a flash and then quickly dissipates; and yet, here we see the opening of a space for black male concern for black women that works against cultural memory's informing us that very little of this concern ever took place during the Civil Rights Movement. Interestingly, what gets us moving forward, problematically or not, is the black gay bottom. The bottom here, the "tight ass," becomes another "receptacle" into which Hall can shoot his load, the semen that previously had been associated with those negative feelings that arose upon Arthur's death—grief, anger, and shame. Hall relishes momentarily in the nothingness of the sex, even as it ends up dragging him down, further towards the bottom. Here, in this sexual position, and though he ends up recognizing that homosexual sex is not something he is actually interested in, Hall experiences a new epistemological framework that includes the possibility of a gendered schematic where there was not one before, linking the bottom, as Katherine Bond Stockton sees it working in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, to "questions of feeding, pleasuring, burying and mourning [and] the *way* of working out wounds" (69). In her monograph, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*, Stockton uses Morrison to argue against the lack of "value" placed in the bottom and all that that word encompasses while seeking a place for it within a sustainable strategy for black Americans. Perhaps Baldwin does this as well, albeit

through different channels. If, as Stockton contends, "[t]he era of civil rights was itself a period of symbolic reversal; […] was grounded in a bottom theology; and with its struggle over restrooms and buses […] offered a veritable discourse on backseats and toilets," Baldwin too attempts to recapture those bottoms and the affects associated with them (99).

Stockton's figuration of a "bottom theology," one marked by the repulsive stuff of everything from dirt to bodily excretions, creates channels for indecent pleasures that the community cannot recognize. By locating certain pleasures in dirt and excrement, a community can reevaluate that which it holds dear in the face of that which, at least ostensibly, disgusts it. Though the revulsion that comes after queer sex is important for Hall's looking forward, that revulsion does come out of what he most likely would consider to be a perverse pleasure in the stripped-down biology of sex. The disgust, in effect, cathects the ephemeral love of being sexually satiated with the more lasting love of the body as a sacred object that can grow tired of fleeting pleasures. Thinking about the body through this lens makes room for thinking about how queer sex that is affectively charged with love between men can be useful for how we reconsider African American history as something that is not completely homophobic.

Freaks and the American Ideal of (Queer) Manhood

In order to work towards how black queer love can alter the present's relation to history, we must consider the ways in which both brothers react to traumas that may feel different but perhaps inform one another throughout the rest of the novel: the loss of a brother at a relatively young age and the sexual abuse of a minor. Just before signing his

first major record deal, Arthur begins to tell his brother the story of the sexual assault that he had endured when he was about 13 years old. He and Hall have been going from bar to bar all night, telling stories and keeping the brotherly intimacy that had characterized their relationship kindled as they begin a new chapter in which they become business partners. After acknowledging that nothing would change with their new arrangement, Arthur ominously makes a claim about music and the act of singing: “When you sing, […] you can’t sing *outside* the song. You’ve got to *be* the song you sing. You’ve got to make a confession.” (52). This provides the impetus for relaying a story from his past in which an older man asks Arthur to buy him something from a store with the intention of going back to his apartment to pay the child back. Rather than repay his debt, the older man performs oral sex on the child, only stopping when a loud noise from overhead startles him. To end the encounter, the older man gives Arthur 45 cents, as if paying for the sexual transaction rather than the debt. Once the story is over, Arthur finishes his drink and remembers: “‘I had just started singing. […] That man made it impossible for me to touch anybody, man or woman, for a long time, and still, he filled me with terrible curiosity. And, all that time, I was singing, man, I was singing up a storm.’ Then he stopped laughing. ‘I’ve got to live the life I sing about in my song,’ he said” (54).

What is it about the relationship between black music (especially black spiritual music) and its traditions that make both so pertinent and useful for those working through their own personal traumas? What resources can be found deeply embedded in these practices? In the last chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois interprets the sorrow songs as “the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty

wanderings and hidden ways" (169). Here, the trauma is collective; slaves would sing the sorrow songs as a way to move through and move past the violence of slavery against *all* black people. The sorrow songs then carry significance across generations as a cultural artifact rather than as a string of signifiers that come to have discursive power; as Du Bois points out, the children who sing the songs know "as little as our fathers what [the songs'] words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music" (170). More recently, Craig Werner has described the impulse to turn toward gospel as a three-step process: "(1) acknowledging the burden; (2) bearing witness; (3) finding redemption" (29). The burden that Werner locates in gospel music may be unique to the individual singer but connects to larger discourses of struggle and suffering for the race. Much black feminist work has done exceptional work carving out the space of black women in musicological discourses.[32] That space refused its own boundaries as it contended that black musical forms like jazz and the blues could not simply be defined by the men who became iconic for their talents.

As Robert Reid-Pharr suggests, Arthur responds to his sexual assault by "feed[ing] that terrible curiosity, a curiosity of the flesh with the pleasures of the spirit" (*Once* 107). This pleasure never negates the presence of the body; Reid-Pharr, in fact, says that nothing can. Any sort of cultural production that is undertaken implicates a body being marked and utilized in and by time and space. In the case of this novel, however, Reid-Pharr contends that the black queer body in particular does not refashion

[32] See Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*; Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative* and *If You Can't Be Free, Be a A Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*; and, Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement.*

how we read something like the singing of the gospel; instead, that body merely (though not incorrectly) marks a way that we can read cultural practices as being dynamic. By representing the black queer gospel singer, Reid-Pharr argues that Baldwin means to inject more interest in the act of gospel singing as a cultural form and practice. Rather than have a parochial vision for what a gospel attached to queer libidinal energies means, Reid-Pharr argues that Baldwin "allows us another opportunity to understand the great level of self-creation that is part of our experience and indeed of the whole of human experience. He also opens up the possibility that the Black American might decide against re-creating himself or his culture in ways that seem not only familiar but inevitable" (*Once* 109). The inevitability here lies in the way in which a black queer gospel singer represents a deep complexity that speaks to possibility in the human condition. However, the adjectives attached to blackness ("queer," "gospel," "singer") do not so much enhance or even particularly modify "black American" in Reid-Pharr's formulation because the black body takes up so much of the frame in his schematic. Instead, a common thread of "alienation" binds, not even simply black Americans, but all Americans so that if we all could account for that feeling in more productive ways, this would foster "the beloved community that we all imagine floating out there just above our heads" (*Once* 118).

It would be interesting to put this in conversation with Reid-Pharr's earlier work in *Black Gay Man*, a collection of essays that aims to quarantine these three words into their own sections even as it presses upon the complexity of such an identification throughout. In what is arguably his most provocative essay in that collection, "Living as a Lesbian," Reid-Pharr makes claims about becoming and being a whole human without

jettisoning the sexual category of lesbian as such a category has been instructively important for the critical theorists that he argues have been central for his thinking. Living as a lesbian in that essay does not mean ridding oneself of masculinity either; instead, black (queer) feminist work has given him the tools to refashion his own masculinity in a way that makes the deep implications of intersectionality for black people that much more tactile. Masculinity must continue to be fluid and ever changing rather than stable in its multiplicity, and identifying *with* black lesbians seems to require identification *as* black lesbian even as he reminds himself in the coda that "I am always confronted with the reality of my own masculinity, this strange and complex identity that I continue to have difficulty recognizing as privilege" (*Black* 162). The level of introspection that Reid-Pharr carefully treads in "Living as a Lesbian" feels conspicuously absent from his analysis of what longings and desires are attached to gospel singing when such a practice is performed by a black queer subject. The novel invests much more into how blackness *and* queerness change the subject's relationship to the cultural practice, revealing something about how that cultural practice can be used politically.

During the Southern leg of their tour, Arthur and his lover/bandmate, Crunch, find themselves in an Atlanta hotel room on a lazy Saturday afternoon. The other members of the band, who have recognized that something is going on between them, have left them alone. The South is strange to both Arthur and Crunch and so they decide to stay in their hotel room and explore the desire that is becoming thicker between them rather than explore a city that frightens them. Their love for one another frightens them as well but in

this room they begin their first act of lovemaking and Baldwin pays particular attention to what sorts of affects are released when black male bodies come together:

> It was Crunch's cock, and so he sucked it; with all the love that was in him, and a moment came when he felt that love being trusted and returned. 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 him.* It was as though, with this kiss, they were forever bound together. […] *You must come in at the door.* He held the prick in his mouth again, sensing, awaiting, the eruption. He, and he alone, had dragged it up from the depths of his lover. (211)

The italicized words here come out of the spiritual "My God is so High," a rather popular hymn about salvation. As with many spirituals, the lyrics are not so standardized that there is only one way in which the song can be sung but the core message remains constant through most renditions.[33] The spiritual takes Jesus's assertion in John 10:7 that He is the door of the sheep and asks singing parishioners to use Jesus as the mechanism through which they come to Christianity and spiritual fulfillment. The song goes on to strongly assert that intimate knowledge of and acquaintance with Christ is in fact the *only* way to become a true Christian, which would be considered a fairly uncontroversial conceit for most Protestants.

---

[33] While there are some variations of the song, the lyrics do not vary drastically from performance to performance. These lyrics come from the chorus of "My God is so High." Most renditions of this song end the chorus with the line "You must come in by and through the Lamb" though some lyric books call for it to end with "You must go through the door." Further, most lyrics sheets call for the first line of the spiritual to start with "My God is…" while all subsequent lyrics begin with "He's…" Baldwin chooses to drop out the referent. Interestingly enough, these lyrics more closely remember Elvis Presley's cover of the song, "So High," which was first released on his 1967 gospel album, *How Great Thou Art*. Elvis drops out the referents after the first line and the last line of the chorus is "You must come in at the door."

Rather than keep the capital letters that would denote a reference to God as that which cannot be gotten over, under, or around, the scene calls for lowercase letters as if the double signification is not clear enough. Rather than suggest irreverence, the lowercase "h" means to open up possibility for what the singular male pronoun can allude to in this moment. In a essay on the nature of love, Leo Bersani explores love as an affective relation steeped in and driven by narcissism. Through a reading of Socratic love, Bersani concludes that "we seek, through love, not only to relive, albeit imperfectly, the 'ultimate vision' of absolute ideas some of us my have shared with the gods; we also wish to revive the memory of the god in whose company we purchased that vision" (81). While, for Socrates, this makes the love object a representation of an idealized form (that of a god), it is the mere identification of the love object with a spiritual form that has critical purchase here. Unlike disgust, which creates the boundary between subject and object clear, this kind of Platonic love, which finds idealized beauty in imperfect forms, helps to break down boundaries between subjects, allowing one to truly know the other by finding the self within that other. But, in knowing the other, there is still a relation to God/god/gods that continues to be useful for what "knowing" actually entails, a faithfulness behind the knowing that strengthens it. In essence, the love between men here is also bulwarked by the relationship that both have with God.

The hotel room stands as a space for Arthur and Crunch to explore the kinds of relationality that have already been evinced at their public concerts and churches all around the United States. After professing their love for one another, their group heads to Birmingham, Alabama, where they are immediately thrown into performing a concert at a local church. The South had been less than hospitable to them as poor Northern blacks

and Arthur (by way of reflection from Hall) remembers how an accumulation of this and other palpable bad feelings weighed upon the beginning of the show. When the music begins, however, those negative feelings almost immediately dissipate. Arthur's recollection of the event hones in on the way in which singing in the church felt like a secretly erotic affair between him and Crunch, one the church unwittingly participates in. By the end of the song, everyone in the room has been remarkably moved not only by the words of the song but also by the arresting affective energy that flows through Arthur and Crunch. Their intimacy, something shared between them and acting unbeknownst to seemingly everyone in the room at the time, effectively heightens the power of the spiritual for those who are listening even as it deepens the connection between the two singers as lovers. Though this identification with queer singers does not absolve individual parishioners of any harbored homophobia, their acceptance of queer affect (willed or unwilled) presents them with a changed relation to a space that often acts as if there can be no queer presence.

The previously quoted scene in which Crunch and Arthur share their first queer sexual experience exhibits an understanding of the relationship between language and affect that Eve Sedgwick begins to articulate in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, which I gesture toward in my introduction. So, if queer affect is something that has attached itself to the gospel songs that Arthur, Crunch, and the rest of the band use as political tools, there is something to be said about how queerness makes up a constitutive part of the congregations and other audiences that listen. Further, the queer attachments to such an object indelibly modifies the intersubjective relations between black queers in this text so that the gospels become a key part of how lovers

come together. As much as a cursory reading of *Just Above My Head* might seem to suggest that Arthur plays the willing heretic, using coded language to distance himself from the religion that provides the songs he uses to make, those songs, even until the novel's end, come to imprint upon his loving relationships and the memory of those relationships.

The relationship between the black church and queerness is quite vexed. While many sermons will denounce homosexuality rather often as a sin that must be named in order to discourage followers from "choosing" such a lifestyle, the open secret often seems to be the number of queer gospel singers and choir directors that inhabit black churches. As E. Patrick Johnson has argued, black queers would often end up as creative directors or gospel singers because the artistic aspects of church culture would provide them the space to actually find themselves in a safe space.[34] As C. Riley Snorton has suggested in his reading of hooks, the roles that black gay men would hold at the helms of such groups would saturate the church with a demonstrably queer aesthetic: "Locations of black sociality, then, like the black church, beauty salon, barbershop, or nightclub, hold the queer possibilities for black reproduction or the production of nonheteronormative creations, which is to say, they take on the queer aesthetics of black survival" (101). So, the queer aesthetics of black survival are useful for queer and non-queer blacks alike. These spaces allow African Americans, figures who have often been theorized as antithetical to the productive and the heteronormative, to choose that which will define them on their own terms and in their own spaces. Further, within those spaces,

[34] E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned From My Grandmother" (2005): 148-149.

black queers can find their own times and places (during the late-night choir practice, behind the closed doors of an office) within a field of black heteronormativity to find solace and a means for (relatively) unfettered self-expression.

When sex between Arthur and Crunch does happen, the transmission of affective relations make them a candidate for how a supposedly deviant population can attach itself to futurity without falling into the trappings of what Lee Edelman has (now famously) called "reproductive futurism." In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman polemically argues against the feel good politics of homonormativity, suggesting that one of the objectives of queer theory is to align queer politics and queerness against the trappings of the symbolic figure of the child: "De-idealizing the metaphorics of meaning on which heteroreproduction takes its stand, queerness exposes sexuality's inevitable coloration by the [death] drive; its insistence on repetition, its stubborn denial of teleology, its resistance to determinations of meaning (except insofar as it means this refusal to admit such determination of meaning), and, above all, its rejection of spiritualization through marriage to reproductive futurism" (27). Edelman's position has been critiqued rather handedly by the likes of Jose Esteban Muñoz, Sharon Patricia Holland, and Chandan Reddy, all of whom do so from the position of queer of color critique.[35] My last section follows their trains of thought on this matter to consider how a queer affective reading of a pivotal scene of intercourse between two black male gospel singers allows us to reconsider what a relationship between queer bodies and the future actually looks like when spiritualization refuses to be denied.

---

[35] Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 91-95; Holland, The Erotic Life of Racism, 33-34; Chandan Reddy, Freedom Without Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State (2011): 173-181.

Queer Life After Queer Death

To overhaul a history, or to attempt to redeem it—which effort may or may not justify it—is not at all the same thing as the descent one must make in order to excavate a history. To be forced to excavate a history is, also, to repudiate the concept of history, and the vocabulary in which history is written; for the written history is, and must be, merely the vocabulary of power, and power is history's most seductively attired false witness.

James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*

How does love factor into Edelman's conception of the relationship between queer politics and the death drive? If we want to argue that love is and/or can be detached from the libido (something we *should* want to argue), he leaves little room for such an affective drive to figure prominently as a positive conceit in such a work. In one of the more virulent reframings of the monograph's central question, Edelman evokes love as that which can and should be pushed aside for a more perfect queer politics. In response to a perniciously homophobic statement made by Donald Wildmon, founder and head of the American Family Association, which suggested that being complacent in the face of increasing legislation that would give rights to queer citizens would lead to the downfall of Western civilization, Edelman asks why this kind of restructuring would be a problem for or at odds with queer activism:

> Before the self-righteous bromides of liberal pluralism spill from our lips, before we supply once more the assurance that ours is another kind of love but a love like Wildmon's nonetheless, before we piously invoke the litany of our glorious contributions of the civilizations of East and West alike, dare we pause for a moment to acknowledge that Mr. Wildmon might be right—or, more important, that he *ought to be* right: that queerness *should and must* redefine such notions as 'civil order' through a rupturing of our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity? (16-17)

The question is provocative and dovetails well with contemporary critiques of homonormativity that are highly suspect of queer impulses towards structures that work

to legitimate heteronormativity like marriage. Edelman offers a queer theoretical alignment with jouissance and the death drive that embraces the negativity that comes with being figured outside of the Symbolic. This extracts queers from any proper envelopment in the Real and the self-shattering that jouissance provides allows for subjectivity outside of the predetermined boundaries of the concept of identity, which has largely been set up without queer influence.

For Edelman, operating outside of the Real comes with a set of assumptions, one of which being that the subject who lives outside of it inherently must be a white/"colorblind" queer figure. If queer theory must continue to rearrange its assumptions in order to make other figures central to the field's work, then characters like Arthur and Crunch test the limits of how useful "identity" or even "queerness" can be when considered as stable categories. As Holland tells it, "critiques that cannot seem to bear the weight of their own conclusions—ones that segregate as well as discriminate—worry me to no end and open themselves up to profound skepticism, if not devastating blindness for this black.female.queer. What kind of legibility will a black.female.queer *critique* have if she falls outside of the neat political boundaries set for her in the roll call of critical agents?" (*Erotic* 79). While neither Arthur nor Crunch constitute the fullness of the particular descriptors with which Holland engages ("black.female.queer"), they do further Edelman's work on rethinking a queer relation to futurity by arranging a set of affective relations that challenge our theorizing about queerness's relationship to temporality. The love between these two queer gospel musicians resembles what Jennifer Nash calls black feminist love-politics, especially given her notion that this practice orients itself towards an open-ended future even as we readers know the future towards

which this love is headed. Nash's reading of Audre Lorde's insistence on the future of our earth being dependent on women's ability to construct coalitions as "a project strategically disinvested in remedying the present (or the possibility that the present could be remedied), and wholeheartedly invested in the future as a locus of possibility" resonates strongly with the love that unfurls between Arthur and Crunch, which struggles for discursive coherence in the present of its taking place but also looks toward a future outside of the South as that which helps to structure their politics while they do political work in a region that makes them very uneasy.

Arthur's relationship to the political constantly feels strained, even as his travels around the South are framed as activist work. He cannot figure out how to properly traverse any of the terrains that they inhabit and his faith consistently gets tested not only by the queer love that he feels but also by the sense of detachment that such extensive travel produces. Rather than find solace in the historical ground of the American South, tranquility only comes in the ephemeral and often harried space of the hotel room, particularly because it is a space that he can openly share with Crunch. It is in the space of the hotel room that the couple can make claims of forever, claims that are supported by how their simultaneous orgasm opens up the possibilities of the gospel. I have already spoken about how the love between Crunch and Arthur forces the song to change the conventional capitalization of male pronouns in "My God is High," allowing for a more capacious reading of to whom those pronouns refer but it also provides black queers with a relation to futurity that is couched in an idea of eternal life that can be adapted for their inclusion. Admittedly, this conception of eternal life constitutes a slanted approach to enfolding queers into normative Christian frameworks but it is those frameworks that

Arthur is unwilling to wholeheartedly jettison as he explores what love between men actually entails. The mechanics of the simultaneous orgasm alongside the language of the popular gospel song both queers the song and aligns that queered song with a sense of sexual normalcy. As Annamarie Jagose argues, the phenomenon of the simultaneous orgasm, which made its way into a number of early twentieth-century marriage manuals, would be a key site for mapping the exact contours that make up heteronormative behavior. As the century progressed, such manuals would move away from an advocacy for simultaneous orgasm as that which should make a married couple most content to a denouncement of the practice as something subnormal. With both of these models, Jagose argues, simultaneous orgasm was just one erotic practice (amongst others) with which the heterosexual couple could evaluate its proximity to being "normal."[36]

It may be arguable whether or not Arthur and Crunch achieve simultaneous orgasm towards the end of the sexual act to which I have been referring. Crunch certainly achieves orgasm and releases reproductive material into Arthur's mouth. But, Arthur's own orgasm is never narrated; what he experiences seems to be closer to jouissance in the way that Slavoj Žižek articulates it as a derivative from the Lacanian term. Though jouissance constantly feels like an uneven and shifting term for Žižek, the "enjoyment' embedded in the term that he finds useful in its challenging the spatial order of particularly safe emotional zones can be useful for thinking about how Arthur's pleasure

---

[36] As Jagose writes to introduce the chapter on simultaneous orgasm: "As a figure, simultaneous orgasm works not only to render coincident the carnal temporalities of husbands and wives but also to pull into synchronous relation the past and present conditions of heteroeroticism, thereby securing its claims on the future" (40). It is this "carnal temporality" that most interests me because such a practice amongst queer couples could do similar work.

translates into a potentially progressive action.[37] Arthur's enjoyment of Crunch's orgasm may or may not result in an orgasm at the same time but the radical pleasure that it brings about reorients not only the space but temporality in this moment:

> Curious, the taste, as it came, leaping, to the surface: of Crunch's prick, of Arthur's tongue, into Arthur's mouth and throat. He was frightened, but triumphant. He wanted to sing. The taste was volcanic. This taste, the aftertaste, this anguish, and this joy had changed all tastes forever. The bottom of his throat was sore, his lips were weary. Every time he swallowed, from here on, he would think of Crunch, and this thought made him smile as, slowly, now, and in a peculiar joy and panic, he allowed Crunch to pull him up, upward into his arms. (212)

The close proximity of *jouissance* to orgasm allows us to think of this scene alongside the discourse of simultaneous orgasm and its normativizing or non-normativizing properties. If the idea behind simultaneous orgasm helps to support the ideological project of heteronormativity because of its alignment with reproduction, this particular instance of non-reproductive sex does its best to reach for a normativizing gesture in its romantic, even if somewhat crude, representation of the scene of intercourse. Though, as I have already suggested, queer theory has found issue with homonormativity as an unradical, uncritical acquiescence to dominant social structures that would rather see queers excluded, there is a way in which the scene of black queer intimacy echoes my paraphrase of queer activist Joseph Beam's popular slogan, principally that "Black Men Loving Black Men is *the* Revolutionary Act."[38]

---

[37] For a useful reading of how Žižek sketches a relationship between jouissance and emotion, see Paul Kingsbury's "Did somebody say Jouissance? On Slavoj Žižek, consumption, and nationalism" (2008).

[38] The actual slogan, of course, is "Black Men Loving Black Men is the Revolutionary Act of the 1980's." Though the temporal marker is very important for Beam's claim, I wish to be a bit more open here about what this kind of queer act means for blacks in general and black queers more specifically.

Revolution arguably appears in the form of the recursive remembrance of the queer lover that affects how Arthur relates to Crunch after this initial sex act. If affect plays a part in the kinds of everyday resistances that people on the margin direct towards dominant social logics as Muñoz, Puar, Bertelsen, and Murphie contend, the relation to spirituality, a mode of being often reinforced by a set of regular practices that also can play a part in social critique, should be better explored. As Ann Cvetkovich, following a line of thinking that comes out of the work of M. Jacqui Alexander, suggests, the everyday recursivity of spiritual practice can present us with a grounding in between organized religion and secular epistemologies. Cvetkovich understands spiritual practices as being able to help articulate "a politics of feeling that is manifest not just in the overt or visible social movements of conventional politics but into the more literal kinds of movement that make up everyday life practices or forms and cultural expressions" (199). These are not mutually exclusive forms of movement; rather they are organically symbiotic and mutually constitutive to the extent that one cannot build upon itself without consideration of the other. What is required, according to Alexander, is a "rewiring of the senses" (308) that takes very seriously how spiritual practices can lend themselves to what she calls the "radical self-possession" of marginalized and oppressed peoples. This takes the form of a dualistic politics that requires self-determination of both the self and of the community/communities to which that self finds herself attuned and provides us with the working synapses that can most productively connect body, soul, self, and community into a progressive racial (and, for her, transnational) political framework.

It is difficult to parse the potential recursive nature of remembering the queer lover with each swallow. As Sara Ahmed argues, history occurs in the repetition of bodily gestures. In the process of acquiring orientation, the reiteration of certain gesticulations becomes a defining feature in what the body is, how that body interacts with the world around it. As Ahmed writes, "it is important that we think not only about *what* is repeated, but also about how the repetition of actions takes us in certain directions: we are also orientating ourselves toward some objects more than others, including not only physical objects […] but also objects of thought, feelings, and judgment, as well as objects in the sense of arms, aspirations, and objectives" (*Queer Phenomenology* 56). In these moments, when sex changes the very makeup of the spiritual songs that have been a cornerstone of his activism at the same time that it solidifies and consolidates a new queer relation, the triangulation of relationality disallows these attachments to be changed discretely.

The kind of repetition with a difference that marks how recursive behavior functions orients the black queer body towards a self-fulfilling timeline that can take both spirituality and sexuality as ideological formulations into account as those which deeply inform one another over long periods of time. The idea that Arthur is reminded of Crunch every time he swallows may clearly be hyperbolic but the consistent return back to Crunch signposts a site of coming into full humanity, with the attendant range of affective possibilities that come with it. Towards the end of the novel, shortly before the narration of Arthur's death, as Arthur smells Jimmy's cooking and thinks about how much happiness he holds within him, the past comes back to inform not only the present but how the body can situate itself within that present: "He thinks of Crunch, perhaps,

because—this is not the way he puts it to himself, but it is something like this wonder which him at the window—he has never thought of joy as being a potential of the air one breathes, or of happiness as being as simple, for example, as the light in Jimmy's eyes when Jimmy looks at him" (573). This begins a somewhat random list of objects and actions that can extract happiness out of Arthur. Though many of these revolve around the body as a locus of pleasure, that body and those pleasures open up a part of Arthur that often seems lost in the narrative as happiness only seems to surface in the company of the queer lover. This is a happiness that exudes outward from the body and can not only be felt by but also explained by others; Hall narrates the aforementioned scene but the novel abruptly changes narrators to Jimmy on the next page. The palpable earnestness that comes out of both brother and lover leaves little doubt that both truly understand what transpires within Arthur and as Jimmy goes on to suggest, "Arthur was sacred to [him]" (576).

Gospel singing, as the act of habit that lifts one up out of the bad feelings, does so for Arthur because of the genre's attachment for him to queer love as an affective force. Gospel does not create a queer utopia but it does give Arthur a place in the world and in his congregation. It gives him the rhetoric that makes it possible to hold homophobia directed towards him and the love he holds for God and his lovers in productive tension. When Jimmy asks Arthur why he does not move on from gospel to the blues, Arthur responds that he just does not understand the blues since falling in love with Jimmy. Instead, it is the capacious affective potential of gospel that still holds the most currency for the kinds of multivalent expression that he wants to do. And, when properly attuned, that underlying script of queer love can indeed be felt and properly described by others,

despite previous scenes in which it seemed to merely float above everyone's heads, unable to be perceived. When Arthur and Jimmy sing "Just a Closer Walk With Thee" together, Hall notes in a reflection that indicates a new, more informed perspective: "This song became for them, then, theirs, a sacrament, a stone marking a moment on their road: the point of no return, when they confessed to each other, astounded, terrified, but having no choice, in the hearing of men, and in the sight of God" (562). The love between two black men is not meant to operate outside of the Lord's purview here as a song in His name solidified and reifies that love in His name.

It is only when Arthur is alone, truly alone, that death catches up to him. Even with Jimmy about to board a plane to see him in London, the moment of being truly alone finally catches up to him and, perhaps fittingly, Arthur dies of a heart attack. When an Irishman from across the pub pierces into him with his eyes, his heart immediately fails and he dies soon after. The haunting that the black queer body produces for the rest of the narrative echoes Sharon Patria Holland's assertion that those moving towards death occupy a liminal space in which "the living and the dead converge, mingle, and discourse" (*Raising* 40). For Holland, this holds significant importance for black subjects and their relation to nation building through a biopolitical/necropolitical framework; however, it operates on a more micro level as well. The queer intensities that saturate strategies for gaining social and political capital (via the circulation of the gospel songs, the ways in which those songs allow certain activists to travel around the country, access to military benefits, etc.) reside latently, only to be extracted by those who want to extract them, conclusively changing cultural memory by incorporating those extra-rational pulses

that cannot be so easily repudiated, perhaps so that they can be celebrated and marked as agents in future work.

CHAPTER 2: "But Go Thou and Preach the Kingdom of God": Queering the Spatial Cartographies of Religion and Power in the Fiction of Randall Kenan

"The past is never dead. It's not even past."
- William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun

"All niggers have been cursed, the ironic voice reminded him, all niggers have come from this most undutiful of Noah's sons. How could John be cursed for having seen in a bathtub what another man—if that other man had ever lived—had seen ten thousand years ago, lying in an open tent? Could a curse come down so many ages? Did it live in time, or in the moment?"
- James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain

After a chapter that considered *Just Above My Head*, I must return to James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which ends with an unsatisfying turn to the threshing floor of a small Harlem storefront church. John Grimes, the novel's young queer protagonist, succumbs to the voices in his head during a Pentecostal worship service in which all of his family members are confronted with their own spiritual and secular memories. The threshing floor and the changes that occur in John are mired in uncertainty; as I have suggested previously, readings of this scene range from focusing on the healing salvation of a black boy who previously had not properly found his place within the social order of his church to the elaboration of a continued destructive attachment to a church and a family that will continue to be hostile towards him. The ambiguity in the last section of this novel, however, reveals the survival tactic that many queers must utilize if they are to have a relationship with certain spiritual people and spaces. The density of affect, all of which lies at the center of this display of emotionalism within a space that is already congested with the palpable affective presence of a congregation in the throes of service allows John to scrape by with what is available to him at the time:

> Then his father returned to him, in John's changed and low condition; and John thought, but for a moment only, that his father had come to help him. In the silence, then, that filled the void, John looked on his father. His father's face was black—like a sad, eternal night; yet in his father's face there burned a fire—a fire eternal in an eternal night. John trembled where he lay, feeling no warmth for him from this fire, trembled, and could not take his eyes away. A wind blew over him, saying: "Whosoever loveth and maketh a lie." And he knew that he had been thrust out of the holy, the joyful, the blood-washed community, that his father had thrust him out. His father's will was stronger than John's own. His power was greater because he belonged to God. Now, John felt no hatred, nothing, only a bitter, unbelieving despair; all prophecies were true, salvation was finished, damnation was real! (198)

It is the emphasis on "unbelieving despair" amongst the joyful in the church that indicates a change not only in John's personal relationship with Christ (one that seems to only be reinforced later with his utterance of the phrase "Yes, oh, yes" when he is asked whether or not he has been saved) but also in what is possible for him within this community. It is not so much that his relationships with people like his father who has been the most critical of him and his choices has changed as a result of possession but more that the interchange of emotions (in effect, a substitution of hatred for despair) has allowed for self-affirmation, though not of the queer kind. Here, John recognizes that his despair, coupled with his sexual desire for Elisha, have cast him outside of the realm of the holy, for whosoever loveth the same sex maketh a lie. John's queer identity has not miraculously been absorbed into the blood-washed community; rather, the expulsion from that community that he experienced on the threshing floor, one he intuited as he was affected, is the catalyst that allows for an easier transition in this church community. This, at first glance, seems counterintuitive. John is expelled so that he can be reincorporated. But, there is a body-spirit split here. The spirit of the young black queer has been expelled so that the body can be reincorporated. The performance of spiritual

becoming, however, allows the community to invest into the child that could have gone astray. In this way, the possession of John Grimes on the threshing floor does not place him "outside [of a] framework of rational heteronormative regulation" as Roderick Ferguson suggests in his reading of Baldwin in *Aberrations in Black* (107); instead, his newfound ability to interrogate his own shame and despair finally allows for a church community to make good on its claims to protect tose who are most in need.

In a short story that ostensibly resembles *Go Tell It on the Mountain* called "The Book of Luke," Guy-Mark Foster writes the story of a young black queer child who surveils the locker room of a local pool to leer at the naked bodies of slightly older white boys. In an initial description of his favorite specimen, the boy relates the object of his affection as having "the same bandaid-colored complexion as the painting of Jesus Christ hung in my momma's house" (23). After ogling and admiring this Christ figure for some time, the black boy imagines the Jesus of the painting in his mother's house exiting the artwork and entering the physical world for a sexual tryst. Time and space collapse as the boy imagines what he would do with a Jesus Christ that is willing to have sex with him: "I cannot tell where I am, or if the date of my daddy's birth has passed and it's another day, a brand new year, or whether I am older than my age now, or younger. All I know is that the Son of God is smiling upon me and I am jacking Him off with my huge smile of a body" (27). He postulates that this encounter with the Lord will please his mother but her happiness is ultimately irrelevant because the idea produces a joy in him that "I might let myself explode into a zillion particles of blinding white light" (27).

The figure of the white child and the figure of the queer Jesus Christ combine to tear the black child from his own poor circumstances: a home broken by a father who did

not love God enough to save himself or his marriage; a destructive fixation on a pool as a potential cruising spot despite a vehement abhorrence for the smell of chlorine or the act of swimming; a relationship to the church that is strained; and the violence that comes with being a young black boy who cannot help but stare at other boys despite knowing that such a predilection will too often lead to a beating. In the story, a gay Jesus appears in order to do what a straight Jesus is supposed to do for all of his followers: save them. The young narrator finds a willing love object in Christ, directing his lust toward the figure that his mother most appreciates in a religion in which he does not always find contentment. The narrator can find some temporary solace in the Bible; in fact, he reads Luke 6:22-23 everyday when he comes home from the pool.[39] This allows him both some comfort in the face of violence and a bit of breathing distance from a mother who desperately wants her child to be a good Christian. That good Christian cannot be queer, however, and there is every indication that if his mother knew of this love for white boys sublimated by this particular kind of love for Christ, this affirming act of queer sex with Christ would be read as heretical.

I begin my chapter with Foster's story and Baldwin's novel because they both represent narratives that think through what it means to be black, queer, and spiritual at two very specific moments: the 1940's, shortly before the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, and the 1980's, a moment that saw increasing black queer visibility in public life. In the vein of Guy-Foster, Essex Hemphill writes glisteningly about what his carnal love for men means in ethereal and otherworldly and human and earthly terms: "it is

[39] Luke 6:22-23 as translated in Guy-Foster's story: "Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast your name as evil!" (26).

sacred communion, causing me to moan and tremble and cuss as The Holy Ghost fucks me. It is knowledge of fire and beauty that I will carry beyond the grave. When I sit in God's final judgment I will wager this knowledge against my entrance into the Holy Kingdom. There was no other way for me to know the beauty of Earth except through the sexual love of men" (69). For Hemphill, being queer can, at times, be as good as sex with God must be. And even when queerness can be "miserably intoxicating with requisite hangovers and regrets," queer love registers as a rubric by which he interprets and attaches to everything around him. Once he is taken outside of the parameters of human conceptions of time and space, he knows that it is this love that will either allow or deny him access to heaven. But, this will take place on Hemphill's own terms. He cannot fathom any epistemological framework that does not take his queerness as a guiding principle and a God that would judge this unfairly does not deserve to have Hemphill by His throne.

Black people and black art have had a long history of structuring and restructuring a relationship to Christianity that was foisted upon them as a result of the transatlantic slave trade and the Middle Passage. For black queers, a relationship to institutionalized religion is further strained by cultural, social, and economic uses of scripture to deny basic rights and compassion. What the combined work of Baldwin, Guy-Foster, and Hemphill articulates, however, is an attempt to reconstruct what that attachment looks like and how it is arranged. If an attachment to Christianity carries such intersectional baggage, it must be radically restructured both in terms of how black queers incorporate it into their lived experience and how they can imagine that religion conceptually. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* ends not with the queer child finding a space for himself in the

church but listening to the spirits and compromising his way into the space between the light and the darkness of an institution from which he cannot possibly escape. Both Guy-Foster and Hemphill take the opportunity to, as Vincent Woodard suggest, "build upon a legacy of black people using their bodies and body parts since slavery to reconfigure the precincts of the sacred and profane" (210). Woodard goes on to argue that this kind of work gains currency through a prioritization of the anus as a sacred symbol. By thinking about black interiority through an orifice and an erogenous zone, Woodard emphasizes a new relational model—that is, anal sex between black males—that recuperates those written out of cultural and historical discourses by being both black and sodomites. Though Woodard goes on to suggest that processes of European colonization and participation in slavery have erased the vicissitudes of diasporic intimacy, I remain stuck in the ways in which the black queer body figures so prominently in how black gay children find their path to or away from God and religion. To think about spiritual relationships to the Lord through the corporeality and carnality that Guy-Foster and Hemphill linger in carves out a space through which a love for Christ can be unapologetically queer.

This chapter asks whether the black queer body, its erogeneity, its complexity, its subversion, and its willfulness can be the primary site by which black queers reconfigure a relationship to a religion that ostensibly would rather that they do not exist. As I will discuss more fully in the next chapter, Audre Lorde suggests that the erotic and the spiritual are deeply imbricated in her landmark essay, "The Uses of the Erotic." If the erotic is spiritual, and the erotic is embodied, then the spiritual is embodied. Of course, Christian practice does not ignore the corporeal. Many church services begin with the

metaphorized consumption of Christ's body as an act of fellowship. But thinking about the body as simultaneously erotic and spiritual, I argue, allows black queers and especially young black queers an opportunity to establish an understanding of Christ through the same erotic precocity with which they learn about themselves and their bodies. This does not ultimately mean that black queers will automatically and smoothly be brought into a Christian fold or that it forces black queers to desire a place within that fold. Rather, constructing this alternative relation allows black queers to restructure a number of different kinds of attachments to everything from family and kinship to history and the land.

With this, I turn to the work of North Carolinian writer, Randall Kenan. While much of the criticism of Kenan's work has focused on how the deaths of rural black queer folk force a community to reflect upon its destructive relationship to black queer life, I wish to argue that it is not the death of this figure but his method for restructuring his attachments that provides for the most radical response possible from Tims Creek, the fictional town that makes up Kenan's discursive universe. In his short story collection, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,* and novel, *A Visitation of Spirits,* Kenan uses the black queer body both erotically and non-erotically to think through what it means to create new attachments to old institutions and old places that have historically been hostile to its existence. For Kenan, it is not enough to imagine a new relational model by fantasizing about anal sex with Christ; he makes the queer body retrace his steps. By walking a fine line between the living and the dead, Kenan's characters reveal what is already queer about Southern space. These characters do not have to use their imaginations to refract a desire of which they should not be ashamed; the body, either in the past or the present

leverages spaces that have their own queer attachments in order to make a case for queer viability and vitality in the face of certain queer death.

In order to rethink the interface between queer vitality and queer death, Kenan centers queer sexuality in his formulations of black religious life. This endeavor marks a shift from much queer work that finds it difficult to parse religion for its redemptive possibilities.[40] The queer figure at the center of this chapter, Horace Cross, navigates a Southern world through a prism of queer trauma precipitated by the act of being possessed by abusive demons and his ultimate death via suicide driven by that possession. The death of the child, the event that the novel fatefully, even if erratically, marches toward constitutes the queer trauma of the novel, a trauma that fails to allow the novel to cohere as one consistently structured narrative. The plot of the narrative moves backwards and forwards in time while the novel itself is told from multiple perspectives, contains some chapters that are dated and time-stamped and others that are simply marked as the confessions of Horace's cousin, James Malachai Greene, or Horace himself and includes conversations that are formatted as screenplays.

As Patricia Clough argues, trauma—in this case, queer trauma—refracts how the body relates to time. Using Deleuze's idea of the crack to think through how the traumatized subject holds onto a loose grasp of linearity, Clough writes:

> [T]rauma makes the past and future meet without there being a present. The future is collapsed into the past as the past overwhelms the present […]. For Deleuze, however, the crack of heredity is not about what is being passed down, something being passed from the past to the present, as for example, in the passing on an addiction to alcohol. The crack is rather the potential for a serving in terms of inheritance, the potential for swerving to the future. As a result, the past does not

---

[40] See Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (2003) for a monograph that attempts to do some of this work.

> overcome the present because the past in general is ontologically present. The crack arises in the present out of the past as a virtuality, as a chance of repetition veering off from what is, off from what is a passing to the past from the present. (13)

The movement through memory that is the primary spatiotemporal mode of this novel constitutes what Clough, following Brian Massumi, calls the actualization of the virtual. When Horace Cross is possessed by demons and ushered through his memories, the past does more than merely haunt the present as the past ontologically *becomes* in the present. The haunting of time in *A Visitation of Spirits* is not a rewriting inasmuch as it is a re-becoming, a reimagining of queer vitality in a virtual realm that may not be beholden to the parameters of reality (that is, in terms of what is realistically allowable in terms of movement, sensation, being, etc.) but, in fact, is open to so many more possibilities that directly impact what it means to be phenomenologically black and queer. This temporal aberration, this movement of the body through a time and space that it has already inhabited, swerves potentiality toward a new future as the body divests itself of its affective relationships and sutures new ones. As my reading will suggest, it is the construction of these new affective attachments to land, church, and family rather than the death of the queer subject that presents the possibility for a Southern space that can more dexterously handle its queer and religious resonances at the same time. Horace's trip through time is not limited to his own personal past; rather, a heredity of black queer existence permeates memory as queer memory pushes up against a queer spatial past that has been documented even if it has not been analyzed as such. If, as I will argue, queer spaces cannot rid themselves of their queer past, the recursivity of queer becoming

through queer memory reveals a queer phenomenology that continuously revisits, reevaluates, and, at certain points, reformulates its attachments.

This work, the work of reorienting black queerness into a different relation to black religion, constitutes a challenge to the biopolitical project of living in the everyday for black queers, especially in rural areas. E. Patrick Johnson's work in *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men in the South*, complicates the reading of unmitigated negativity in terms of the black church as a disciplinary regime for black queer bodies. Before his transcriptions of interviews with black queers pontificating on their complex relationship with the church, Johnson describes black churches as spaces of agency and creativity, providing two explanations for why black gays like Delmar in Hughes' "Blessed Assurance" and Arthur in *Just Above My Head* flock to the choir as a site of refuge and self-expression:

> First, participation in the church choir provides a way to adhere to the religiosity of southern culture but also build a sense of community within what can sometimes be a hostile space. This is one instance in which a seemingly repressive sacred space actually affords a vehicle for the expression of sexual desire. Second, as some of the men suggest, the choir provides a medium to express one's sexuality through the theatricality already build into the church service (*Sweet* 184)

In his foundational essay that conceptualizes "quare studies" as a corrective to the whitewashing tendencies in queer theory, Johnson calls upon scholars who want to utilize the then-burgeoning field of black queer studies to throw into sharp relief the site of the homeplace as a periodically problematic site of both asylum and turmoil. The church is a fundamental site of solace for black communities that Johnson argues must be critiqued precisely because of its ostensibly antagonistic relationship with sexuality. As he argues, "[black queers'] role within the black church is an important one. Those in the pulpit and those in the congregation should be challenged whenever they hide behind Romans and

Leviticus to justify their homophobia. We must force the black church to name us and claim us if we are to obtain any liberation within our own communities" (149). Johnson himself does this work in "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark," an essay that takes the body as a point of departure for thinking about the categories of "holy" and "sexual" outside of an oppositional binary logic. I take his flirtations with the "place" of the church and the "space" of the dance floor seriously as he usefully thinks through how these categories are both mobile and pliable so that even a site that can be read as antithetical to Christian worship, the black queer dance floor, informs the way in which we can consider spirituality in all of its queer fullness. In that dance hall, the spirit is articulated through the flesh, a reference to Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's "theory in the flesh" and the way in which such a theory is constituted by the physical attributes and complexities of the everyday coalesce around a politics born out of necessity.[41] Cribbing off such a theory, Johnson notes that this politics born out of necessity "is that of sexual expression and affirmation, the conjoining of the physical realities of being black and gay with those of being Christian" ("Feeling" 410). This enactment of Moraga and Anzaldúa's "theory in the flesh" in relation to black queer religious becoming impacts my own thinking on the significance of the body piercing through its own memories and histories. Johnson theorizes the performative space of the night club as one that means to "liberate the body" in contradistinction to a church that may acknowledge the body as a site of sexuality but treats such sexuality (in all of its configurations) as that which must be tempered if not outright repudiated. This chapter looks at what it means to make memory

---

[41] Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* 3rd ed. (2002): 21.

and history that space of contradistinction, even if that space fails to reconceptualize a new orientation that does not sacrifice black queer life for the purposes of a black queer future.

Space and the Black Queer Frontier

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau argues that we each compose a spatial story as we walk through urban environments. The named or numbered streets, buildings, neighborhoods and other proper nouns that make up these built environments that determine movement through a large and densely inhabited area are suffused with a number of meanings with which each walker has a subjective relationship. This is to say, for example, that my best friend and I conceptualize the Chrysler building differently as we are two different people with two different perspectives and experiences, some related to that building and some not. If all New Yorkers have different relationships with all urban features, all of those relationships constitute a spatial story, a way in which spaces come to be thought of and organized. These spatial stories open up what each properly named landmark or road can signify, making each named feature of the city a site of indeterminacy, open to all of the possibilities that each passerby attaches to named objects that may not move but certainly are not fixed. This dialectic between fixity and indeterminacy is a defining distinguishing characteristic of Certeau's definitions of places versus spaces:

> A place (*lieu*) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (*place*). […] A *space* exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the

> ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. (117)

Though Certeau utilizes the city as a model in which the deployments of movement operate in a way that carves out boundaries and definitions, his theorization of space also has profound implications for suburban or rural areas as well. Though the scale of these proximities and programs may be more substantial and entropic in cities, walking in the country has similar implications.

Certeau's work quite usefully imagines moving through space as moving through layers of meaning. While we think we move through space only in the present, we also move through memory when we revisit spaces. Randall Kenan's fiction attempts to literalize this experience, using demonic possession as the mechanism by which this can be possible. For Kenan, it is not enough to recognize that the past haunts the present if meaningful progressive change is going to occur. If Horace Cross must die so that Tims Creek can see that its homophobia extinguishes some of its most promising citizens from some of its most prominent families, as many critics of Kenan's novel suggest, the South is faced with the pressing issue of how it can move forward in the shifting economic terrain of late capitalism if it continues to abort its future successful citizens on the grounds of regressive religious standards. Horace Cross dregs back up these homophobic memories that lie beneath the visible plane and haunt space in silence. Horace actualizes the silent and invisible yet palpably present past, giving voice to a series of stories that directly affect the relationships between Tims Creek residents. With this, it is not only the death of the black queer child but the process by which his body integrates memory and history that forces a rural Southern town to confront its nostalgia for how certain

economic models have produced a set of social relations that it continues to think is working optimally. Every place is full of these invisible absences that resonate strongly for individuals but may not be interesting or of note for collectives. However, when the collective encounters the black queer body that tracks these absences into the present, that which had been personal becomes that which the community must actively bear.

As I have suggested, *A Visitation of Spirits* centers around the tale of a young black boy who is possessed by demons, making it a novel that amongst many things is about black queer lived experience, transmutation, the occult, spirit possession, history, alternative kinship, and religion that somewhat abruptly ends with a "requiem for tobacco." After a narrative that ends with the suicide of its young black queer narrator, *A Visitation of Spirits* turns to a very specific relationship between post-Agrarian capitalism and memory in the state of North Carolina, the state in which Kenan's fictional town of Tims Creek is located. In this requiem, the tobacco industry, one of the state's most profitable industries after the Civil War holds the key to a past in which an economic practice constituted a greater social good, as the novel recognizes in its final words: "In many ways it is good. Work has become less torturous…for those who work. But it is good to remember that once upon a time hands, human hands, plucked ripe leaves from stalks, and hands, human hands, wrapped them with twine and sent them to the fire. And it is good to remember that people were bound by this strange activity, this activity that put food on their tables and clothes on their backs and sent their young ones to school, bound by the necessity, the responsibility, the humanity. It is good to remember, for too many forget" (257). The technological shift brought about by the industrial turn in tobacco production—from hand labor to machinery around the mid 20th-century—has

direct implications on a North Carolina community's ability to not only remember, but to come together in a constructive manner, based on the shared memory cultivated in how human labor drove that community's economy. People knew each other better when men labored for the production of tobacco, fostering a greater sense of community and an ethics of care about others that diminishes with the rise of mechanical production.

The attention to profits over labor brings with it a disconnect from the land as a key player in the life-sustaining practices of Tims Creek. As Maisha Wester suggests, the requiem for tobacco reflects a nostalgia for a past time that also promotes a change in the community, one that takes the best parts of the civil rights era and opens up possibility for those figures that might stand outside of the narrow parameters drawn up by black respectability politics but have the aptitude to make considerable contributions to racial uplift. As Wester puts it, "Horace's sacrifice suggests a need to reconsider history and search its tombs for the bodies and voices of disruptive figures sacrificed for the sake of unity. […] 'Requiem for Tobacco' signals a change in the community through its nostalgia for the dying way of life in Tims Creek [and] suggests that the ghost of the sacrificed, and not the act of sacrificing itself, is what will force the community to change further" (1050). On a related but different register, I would argue that this shift within one of North Carolina's primary economic systems, a shift that untethers workers from a land that is saturated with its own queer histories, stands as one of many features of estrangement that renders this community hesitant to make a space for even its most promising queer residents.

Arguably the most promising of those residents is Horace Cross, a black queer adolescent who is described as the Great Black Hope, the Straight-A Kid and the Chosen

Nigger (*Visitation* 13). Readers meet Horace, however, in a state of flux and transformation. We meet him in his bedroom as he asks himself "… What to become?" (11). Whereas traditional narratives of queer rural youths who find their circumstances to be too restricting take them to the streets of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Atlanta, or New York, Horace cannot imagine himself leaving Southeastern North Carolina from the very beginning of his story. Though he ultimately would like to use white magic to transform into a red-tailed hawk, it is the land that also takes up his preoccupations:

> [Horace] thought about the land: the soybean fields surrounding his grandfather's house, the woods that surrounded the fields, the tall, massive long-leaf pines. He thought of the miles and miles of highways, asphalt poured over mule trails that etched themselves into the North Carolina landscape, onto the beach, the sandy white, the sea, a murky, churning, the foam, spray, white, the smell of fish and rotting wood. […] He was trying to think like a bird, *the* bird, the only bird he could become. And when he saw a rabbit, dashing, darting through a field of brown rye grass, and when he saw talons sink into the soft brown fur, he knew. (14)

Flight, here, allows Horace to gain a mastery that he is not generally afforded over the terrain that he already knows. Horace's desire to stay within the boundaries of Tims Creek challenges the idea that a land built out of freedom needs to be inhospitable to those who will not stay within the boundaries of prescriptive decorum. The histories of the town are just as much his histories as they are anyone else's. It is not a desire to leave Tims Creek that characterizes Horace's early forays into sorcery and the occult; rather, magic affords him the opportunity to finally sit at the top of a food chain. This promise does not dissipate when the magic goes awry and he is possessed by a wicked spirit that promises a change:

> So he listened to the voice [of the demon], the voice that was old and young, and mean and good. He put all his faith in that voice. The voice said march, so he marched, surrounded by hobgoblins and sprites and evil faeries and wargs—

> aberrations like himself […] and he was happy, O so happy, as he cradled the gun in his hand like a cool phallus, happy for the first time in so, so many months, for he knew the voice would take care of him and teach him and save him… (28)

With this, Horace begins to move in and out of time, his body participating in what I call queer affective mapping practices. I take this term "affective mapping" from Jonathan Flatley's work on melancholia and modernism in which he defines the concept as a term used "to indicate the affective aspects of the maps that guide us, in conjunction with our cognitive maps, through our spatial environment" (77). This affective map operates as one of the layers of Certeau's walking schema—that is, the affective attachments to sites and people and objects determine how we interpellate ourselves within our surrounding built environments. These, of course, are not pre-determined; we evaluate, re-evaluate, and refashion our affective attachments constantly as both our environments and our selves are always changing. If, however, the black church and black religious institutions and spaces have considerably trenchant relationships with queerness that largely tarry in the negative, Kenan imagines what it would mean to alter that relationship in a game of subject-side affective economies—that is, if the institution will not stop harassing queers or speaking against homosexuality, Kenan asks what strategies are available to the queer subject who will not or cannot move to more hospitable spaces.

For my purposes, I am less interested in what a text as an affective map can change in a reader, and more interested in how witnessing a character draw their own affective map as their body physically moves backwards and forwards through a replay of their own physical and emotional life equips us with a way to think about a more open present. In essence, the affective map that Kenan provides us through this narrative is just as embodied as it is aestheticized and writerly. If the space of Tims Creek has a queer

history and a history of abjected queers, the black queer youth must redraw the affective maps that are grafted onto this land if he is ever to have a chance. It is the practice of redrawing rather than the presentation of the map itself that works to impress upon the real.

In this way, the writing of an affective map participates in what Elizabeth Freeman calls "erotohistoriography," an affective historiographical method that "indexes how queer social practices, especially those involving enjoyable bodily sensations, produce form(s) of time consciousness, even historical consciousness that can intervene upon the material damage done in the name of development. Against pain and loss, erotohistoriography posits the value of surprise, of pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfillments from elsewhere, other times" (59). As Freeman goes on to suggest, this method exceeds the present, showing the ways in which the pleasures of the past, present, and future can impress upon one another. Horace's embodied dissent into his own memories does similar work, even if he traffics within a more variegated range of affective modes from abject shame to abject self-indulgence. This opening up of the past, however, has profound spatial as well as temporal implications given the ways in which the town of Tims Creek and its history have their own way of configuring how the past can be opened and then, at the end, shut down. The space itself so abruptly and so frequently forecloses the possibility of a productive queer habitus. Rather than give in to this queer history, the town would rather struggle with a queer presence always already on the verge of a horizon from which it cannot walk back.

Though much work on *A Visitation of Spirits* posits that Kenan's Tims Creek needs a revitalization or a reimagining that allows for the richness of queer life to operate

uninhibitedly, I wish to argue that reading this novel alongside Kenan's short story collection, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, also set in Tims Creek, reveals a spatial discourse in which queer affect has always already been affixed to the land. Remembering the queerness of space does not do enough to bring about the radical change that makes black queer life livable but Kenan asks us to consider a better method of indexing the queer attachments to land because of the way in which the shifting economic models of the post-Agrarian South made intimacy between black people of all sexualities less available. In this way, Kenan engages in a mode of postsecular critique that imagines the preconditions that could but would not necessarily lead to that queer utopia on the horizon. His aim is not to provide the blueprint for queer utopia because the reality of black queer Southern life is that it is always in peril. Even in moments that seem to be approaching a time and space in which queers can comfortably possess their own erotic lives, comfort stands in close proximity to abjection and death. Tims Creek is a town in process and can only continue to be in process as it redraws its own affective maps and opens up what "intimacy" as a relationality and a practice looks like.

Flatley goes on to argue that there is no possibility for political action without these affective maps as it is through the realm of affect that we have a relation to any political formation: class, gender, sexuality, etc. In order for affective political resistance to work, Flatley argues, "[s]ubstitute objects of positive affective attachment must be provided where necessary, counter-moods evoked, and the emotional valence of various objects and ideas changed through processes of rearticulation and recontextualization" (79). But what happens when that process of recontextualization amounts to merely putting a space that has found itself out of alignment back into its proper context? The

work of a short story like "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead," which I will discuss below, is to place the queer places, practices, and lives of modern-day Tims Creek within a history that lays well outside of the parameters of respectability. By forcing Tims Creek to stake claims on its queer history, Horace Cross becomes a queer subject that is not only reimagining his own memory and reorganizing his relationality to spaces like the church or the school or the theater; Horace Cross, rather, is the black queer youth that changes the affective fields of a town that must more openly acknowledge its established and intertwined slave and queer histories.

My argument here bucks a trend in scholarship on *A Visitation of Spirits* that tends to fall in line with Sharon Patricia Holland's useful and incisive reading of both the novel and the place of black queer bodies in the larger scholarly fields with which those bodies intersect:

> Although it is true that to some extent African American studies has paid attention to feminism, it is abundantly clear that there is no room in the closet for discussions of sexuality that move beyond a heterosexist paradigm. With African American studies having chosen its 'proper object' of inquiry, and with feminism and lesbian/gay studies debating about what theirs should be, there is ample room in *all* fields for a ghosting of certain black bodies. Black queer subjectivity is the body that no one wants to be beholden to. Like Horace and his countless rituals for transmutation, in order to speak, queer black bodies have to search in outrageous places to find voice—they have to come back from the dead to get the recognition they deserve. (120)

Though Holland's work in *Raising the Dead* comes just before black queer studies' most trenchant interventions in these fields, Kenan's work does more than simply produce the apparitional body of the black queer subject. Even while possessed by demons and hurtling towards his own suicide, it is Horace's tortured vitality *and* his slow death that is most impactful. Surely, it would be nigh impossible to frame Kenan's fiction as not

engaging the necropolitical within the terrain of queer critique. The death of the queer child furnishes a nostalgic turn backward rather than a progressive leap forward, calling into question whether it was queer death or the rehashing of queer life—unsanitized and still full of violence and utter exhaustion—that could be the impetus for change, if change can ever even occur.

This reading resonates most closely with Sara Ahmed's work and her thinking about how changing the affective connections between people and other people or objects change how communities operate. On the surface, this seems self-evident. Bias and feelings (whether based in reason or not) towards certain behaviors underpin many of the ways in which the state polices those within its borders. As Ahmed argues, our vocabulary about emotions renders them as that which an individual possesses. As she sees them, however, affects circulate in ways that hold implications for how larger social bodies organize. She writes, "emotions *involve* subjects without residing positively within them. Indeed, emotions may only seem like a form of residence as an effect of a certain history, a history that may operate by concealing its own traces" (119). Ahmed goes on to argue that the circulation of affect and an attention to this circulation stands as paramount for how we can think of the operation of populations at any scale from a small community to the nation-state as "affective economies need to be seen as social and material, as well as psychic. Indeed, if the movement of affect is crucial to the very making of a difference between 'in here' and 'out there,' then the psychic and the social cannot be installed as proper objects. Instead, materialization, which Judith Butler describes as 'the effect of boundary, fixity and surface,' involves a process of intensification. In other words, the accumulation of affective value shapes the surfaces of

bodies and worlds" (121). Affects work outside of the black queer body and do not die with the death of the black queer subject. Any adjustments to the affective attachments and affective fields that determine the town's position on what is and is not acceptable has its own separate afterlife. The life, the rendering again of that life, and the extinction of that life are all responsible for meaningful change in the way queer and non-queer bodies bind together in this town. By revealing the queer traces that previously had been concealed, Horace taps into the different erotic possibilities that always already reside in Tims Creek and should make anything but strict heterosexual respectability the organizing principle for social life in the South. The affective economies that have operated throughout both Horace Cross's life and Tims Creek's history should not allow it.

In order to fully parse out Horace's intervention in the spatial history of Tims Creek, I will first demonstrate through a reading of a selection of stories in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* how Kenan sets Tim Creek up as a queer space replete with spiritual resonances. Then, I will return to *A Visitation of Spirits*, in order to discuss how the presence of the queer body that toggles between the personal past, the collective past, the personal present, and the collective present, indicates a non-linear temporal mode that the haunted South must engage with for the sake of its own future.

"To call up a demon you must learn its name…"

Let the Dead Bury Their Dead begins with "Clarence and the Dead (*And* What Do They Tell You, Clarence? *And* the Dead Speak to Clarence)," a complicated story in

which Clarence, a child who never reaches the age of six, begins to speak like an adult at an impossibly young age. This adeptness with language eventually extends far enough that he gains the ability to converse with the dead. The young necromancer frightens the town and so, rather than attempt to exile the child, a number of the townspeople immediately turn inward towards their religion. Their Christian morals, however, lead to frightening conclusions when their consensus building guides them into realizing that "after a round of prayers for the souls of Mr. George Edward and Miss Eunice [the boy's parents] […] the boy ought to be bound to a stake and burnt or left on a dry riverbed for the devil to claim his own" (14). Rather than actually burn him (though the townspeople do regularly show up at the child's house with burning effigies), Ellsworth Batts, a distraught widower who has become so dangerously inconsolable by his wife's death that he refuses to even brush his teeth or cut his hair appears and becomes acquainted with the small child and his talents. Ellsworth's repeated visits to Clarence's family's house is largely seen as strange but the town only begins caterwauling for Ellsworth's exile once he comes into contact with Clarence. Clarence can channel the ghost of Ellsworth's deceased wife and the connection between Ellsworth and his wife's spirit (as it inhabits the body of a 5-year-old Clarence) becomes so strong that they manifest in what look like pedophilic tendencies towards Clarence. Ellsworth becomes more and more persistent as time goes on, his advances more and more baleful. The reaction of the residents of Tims Creek is worth quoting at length:

> Nothing like talk of crimes against nature gets people all riled up and speculating and conjecturing and postulating the way they did when word got out about Ellsworth Batts's "unnatural affection" for Clarence Pickett. The likelihood of him conversing with his dead Mildred through the boy paled next to the idea of him fermenting depraved intentions for young and tender boys. Imaginations

> sparked like lightning in a dry August wood, and folk took to shunning poor Ellsworth and keeping an extra eye on their womenfolk and children and locking doors after dark. (19)

The town's decision to expel Ellsworth Batts by removing him from Tims Creek is not simply an act of desperation; it is an attempt at homeostasis. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues in *Phenomenology of Perception,* spaces reorient themselves in relationship to us when the balance of perception feels off. Speaking about an experiment in which a man sees a reflection of the room that he stands in at a 45-degree angle, Merleau-Ponty suggests that though the immediate visual response is strange and defamiliarizing, the body quickly adapts in order to no longer feel slanted:

> Let us say that perception before the experiment recognizes a certain *spatial level*, in relation to which the spectacle provided in the experiment first of all appears oblique, and that during the experiment this spectacle induces another level in relation to which the whole of the visual field can once more seem straight. It is as if certain objects (walls, doors and the body of the man in the room), having been aslant in relation to a given level, then take it upon themselves, attracting to themselves in the virtual, acting as 'anchoring points', and causing the previously established horizontal to tilt sideways. (290)

As both Merleau-Ponty and Certeau argue, bodies impress meaning onto space; thus, why some spaces and the people who inhabit those spaces find that some bodies can be incorporated when others cannot. As Tims Creek cannot acknowledge that it has already found equilibrium with its queer presences, it assumes that only expulsion will return them to a normal, non-queer state that they never had.

This propensity for becoming straight is so intense that even Clarence himself does not escape calls for banishment. Almost as soon as the townspeople realize that the child has his own bizarre tendencies, they call for his removal from the boundaries of Tims Creek in everyday conversations and at church services. However, these initial calls

for his banishment to get rid of him eventually dissipate and he becomes another ripple in the texture of Tims Creek—perhaps an aberrant ripple, one with a different kind of pulse but a ripple that can be incorporated based on his status as child, as that which needs protection, and as that which can be malleable, eventually bent to the will of how this Southern town means to see itself in its reflection. Unlike Clarence, Ellsworth Batts is an irredeemable force that offends the town's orientation in two ways: first, by being caught by the sweetgum tree kissing Clarence (who is channeling Ellsworth's wife) and by finding himself in Clarence's bed, he introduces the ultimate threat to childlike innocence, pedophilia; and, second, he reinvests power in the child as a necromancer, making the molding of that child into a productive member of Southern society that much more difficult. In order to best regulate what constitutes appropriate spatial practices from the perspective of a Christian framework, Ellsworth must jump into a river to his death—and so he does, chased by bloodhounds and Tims Creek residents brandishing firearms. In delimiting these practices, the body read as queer becomes diametrically opposed to "womenfolk and children," signifiers for reproduction and species perpetuity. Homosexual or not, given his intense grieving process, it seems unlikely that Ellsworth will ever find another woman with whom he can reproduce and he also represents a direct threat to children. Even if that threat narrative has been mapped onto Ellsworth against his will as the relationship that he sutures with Clarence is predicated on reconnecting with his heterosexual spouse in the afterlife, Tims Creek residents end up asking why should one be allowed to inhabit the same spaces as those who can both comply with the proper strategies of power and can produce more bodies that could be made respectable?

But, then, Clarence dies too. The necromancer (regardless of age) and the pedophile (regardless of race) are not allowed to inhabit even the liminal spaces of Tims Creek. Both must be extinguished in order to support the social order of heteropatriarchal or middle-class values that the town ostensibly reveres because the church says that this is what is acceptable. The deaths of Clarence and Ellsworth underscore—albeit, drastically—Henri Lefebvre's assertions about how difference is allowed to operate, particularly when it comes to sites organized by a spatial order built by religion:

> The level of *singularities* stretches outwards around bodies: that is, around each body and around the connections between bodies, and extends them into places affected by opposing qualities—by the favourable and the unfavourable, say, or by the feminine and the masculine. These qualities, though dependent on the places in question, are also what confer symbolic power on them. This level is governed, though at times in an inverted manner, by the laws of symmetry and asymmetry. (226)

Much of the continued rhetoric behind the opposition to queerness and queer desire relies on a specific kind of asymmetry between male and female bodies—that is, that male bodies seem to "fit" into female bodies by way of correspondingly placed orifices and protruding limbs. These spatial practices and the behavior that is regulated between bodies are, as Lefebvre goes on to point out, "subordinated to principles of coexistence dictated from above, and indeed only written down" (227). Because the discursive space of Tims Creek does not properly allow for black queer bodies to live outside of its cartographical limitations here, there are no spaces of abjection for these sexually aberrant bodies to inhabit and so the town means to make them unintelligible in death.

With "Clarence and the Dead," the townsfolk themselves realize that there is not enough space to accommodate deviance because their own productivity and living are

more important. When describing how Clarence died, much emphasis is placed on how the town quickly returns to normal after it hears about the deaths of a man and a child:

> Doctors say [Clarence's death] was a bad case of the flu on top of a weak heart we'd never heard tell of. We figured there was more to it than that, something our imaginations were too timid to draw up, something to do with the living and dying that we, so wound up in harvesting corn, cleaning house, minding chickenpox, building houses, getting our hair done, getting our cars fixed, getting good loving, fishing, drinking, sleeping, and minding other people's business, really didn't care about *or have time or space to know.* (22)

In the end, neither Clarence nor Ellsworth's death is erased from the text. Reconsider the actual title of the story, "Clarence *and* the Dead (*And* What Do They Tell You, Clarence? *And* the Dead Speak to Clarence)," in which the name becomes repeated far too often on the page while the emphasis on the conjunction belabors the repetition. But, after their deaths, the town returns to its ordinary, "straight up" preoccupations as if only after death could they truly go on with their normal lives. In essence, Tims Creek cannot operate optimally when it focuses heavily on pedophilia and sexual deviance so pedophilia and sexual deviance are made to become invisible in the deaths of the collection's first queer characters. The town's penchant for and directive towards homeostasis, a set of conditions predicated on heteronormative behavior, remains a focal problem throughout the collection even as it marches toward the final story and a queer history that the text itself argues cannot be denied. The fantasy of queer eradication or queer silencing allows us to read the first story as doing similar work to the last story as it constructs the queer historical grounds for the narrative(s) that come(s) out of it.

Before *Let The Dead Bury Their Dead* reaches its conclusion, however, other queer characters are presented as being just as unable to find stability. Even when stereotypically common relations between Christianity and queerness are presented, both

parties cannot help but inflect upon how race, religion, sexuality, and capitalism intersect. For white queer males, for example, the locally concentrated economic relations that tether this rural community of blacks and whites either transfigure them into a form of social/cultural capital that can be used in specific times and specific spaces for the accretion of social power or an aberration that does not receive a fully formed identity as anything more than a sexual "Other." Dean, the poor white queer male in "Run, Mourner, Run" falls in the former category as he is perhaps the most fully developed queer character in the collection and, though readers get insight into large portions of his background, his actual character functions as little more than a bridge connecting white and black heterosexual-identified men vying for power in the region of black male domestic spaces.

In this story, Kenan takes readers straight to the bedroom, unable to hide the intimate moments between Dean and Ray, a prominent figure in the community and a black man seemingly on the down low. The couple is interrupted there by the white and heterosexual Percy Terrell who had strategically been using Dean as a tool for shaming Ray, "the one colored undertaker in town," and the "richest black man in Tims Creek" (167). As Melvin Dixon argues, since the slave narratives of the 19th century, "issues of home, self and shelter have loomed paramount in the black imagination" (2) making the homeplace a tropic preoccupation in African American men's literature and what is striking to note for this story is the way in which the queer body is made to undo this historical narrative from within the black home, and more specifically, from inside his bedroom. Lefebvre's assertion that "[s]pace assumes a regulatory role when and to the extent that contradictions are resolved" (420), entrusts power to the space of the bedroom

as it organizes heterosexual activity into becoming the "normal" sexual schematic and that power can be directed in interesting ways. The spatial order of this particularly intimate space can be the most dominating and domineering in the discussion of an individual's sexuality because the performance of sexual intercourse (which would normally occur in this room) takes precedence over discursive methods of carving out such identity by way of language, utterance or role-playing.

To quickly return to the story, Percy's desire for control over the black body and his use of Dean as little more than a device for implementing that control show the ways in which heterosexual characters are the ones most obviously benefiting from queer inclusion and intrusion in this text. Cast off to the margins even when their narratives technically dominate the conversation, those queer margins are less spaces of radical openness that can be chosen and mobilized politically in a move that bell hooks sees as possible for oppressed and exploited peoples and more sites of fixedness for gay identity.[42] By the end of the story, the one that is most affected by anyone or anything is Dean, the queer white male who has been beaten up, ridiculed, and made to take charity from Ray's wife. For reasons that are elided from the story, the documentation of sexual performance between men destroys no one but the individual that was known to be queer in the first place. Somehow, the black bourgeoise remains relatively untouched and the

[42] In an essay entitled "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," hooks argues that marginalized populations within marginalized populations must be able to create space within a dominant society from which they may produce a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose—to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center—but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (149-150).

cartographies of power are drawn so that black men who willingly participate in queer sex acts can hold more social authority than their gay white counterparts.

As much as I am arguing that the town of Tims Creek relies on the abjection of queerness to construct itself as a thriving Southern town, the tension between religion and sexuality cannot be solved by the total rejection or negation of queerness from Southern space. The potentiality of and for black queerness is reopened by the collection's last story, the eponymous "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" in which the prehistory of Tims Creek is told through various genres of writing and storytelling. The frame narrative takes the form of a scholarly edition of *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, an "Annotated Oral History of the Former Maroon Society called Snatchit and then Tearshirt and later the Town of Tims Creek, North Carolina [circa 1854-1985]" published by the Right Reverend James Malachai Greene, a self-appointed historian of Tims Creek and the cousin of Horace Cross. The oral history is principally told by Jimmy Greene's Uncle Zeke and interrupted and/or corrected by his Aunt Ruth. Zeke's story is also interrupted by quite lengthy footnotes, some written by Rev. Greene and others written by Reginald Kain, the scholar who has gotten this monograph published after Greene's untimely death in a car accident. The story/oral history/monograph also incorporates diary entries and letters written in the 19th century by members of the Cross family, then a white slave-owning North Carolinian clan of some wealth.

Though, ostensibly, faithful readers of Kenan's work are finally provided access to the history behind the strange fictional county that stands as the setting for all of his fictional work, Tims Creek's "true" history is occluded by Kenan's deployment of a bricolage aesthetic. History hides behind layer upon layer of textual material drawn upon

from a variety of sources, calling the reader's attention to the (perhaps misplaced) trust that she places in everything from folktales to the institutionalized archive. By using a number of sources and genres in order to properly locate the history of Tims Creek, Kenan's work recalls Michel de Certeau's descriptions of how stories carve out the boundaries of space whether through the use of first hand accounts that aid in the adjudication of land rights or the patchwork of tales, rumors, opinions, and facts that help listeners imagine what the parameters of a space look like. For Certeau, "[t]hese 'operations of marking out boundaries,' […] shed light on the formation of myths, since they also have the function of founding and articulating spaces" (122-123). These foundations, however, are called into question immediately by the inclusion of Aunt Ruth; the footnotes that, though also dubious in their veracity, point out in several instances that certain aspects of the short story's main narrative cannot be found in any records; and the disruption of that narrative by way of other textbooks, letters and diary entries. All of these different sources of knowledge interrupt and "correct" the one that discursively dominates the pages, making proper town history feel nearly impossible to know.

To turn now to the specifics of "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead," the story largely narrates the backstory of the Crosses living in Tearshirt, the towch which would eventually become the modern-day Tims Creek that is the setting for the rest of the collection. Owen Cross, the patriarch, wins a slave he names Pharaoh in a card game, a slave that Rebecca Cross, the mistress of the estate, can only describe as "Huge & black & has a hoop in one Ear & has Frightening Scars about his Face of a most disturbing Nature" in her diary, excerpts of which show up in the story (307). As Robert McRuer

suggests, while readers might not see one earring on an African slave as a signifier for homosexuality given the historical context, he "submit[s] that Kenan's work as a whole repeatedly inscribes the presence-absence of queerness into the Signifying Monkey. […] Certainly, the signifying earring that reappears here need not be, in Jimmy's words, "thought of as—'; yet even when Kenan's tricksters are not *exactly* 'gay,' they are not exactly 'straight' either" (114). Pharaoh may not be gay but he can be read as queer, constructing a queer kinship between the slave of the 19th century and the queer child of the 20th century through the earring that, as Trudier Harris argues is the case for Horace, "places him beyond [the Cross family's] notion of family and history" (118). The earring, as McRuer goes on to argue, suggests that Pharaoh must be read through Horace in order to think through how traditional hierarchies of power are being challenged by Kenan's work.

To step back, this is not an attempt to fall into the rhetorical trap that Rebecca Balon cautions scholars who work on queerness and slavery to keep in mind when thinking of the figure of the slave as non-normative in her reading of David Halperin's work in *Saint Foucault*. As Balon suggests:

> While [Halperin's] methodology has succeeded in untethering queerness from essentialized, ahistorical gay and lesbian identities, I argue that Halperin's brand of queer theory nevertheless cannot account for the kinlessness and lack of futurity that characterize the nonnormativity of slave sexuality because the former still relies upon an understanding of the body and the human will/desire as coextensive and does not grapple with the extreme coercion that produces sexual nonnormativity in the case of slavery. What is queer is by definition nonnormative but, contrary to Halperin's claim, what is nonnormative is not necessarily queer. (142-143)

Balon's reading of "queer" relies on a set of historically contingent definitions that erase the possibility of the category of the "queer slave" to accurately be applied to any figure

real or imagined. This argument rests partially on the historical genealogy of homosexuality that Foucault sketches in *The History of Sexuality* and partially on the economic, legal, and power relations that were the very conditions of slavery. Historical fiction, however, makes such unthinkable subject positions thinkable in a very real way and Kenan's use of the genre of the scholarly monograph grants a sense of legitimacy to the category of the queer slave, revealing reverberations along the axes of slavery and sexuality that track into the present.

Even without this, however, there is enough to connect Horace and Pharaoh based on the shared affective genealogy that evinces a charged relationship to inhabited space. This does not require that Pharaoh be queer or that we open up the definition of "queer" to incorporate all non-heteronormative desires. Tearshirt, the town that Pharaoh founds on the lands owned by his former master, is a space that holds the explicit aim of making all relations, sexual or non-sexual, legitimate in the eyes of a habitus existing outside of state-sanctioned legal frameworks. Tearshirt exists on the land of the plantation that inherently produces the status of the slave as chattel even if it acts as a space in which devalued peoples can build one another up and operate as humans rather than property. This is a different affective economy than the one that slavery produces in which sexual and/or platonic desire are inherently placed in peril in every facet of slave life. If, as Sara Ahmed argues, "the circulation of signs of affect shapes the materialization of collective bodies," this shifting of how black bodies stick together should have lasting effects on how black bodies across time continue to stick together in a capacity markedly away from shame ("Affective" 121).

What is striking about the origin story of Tims Creek may be that it involves the construction of a space of pleasure and intimacy rather than pain, protected by energies of a seemingly magical slave. Kenan's neo-slave narrative further expands the territory opened up by neo-slave narratives like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* in thinking about the complex and numerous affective modes and lives that slaves possessed.[43] Though Kenan does not narrate the everyday acts of resistance that took place in the maroon colony that becomes known as Tearshirt after the Civil War, we must read this space against the grain of cultural narratives of slavery that narrowly allow the slave to operate in proximity to pain, shame, and abject suffering. My task is not to rescue Tims Creek from the history that it has. Rather, I am interested in thinking about Horace Cross's personal past alongside and across Tims Creek's archive in order to more fully account for the spatial and temporal histories that he engages with in his journey on that fateful night in April 1984. This shifts the burden of a catalyst for change in this town from the death of the black queer child to an acknowledgement by that town of what is allowable in this present that has accumulated multiple overlapping histories.

With that said, however, the town eventually collapses due to over the top religion and erroneous sexual behavior that all leads back to the initial purchase of Pharaoh as if no destruction would have happened had he never come into play. The veracity of such a statement, however, cannot be substantiated when several different stories are being told in this short story and all of the alternative and errant narratives lead into the events that

[43] I see this work in conversation with that of the late Vincent Woodard who, for instance, in his masterful reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, argues that a reading of the "male rape scene" in that neo-slave narrative allows readers the opportunity to challenge their reading of black male interiority in antebellum America by "grounding the idea of the tight place in the homoerotic experiences of black men during slavery" (213).

they have ended up calling “the Horror.” To tell the story succinctly, shortly after Pharaoh’s death, his leadership is replaced with that of an unknown preacher who introduces the town to organized religion. As Uncle Zeke tells it:

> [The citizens of Tearshirt took the Preacher in] and built him a church directly. The first in Tearshirt. He told them to build one without windows so they could concentrate on the Word of God. See, Pharaoh hadn’t been too big on the white man’s God, they say, told the people to love themselves and all things would follow, said God’s in everything, everything, everywhere, in the trees, in dogs and cats and birds, even in them. Well that a lie, the Preacher say, God is high above and looking low, to believe otherwise, well, Preacherman say, that’s the sure way to hell and damnation. (315)

Though some initially have some reservations about how much the Preacher has upset the town’s everyday rituals, those whisperings turn to loud speculations as a succession of strange events: the suicide of a young woman after she bizarrely begins trying to have sex with inanimate objects; the murder of a young boy after he bizarrely begins having sex with barnyard animals; the death of another young boy who begins defecating in food jars and threatening people with knives; and, finally, the unexplained death of a woman who encounters the preacher having sex with a cow out in the pasture. After this last event, the preacher gives one last sermon about Pharaoh in which he claims the dead form former slave was the devil. Given the pronouncement, the Preacher tells the congregation that they should dig up Pharaoh and obtain a book that he had been buried with which may hold the key to untold riches. In order to obtain that book, the Preacher lets loose an undead army of formerly living Tims Creek residents, some of whom relish in the opportunity to reacquaint with loved ones while others wreak havoc. Pharaoh must also return from the dead in order to save Tearshirt from itself, decapitating the Preacher and

ushering in a scorched earth scenario in which the town is purged and a new town can be built.

The Horror is an event characterized by its fidelity to its deviant pleasures. Precipitated by a number of acts of bestiality and pedophilia, the relationship between Christianity and acceptable sexual practices is further unmoored by the inclusion of a letter that Phineas Cross, the queer son of Own Cross, Pharaoh's former master, writes to his male lover in 1859. The missive can be found right after the narrator signals that he will talk about "the Horror" *and* after Ruth has undermined the gravity of the situation by retorting, "Horror my left tit" (318). This sentence comes right at the bottom of the page and so, instead of receiving details about this supposed horror at the top of the next page, reader expectation is stilted by the introduction of a new source: "Phineas Owen Cross [1830-1921] is considered one of the most eminent botanists of his day" (320). The Horror is interrupted by the short narrative of a white queer male entering black heterotopic space in the wilderness, a space that has been set up after the Cross' slaves have successfully revolted and escaped under the leadership of "field nigger" Pharaoh. This scene in the wilderness, which feels remarkably pastoral given Phineas's curious entrancement, presents a piece of town history that cannot be found in any other source even if it too is largely left to the wayside in favor of the Horror which provides for a more compelling read.

This wilderness that is not wild represents a vantage point, the space within the space that represents how the limits of possibility can be stretched and widened beyond the parameters that legal codes afford. When Phineas Cross stumbles across the maroon society that has formed on his father's land, his bewilderment of Menes (Pharaoh's other

name) being in such close proximity coupled with the slave's status as a magical Negro makes his claims to property more than persuasive to the young aesthete. In a letter that he pens to his male lover, Phineas writes, "I instantly recognized him: the notorious slave Menes, the very one, who, 3 years past, had murdered my own brother and five white overseers and disappeared from the face of the earth […]. The wonder of it! He is the most awesome of Negroes I have ever beheld; I had always looked on him with more than a little fondness, having found him so bewitching, virile, and more than anything mysterious in the way that only Africans can be" (324). In the clearing, Menes/Pharaoh refuses the economy of shame that Saidiya Hartman has argued had been imposed onto slaves, rendering their desire socially and legally illegible. Love between slaves had to be hidden lest the intimacy between blacks be used as a mechanism of white power that could be leveraged in order to keep slaves compliant. Speaking about Harriet Jacobs' refusal to fully describe the violence that had been done to her body over the course of enslavement, Hartman argues, "Not only do the enslaved bear the burden of crime, the onus of guilt indissociable from speaking of the foul wrongs of slavery, and the punishment essential to the constitution of the subject, but also the inability to marry renders all desire illegitimate, as it is unlicensed, extralegal, and without a sanctioned domain" (109).

The maroon colony that is built on Cross-owned land, may not be the space that makes queer desire articulable but it is the space in which complex black affective modes are made articulable outside of the purview of white dominance. This does not prove that those who lived there found all desire could be made intelligible in the clearing. As Anthony Dyer Hoefer argues, "while the various social practices that characterize

marronage necessarily included Western forms of knowledge and the experience of slaves, runaways, and freed persons within various New World cultures, this commitment to Africa [in maroon culture] configured the unmapped geographies of the maroon community as a space in which black suffering could be articulated" (126). The space in the wilderness ensconced away from the logics and mechanisms of slavery represents a space that has the potential to depathologize slave sexuality, clearing the way for a future community that will not make desire unintelligible.

The inclusion of Phineas' letter in this section on the horror works to bridge a conceptual gap between the "unarticulatable" queer slave and the post-Foucauldian consensus that the figure of the homosexual is a late 19th century conceit. Kenan interrupts the narrative of religion and sexual deviance to make room for a love between (white) men that opens up the possibility for queer desire to be articulated in this mid-19th century narrative, even if it is written in the late 20th century.[44] Her diary entry on February 3rd, 1855 connects the rejection of her son's lust for men with the brutishness of Pharaoh, sanctioning the queerness of the sons of white proprietors while condemning the mere presence of supposedly aggressive black male sexuality and intimating fears that his sexuality may be so alluring that her husband may have fallen prey to his charms:

> He is a Frightfull one, this Menes is. He has no Place in a Fine House like Canaan & certainly not as a major domo to a State Senator. I have tried to Talk Sense into Owen but He just Snarls & Barks at Me & says it is not My Business & calls this Blackamoor a Genius & goes on about Him in a most Unseemly Fashion. If I did not know My Husband's long History of more Conventional Fleshly Perversions & Shameful Self-Indulgences I might think He has taken this Menes into Horrible Abomination, but My Husband, the Father of My Children, the Former Magistrate

[44] See Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (2010). His work on how the entanglements of desire under slavery continue to play out in the present has been instructive.

> & now Senator is a Whole Man & despite his at times UnGentlemanly & UnSeemly Behavior & Indulgences of the Flesh, I Know him to be Sound & Good & I Praise Christ Jesus that is so. (308-9)

After Rebecca reveals her fear of Pharaoh's penis, she cannot pen another entry until he leads the slave revolt that kills her other son and drives runaway slaves to the maroon colony. By refusing the shame that Rachel and other whites like her attached to slave desire, the ride into the wilderness by Pharaoh and other revolutionary slaves undertake allows blackness to operate outside of capitalism and this allows black agriculture, black business, and black sociality to thrive in a way that resembles the progress that any racialized community would want within a system that values it rather than dehumanizes it. Whether or not the maroon colony resembles a queer space and whether or not the leader of the maroon colony can or should be read as queer, this space in the wilderness provides precedent for relationality between black people that may be undercut by the Horror but cannot be forgotten. By constructing an affinity between the slave Pharaoh and the young queer Horace Cross, we can see that the queer traces survive into the 20th century.

"Men dreamed that, once, but now it is real in another way…"

When a demon forces Horace to ring the church bell late at night and enter, this spiritual space becomes more sensationally vibrant than it has ever been. The colors are more vivid; the smells are more pungent. He enters a memory in which the congregation is singing and the words "Lead me, guide me / along the way / Lord if you lead me, / I will not stray / Lord let me walk / each day with thee / Lead me, O Lord / Lead me" induces him to look over a congregation made up of people who have since died; his

grandfather, his grandmother, other parishioners. When he asks the demon how these ghosts can appear there in front of him, the demon gives him a rude awakening.

> "Are you really as dumb as you look? asked the demon. You know, for all your damned learning you don't know a mother fucking thing, do you? Ghosts? Yeah, you might call them ghosts. Ghosts of the past. The presence of the present. The very stuff of which the future is made. This is the effluvium of souls that surround men daily. All you have to do is take the scales off your eyes and look and see. You are seeing. I have removed the scales from your eyes. (73)

Taking the scales off of Horace's eyes affords him the opportunity to see how his relationship to the church has given him the modicum of space to explore his sexuality that had previously gone unacknowledged. The power of Horace's grandfather, here in the memory of the church with "hands [that] were large and dark, callused from long days in the field and at the barn," allowed Horace to go relatively unchallenged by authority figures outside of his immediate family (71). Whereas the collective eyes of the community policed other children, Horace was given more respect and given some leeway to step outside of the boundaries of respectability because those hands of his grandfather were attached to the man that they feared the most. Standing in the middle of his rememory, with all of the limitations that governed how he could interact with this space gone, Horace finds a renewed pleasure in black spiritual community, with "his folk, his kin" (73). After the Right Reverend Hezekiah Barden takes the pulpit to preach about the dangers of "Live-in Lovers" on television, a catalyst activates the dissent into further dreams that force Horace to encounter the pain and torment that he received at the hands of his family, his school, and the community in which moments before he had found solace. The demon ends up decapitating the remembered Reverend Barden just as Horace realizes that his prayers would exclude him on the basis of his desires. Barden resurrects

for the purposes of christening Horace and after being dipped in the cold waters of the baptismal pool, he quickly reorients his relationship to the church. He cannot continue to relate to it through his grandfather and this stark realization hurls Horace back into the cold air of the present, "soft ballocks resting gently on the velvet upholstery" (86).

While forays into the church and the school serve as important switch points between formative memories, Horace's queer desire becomes most sharply intelligible while he holds a job at the Owen Oliver Cross Memorial Outdoor Theater, an open-air amphitheater that is most likely named after the member of the Cross family who originally purchased Pharaoh. During his tenure there, the theater puts on a production of *Ride the Freedom Star*, an expensive and contrived show that tells the history of the white side of the Cross family from the American Revolution through to the Civil War. Despite awkward dialogue and shoddy historical accuracy, *Ride the Freedom Star* employs a large number of actors and backstage crew members, many of whom come from out of state. Along the way, Horace begins a sexual relationship with Antonio Santaneglo, one of the cast members. During one particular sexual encounter, Antonio asks Horace what he thinks of the play, which is ostensibly about the slave-owning side of his family and does it best to cast them in a positive light by including dialogue from slaves who calim to be happy to be on the plantation. Horace intimates an ambivalence about the play because of what the sordid narrative says about his family's past and his own fate: "I don't know. It's funny. I'm kind of proud, too. You know. Not about the slavery stuff, but to know where we've gotten, you know? […] You know, I often think of how I'm going to make my family proud of me" (224). Horace's pride not in in the fact that his ancestors owned slaves but in the futures that making money off of slave

labor made possible for subsequent generations is bluntly interrupted when Antonio calls him “superfag” and reiterates that Horace is a faggot. Horace rebuts the charge by exclaiming “What I *am* is brilliant” reclaiming his place as the Great Black Hope, the straight A-Lad and the Chosen Nigger.

Horace risks his chosen status at a cast party after opening night in which Antonio takes him to a graveyard where the cast and crew participate in an orgy reminiscent of “religious exaltation” (230). The pleasure that such an event means to afford, however, is redirected to an extended meditation on death. The overwhelming emptiness that follows all of the sex and the alcohol and the drugs opens Horace up to the suicidal thoughts that eventually overtake his possessed self by the novel’s conclusion. When he sees the tombstones of his white ancestors, the fatalism of his march towards queer death also finally allows him to see the dualisms and the complexities that he theretofore had disregarded:

> [Horace] saw what he had led himself to see, the reason, the logic, the point. It was round and square. It was hard and soft, black and white, cold and hot, smooth and rough, young and old. It had depth and was shallow, was bright and dull, took light and gave light, was generous and greedy. Holy and profane. Ignorant and wise. Horace saw it and it saw Horace, like the moon, like the sea, like the mountain—so large he could not miss it, so small he could barely see it. The most simple, the most complex, the most wrong, the most right. Horace saw. *Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,* said the prophet Joel, *your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.* (232)

These tombstones and the recognition of the lineage between the old men who dream dreams and the children who will predict futures force Horace’s consciousness through the long history of black suffering and oppression from the slave ship to his own present moment. This history forces him to reassess the relationship with white men that he had previously defended at the dinner in which his signifying-earring caused him strife with

his family. When his friendship with his white friends was something simple to defend, Horace could lay claims on queer community. However, the religious exaltation of an orgy, initiated by the cast members of a play about his family, from the theater named after the ancestor who owned the queer slave, in the graveyard that holds the bodies of other dead white family members almost three centuries removed, sets him on the path of indecent pleasures that alienate him from his schoolwork, knocks him off of the chosen perch, and ultimately leads him to his death. The Bible, a text that he reads fervidly after the orgy in order to help constitute meaning out of the guilt and confusion that would follow his experience in the graveyard, does not provide the solace that he is looking for; rather, it places him in the crosshairs of the demons that force him to relive the memories that he can finally make sense of but cannot save him from the abjection that makes him the same kind of queer martyr as Clarence, Ellsworth Batts, Dean, and Pharaoh himself.

The turn towards the end of the novel to affective performance takes the rural queer away from the land—literally, as his job in the theater replaces his previous means of employment, cropping tobacco—and into a space largely seen as more hospitable to queer life. Though such a claim threatens to push the narrative into the metronormative trap that Scott Herring warns scholars of queer rurality to avoid, the Crosstown theater represents an important cross-section of the community for a boy who struggles both with his attachment to his family and his sexuality.[45] The theater is not a queer utopia in rural space; Horace's memory reveals that nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, the

---

[45] Here I am indebted to what Herring calls "critical rusticity," which he defines as "an intersectional opportunity to geographically, corporeally, and aesthetically don non-normative sexuality that offers new possibilities for the sexually marginalized outside the metropolis as well as for those […] inside it." See Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (2010), 146.

theater in the present of Horace's past marks a space of unfulfilled disidentification in which the sexual self that he cannot explore at church or at school gets incorporated into community, even if that community comes with its own queer limitations.[46] This disidentification is not at all about the theater as a site of queer performance or performance as a survival tactic in the repressive South. Horace does not become an actor and ultimately the plays that the Crosstown theater put on do not save Horace from himself either in his memory or during his time there or in his physical return to that space after he has been possessed. Instead, the space that is more closely aligned with affective rather than physical labor reorients Horace toward the queer history that is outlined in "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" and away from the kinship ties that are the most immediately present and threatening. Neither the theater nor the graveyard constitute safe spaces; in effect, they create alternate spaces of queer identity formation that may not protect him from harm but do invoke a different set of possible affective dimensions that ultimately are not satisfying either.

But, perhaps, affective mapping is not enough. In the end, Horace commits suicide with the cold phallus that he has held in his hands as he travels around town in front of his cousin, the Right Reverend James Malachai Greene, a self-appointed historian of Tims Creek. Is it the death of the queer subject that causes Jimmy Greene to write *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*? Does the death of black queer youth serve as the catalyst for the publication of Tims Creek's queer history? The introduction to that

[46] I take the term "disidentification" from José Muñoz, who usefully defines the term as a "mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology." See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), 11.

monograph suggests that Jimmy had been working on it for much of his life, starting well before Horace's death on April 30th, 1984. But, time does not stop in the face of queer death. It does not stop in the face of the death of Tims Creek's youth. Clarence could not stop time and neither does Horace. The representation of black queer life does open up the possibility for a sustained engagement with the queer presence that is more than just a presence. As Lefebvre argues, "The past leaves its traces" (37). But, in these moments towards the end of his life, Horace's body reaches further back to the slave history that all black bodies can reach toward. Both his own condition and that of the slaves that came before him is marked by a profound proximity to death, characterized not only by its being brought up in a flash of danger in a cemetery, the penultimate stop for Horace's demons, the place that holds the black child's final destination, wrapped in Manichean dualisms that cannot be resolved.

What Horace ultimately sees is himself, the demon that has led him on the slow march to his own death. Horace's affective map changes but its destination remains the same. His is the story of many queer youth, held captive by the possibilities inherent in suicide. If we read Horace's life as, in Lauren Berlant's terms, a slow death, the turn toward aligning queerness with positive affect that I eluded to in the previous chapter loses it cache with certain kinds of queer lives.[47] It is the lateral movement towards death—again, the redrawing of the affective map and the reworking of old affective attachments—that could possibly have any effect on the future. When Horace dies, once his body ceases to function, time does not stop and though the novel itself reverts to a past time, a requiem for tobacco, the narrator is clear that, much like in the cases of

[47] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (2011): 95-120.

Clarence and Ellsworth Batts, time will march forward with or without the black queer body. “Most importantly, the day did not halt its tracks: clocks did not stop. The school bus rolled. The cows mooed. The mothers scolded their children. Plows broke up soil. Trucks were unloaded and loaded up. Dishes were washed. Dogs barked. Old men fished. Beauticians gossiped. Food was eaten. And the night the sun set with the full intention of rising on the morrow” (254). Time may go on as usual but Horace’s presence and his changed relationship to his own queerness represents the only case study for an attachment to queerness that has even a semblance of hope.

To conclude, this reading of space, place and sex aimed to provide for a reading of Kenan’s work as that which is unable to deny the relationship between these three terms. In effect, the queer/racial/religious historiography that takes place in the eponymous story of *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* and *A Visitation of Spirits* reorients the (black) Christian hermeneutic of “normative” sexuality so that the queer counterpublics that seem to be the outliers in this community become etched into what makes up what is “normal” or “normative” in Tims Creek. Though the Black Church and the “proper” spatial practices it engenders obviously become problematic for queer existence, by writing queerness directly into the fabric of Tims Creek, Kenan is directly infusing the spatial practices of Southern life with the queerness that it often tries to repudiate but cannot possibly ignore.

CHAPTER 3: Bodily Attunements: Healing, Time and the Body in Toni Cade Bambara's The Salt Eaters and Toni Morrison's Paradise

> "The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep. When we view living in the european mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious. But as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-european consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes."
>
> - Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"

> Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?
>
> - Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*

In her groundbreaking edited collection, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Toni Cade Bambara published the incisive black feminist essay, "On the Issue of Roles." Excerpted from an autobiographical lecture that she delivered at Livingston College in New Jersey in 1969, Bambara directs righteous anger and biting critique at the idea of a "woman's role" in the black revolutionary struggle. Parsing out what such a role even refers to is difficult for Bambara because, ultimately, she works toward ending prescribed gender roles since these roles serve no purpose for any progressive political platform. Instead, as she writes, "I am beginning to see, especially lately, that the usual notions of differentiation in roles is an obstacle to political consciousness, that the way those terms are generally defined and acted upon in this part of the world is a hindrance to full development. And that is a shame, for a revolutionary must be capable of, above all, total self-autonomy" (Cade 123-4). With a preface to the anthology that embraces the diverse group of women who have contributed to it—a list that, alongside Bambara, includes the likes of Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, Abbey Lincoln, and

Gwen Patton, amongst others—Bambara makes it clear that any attempt at an invariable definition of the role of black women in revolutionary struggle effectively delimits possibility in an anthology expressly concerned with rejecting any such limitations.

If anything, Bambara's call for an eradication of gender roles closely resembles an essential component of Alice Walker's definition of a womanist, a term she came to define at the beginning of her 1983 collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. The category of womanist has not been without its critiques but at its core it is a designation that highlights an identification with an ideological strategy meant to achieve a sense of wholeness within the black community. As Walker writes in the definition of the term, a womanist is, amongst other things, "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health" (xi). In an essay that parses out the salient ideological distinctions between black feminism and womanism, Patricia Hill Collins suggests that not enough attention has been paid to the ways in which this feature of womanism, the fact that it stands as a life-sustaining practice for *everyone*, has been underutilized as both womanists and black feminists throughout the 1980's continued to ignore that many of its key contributors identified as black lesbians, choosing instead to disregard the ways in which anything but heterosexuality would influence their work.[48] Collins' somewhat brief critique of this aspect of womanism derives out of the work of Barbara Smith, who reads womanist

---

[48] Collins: "Despite the fact that some of the most prominent and powerful black women thinkers claimed by both womanists are black feminists were and are lesbians, this precept often remains unacknowledged in the work of African American writers. In the same way that many people read the Bible, carefully selecting the parts that agree with their worldview and rejecting the rest, selective readings of Walker's womanism produce comparable results" ("What's in a Name?" 12).

scholarship as basically denying any sense that “deviant” sexualities have anything to contribute to this body of work. If womanists are meant to take seriously the proposition that the wholeness of black people requires an ability to account for all kinds of relationships between black women, an inability to fully appreciate how same-sex desire underpins a significant amount of work that could be considered womanist should be most disconcerting.

More recent work by Monica A. Coleman similarly decries a lack of attention to sexuality in the ever-burgeoning field of womanist theology. Though most contemporary descriptions of womanism make reference to the openness of the term and how that openness lends itself to incorporating a number of different kinds of relationships between black women, Coleman laments that, in reality, when actually reading the scholarship, it quickly becomes clear that many scholars would rather actively gloss over any sustained attention to sexuality: “When I read Walker’s definition, I feel at home, but the trajectory of womanist religious scholarship has left me in a house without enough furniture. There are not enough chairs, couches or beds for me or many of the black women I know and love. It isn’t a place where we can be who we are in some of the most important ways we live—sexually, spiritually, or politically. I’ve been dissatisfied by the heteronormativity of womanist religious scholarship. [...] Walker gives a primacy to the sexual love between women, something that womanists have often failed to do” (86). Combating the prevalence of heteronormativity in the field of womanist religious studies is something that Lee Miena Skye agrees should be a central component of the scholarship in her response to Coleman. For Skye, attending to all of the specificities of female experience is integral to this “pursuit of wholeness” that is at the core of the

successful healing of both individuals and communities (Coleman 121). Skye writes, "fundamental to the universal womanist theological academic tradition is the search for wholeness. This is always contextual. Therefore, we cannot write for the wholeness of others whose context is different from ours, be it a cultural, spiritual, social, political, sexual, economic, or gendered context. We can only respect, sympathize, and support them; to do otherwise would be arrogant" (Coleman 121). Not speaking for others from a place of ignorance requires a deep connection with the other, one that requires significant emotional and physical attunement with that other. While these strident critiques of womanism as a field continue to be relevant for pushing at the limits of how the field accounts for the full complexity of black and female and black female experience, this chapter asks us to reconsider whether or not certain fictional works that could be categorized as womanist texts do the work of tracing the connections between race, spirituality, sexuality, and community building from within a womanist or black feminist framework. How does an attunement to the body in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* reorganize that which becomes scattered and disorganized in the face of political opposition? Both novels, known for the ways in which they manipulate time and space in order to tell polyvocal and multivalent narratives use the act of touch as a key mechanism through which black women come together and enhance the racial and gendered consciousness that many early black feminist organizations saw as being paramount for sustained political work.

I turn to touch not only because of its centrality in these two narratives but also because of its radically potentializing qualities. In *The Politics of Touch: Sense,*

Movement, Sovereignty, Erin Manning, following the canonical work of Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter*, argues:

> Being is becoming-relational. […] If gender is not conceived as a naturalized biological essence or strictly a sociocultural condition of possibility, we can conceive of a politics of gender as an engendering toward a composition and decomposition of bodies engaging in the activity of forces and energies that are neither solely biological nor solely political. […] The en-gendered body is an affective, relational body that not only individuates in excess of its-self, but creates new and differing chronotopes that qualitatively alter the matter-form of which it is composed. (106-107)

The en-gendered body, a body that is reaching towards and in process, is also relational in the moment in which it is touching or being touched. The scene of healing, a complex episode constituted by multiple actors, some touching one another, some not, but all together with the purpose of making that which was once sick into that which is well, cannot stand as merely biological nor solely political and the narratological strategies of these novels do now allow for it to stand firmly as either one or the other. The scene of healing is simultaneously biological and political precisely because of how embodied and relational it is.

As scholars like Farah Jasmine Griffin, Angelynn Mitchell, and Ann Folwell Stanford have shown, healers and healing have been fairly commonplace figures and tropes in black women's writing since the 19th century.[49] The use of health, healing, and wellness only see increased visibility in more contemporary black fiction, perhaps most famously in the now iconic scene of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in which Baby Suggs

---

[49] Here I'm thinking of work like Farah Jasmine Griffin's "Textual Healing, Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery" (1996), Angelyn Mitchell's *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, & Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (2002), and Ann Folwell Stanford's *Bodies in a Broken World: Women Novelists of Color and the Politics of Medicine* (2003).

sermonizes in the Clearing, telling a number of black women that in order to find solace, they must cry, sing, dance, and otherwise actively love their bodies. Novels like Gayl Jones *The Healing*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama's Day*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* amongst others all make use of healing as a primary method for thinking about "curing" the unhealthy relationship black communities have with the dominant society. Going beyond the general use of the trope of healing in black women's fiction, I turn to the scene of healing as a specific call to action, one that places spirituality (using all of the capaciousness of that term) and community at the forefront of civic engagement. I define the scene of healing as a gathering, led by a main spiritual advisor, that means to cure one or more people from that which is making them ill personally, spiritually, politically, erotically, and otherwise. In both of the scenes that I talk about in this chapter, what lies at the center of black female suffering is a number of bad memories that will not allow black women to move forward in a way that would make them useful as civic subjects that could effect meaningful change in the communities that need them.

The attunement to the body that is marked by the way in which the scene of healing unfolds and the centrality of bodily knowing that makes healing successful in the first place makes a politics of touch seem so useful for black feminism or ideologies that resemble it. Early black feminist organizations made it a point to inform their members about the intricacies of the female body. These novels take the impetus for consolidating such knowledge and construct an approach to the body that takes into account both its physiology and its sacred attachments in order to tap into the resource that Audre Lorde describes as female and spiritual, behind expression and recognition, and ostensibly

activated by both haptic and emotional connections between women. As Sarah E. Chinn argues employing Lorde's conceptualization of the power of touch in both her innovative essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" and her biomythography, *Zami*, "Lorde's project […] is not utopian but reparative; as Eve Kosofky Sedgwick phrases it in another context, Lorde reminds us that 'hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader'—the reader Lorde hopes to construct—'tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates.' The power of a politically conscious, socially ethical hope is to readjust the balance among the senses, rework the relationship between body and consciousness, and reforge the links shattered by fear of difference." (196). When bodies are conduits of knowledge, as Chinn suggests following Lorde's provocations on the subject, touch operates as the manner in which spiritual and corporeal knowledges get transferred, making for a more informed activist politics, especially when, as it is in the case of *The Salt Eaters*, that touch is feminine and spiritual. Touch extends the self and this becomes central in how the self comes to recognize points of divergence and convergence between those with shared goals, negotiates differences and similarities, and devises a plan of action that best accounts for the information provided.

This extension of self is important to note because it allows for a basis for community built upon an ethics of care. In an article on healing and the erotic in neo-slave narratives written by Michelle Cliff and Sherley Anne Williams, Farah Jasmine Griffin expresses hesitation in deployments of the erotic as a non-problematic tool for fighting oppression. As she argues, "Listening to one's body and loving it is an important step for all women who have been conditioned to hate their bodies. Affirmative sexual

relations and rituals of spiritual renewal help to lead one to the stance of self-love and self-care. However, clearly the reclamation of the sexual body and affirmation of the spiritual self are not in and of themselves enough to constitute acts of resistance; in and of themselves they do not alter the conditions that oppress black women." (533-4). This problematic is not alleviated for Griffin in the work of Cliff and Williams. These novels provide the tools for dismantling oppression without being able to follow through. Those tools provide us with a new way of experiencing the black body, one that privileges touch over the visual, which, as scholars like Nicole Fleetwood point out, has its own hand in reifying systems of black oppression.[50] As Griffin suggests, using other senses to construct a relation with the black body begins the project of reimagining the black female body on terms that return ontological agency to black women themselves. With legacies that have been heavily embodied and physically violated, touch provides another kind of relationality to the corporeal that stands against historical discourses of the black female body that described it as ugly, monstrous, and non-normative.

Touch, of course, is not without its own problematics but, particularly as discussed in the realm of continental philosophy, it maintains an integral position in world-making. For both actors in the touch, the touch helps to construct a discrete sense of self as that which is touching distinguishes itself from that which is being touched. For French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the distinction between touching oneself and touching another is remarkably perceptible. Thus, touching another and recognizing that other in the touch reinforces selfhood. But, as opposed to the black

[50] See Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (2011).

female novelists who use touch as a more discreet analytic through which black women can connect with one another and become more informed about themselves, Merleau-Ponty privileges sight in the touching experience as that which allows for simultaneous recognition of the self and the other, the touching and the being touched. As he theorizes:

> No doubt, it is not entirely my body that perceives: I know only that it can prevent me from perceiving, that I cannot perceive without its permission; the moment perception comes my body effaces itself before it and never does the perception grasp the body in the act of perceiving. If my left hand is touching my right hand the work of my left hand as it touches, this reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment: the moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand. (*Visible* 9)

For Merleau-Ponty, the fact that the body (rather than the mind) acts as the "stage director of my perception" makes it so that the self cannot extend further than the physical limitations of that body and with this knowledge, the alterity between self and other is marked. That which is visible outside of the body can be acknowledged as other with this knowledge. Thus, Merleau-Ponty does not have to rely solely on the dual function of touch in order to construct a self/other dyad and con posit an act of self-touch that does not follow as being simultaneously touching and touched. Sight *and* touch are operative in the construction of said dyad. The self's inability to hold simultaneous recognition of touching and being touched when one touches oneself comes from the self's inability to see the instrument that is doing the seeing (the self's own eye). Because both touch and sight are required for recognition in Merleau-Ponty's assessment, the circuit becomes complicated by an inability to visually verify that the organ through which living beings see actually exists for themselves. For Merleau-Ponty, we can only

uncritically trust that our retinas exist where they are supposed to be located; we cannot be entirely sure that they are there (146).

Hortense Spillers and her useful theorizing that distinguishes "body" from "flesh" refines Merleau-Ponty's insistence on privileging the ocular when it comes to discussing touch. Merleau-Ponty takes up this distinction as well but where the two theorists most strikingly diverge in their corresponding formulations is in the materiality that bulwarks these theorizations. Merleau-Ponty states unequivocally that though the body is a thing among things, verifiable by the fact that it is visible and can be recognized as such by other living beings, the flesh "is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being which would add up or continue on one another to form beings. […] In general, it is not a fact or a sum of facts 'material' or 'spiritual.' Nor is it a representation for a mind: a mind could not be captured by its own representations; […] The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance" (139). For Merleau-Ponty, the flesh is a constitutive part of being that interests him as something that straddles the line between the material and the abstract even as it is attached to the thingness of the body. In essence, it operates much like the meaning behind language; in a rough analogy, if the body is the signifier, then the flesh is the signified.

In contrast, for Spillers, flesh constitutes at once "that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography" and "altered human tissue" subjected to "lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, [and] punctures" (67). The violence against the flesh of black women during slavery produced cultural scripts that transfer onto subsequent generations of women who have similarly rendered

flesh. This history that connects black women via the physical trauma that marks black female flesh and the psychic trauma that is an accompanying result continues to prevail as a key site for connection between black women since slavery. If Merleau-Ponty is interested in the flesh as an element of being that operates within the now and becomes that which constructs alterity while also being that which allows the living being to sense the world, Spillers extends this formulation to think about how flesh phenomenologically operates in the present with this accumulation of the past marked upon it.[51] Spillers makes this intervention in how we can conceptualize a difference between body and flesh because of the overarching argument of "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" which takes into serious consideration how black feminist and postcolonial thought can be instrumental in our considerations of the complexities that make up the category of the human. If, as she suggests, the flesh is a "primary narrative," one that has been distinguished by its "seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard," the history of slavery, colonialism, and brutality holds primacy in how that flesh gets read even after the captive body becomes free ("Mama's" 67). In other words, black skin does not have the luxury of being able to operate wholly within the now without historical burden.

---

[51] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*: "The flesh is in this sense an 'element' of Being. Not a fact or a sum of facts, and yet adherent to *location* and to the *now*" (139-140). For more on Hortense Spillers and her work in relation to Fanon (who also extends the work of phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre) and his attempts to minimize the ways in which slavery comes to define blackness for post-slavery subjects, see Spillers' essay, "Peter's Pans: Eating in the Diaspora" (2003) and Darieck Scott's work on Fanon and Spillers in the first chapter of *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (2010).

This flesh, however, is not only raced but also gendered. The iconography of the flesh takes on other significations when it is the flesh of black women. Speaking about the symbolic physio-cultural legacy of the black female in slavery, Spillers remarks:

> These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually "transfers" form one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic* substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments. […] A female body strung from a tree limb, or bleeding from the breast on any given day of field work because the 'overseer,' standing the length of a whip, has popped her flesh open, adds a lexical and living dimension to the narratives of women in culture and society. This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh 'ungendered'—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations. ("Mama's" 67-68)

The "method for reading" that Spillers ends this excerpt with here, a longstanding method for black feminism, may get gestured toward by other theoretical frameworks but often gets cast aside in favor of a more "neutral" subject position (i.e., straight, white, male). But, if flesh operates as the material condition referred to by the symbolic order referenced by Merleau-Ponty and Spillers and is mediated through the social, the touch of black female skin upon black female skin allows for black women to cross what Alexander Weheliye calls "the precarious threshold where the person metamorpohses into the group and 'the individual-in-the-mass and the mass-in-the-individual mark an iconic thickness: a concerted function whose abiding centrality is embodied in the flesh'" (44).[52] Though Spillers regularly talks about a historical condition in which black women become that which has been used as the intermediary between the human and the non-

[52] The quote within this quote comes from Hortense Spillers' essay, "'All the Things You Could be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race," 101.

human,[53] what happens when the flesh becomes that which activates an in-group with its own political inclinations that aligns differently from others with the same epidermal racial schema? The contact of skin upon skin that touching subjects endure, especially when those subjects can, as Sara Ahmed puts it, open some bodies to other bodies allows for a queer orientation "that put[s] within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy" (*Queer Phenomenology* 107). The world-making that Merleau-Ponty thinks through in his work becomes shared, allowing touching subjects to make their own world or connect worlds together across and against traditional genealogical models. The orientation that is constructed when certain bodies that are aligned with one another come into contact can be used in an attempt at reconstituting power from a black feminist perspective, much in the same way that Lorde proposes the erotic as performing similar work.[54]

In her latest monograph, Sharon Patricia Holland speaks to the lack of black female queer representation in theoretical frameworks that purport to take black female desire seriously—namely, feminism and queer theory. The identifying standpoint of black.female.queer, as Holland suggests, holds a particularly nebulous status in an academy that "continually reminds us that we have not yet accomplished our lofty goal of

---

[53] As Spillers argues, "[The black woman] became instead the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning different—visually, psychologically, ontologically—as the route by which the dominant male decided the distinction between humanity and 'other.'" ("Interstices" 76). This stands both as a comment upon the historical condition of the treatment of African American women and an understanding of contemporary cultural ascriptions onto black women of what it means to be both black and female.

[54] Though in the previous quote from Ahmed she speaks more specifically about same-sex desire, I wish to argue that a reading of her work here need not be limited to thinking about explicitly queer sexuality. Instead, it could be expanded to think about other manners of being that deviate from a social or cultural norm.

politically efficacious and practiced theory" (*Erotic Life of Racism* 66). The black.female.queer position within these theoretical structures and their formulation makes her valuable even as her own self-determination remains exogenous to these projects. Holland means to provoke a paradigm shift that takes Hortense Spillers seriously when she argues that the long history of violence against the black female body not only indelibly impacts the historical trajectory of black Americans but becomes a constitutive part of how the nation conceptualizes "sexuality" for all of its citizen-subjects. This takes black female experience from the realm of the parochial (as the academic establishment generally sees it) and throws into sharp relief its centrality in contemporary understandings of larger conceptions of community-building, democracy, the nation-state, the diaspora, the human, etc. In this vein, by framing *The Salt Eaters* as a novel that values black female subjectivity as a method for reading both the present and the past, we can read touch, its relation to the body, and bodies as forming the basis for community-building precisely because of touch's capability to extend and reciprocate. With this, I turn to *The Salt Eaters* in order to think through the place of touch and the body as a method for organizing the past and the present as a means to move forward towards a political future that is the key for eradicating oppression.

Technologies of the Living: *The Salt Eaters*

The Salt Eaters, published in 1980, is a novel about the fictional community of Claybourne, Georgia and the psychic weight of racial politics in the 1960's and 1970's. It centers on the healing of Velma Henry, a community organizer and activist. The psychic weight of her work prompts her to attempt suicide and the primary narrative of the rest of

the novel pivots on her recovery under the guidance of Minnie Ransom, the local healer extraordinaire, and Old Wife, Minnie's spirit guide. Healing quickly spurs a flood of memories that *The Salt Eaters* captures at a frenetic pace; the novel's opening chapter takes readers from an infirmary to a dinner between husband and wife to two different activist meetings all in the span of a few pages.

The process of healing that takes place in this narrative requires more than just the mental and spiritual focus that one would expect from such a procedure. Consider the first description of the healing scene between Velma and Minnie and the way in which touching the female body allows for the connection that will open Velma up to the spirits that are in Minnie's possession:

> […] the balls of three fingers pressed suddenly, warm and fragrant, against Velma's forehead, the left hand catching her in the back of her head, cupping gently the two stony portions of the temporal bone. And Velma was inhaling in gasps, and exhaling shudderingly. She felt aglow, her eyebrows drawing in toward the touch as if to ward off the invading fingers that were threatening to penetrate her skull. And then the hands went away quickly, and Velma felt she was losing her eyes. (6)

As the narrative goes on to suggest, this particular healing is ordinary in that healer and patient extend towards one another via touch but there is something particular about Velma that makes reaching her depths more challenging than usual. Normally by treating the patient in this way Minnie takes what she calls the out of tune notes of the person she is healing and makes them melodious again. As Carter Mathes points out, the opening scenes of healing between Velma and Minnie, however, "clearly dispel any notion of the sonic as a straightforward pathway toward radical transformation and instead situate Velma's relationship to sound as reflective as reflective of a tension between the potential deception of appearances and the idea of vision as a phenomenological mode of

awareness and critique that extends well beyond the visual" (371). While Mathes rather adeptly traces the ways in which the sonic contributes to both the frustration and the ultimate resolution of healing for this novel as the visual becomes either that which cannot be trusted or that which occludes the possibility for a settled conclusion, the haptic qualities of healing should be addressed as well as they literally become that which unites body and spirit. The intimacy of touch, an aspect of this particular healing that Minnie does not always have to use, helps both Minnie and Old Wife trudge through both the usable and unusable past in order to help Velma pull through the cultural and personal memories that have caused her and the community damage.[55]

For Minnie, Velma represents a new generation of sister-activists and, especially during the beginning of the novel, this creates discord between her and Old Wife. While Minnie's spirituality blends together parts of Christianity, Caribbean/West African religions that are heavily interested in ancestor worship and spirit possession, and an attunement to the natural world, Minnie rather unconvincingly tries to state that she cannot relate to a modern crop of women who "want their loving done with sweet-tooth cupcakes and shiny cars and credit cards and grins from white folks" (61). While her spiritual life keeps her in tune with the cultural/racial memories of oppression that keep her bonded strongly with other black women, those black women, in her mind,

---

[55] Though Minnie describes touch as a "routine" part of the healing process, the narrative makes it clear that some healings go smoother than others: "[Minnie] would lean her ear to the chest or place her hand at the base of the spine till her foot tapped and their heads bobbed, till it was melodious once more. And often she did not touch flesh on flesh but touched mind on mind from across the room or from cross town or the map linked by telephone cables that would carry the clue spoken […] and the charged response reaching ear than inner ear, then shooting to the blockade and freeing up the flow" (48-49). The extent to which Minnie has to hold on to Velma, amongst other things, supports the idea that this healing is particularly arduous.

vigorously separate themselves from any sense of cohesive community. It is Old Wife that has to tell Minnie what she already knows. The oceanic, which M. Jacqui Alexander describes as "overflow[ing] with memory. Emotional Memory. Bodily Memory. Sacred Memory" (290) comes into focus for Old Wife as that which should be what connects black women inter-generationally: "Why then you rip them fancy clothes off, Min, and trash out into them waters, churn up all them bones we dropped from the old ships, churn up all that brine from the salty deep where our tears sank, and you grab them chirren by the neck and bop'm a good one and drag'm on back to shore and fling'm down and jump to it, pumping and cussing, fussing and cracking they ribs if ya have to let'm live, Min. Cause love won't let you let'm go" (Bambara 61). In Courtney Thorsson's reading of this scene, Old Wife's reference to these waters represents a collective history that flattens out experiential differences and becomes that which creates a baseline of care out of which healing can emerge. Referencing Farah Jasmine Griffin's work and "textual healing," Thorsson argues that what Minnie Ransom does holds as a constitutive piece of "ordinary women's work. Velma's healing is successful because it depends on ritual, community, and everyday practice. Women's work of organizing, both revolutionary and ordinary, happens on the page and in the body, in writing and the laying on of hands" (53). This healing work becomes that which is supposed to support black female activism so that it does not become the all-consuming burden that eventually ends up driving Velma to attempt suicide.

Though Old Wife's appeal to Minnie about the shared histories that can be found collected in the water creates strife between healer and spirit guide, it is explicitly the connection between the two and Old Wife's provocations in bringing women together

that allows readers to get to know more about Minnie and her own relation to her body. When Minnie asks Old Wife what she should do in order to better pull Velma through these histories, Old Wife forces Minnie to reencounter the old ways that turned her to healing in the first place; her availability for these healing powers rather than any innate sense of goodness governed her path to this profession. With this, readers come to understand that healing does not require a particularly pious character. Minnie still thinks erotically about Julius Meadows, a doctor in attendance for the healing and it is Old Wife who helps her as a young woman struggling painfully with coming into adulthood. Over the years, she would have to organize herself and understand the intangible pulses that came to inform her healing practices before she would be able to reach anyone, let alone a complex figure like Velma.

For even those who are closest to her, Velma refuses to become easily legible or knowable. One of the first memories that surfaces after her healing begins is a dinner between Velma and Obie, her husband, in which the two could not be any more distant from one another despite occupying the same table. While Obie attempts to foster intimacy between him and Velma, vowing to help her forget the pain that he gathers has been plaguing her for some time, the only thing that comforts her is the feeling of her velour blouse on her skin. Contrary to his intentions, Obie's emotional appeal, burdensome in its overwrought tenor, puts Velma on edge. The intimacy that he wants to drag out of her is directly responsible for her seeing things about him that take her out of the moment. Rather than focusing on Obie's enthusiastic entreaty, Velma pays more attention to the piece of spinach stuck between his front teeth. While he implores her to look inside of herself because she refuses to let go of wrongdoings against her that

happened in the distant past, she cannot get over the absurdity of being lectured by a man who lacks enough self-awareness to keep from looking like a fool. It is only when the couple touches hands that she can even focus on the past that she has with her husband and the love that has led up to this moment:

> The two hands lay there side by side on the table like a still life. She rubbed his hand and he did not pull it away exactly, just sort of. She rubbed the ridges in his thumbnail and tried to listen to what he was saying now about the atmosphere she set up in the house, what her emotional something or other was doing to the kid, to him, mostly to her, She heard bits of it while floating in and out of the scene, thinking on that first day when she fell in love with his hands or called it love and called it, smirking, falling. (24)

Clasping hands and remembering love not only for Obie but also for his hands reminds Velma that this love is not enough. Even if Obie loves her and wants to say the right things, there is a disconnect between the couple that love and touch and sex seemingly cannot reconcile. The comedy of spinach stuck between Obie's front teeth only manages to be remarkable as a symptom of other compatibility issues. The bedroom scene that Obie later describes as finally intuitive even if he still has not unlocked all of Velma, for Velma reads as not only clinical and unsatisfying but clumsy in a manner that feels similar to that between two people who might have just finished a one night stand: "Like being rolled to the edge of the bed, to extremes, clutching a stingy share of the covers and about to drop over the side, like getting up and walking, bare feet on cold floor, round to the other side and climbing in and too mad to snuggle for warmth, freeze" (25). This description begins the narration of a litany of acutely disappointing circumstances that encompasses a number of the stressors that result from Velma's activist work. The list culminates in it being revealed that Obie is responsible for Velma's attendance at a meeting that I will touch upon below in which black women stand up for their own vested

interests. So, though Obie's touch could be said to have been at least partially responsible for sparking Velma's path to Women for Action, the activist group for which she ultimately becomes responsible, it also stands as that which cannot fully connect husband and wife and their mutual political goals.

Obie's insistence that Velma let go of the past and "create a vacuum for good things to rush in," however, resonates with the words of Minnie Ransom when she says "I can feel, sweetheart, that you're not quite ready to dump the shit […] got to give it all up, the pain, the hurt, the anger and make room for lovely things to rush in and fill you full. Nature abhors a so-called vacuum, don't you know?" (16). This insistence on asking Velma whether or not she is actually ready to be healed or to find wholeness becomes a recurring trope for the novel, especially when the narrative returns to its frame story. Minnie Ransom's insistence on challenging this common approach to health—that is, that wanting to be healthy should be an unquestioned certainty—pushes at the limits of what it means to be ill. Rather than rely on the established medical models that have a long history of discriminating against African Americans in various and untold ways, Minnie introduces a more syncretic model that takes various spiritual approaches and blends them with more traditional medical practices.[56] As Chanette Romero argues, *The Salt Eaters* "asserts Vodun and Yoruban-based spiritualities as capable of 'build[ing] new, more inclusive politics and communities. […] [The] element missing from ethnic nationalistic politics is to be found in older African female spiritual traditions that are

---

[56] See Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1997); W. Michael Byrd and Linda A. Clayton, *An American Health Dilemma: A Medical History of African Americans and the Problem of Race, Beginnings to 1900 (Volume 1)* (2000); and, Todd L. Savitt, *Race & Medicine in Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century America* (2007).

closely tied to the 'birds and insects' and 'mud' of the natural world. The novel is careful to differentiate nature-oriented spiritual traditions from not only Black nationalism, but also Euro-American romanticizations of nature" (131). By having the central action of the novel incorporate more than just the Christianity that has come to be indelibly stamped onto how we remember the Civil Rights Movement, Bambara narrativizes a more open and more complex model of activism that would allow black feminism and black feminist organizations to gain traction against open hostility and active disregard. While people freely enter and exit the observation room and even as members of the community openly mock the relevance and effectiveness of these non-Christian healing methods, by the end of the novel, this distinct spiritual model provides Velma with a way to rise out of a deep depression. If, as Audre Lorde suggests, the body and the spirit and the discursive are all important tools for a progressive politics that features black feminist concerns, reconfiguring our memory to retroactively include all that was actually happening during the headiest days of the Civil Rights Movement and its aftermath makes it more difficult to move forward with the same kind of heedlessness.[57]

---

[57] See Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House": "Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*" (112). For academic feminist discourse to not take full use of the complexity of what the designation "woman" or "female" means is to do a disservice to feminist causes. Allowing for the discursive, the spiritual, and the corporeal to reach their fullness in feminist thought is a key step that should not be overlooked in any feminist practice.

As M. Jacqui Alexander proposes, the construction of a dialectic that is not just material or spiritual or psychic but all three requires a "rewiring of the senses," a rewiring that comes out of an evaluation of the personal's relation to the sacred and the ways in which such a relation manifests—that is, through the ritualized and routine acts that constitute what she calls spiritual labor (308). How we come to know in a spiritual way does not rely on something wholly outside of the body; rather, it is through bodily interaction that we acquire a certain number of sharpened tools with which we can make sense of the world around us. Linking the material with the spiritual allows for a different, richer relationship with that which surrounds us and that which we thought we already knew. Alexander proffers "time with a capital T" (309) as an example of that which we experience both bodily and spiritually, something that we think we know bodily but becomes increasingly altered the more that the spiritual presses upon it. As she suggests:

> Time becomes a moment, an instant, experiences in the now, but also a space crammed with moments of wisdom about an event or series of events already having inhabited different moments, or with the intention of inhabiting them, while all occurring simultaneously in this instant, in this space, as well as in other instants and spaces of which we are not immediately aware. [...] What in human idiom is understood as past, present, and future are calibrated into moments in which mind and Sprit encounter the energy of a dangerous memory, a second's glimpse of an entire life, of a dream or a sequence of dreams, of a shadow lying under a village, of the vibration of a feeling, of a letter to be delivered, a decision to be made, all penetrating the web of interactive energies made manifest. (309-310)

Time here becomes even more than just an accumulation of energies, intensities, memories, and experiences; it becomes, with the help of the spirit, something that exceeds a heavily regimented human/social construct constituting the foundation for a rewiring of the senses. This makes time polyvocal and multilayered, allowing for a fuller

consciousness that can take in and understand various histories at the same time. Chanette Romero calls this temporal model "healing time." As she argues, healing time represents the "instantaneous past/present/future when characters, needing to heal, temporarily leave the novel's historical setting to enter into an ever-present time associated with spirits. The healing is usually accomplished when the character reconnects to spirit beings […] in an ever-present time" (56-57). In healing time, the historical accumulation that presses upon people of color in each present moment becomes that which can be manipulated and altered in order to produce a desired outcome. That accumulation directly interacts with the historical moment of the present, having very real effects not only on those who speak to the ancestors but to all who witness this active reaching towards these histories via spirit possession. In *The Salt Eaters*, this reverberation gets represented by the ripple effect of the narration and the way in which both past and present stories of those attached to Velma collide, sometimes erratically.

Healing time in *The Salt Eaters* manifests in multiple configurations and at times, it can be rather erotic as healer and patient stretch towards each other for the purposes of bringing one another out of the depths. Though it occurs in a sacred space both inside the Infirmary and outside of it, the process can feel heavily embodied. In one of the descriptions of what is actually occurring, the interaction between Velma and Minnie feels even more like simultaneous orgasm than the sex described between Velma and her husband:

> Minnie, too, was feeling up, was clucking her tongue against the roof of her mouth and humming. Velma's frequency was lowering as she danced away from the humming toward music of an earlier moment, the radio by the bed. Velma's growling a groan now swirling round the concentric circles in the roof of her mouth in search of a seam, a break in the curvature, a way to get out and away

> from the sour-sweet taste of sex coating her tongue, Obie whispering hoarsely in her ear about the moist coils of her tunnel drawing him in deeper. And she waiting to deny him herself, to hold back, to deny herself, to withdraw into the sheets tangled under her knees. Her groaning spiraling up to break through the roof of her mouth and thunder up to her brain. Velma's frequency sharper as she drifted back toward Minnie's humming. And they met somewhere in the air near the window, Minnie and Velma, pulling against each other and then together, then holding each other up out of the fall, holding each other stable on stools. (102-103)

Velma, still under Minnie's influence, momentarily returns to the place of sex with Obie. But, rather than find comfort in him, she brings herself back to Minnie and they collapse into one another much like two lovers who have just made love. Ultimately, this does not become the "memory" that heals Velma—in fact, she begins to sink again almost immediately when Minnie interrupts by asking her, yet again, to choose her own cure. However, it helps Velma to trust Minnie as she keeps asking about the price of the cure and whether or not wholeness is actually a righteous goal. It begins to break down the boundaries between these two women as they continue on this journey as it is only after their coming together and after the ensuing rush of memories that Velma can firmly declare, "Health is my right" (119).

The fact that the healing turns to the erotic should come as no surprise to readers of Alexander's work or that of Audre Lorde. Undoubtedly, Alexander's thoughts on spirit and time unmistakably come out of and extend the work of Lorde, principally her contemplations of the erotic and its function as an organizing principle in political work. As she writes toward the very beginning of "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," "the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (53). Being in tune with the erotic holds a distinctly spiritual cadence, something that can be lost in

contemporary considerations of the erotic. Because spirituality can be interpreted as strictly anti-sex given various religions' various tenets about when sex is appropriate and between whom sex can take place, many refuse to take on the complex standpoint of thinking through the places in which the spiritual and erotic as simultaneously working resources imbricate and directly impact one another.[58] Compartmentalizing the spiritual and the erotic relegates the former to a "world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing," according to Lorde (56). On the contrary, however, the way in which the spiritual and the political connect is via the erotic, expressions that deeply connect women interested in coalition building.

As much as the activist connection between Velma and Obie appears strained by an inability to establish the pinnacle of erotic attunement with one another, there more generally seems to be little room for fruitful political work to come out of any plan that does not take women's interests more seriously. Healing time breaks down to make room for a more violent temporal model long before Minnie can reach Velma and provide the stability necessary for staking a claim on health and wholeness. Many of the outside observers of the healing take note of Velma's inability to sit still while Minnie performs her healing work but, especially towards the beginning of the healing, much of the unsteadiness seems to come from a string of memories that make clear the strife between black men and black women in racial politics. The memory of Obie and Velma in the diner transitions into a political meeting in which Jay Patterson, a local politician running

---

[58] Work that takes the intersection of religion and sexuality seriously includes Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini's *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance;* Michael L. Cobb's *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence*; and Marcella Althaus-Reid's *The Queer God*.

for county commissioner, becomes an object of scrutiny. The meeting, convened by several local activists representing a number of local groups looking at racial issues from a variety of perspectives, turns to criticism of not only Patterson but all of the other men who would rather lobby for another male leader uninterested in black women's interests and contributions.

The lack of attention to black women is nothing new and a string of memories that haunt Velma towards the beginning of the healing highlight this. In response to his asking for community support, an older woman proposes a number of questions to Patterson disputing who has been the most successful in raising money or bringing about change up until that point. While many in the crowd deploy impudence as a way of expressing frustration with the "business as usual" narrative that the appointment of yet another black male figure would publically convey, the mother of one of the activists interjects in order to force those interested in Patterson's nomination to recognize how black women have been instrumental in the movement's forward progression. She asks, "'Who put your campaign together, Reilly, while you and Grace vacationed on Jekyll Island?' 'Who raised the money for the South Africa ad, composed it, gathered up the signatures and the money, placed it and absorbed the backlash?' 'Who muzzled the Claybourne *Inquirer*, got them to squash the smear when your books turned up funny, Hill?' 'Who saved your ass—and never got reimbursed for calls, postage or gas?'" (33-4). The incisiveness of these questions about basic inequalities in the movement only sharpens when Velma's memory of this gathering pushes against a memory of an instance before that in which another male speaker arrives at a boycott rally in an air-conditioned limousine while Velma struggles acutely with menstruating in a gas station

bathroom. The glaring dissimilarity in circumstances places Velma squarely in the realm of the corporeal and tactile while the speaker woos the crowd with his appearance and speech: "[Velma] knew beforehand that she would squat over a reeking, smeared toilet bowl stuffed with everything that ever was and pray through clenched teeth for rain. Some leader. He looked a bit like King, had a delivery similar to Malcolm's, dressed like Stokely, had glasses like Rap, but she'd never heard him say anything useful or offensive. But what a voice. And what a good press agent. And the people had bought him. What a disaster. But what a voice." (35). The authentic and literal trench work that Velma endures in order to continue her participation at the demonstration sharply contrasts with the superficial and comfortable veneer of a leader who comes to stand in as an amalgamation of other, presumably more prominent, black male figureheads. Velma's participatory work, the very real everyday conditions unaccounted for in the annals of civil rights history, is written here as the conditions that black women had to face while their political interests were either sidestepped or outright ignored. The body at work occupies considerable mental energy as Velma informs male leaders of other sacrifices black women made to better encourage the black men who disregarded them:

> [Velma] stood up again, certain that she was leaving a red-brown smear on the chair. 'Who's called in every time there's work to be done, coffee made, a program sold? Every time some miscellaneous nobody with a five-minute commitment and an opportunist's nose for a self-promoting break gets an idea, here we go. And we have yet to see any of you so much as roll up your sleeves to empty an ashtray. […] 'Drinking at the bar is all we've witnessed yet. You all say we need a conference, we book the hotel and set it all up and yawl drink at the bar. We shuttle back and forth to the airport yawl drink at the bar. We caucus, vote, lay out the resolutions, yawl drink at the bar. We're trying to build a union, a guild, an organization. You are all welcome to continue operating as a social club, but not on our time, okay?' (36-7)

Here, in a moment that would not occur to black men being critical of the work that certain civil rights groups engage in, Velma's period only intensifies her frustration with male participation in the political struggle. She must negotiate and has negotiated the workings of her body as she makes clear the significant role that she and other women have played in keeping their movements operational even as the men receive most of the credit. The worry about leaving menstrual blood on her chair dissipates quickly and she goes on to use this opportunity to announce "Women for Action," a group that she is certain will function as an agent of change even as the male leaders in suits and limousines continue to be ineffectual. But, menstruation becomes important, then, for both a meeting and a rally in which women have to vociferously assert their place in organizations that they already supervise by taking care of the undistinguished but necessary grunt work. In effect, menstruation becomes the experience that connects these two instances in which black women must carve out space for themselves in a way that asserts individuation without alienating solidarity.

While, as Elliot Butlers-Evans suggests, the male body "is presented as an aggregate of signifiers that suggest superficiality rather than substance," in these moments, Velma's presence exceeds both ideology and corporeality in order to become a more perfect symbol/actor for political justice meant to bridge the gap between black nationalism and black feminism in her biological and psychic dedication to her cause (179). The process of menstruation, which historically has been linked to baseness or a curse, in *The Salt Eaters* becomes not that which must be overcome but a material condition of the everyday that may sometimes need to be managed but does not impede

whatever one feels is their duty as a civil rights activist.[59] The menstrual cycle does not mark any particular weakness that makes black women any less committed or worthy of leadership positions despite the patriarchal attempt to associate menstruation with an inability to be rational or capable in leadership positions. Further, the black feminist ethos that is being cultivated by groups like Women for Action does not negate what it means to fight for civil rights primarily along the axis of race; rather, the palpable antagonism that Velma feels in these moments constitutes a negotiation between the usable aspects of a male-driven racial politics and the specific concerns that she and other black women share outside of the narrow purview set by certain male leaders.

The temporality of this part of the novel, marked by memories of the events that spark a need for an organization like Women for Action tied together by the processes of the female body, highlights a way in which thinking about civil rights activism requires an attention not only to the body but about how certain bodies align with each other. If Velma's menstruation emphasizes that there are female perspectives that get overlooked on the basis of a perception of feminine frailty, it also emphasizes strength, courage, and a single-mindedness that makes for the possibility for effective leadership in all black women, especially when black women encourage one another. Though Velma worries about the residue of period blood that she might leave behind, it is the prodding of her best friend, Palma, that makes Velma give her most spirited speech even though she is "certain that she was leaving a red-brown smear on the chair" (36). As Elizabeth Grosz following the work of Julia Kristeva argues, menstruation symbolizes a deep sense of

[59] A compelling source on both the historical treatment of menstruation and the role of this biological process on contemporary feminist activism can be found in Chris Bobel's *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010).

female futurity even as it also hearkens back to an infant past in which the body gets stained with dirt and bodily fluids because a baby cannot control itself. As Grosz writes, this "necessarily marks womanhood, whatever else it may mean for particular women, as outside itself, outside its time (the time of a self-contained adulthood) and place (the place definitively within its own skin, as a self-identical being), and thus a paradoxical entity, on the very border between infancy and adulthood, nature and culture, subject and object, rational being and irrational animal" (206). Rather than rest on menstruation as a marker of sexual difference, Velma rejects this temporal model that reaches back to childhood as a justification for keeping women silent and marginalized.

The vagina, its workings, and representations of both mark less of a reaching back towards infancy and more of an attempt at reaching forward towards cultural health through political work. Palma's touch complicates an easy correlation between female touch and political expediency, however, when Palma herself does not showcase the dedication and courage that Velma displays at all times. Just before Palma's nudge prompts Velma to enumerate the goals of Women for Action, she remembers a cowrie-shell bracelet that she buys for Velma from a merchant who labeled it as "matriarchal currency." Rather than gift it as a memento of solidarity, however, the bracelet was meant to "shame [Palma], for she should've been on the march, had no right to the cool solitude of her studio painting pictures of sailboats while sisters were being beaten and raped, and workers shot and children terrorized" (36). As David Ikard notes, in this moment, "Velma becomes an active agent in perpetuating the very myth that causes her suffering and forecloses the possibility of cultural healing" (118). Rather than find strength and unity in a bracelet that one of her male colleagues calls "little pussies with stitched teeth," Velma

uses the necklace as a symbol to reject what many would call a more balanced approach to political work, one that does not renounce personal hobbies and activities that foster wellness in favor of the brutal cycle of unsustainably perpetual political work. The moment is fleeting but there is a way in which the power that is shored up in representations of female genitalia has its limitations when it does not recognize the potential in other activist methods, even if those limitations quickly cease to matter as both Palma and Velma make their feelings heard in the subsequent memory at the meeting addressing Patterson's nomination for commissioner.

With this being said, the various alignments with womanhood and activism disrupt conventional models of time in order to make room for different political futures—that is, futures that can accommodate those objectives that often fall out of a dominant cultural narrative. As Ben Highmore argues, "living historical time infuses with daily time in ordinary life, because as well as living 'now' we also live with the possibilities (with the limits and opportunities) that the future is seen as providing (or will have provided). Being able to see the future as significantly different or substantially the same as the present places the intimate politics of living within the realm of the day-to-day imagining of narrative cohesion, continuity and change" (92). Much of *The Salt Eaters* reads as if it is living historical time because of its attention to the quotidian and how the minutiae of a political movement reveal all of the different subgroups that are written out of cultural memory. Bambara takes this level of detail and sharpens it so that the process of menstruation placed in the midst of a political rally in a dirty gas station bathroom aligns with the routine elision of black female recognition in African American political histories. Lying under the surface of Velma's use of the bathroom of a gas

station that she is supposed to be boycotting is the possibility of a routine future that has previously been narrated—that is, one in which multiple black women make their voices heard in the face of a political nomination that they do not find to be favorable to their interests. In essence, the scene of menstruation makes way for the scene in which Velma asserts herself as a political leader. The scene in which Velma asserts herself as a political leader makes way for the construction of Women for Action, a group that brings black women together for political organizing. Women for Action provides the space for black women to convene and think critically about their political platforms, making it clear for multiple women who express their opinions that electing another black man like Jay Patterson would not be in their best interest. More than just an origin point (because it cannot be that when Velma's activism does not merely begin with this particular rally), the memory of the gas station serves as the sticky bond between memories that shows how they are connected in a way that takes seriously the idea that the political is corporeal but not limited by the corporeal.

These moments in which the everyday lived experience of being a black woman either becomes a focal point for black female activism or a way in which black women come together for the benefit of a political platform helps to shape the inconstant temporality of *The Salt Eaters*. The novel's fragmentation, its deliberately chaotic approach to linear narrative reflects a different relation to time, one that does its best to account for an accumulation of memories and feelings that may ostensibly seem disjointed but all work together in order to form the field of discourse that one of the members of the Seven Sisters, a traveling performance arts group, affirms when she says "the material without the spiritual and psychic does not a dialectic make" (Bambara 64).

Much like high modernism's use of stream of consciousness as a narrative mode meant to better reflect human thought processes as they occur in the moment, the proliferation of images, tableaus, and recollections in *The Salt Eaters* presents readers with a memoryscape that helps form the basis for a black feminist consciousness that operates both within and outside of a black nationalist and liberationist political apparatus. The narratological method here performs two tasks: first, it presents a different relation to teleological time that provides the benefit of not having black feminist concerns set aside as trivial or unimportant for ostensibly larger political frameworks concerned with the environment or civil rights, for example; and second, it provides key epistemological approaches that are enacted and deployed via bodily interaction. By thinking through the category of the political in a way that privileges both the body and a distinct relation to time, Bambara gives us a framework with which black women can shift the discourses that have excluded them. That flesh, the materiality of the body before or behind the sociocultural impact that gets placed onto raced bodies, becomes a site of discursive power worth exploring for the purposes of effectively changing cultural memory. With this, I turn to Toni Morrison's *Paradise* to think through how she values healing as a process that radically undermines the validity of those heteropatriarchal structures that ignore black women at best and outright commits violence against them at worst. Morrison asks readers to consider what kinds of options are available to black women when their very right to exist continues to be called into question.

Care for it in Every Way Flesh Works: *Paradise*

Toni Morrison's 1998 novel *Paradise* extends the questions that *The Salt Eaters* posits for the purposes of better understanding the relationship between black women, healing, and the political atmospheres that can best accommodate interests that go beyond consolidating heteropatriarchal values under the guise of a progressive racial agenda. Perhaps even more than *The Salt Eaters*, *Paradise* takes very seriously the arguments laid forth in the Combahee River Collective's manifesto, which was published in 1977, a year after the novel's temporal arc ends. Under the auspices of this collective, black feminists and lesbians organized periodic retreats between 1977 and 1979 that placed them away from dominant society and into conversations about the black feminist movement and how they found themselves strategically participating in the dismantling of structural oppressions. These retreats are provided the space necessary for doing the heavy work of articulating all of the complexities of their heady agenda. Their statement, a declaration that would become anthologized as somewhat of a manifesto detailing the struggles they were engaging in and their methods for resistance, stands as a document that could have only been produced in these spaces that felt as separate as possible from heteropatriarchy, heterosexism, and the oppressive conditions of being raced bodies under the conditions of late capitalism.[60] *Paradise* delicately reflects some of the productivity of critical and

---

[60] Indeed, one of the most progressive aspects of the statement is the call for socialism and an abandonment of the capitalistic structures that kept inequality as a way of life for so many as a key mechanism for accruing social/political/economic power for all marginalized groups but especially women of color: "We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. […] We are not convinced,

spatial distance from such conditions in the Convent, an all-female community that can be found in what used to be a school for Native American girls. The building sits on the outskirts of Ruby, Oklahoma, a town largely run by the descendants of its founding fathers and, thus, much of the action of the town's residents means to secure the power of those original families whether it be through the laborious construction of genealogical records or the elimination of a self-sufficient society that threatens to disrupt the order that it has struggled mightily to cultivate. The novel begins with Ruby men murdering Convent women as the rest of the narrative tries to fill in the history that leads to such an event happening.

The Convent makes space for a logic of relationality between black women that is both spiritually capacious and open to various articulations of desire. It serves as a space relatively untouched by men, at least until a group of Ruby men invade to extinguish their opposition. Before this, only Deacon, the brother of one of the Convent's occupants, Ruby, ever really penetrates its walls and then he is helpless to save the Convent's mother figure, Consolata, when he and his brother find her during their attempted massacre. With the postulation of the Convent as a quasi-separatist space, rather than focus on what Peter Widdowson calls "the intimate, if tense relationship" that cathects the patriarchal/patrilineal space of Ruby, Oklahoma with the feminine/feminist separatist space of the Convent, I wish to pay closer attention to this space for black women as it constitutes not simply a place that exists in an oppositional binary relationship with Ruby. Certainly, there is no possible way to ignore the symbiotic relationship between the towns

---

however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation." (267-268)

and this reading will eventually focus on what the Convent comes to signify for Ruby but, rather than ask why the Convent seems so threatening to Ruby, I interrogate how an attunement to the female body provides a sense of healing for women who feel ostracized from their normative communities. The syncretic approach to healing that Morrison incorporates into *Paradise* integrates non-traditional spiritual practices from South America with other recognizable Western forms resonates with these women because it provides them access to alternative systems that derive power from female sources.

The focus here will be on women and female intimacy because tapping into the psychic and physical resources available through this particular intimacy seems to be all that is required to mobilize black male efforts to kill women who have extricated themselves from a dominant society. In this, the Convent exists as an attempt at constructing both senses of what Michel Foucault calls a heterotopia—that is, an approximation of utopia that can exist in reality (because utopias have no place and ultimately amount to fantasy) and also a space where bodies that cannot fit inside the norm are deposited. As Foucault argues heterotopias function as "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (24). This perpetual testing of boundaries and order causes a problem for Ruby, a community built out of the failed ruins of another, after "freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 and were stomach-crawling by 1949" (Morrison 5). This history of constant failure, tied in to the fact this this lineage of communities is propagated by the movement of families makes genealogy even more important than it already is for African Americans in a post-slavery America. Indeed, though it is families that get displaced in order to form

a new community like Ruby, the men of Ruby hold not only the prestige in their new community but also the designation of being those whose bloodlines need to be protected at all costs.[61]

The absurdity of protecting these patrilineal bloodlines for the ostensible purposes of keeping African American patriarchy intact manifests in Ruby's response to a character like Billie Delia, daughter of Patricia Best and Billy Cato, one of the town's Founding Fathers. Her name, as Susan Neal Mayberry suggests, bringing together both the masculine and the feminine, Billie Dalia stands as a character whose sexuality seems unintelligible to Ruby, a town whose original genealogies require families and require procreation but has a historiography written as if this society has spontaneously spawned as an autochthonous location.[62] The New Fathers, with a title that elides that fact that they traveled from Haven to Ruby with the rest of their families, both inherit and set up a system that treats female sexuality irreverently because it ultimately does not trust it if it is left to its own devices and does not result in progeny. This mistrust and ignorance leads the town to ostracize Billie Delia because, as a little girl, she took her underpants off in order to feel pleasure with a horse underneath her the way she did when she was younger,

---

[61] In a discussion of patriarchal lineage in the novel that seems to signify on the long description of Christ's genealogy at the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew: "Pat was convinced that when the subsequent generations of 8-rock males did scatter, just as Zechariah feared, into the army, it could have been over and one with. Should have been over and done with. The rejection, which they called the Disallowing, was a burnw hose scar tissue was numb by 1949, wasn't it? Oh, no. […] They consolidated the 8-rock blood and, haughty as ever, moved farther west. The New Fathers: Deacon Morgan, Steward Morgan, William Cato, Ace Flood, Aaron Poole, Nathan DuPres, Moss DuPres, Arnold Fleetwood, Ossie Beauchamp, Harper Jury, Sargeant Person, John Seawright, Edward Sands and Pat's Father, Roger Best, who was the first to violate the blood rule. The one nobody admitted existed." (*Paradise* 194)

[62] Susan Neal Mayberry, *Can't I Love What I Criticize: The Masculine and Morrison*, 260.

too young to wear everyday underwear. Her mother beats her profusely and the shame from this fairly innocuous act haunts her for years. The psychic damage is so severe that Billie finds herself at the Convent, it being her only real option.

Though Billie Dalia eventually returns to Ruby after being given the time and space to heal, she longs for the women of the Convent to return to the town as, to her, they are the only ones who can repair the "backward noplace ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where; who had seen in lively, free unarmed females the munity of the mares and so got rid of them" (Morrison 308). She comes to this observation after the funeral for Save-Marie, the child of a couple linked by kinship to the New Fathers after an impassioned speech by a local reverend about how the child was swathed in love and care before her death and before the community could begin its policing of how this female child would express herself as a sexual being.

And yet, Save-Marie is not the only child who becomes sick or dies. Arnette, whose marriage to K. D. is meant to soothe over some of the tensions that have caused strife in Ruby, finds herself at the Convent when she is ready to deliver her baby but ends up losing him. Even before she has her child and runs away without asking about his health, however, Consolata notices how Arnette was "revolted by the work of her womb. A revulsion so severe it cut mind from body and saw its flesh-producing flesh as foreign, rebellious unnatural and diseased" (249). Arnette's move to the Convent has little to do with finding solace or renewal; instead, she arrives there for the purposes of ridding herself of a burden that would be her downfall in Ruby. In a community that invests so much power in patrilineal kinship and protection of the blood, Arentte's lack of desire for

her child serves as behavior that cannot take place in Ruby. So, in order to make up for the child she refuses to have and care for, Arnette must marry K. D. so that attention can be diverted from an "animus that centered on the maybe-baby the bride had not acknowledged, announced or delivered" (144).

The treatment of the child here resonates with the work that Lee Edelman outlines in his now infamous polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. In a previous chapter, I mentioned Edelman as some of his work pushes back against the feel-good politics of queer activism that reinforces homonormativity and calls itself progressive. More than this, Edelman argues for the radical potential of a queer politics that embraces his conception of *sinthomo*sexuality, rejects the figure of the Child as the emblematic product of social relations and takes the social body's own projected futurity as that which it must be interested in protecting. *Sinthomo*sexuality, he argues, "den[ies] the appeal of the fantasy, refusing the promise of futurity that mends each tear, however mean, in reality's dress with threads of meaning [and] offers up fantasy turned inside out, the seams of its costume exposing reality's seamlessness as mere seeming, the fraying knots that hold each sequin in place now usurping that place" (35). The black politics of Ruby may not align perfectly with such a queer politics but there are aspects of Edelman's work that does have purchase here. Edelman, who ignores how the queer politics he sketches would impact the black community or black queers, sees a need for a stance that strategically and willingly opposes the "Child as future" model as that model props up the structures that maintain oppression. By utilizing this platform, by shifting the conversation about rights from truth to fantasy and by embracing what he calls "queer negativity," the center of society's penchant for denying equal rights to queer individuals

because they do not give anything back to society cannot hold. The question for *Paradise*, however, becomes whether we can qualify how important this fantasy or romance of community and futurism can be for a group of black people who were so systematically denied access to it for centuries and generations. In many ways, Ruby's fetishization of genealogy stems from this longer racialized history of displacement and an inability to keep roots.

Even without considering the genealogical tracing that can be done to link the 8-rock families to slavery, the "sanctity" and the strength of the black family structure continues to be seen as needing protecting from the dangerous (white) intrusion embodied in homosexuals.[63] Many scholars see the problem specifically located in the fact that queer sex acts do not produce offspring, as if black lesbians lose their ability to bear children on account of their queerness and black gay men cannot adopt or hire a surrogate, thus continuing their bloodlines. Were the Convent the lesbian separatist colony that the Ruby men envision, the argument that this space lacks this ability to support children might seem to have the semblances of clout. It, however, has no such issue—Pallas successfully delivers her baby boy while finding solace in the Convent after finding her boyfriend in the midst of sexual intercourse with her mother. In essence, the politics of the Convent, whatever those politics are, do not rest on the cultivation of a space that caters to healthy offspring. While this can be a feature of the space, as it is in

[63] By this, I mean that the popular image of queers has usually been white, middle class, and male. Blacks have historically considered queerness to be something that only really affects white people and white queers have ignored queers of color for reasons that range from rhetoric for political rights ("Gay is the New Black" springs to mind here) to a general ignorance of how intersectionality can make for a fuller political framework. For a more discerning elaboration on this historical trend, see the first chapter of Kelly Brown Douglas's *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1999).

the case of Pallas, the Convent does not exist primarily as a protector of genealogy. Healing in the present takes precedence over any such protection of the future.

The Convent is not inherently hostile to the cultivation of new biological life but, because of the radical insecurities of men faced with the spectral threat of the black lesbian, it falls prey to the futurity-ending practices of those unable to see past their patriarchal interests. As Audre Lorde asserts, "the black Lesbian is an emotional threat only to those black women whose feelings of kinship and love for other black women are problematic in some way" ("Scratching" 49). This threat surfaces once a group of the Convent women come back to Ruby for the wedding between K.D. and Arentte in Reverend Pulliam's church. Though much of the novel is framed as if Ruby men and Convent women are pitted against one another, the black women of Ruby also make an appearance at a wedding and end up showing their own hand at overseeing what constitutes the respectable behavior of black women. When the women of Ruby and those of the Convent finally meet at an event meant to engender healing for Ruby, it quickly becomes clear that these two groups provide for radically different models of black womanhood. Even at a wedding that means to repair the genealogical damage that K.D. has done to Ruby by leaving Arnette and keeping company with one of the Convent women, the Ruby community actively refuses to even consider alternatives to the models of respectability politics that have policed behaviors of both genders. Ruby women "did not powder their faces and […] wore no harlot's perfume" so that even the "voluptuous' feminine smells of mint and wild "sweet William disturbed the congregation," upsetting the proper balance that was supposed to be achieved by this impending marriage (143). Once the Convent women uproariously arrive, Ruby women quietly gossip amongst

themselves about which of *those* women were sleeping with which of *these* men. Their dancing, as one of the Ruby guests suggests, saves the day because there is "nothing like other folks' sin for distraction" (159). The sin of aberrant female sexuality essentially takes center stage at an event meant to save the town form the sins of infidelity and pregnancy outside the confines of marriage. The Convent women remind the denizens of Ruby of the damage that an indulgence in relying on other women can result in. Relying on other women for wholeness needs to be properly surveilled because anything less than constant vigilance leads women into the throes of harlotry.

Putting female sexuality on display, however, is not the intention of the Convent women. They arrive in Ruby to celebrate the marriage but their presence results in disrupting the solemn performance of restraint that should have marked the event. As I have mentioned, K. D. and Arnette have not only produced a baby out of wedlock, that baby was birthed at the Convent and died, forfeiting another entrée into the town's next generation. As Reverend Pulliam and his wife wordlessly intimate between each other, "fun-obsessed adults were clear signs of already advanced decay. Soon the whole country would be awash in toys, tone-deaf from raucous music and hollow laughter. But not here. Not in Ruby. Not while Senior Pulliam was alive" (157). The wedding, which was supposed to repair and help preserve the town's respectable reputation, effectively unravels with the intrusion of black women enjoying themselves through dance. These bodies lack the decency to even be covered up with underwear, recalling Billie Delia's youthful sexual transgressions, her ostracism from the community and the fact that she is one of the few who has resided at both Ruby and the Convent, ultimately choosing the latter as a more healthful space. These fairly innocuous actions performed by black

female bodies—dancing, riding bicycles, laughing, touching—constitute an aggregate of behaviors that Ruby men must sanction if they wish to keep their town on the same forward trajectory. The fact that these women can make their way to Ruby, exposing the town's women to an alternative code of (dis)conduct, makes it clear in the eyes of these men that those women can no longer be allowed to exist.

This turn towards the apparent perversion of the Convent women could come as a surprise to readers after the novel's initial justifications for why the Ruby men find mass murder an appropriate response to their anxiety about disorder in the town's teleology. Even though the men "know" that sexual intercourse between women takes place in the Convent and even though they are aware of the ironic lack of Christian religion in a mansion now known as the Convent but once operated as Christ the King School for Native Girls, what the narrator says is most alarming for the black men who have to come kill sleeping women are "the series of infant booties and shoes ribboned to a cord hanging from a crib in the last bedroom they enter [and the] teething ring, cracked and stiff, dangl[ing] among the tiny shoes" (7). These men see a space that has been read as a lesbian separatist enclave and blame it for the rash of sick, orphaned, and dead children that has plagued Ruby's existence with no supporting evidence. This understanding of the Convent as a space that cannot accommodate the livelihood of children, even after the palimpsests of a child having lived there is found, manufactures an irreconcilable anxiety. The absent child appears in the first ten pages of a text with a temporal arc much like *The Salt Eaters* in that the scaffolding for the narrative is largely constructed in the first chapter as subsequent chapters weave forward and backward through time, filling in narrative gaps. By the novel's conclusion, we know that the baby has not been stolen or

erroneously placed; in fact, the child is the product of one of the defective male/female relations that creates the need for a female community like the Convent to open its doors. The men have no way of knowing where the baby has come from or where it has gone because rather than talk to women, they talk amongst themselves about women while female bodies are largely relegated to "the tippy-tap steps of women who were nowhere in sight" reflecting the problems of civil rights activism that Velma finds so troubling (61).

With this, the question remains: why do the black men of Ruby not hesitate before soldiering onward with their killing spree after stumbling upon a crib? If a black patriarchal agenda cannot afford to tolerate those who refuse to participate in the project of futurity, once the possibility for child-rearing or child-bearing arises, why do the men of Ruby not rethink their plans or halt that which would be met with juridical discipline and harsh punishment if ever discovered by the state? Once one man sees the crib and the teething ring, he slides the safety back on his gun and thinks more deeply about the depravity and disease that he assumes has made up life at the Convent. Whether or not sexual acts between women are taking place barely matters; a lack of the infant's physical presence only strengthens the mischaracterization of the Convent as a space where "revolting sex, deceit and the sly torture of children" all converge (8). This misreading of black female sexuality resonates with what Evelynn Hammonds suggests is a problem with many considerations of its articulation; work on black female sexuality often psychoanalyzes black women within a paradigm that, on the one hand, leaves no room

between homosexuality and heterosexuality and, on the other hand, somehow interprets silence and distance as hypervisible lesbianism.[64]

In what becomes an attempt at countering this narrative, what we see female sexuality offering black women in this text is another method for creating wholeness that does not erase the black female body from considerations of what a progressive racial politics looks like. I must disagree with Susan Neal Mayberry, who contends that Consolata's sexual connection with a man before she arrives at the Convent catalyzes a "serene equilibrium between male and female, flesh and spirit" and that this is somehow signaled by the appellative replacement of Connie for Consolata (256). This reading, I would argue, unnecessarily privileges the male as if some form of masculinity is necessary for black women to heal themselves.[65] When Consolata's powers come into play, whether they are being enacted for the benefit of the other Convent women or for saving Sloane's life, the spotlight is on her body, the female body. What becomes problematic for this strategy, however, is history. The black patriarchal agenda that the Ruby men typify says that black men "need" to protect black women and the idea that women can protect themselves is troubling. Tactics like keeping the image of the baby as the symbol of futurity keeps men valuable and forestalls a movement towards wholeness that keeps men from occupying the forefront of black political visibility. One of the threats of finding wholeness without men is that they can possibly get left behind. By

---

[64] See Evelynn Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence" (1999).

[65] This is not to say that men should always be excluded from black feminist/female spaces but I would not agree with the argument that there is some lack without the phallic.

making female sexuality the imperiling obstacle, Ruby men can reestablish a curative circuit that needs them.

When Consolata shores up the power to begin a healing process for the collective, it is body-oriented, body-positive, and spiritually reflective. The process calls for mental and spiritual action that enacts the body but uses figurations of the body as siphons for emptying out the painful memories that could hinder the ability to move forward. The narrator describes the routine in terms of bodies, body parts, and the relations of those body parts in the given space:

> Consolata told each [woman] to undress and lie down. In flattering light under Consolata's soft vision they did as they were told. How should we lie? However you feel. They tried arms at the sides, outstretched above the head, crossed over breasts or stomach. Seneca lay on her stomach at first, then changed to her back, hands clasping her shoulders. Pallas lay on her side, knees drawn up. Gigi flung her legs and arms apart, while Mavis struck a floater's pose, arms angled, knees pointing in. (263)

Once these adult bodies find their most comfortable position, Consolata paints their silhouette. Then, once their bodies ache from staying still for too long, Consolata relays a story:

> My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed her until I met another. My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him. When he fell away the woman rescue me from my body again. Twice she saves it. When her body sickens I care in every way flesh works. I hold it in my arms and between my legs. […] So I was wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? Hear me, listen. Never break them in tow. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve. (263)

At first, the story makes no sense to the other women but the foregrounding of the spirit before the body serves as an attractive option for them. Consolata distinguishes between the body and the flesh because it is the flesh that needs to stay healthy if all that has been

signified onto the body is going to be refashioned in black women's favor. This point may seem obvious—black women should not have to die for the to be able to repurpose what it means to be black women—but it is important to note how this method of care at least partially pivots around a care for the flesh that recovers the spirit when it is lost. In the face of all different kinds of violence against the black female body, this healer finds the greatest possibility in black women coming together to care for flesh and reconstruct modalities of being that search for a spiritual genealogy that derives power from women.

The scene of healing here makes good use of memory in order to properly recast history and genealogy in order to re-center women and rightfully make them the primary actors in their own legacies. Consolata's turn to histories of black women converts the energy of the Convent into that which can be most productive for black women interested in active rather than passive healing for themselves. This shift from passive to active requires the minister figure of Consolata to evolve from the depressed woman that she is once women start overstaying their welcome to the healer interested in taking old narratives and making them new again for the benefit of her charges and for herself. The repurposing of old narratives demands attending to the bodies upon which these narratives play out. As Foucault argues in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," "the body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity) and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (83). Reading the body in this way, as a site of historical accumulation that can be read in order to make sense of historical

fluctuation, makes the discursive use of the body and the drawing of its parts upon the Convent floor a key method for reworking the narrative that Hortense Spillers argues becomes imprinted onto black female flesh. Much of Consolata's bad feelings stem from a lack of sexual safety in public space and the invisible target on her back that made her the frequent recipient of sexual harassment and assault. These memories, memories related to a negative sexual past, become the memories that these women step into *as a collective* in an act called loud dreaming. During these dreams, all of the women relive their past traumatic experiences in order to extract communal love from the present moment. The process is exhausting and infuriating but working through these personal histories intersubjectively makes moving past the burden on each individual body that which Foucault calls "the stigmata of past experience" (83).

These memories are not only attached to the bodies of the women themselves; they are also attached to the figurings of the body parts that the women draw in colorful chalk in the Convent. Once the women move past drawing the body templates that initially began to take shape during these loud dreaming sessions, their selection of which body parts that they chose to reflect themselves have a common theme: "First with natural features: breasts and pudenda, toes, ears and head hair. Seneca duplicated in robin's egg blue one of her more elegant scars, one drop of red at its tip. Later on, when she had the hunger to slice her inner thigh, she chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor" (265). These sexual organs and body parts frequently played with during sexual intercourse become recast within the confines of the safe space at the Convent. They become outlets that replace bodily harm as the women come to increasingly love their bodies in new ways amongst each other. Those parts that got

Consolata harassed as a younger woman becomes a constitutive part of how the community of this space can move forward. As Patricia McKee argues, sociability in the time of loud dreaming "takes up both interior and outcast and replaces them into social life. When the women take each other's places [as they step into one another's memories], they displace self-negating exclusions with mutual occupations; and individual identities are not represented by self-contained images but extend into other people's responses to the images" (211). The Convent constitutes a safe space, not a utopia, as McKee goes on to suggest. The ritual of loud dreaming takes up the span of at least a few months. This particular ritual, however, occasions a change that might be outwardly imperceptible to strangers as it is marked by "a sense of surfeit; the changed air of the house, its foreign feel and a markedly different look in the tenants' eyes" (265). This affective change that alters both the space and the demeanor of the women is directly tied to this newfound relation to the body that is cultivated collaboratively in these sessions.

As Kimberly Springer reminds us, one of the major impetuses for the cultivation of black feminist organizations in the 1960's and 1970's was the political desire for women to be able to access more information about their bodies: "For young women, their bodies were a mysterious terrain, which was not unusual during hits decade because black women, like their white counterparts, came of age under shared 1950s sexual taboos. […] Learning about the physical female body, the primary site of gender and sexuality, was an obvious and necessary first step in deconstructing what it means to embody womanhood" (119). Organizations like SNCC's Black Women's Liberation Committee would hold special consciousness-raising sessions in which, amongst other

things, women would speak to one another about how particular sex organs worked as a way of linking together the group's civil rights and feminist politics. These basic conversations would be foundational for black feminist groups' more complex arguments about black women's liberation. In essence, becoming attuned to the female body would have been, and continues to be, important for black feminist politics even as black women operate against a historically overdetermined narrative that aligns black female bodies with hypersexualization.

Attending to the spiritual genealogies that consolidate female power as Consolata does helps to dismantle those harmful cultural narratives that determine how we read black female bodies. Though some scholars point to the ways in which the Co(n)ven(t) signifies on and refers back to the Salem Witch Trials, what has been even more useful has been work by J. Brooks Bouson and Jason Frydman on how the break away from traditional Christian frameworks becomes crucial for how these women could resist the confines of Ruby even if those strategies eventually end with their supposed demise.[66] In a chapter that discusses the role of religious syncretism in the novel, Bouson locates a correlation between the matrilineal focus of the spiritual approach to healing that Consolate and the other women undertake in the Convent and Candomblé, a religion mainly practiced by people of African descent living in Brazil. Itself a syncretic religion that takes parts of West African religions of the Yoruba and Bantuu peoples, Candomblé takes what could be called a progressive approach to finding a place for gender in a

---

[66] See Carola Hilfrich's "Anti-Exodus: Countermemory, Gender, Race, and Everyday Life in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" (2006) and Katrine Dalsgård's "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" (2001).

spiritual context. In his monograph on Candomblé, *Black African Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, James Matory finds that Candomblé can be progressive in its gender representation.[67] As Matory notes, Simon De Beauvoir would dedicate a considerable amount of space in her autobiography to a time spent in Northeastern Brazil. The female Condomblé priestess for de Beauvoir and others represents a position of resistance within a system of economic and social oppression because she "surely tapped into the modernist nostalgia for the premodern—the longing, in the midst of an urbanizing and industrializing society, for a bucolic past world of personalistic and emotional attachments, a world where everyone knew his or her place, an infantile world where a warm and caring servant-mother provided all of one's needs on demand" (200-201). The mammy-esque Black Mother figure that these priestesses come to be associated with has been venerated by 20th century white feminists precisely because of this nostalgia for a lost past in which the priestess would be equally nurturing to blacks and whites.

Problematic as the reasoning is for investing power in the figure of the Candomblé priestess, she does serve as a viable alternative to the male figureheads that tend to dominate black politics informed by Christianity and Islam. For Bouson, Consolata takes this role of the Candomblé priestess and modernizes her, moving her away from problematic depictions of the figure as it also pushes against depictions of the

---

[67] A sizeable portion of Malory's book refutes the mid-century work of Ruth Landes, whose 1947 book, *The City of Women*, would argue that Candomblé could be described as a "cult matriarchate" because of its lack of male priests. Male priests, however, did exist and some of the elision of men from this narrative stemmed from a homophobia that posited male priests, many of whom engaged in "passive homosexuality" as being inferior to women and, thus, incapable of being priests.

religion as a matriarchy with no patriarchal roots. As Bouson notes, in Candomblé temples, the daughters "manifest the *orixás* during possession trance and thus help accumulate for the temple the magical energy of *axé*—the 'life-giving nutrient of the material and spiritual realms,' which is especially present in the blood" (239). I end this chapter with a scene between Convent women that most aligns them with this Afro-Brazilian religion and most deftly reveals what is at stake for these women who have needed a sacred space to work through their most vivid and traumatic memories. This scene takes place after the sessions in which the women draw their bodies on the walls and floor of the Convent but before the Ruby men come to eradicate what they feel is not only a lesbian separatist space but also a coven of witches that means to undermine Christianity. Once these healings occur and once the women construct this dialectic between the material, the spiritual, and the psychic for themselves, a cleansing rain occurs that is the final step in their moving forward:

> [The rain] was like lotion on their fingers so they entered it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces. […] In places where rain is light the thrill is almost erotic. But those sensations bow to the rapture of holy women dancing in hot sweet rain. They would have laughed, had enchantment not been so deep. […] Seneca embraced and finally let go of a dark morning in state housing. Grace witnessed the successful cleansing of a white shirt that never should have been stained. Mavis moved in the shudder of rose of Sharon petals tickling her skin. Pallas, delivered of a delicate son, held him close while the rain rinsed away a scary woman on an escalator and all fear of black water. Consolata, fully housed by the god who sought her out in the garden, was the most furious dancer, Mavis the most elegant. Seneca and Grace danced together, then parted to skip through fresh mud. Pallas, smoothing raindrops from her baby's head, swayed like a frond. (283)

The moment of almost erotic ecstasy in nature recalls a scene in *The Salt Eaters* in which the Seven Sisters are sitting in a café as a thunderstorm slowly approaches. As one woman thinks aloud about "the woman-charged cultures" anchored in non-Christian

religions (one of which is Candomblé), a rumbling occurs and she stops speaking as all the women turn inward to the spiritual practices and places that give them comfort in the face of a storm that feels apocalyptic even in its infancy. Much of the last chapters of *The Salt Eaters* describes the effects of this storm on Claybourne's population but one woman's response is particularly interesting because, rather than stay inside or find shelter, she stands with the rest of the Seven Sisters but away from the protection of the café's awning. In this moment, the other sisters can tell that Nilda, the woman standing in the rain, "was not asleep and was not concerned with the rain's pelting of her velvet shirt, darkening now to blue-black ink. Nilda was in the hills with the *peyotero*, listening to the tongue of the sacred cactus where Our Elder Brother, the Deer of the Sun, resides. In the hills, becoming available to the spirits summoned to regenerate the life of the world" (249). Much like Nilda, the Convent women read as if they are already becoming untethered to this particular place in the world in order to find the spiritual cleansing and regeneration that can come with being together in these supernatural moments. Leaving their bodies on the Convent floor begins the metaphysical work of actually being metaphysical—that is, *beyond* the physical. For this reason, I must disagree with Jason Frydman when he suggests that the turn to Candomblé or, at least, Candomblé-inflected initiation rites and rituals, amounts to a failure for the novel to invest proper hope in alternative spiritual practices. As he writes, "the alternative discourses that temporarily challenge this nationalist paradigm, those of Pan-Africanism or New World creolization, in the end fade out of Ruby's collective view. By politically and economically rewarding Ruby for abandoning these alternative discourses of African diasporic identity, *Paradise* disavows the healing promised by the assimilative practices of African-derived, New

World religions such as Candomblé" (139). This incorrectly brands the actions of Ruby as a success for Ruby when, instead, the ending of the novel can be read as a (somewhat tortured) success for the Convent.

Given the critical reception of *Paradise* as the final novel of a trilogy that begins with Morrison's award-winning novel, *Beloved*, and includes the 1992 historical novel, *Jazz*, it only makes sense to read the deaths of the Convent women not as deaths but as extensions of life that transform these women into transcendent ghosts. The novel ends ominously and somewhat ambiguously with the figure of Piedade consoling the white woman who is murdered in the novel's first sentence:

> In ocean hush a woman black as firewood is singing. Next to her is a younger woman whose head rests on the singing woman's lap. Ruined fingers troll the tea brown hair. All the colors of seashells—wheat, roses, pearl—fuse in the younger woman's face. Her emerald eyes adore the black face framed in cerulean blue. Around them on the bench, sea trash gleams. Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the quiet surf. […] Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise. (318)

After a final chapter in which the ghosts of the women who have died return one last time the physical world to be seen by loved ones that they have left behind, we end with this image of two women embracing while one looks forward to how much more work needs to be done. In a novel that cannot ultimately find peace between the violent nationalism of Ruby and the struggling womanist non-utopia of the Convent, this last scene, as Carola Hilfrich argues, makes painfully clear the distance that still exists between the now of the everyday and the post-racial utopia that some imagine: "Morrison's concluding scene, through its loosened, almost endless chain of signifiers each of which opens formerly unavailable or unexpected potentialities of signification, suggests that the 'unbeatable

solace' of an American politics of real life would lie not only in acknowledging, but in working with the epidermal-identificatory contamination or—to use one of her own metaphors—that skin-riding pollination that comes with being a subject in the Americas" (343). In effect, finding spiritual solace within Candomblé or some mixture of it and Catholicism reaches its limits when pushed up against the patriarchal Christianity that continues to surround it. Moving past the histories that get exorcised via the "loud dreaming" or the drawing of bodies on a convent floor may not be enough when we have never properly mourned in the face of the national histories of violence and brutality that have saturated not only bodies but spaces. The troubling personal histories that get siphoned out onto the drawings on the Convent floor may leave the actual bodies of the Convent women but they then get written onto a space that has seen violence against native populations. In essence, the women undertake healing under the auspices of a religion that has its own attachments to histories of colonial violence in the Americas. The ambiguities in this last section of the novel ends the text on a note of seemingly endless work brings us back to Minnie Ransom's seemingly unanswerable question: "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" When so much needs to be reworked, razed and built back up again, in order to become well, the constant refrain asks us to periodically recommit to the arduous process.

Chapter 4: Walker's *Mestizo*

> The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atrevesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal."
>
> - Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera

> You [Gloria Anzaldua] who wrote the borderlands that we appropriate to signal how "queer" we were. There is no romance or seduction to living on the borders. You taught us about the need to shift consciousness, to build common ground, to move from the militarized zone to the roundtable, to view the artist as healer without separation. You taught us that our politics would not be effective without a spiritualized consciousness. Conocimiento. You taught us about Divine intelligence. But we consumed without digesting. You taught us; the question remains, What did we learn?
>
> - M. Jacqui Alexander, Pedagogies of Crossing

In 1935, writing as a traveler in Mexico City, civil rights activist and spiritual advisor Sue Bailey Thurman published a short article in the September 1935 issue of *The Crisis* about her travels south of the border. The piece, titled "How Far From Here to Mexico?," asks the magazine's primarily black readership to seriously consider Mexico as an alternative tourist destination at a time in which many cosmopolitan African Americans were traveling to Europe for both sightseeing and relief from the oppressive conditions of Jim Crow America. Mexico, according to Thurman, had only seen a few non-representative examples of African Americans traveling in the role of "grooms, jazz orchestras or menial laborers employed at the whim of some American family or business

firm resident in Mexico" (267). She goes on to argue that if a wider range of people from the black intelligentsia would apply for travel permits down to Mexico, it would force the government to accelerate the process of issuing passports to black travelers as the state agencies responsible for issuing these permits would come to recognize that African Americans could want to travel of their own free will and with their own money.

In the article, Thurman recounts going to a showing of a Spanish-language version of *Imitation of Life*, which was first released in the United States the prior year. In her recollection, there was a gap in what the film represented about black experience and what could be understood by Mexican audiences. Though many viewers lauded Louise Beavers' inimitable performance as poor black housekeeper Delilah Johnson, calling out "Mucho!" when Beavers appeared on screen, Thurman laments, "Much of [the film] could not be transplanted to this Latin soil and be understood" (267). What spectators of the film could understand and sympathize with was black oppression; they found Beavers' performance so exceptional because she played the familiar role of the black servant so well. Though, as Thurman notes, Langston Hughes had visited Mexico many times to see his father and a jazz orchestra had traveled down to Mexico City (even if their scheduled performance had been met with "ill-fortuned results"), Thurman describes an important opportunity for artists, artisans, and other elite members of the race to spend their hard-earned capital in Mexico; these tourists would make it clear that African Americans could be more than servants and that they were full citizens of the United States even if the United States would exploit them at every turn.

Thurman's transnational vision was more than merely about changing the perception of African Americans in Mexico. The article calls for upwardly mobile blacks

to visit Mexico so that, under the guidance of the immigration department in Mexico City, Mexican consulates would be forced to be more readily willing to authorize travel permits, a problem that Thurman traces back to the idea that many Mexicans do not see African Americans as full citizens of the United States deserving of the same respect as whites who petition to travel there. This Thurman finds deplorable because with the process of issuing travel permits taking so long, many black people are deprived of what the beautiful lands of Mexico made available—that is, namely the opportunities for self-fulfillment that worldly travel has to offer America's most persecuted citizens:

> [The length of time it takes Mexican consulates to approve the travel permits for African Americans] is most regrettable when one remembers that loveliness is here to sell at a rate of exchange in love of pure beauty! Natural beauty—a glimpse of proud Popacatepetl [*sic*] drowsing above the tropical valleys; henna, blue and olive landscapes, a gay backdrop for Santa Anita. Spiritual beauty—Chapultepec Park and the national band concerts; Mexican songs with guitar accompaniment strumming far into the night; lively feet dancing the *Jarabe*; slow-moving feet offering gardenias; swift, gliding feet, scare touching the pavement; off to the new future of Mexico! (267)

The beauty that Thurman describes here and the free and unfettered access to that beauty would have three critical benefits for America's black population. First, with travel comes the self-confidence of building new knowledges about other parts of the world from personal experience. Second, if Mexican consulates issue travel permits for black tourists with the same speed that they do for whites, this would be another small step towards full citizenship for African Americans.[68] Third, and perhaps most critically,

---

[68] In what looks to be an editor's note that is tacked onto the end of Thurman's article, the Mexican government would eventually direct those issuing permits in the United States to do so without hesitation: "Mrs. Thurman was directed by the chief of the immigration department in Mexico City, (in Spanish)—Dirrecion General de Poblacion, Antonio Hidalgo, to advise all Negro tourists interested in a trip to Mexico to apply at the nearest consulate where permits should be granted at once without difficulty. […] Orders have

connecting with the natural and spiritual beauty of Mexico opens African Americans up to an intimacy with the Americas that Thurman captures at the end of her article:

> Herein is a new path to self-discovery and to the state of invulnerableness in which one is sure of what he knows. Its security has been recently summarized in the bold and vigorous utterance of a young Mexican of today: "It is something to have found *my* relationship to the social and political evolution of the three Americas. Circumstances may not overcome this wisdom, for, I have within myself the germ of all reform!" (274).

The curious, youthful take on the intimacy of the three Americas and its impact on a sense of righteousness and positive change suggests, perhaps, both a revolution of the self and the finding of one's place within a transnational framework of revolutionary thought. This future-oriented path to change both for the individual and the American hemisphere based in the forging of new opportunities for cultural contact and hybridity (as long as one learns the language of the new space that one inhabits) comes at such a decreased cost both in terms of price and effort that Thurman's call for increased black tourism transforms Mexico into an enlightened place of escape, one that fulfills both the body and the mind with its aesthetic charm, its splendor, and its revolutionary spirit.

I begin this chapter with Thurman's article because she reorients the flows of black freedom southward rather than northward, upending the more traditional way of thinking about where the gateway to freedom is located for the oppressed. Thurman's article bridges a temporal split between the black slaves who fled to Mexico in antebellum America and the more contemporary black writers imagining new histories in which a deeper than deep South represents possibility rather than peril. The relationship

---

been issued to Washington that no difficulties were to be placed in the way of Negro tourists entering the country and that they were to enjoy the same facilities as anyone else" (274).

between American blackness and Mexico has a long history that often gets elided in the interstitial space between black diaspora studies and Latin American studies. The former discipline rarely mentions Mexico as a space of the black diaspora while the latter prefers to focus on black people whose heritage is of the region rather than nonnative peoples of African descent who have recently emigrated. Though Thurman is not the first to suggest that Latin America can be seen as a space of liberation, she reinvigorates a sense of southward freedom that carries into black writing of later periods.[69]

52 years after Thurman published this article in *The Crisis*, Alice Walker would turn to Mexico as a space of both inspiration and reflection for African Americans seeking to become their truest selves and understand how America's historical legacy has constructed its own fact of blackness without the consent of black people. In the late 1980's, after years of writing and thinking about the possibilities for deliverance that other Latin American countries like Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua would render Walker purchased a home on Mexico's Pacific coast in a small private community about 100 miles south of Puerto Vallarta. It is there, amongst the breathtaking natural beauty of the Pacific Ocean and southern Mexico's lush tropics where she would write considerable portions of her two major novels after *The Color Purple*: *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. While both of these texts have seen considerable critical attention since they were published, virtually none has been paid to a later novel that was

[69] Most notably for my own thinking about the place of Mexico in African American writing and the ways in which that space becomes one of marked freedom not only for black people in general but for the most vulnerable populations within the black community (black women and black queers, for instance) is Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* in which Lorde moves southward in order to flee persecution and finds queer community there.

also influenced by Walker's travels through Latin America, *By the Light of My Father's Smile.*

This novel, much of which is set in the Sierra Madre mountains of Mexico, tells the tale of Susannah and her sister, Magdalena, the daughters of anthropologists who grow up in Mexico under the pressed thumb of their father, only known as Mr. Robinson, and their mother, Langley. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson obtain funding for their long trip to Mexico through their local black church, explaining to the congregation that they wish to study a tribe called the Mundo, a small community made up of descendants of African Americans and indigenous folk who fled southward during the Civil War but, by the 1940's, began to conceive of themselves as Afro-Mexicans. In exchange for the funding, however, their ethnographic trip also functions as a missionary trip; in essence, as Langley and her husband study what they claim to be a dying community, the father also moonlights as a pastor and, eventually, a priest spreading the gospel to a people that have adhered rather steadfastly to their traditional beliefs which fuse together spirit and flesh in ways that make exceptionally clear that the former cannot be accessed without careful attention to the latter. The longer that the father, who is not an especially religious man before they undertake this journey, takes on this role as pastor under false pretenses, however, the more that Christianity begins to affect his relationship with his wife and daughters and Susannah and Magdalena grow up to be very different women still coping with the traumatic events of their childhood.

It will be my argument in this chapter that Alice Walker's turn to Mexico in her 1998 novel, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, was a deliberate one. While this novel is not Walker's first to mention Latin America or to incorporate the region as a major

narrative device, it is my contention that Mexico functions in this text as an important site for expanding our conception of the black diaspora. This novel temporarily disarticulates the African American condition from the nationalist/nation-building project of America by building a politics of relationality that opens up kinship to the intimacy and erotics that Audre Lorde, as I have suggested in previous chapters, posits are edifying for racial politics being constructed in a black feminist mold.[70] The family emerges as a site through which a progressive racial and sexual politics can be articulated precisely because of how the Robinson family eventually allows the Mundo to fully affect the ways in which it sees the rest of the world. Growing up in Mexico and then in Sag Harbor, an incorporated village in Suffolk County, New York that has historically been tied to upper-middle-class and upper-class African Americans, Susannah and her younger sister Magdalena build sexualities that are not tethered to the sexual politics of either nation. In Walker's attempt to construct a perfect feminist society, she allows for sexuality to function in the horizon of a possibility for a black queer utopia that is made possible by the elsewhere of Mexico, a space that is often overlooked in terms of its footprint and foothold in the black diaspora.[71] Though the sexualities of the two daughters do not escape the grasp of respectability while they are alive (in fact, their sexualities and their bodies are often figuratively and literally strangled by it), the death of the father and his

[70] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic" (2007), 53.
[71] Here, I am indebted to the work of Nadia Ellis who theorizes a queer elsewhere at the nexus of Stuart Hall's work on a diasporic "elsewhere" and José Muñoz's queer utopian horizon. As she writes, "In retaining striking traces of the gap between *here* and *there*—between the possibilities spied on the horizon and territory currently occupied—these modes produce urgent feelings of loss, desire, and zeal that mark them, like Muñoz's utopian horizon as queer" (4). This space of the in-between negotiates a productive but uneasy tension between a desire to be an individual and a desire for attachment/community.

coming to Mundo spirituality while he observes the children he left behind allows for a reckoning with how black people have uncritically accepted and acted in accordance with the morals put forth by systems and ideological apparatuses that never had them, let alone their better interests in mind.

Due to an archival gap and an already extant attachment between African Americans and freedom that is routed through Mexico of which Walker takes advantage, Mexico itself emerges as a space of speculation, one that can be utilized for the purposes of imagining black queer female futures. Because Mexico, like Canada, already has these built in associations—that is, a history in which black folk imagined Mexico as a space to turn to in the face of oppression despite its own history of enslavement of traded Africans—it, more than any of the other places that figure into this novel provides the space for theorizing about what is possible for black women's sexuality when black women respond to restrictions on their erotic lives by forcefully rejecting respectability politics. In other words, when the black women of this novel are able to cultivate senses of belonging that are not tied to nationalism or nationhood but, rather, to a broader set of hemispheric or transnational concerns, they open themselves up to a geometry of sexual and political possibility that takes their desires as a foundational premise rather than a functional afterthought.

Walker builds this sustained attachment between African Americans and freedom in Mexico via an archival gap that allows her to invent the Mundo Indians, a mixed-race tribe that has a long history of resisting the impact of European colonization after they build a society for themselves south of the border. Though it is a generic feature of the slave narrative for the protagonist to eventually flee their bonded circumstances for

freedom, the most canonical slave narratives posit the directionality of freedom as pointing northward. This was not always the case. As Rachel Adams argues, those who made the journey southward did not meet abolitionists or anti-slavery organizations who would help them transcribe their stories into printed documents that could be disseminated for the abolitionist cause. Rather, former slaves who built community in Mexico largely encountered either groups that were not literate or populations that did not have enough money to produce and circulate the kinds of documents that more well-off Northern abolitionist groups could. In her discussion of this phenomenon, Adams employs Diana Taylor's work on embodied memory to argue that contemporary literature that narrativizes the experience of African Americans in Mexico means to fill in the gaps of a rather incomplete archive. As Adams suggests, the "performative repertoire of the Afro-Mexicans bears traces of their otherwise forgotten African ancestry and thus, by extension, their acknowledged place within the black diaspora" (62). In other words, by attending to the embodied practices of descendants of the black people who fled southward, we can clean certain things about the cultural pasts that were never recorded. This, however, only obliquely applies to *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, a novel that is principally concerned with this African American family rather than the Afro Mexicans who teach them about themselves. Though Adams goes on to think through how linking a discourse of the black diaspora with one of the borderlands provides a useful vocabulary for understanding contemporary Afro-Mexicans who are descendants of black slaves who fled southward in the 19th century, this chapter will focus on the contemporary African Americans who understand their black identity in relation to Mexico rather than of it.

As Saidiya Hartman argues, slavery and its violences shape what is available to us in the archive. In “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman ruminates on what kinds of stories about slavery can be told when the details of those stories are either lost to time or are written by those in power. In trying to write about an event about which she cannot possibly know all the details, Hartman articulates a method of storytelling that she calls “critical fabulation,” a process that entails “playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view” in order to “jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done” (11). This method pushes back against the hegemonic discourses of historiography in order to attend to that which exceeds even what would be possible to know if the archive existed in as full as a state as would be possible. In effect, Hartman reveals an interest not only in the unknowable details of history and how what cannot be known still resonates with and impacts upon the present. Critical fabulation does not constitute an infidelity to the past; rather, as a practice, it negotiates a longing for that which cannot be known with a duty to do justice to the vulnerable and a deep desire to understand the past’s even deeper impacts on the structures of the present and what is conceivable in terms of our future. If the archive of transatlantic slavery is as scarce as scholars like Hartman, Ian Baucom, and Stephen Best contend, Walker’s narrative treatment of a relationship between American blackness and Latin America, based less on archival work (because so little exists) and more on the imagined enabling attachments to spaces outside of the United States that we have been

able to glean from that archive, mines the irrecoverable past for all of its womanist possibility.[72]

By inventing a tribe of mixed-race people with their own spiritual framework that allows for a black family to find their whole selves, for better or worse, Walker reorients blackness' positionality within and attachment to "America" by reinvigorating a history that has ostensibly been lost to the archive. Rachel Adams argues that Walker's invented tribe "provide[s] an idealized alternative to her troubled African American protagonists" which consist of two beleaguered anthropologists, a queer daughter and another female child who may follow in her parents' footsteps by becoming a professor but ends up punishing her body after a tragic event convinces her that she and her body are unlovable (Adams 61). While I agree with Adams that Mexico and life amongst the Mundo people quickly and, thus, unbelievably approaches a utopian worldview, Walker's novel invents a conceptual space in the mountains of Mexico from which she can imagine what is possible for black feminism outside of the confines placed upon it as an ideology and politics by the mutually constitutive and mutually reinforcing logics of historicism and nationalism. In essence, I take Walker's novel as an expression of the affective afterlives of the forgotten history that was black slaves escaping to Mexico. So, while the archive may be lost to history, Walker finds history in the spiritual and sexual resonances of the everyday that suffuse a site like the mountains of the Sierra Madre.[73]

---

[72] Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic* (2005), 4; Stephen Best, "Neither Lost nor Found: Slavery and the Visual Archive," 150-153.
[73] The choice of the Sierra Madre mountains may stem from Walker's fondness of the work of José Benítez Sánchez, a Mexican artist who specialized in yarn paintings that reflected his own personal history and the indigenous, shamanistic cultures to which he belonged. In particular, Sánchez identified with his Huichol background, connecting with

Rather than fall into the trappings of allowing male agency to govern how the push and pull of Mexico affects African Americans of all backgrounds, Walker creates a black queer sense of belonging that is hemispheric and relational across borders that need not be respected. In their introduction to a volume of essays on the subject of the hemisphere as a category of analysis, Caroline Levander and Robert Levine argue for the hemispheric turn by noting that "once we recognize that the nation is not the realization of an original essence but a historical configuration designed to include certain groups and exclude others, we are able to see the nation as a relational identity that emerges through constant collaboration, dialogue, and dissension" (5). It is important to note this because the Robinson family ultimately is American even if the various members of that family are cosmopolitan; however, that national affinity is ultimately informed by a sensibility that is constructed in several spaces with Mexico being a foundational site in which these national bonds are made. By paying attention to the ways in which deep and local intimacies disrupt the traditional narratives that affect the relationship between the United States and Mexico, Walker thinks through how we can conceive of Latin America as affecting blackness in the U.S. context both inside and outside of discourses of

---

an indigenous Mexican culture that stretches back over two millennia. In a description of Sánchez work found amongst Walker's papers at Emory University's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Sánchez's art—large yarn paintings woven together using the wax of bees native to Northwestern Mexico near the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain ranges—is described as "ritual offerings which symbolisms are inspired in the profound knowledge of the humanity beginnings, transmited from father to son and retains in this extraordinary CHAMANICA culture" (Castillo). This fidelity to the shaman cultures of the Huichol people is supplemented by an attention to women in the pieces Walker purchases. One, titled "The Womb of the Life" is described as depicting where humanity and the world is born, highlighting the sacrifices that the world, as a woman, had to undertake in order to produce the beauty that is the natural world. This work strongly resonates with Mundo beliefs but shifts the transmission and preservation of culture from father to daughter.

colonization and global capitalism. By turning to sex and spirituality not as colonial or colonizing tricks but as erotic everyday practices that nip at the heels of "blackness" as a social formation, Walker attends to the very everyday and very black practices that occur in the borderlands.

To be clear, by privileging this as a hemispheric approach rather than a diasporic approach, I am not calling for a turn away from diasporic studies in favor of hemispheric studies when it comes to theorizing blackness in the Americas. The black diaspora continues to be a foundational and useful approach to thinking about African Americans and transnational exchange that needs no defending. However, much like in Phillip Brian Harper's account of meeting a panhandler looking for sex on a routine bit of conference travel in the late 1990's, the anxiety he attributes to national border-crossing and the politics of disorientation in this other national space is not one that comes from movement through the black diaspora—rather, he describes this as "the disorientation characterizing the transnational imaginary in the era of global capitalism" (464). Though scholars like Rinaldo Walcott and Katherine McKittrick have argued rather persuasively for paying more critical attention to Canada as a place within black diasporic frameworks, one must also turn to Mexico and the rest of Latin America in order to think about the region's push and pull on African Americans diasporically, transnationally, hemispherically, and otherwise.[74] With this, I turn to a few mentions of Latin America in Walker's oeuvre in order to help illuminate what this land and its revolutionary thinkers, artists, and ideas have offered the writer over the course of her writing life.

---

[74] See Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who?: Writing Black Canada* (2003) and Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006).

Walking at the Borderland

In "My Father's Country is the Poor," an article that was first published in *The New York Times* in 1977 and then expanded and republished in her groundbreaking collection of non-fiction work, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Alice Walker begins to mark a terrain by which the Americas inform her work and thoughts on African American life in the United States. In the essay, Walker describes her first trip to Cuba and the ways in which that country comes to shape her own U.S. black feminism. In two key aspects—homosexuality and religion—her own revolutionary spirit is challenged by a utopic horizon that may not be here but is attractive in its close proximity. When her Cuban hosts tell her that queers must be made abject because of their threat to the nuclear family structure that metonymically stands in for stability and prosperity, Walker must confront whether or not queers can be sacrificed for revolution. When Walker's hosts make their opinions about queers and how their lifestyle is not only unpleasant but decidedly counterrevolutionary known, neither her nor any of her compatriots immediately object: "It is their revolution, after all. Perhaps some of us are chilled, thinking of gay friends back home who would not feel as free as we do, in Free Cuba" (209). The exchange is impactful but fleeting. After their silence comes a line break in the essay and Walker goes on to talk about how the time of revolution is incremental but necessary.

The Cuban idea of radical social change ushers in a utopia to reach toward but at the expense of Cuban queers. Though she registers this as a concerning omission from the revolutionary practices that she herself would perform, Walker goes on to extol the virtues of those who are willing to fight for universal equality. In Jafari Allen's work on

gender and sexuality in contemporary Cuba, he argues that queer sociality in that country at the time of his ethnographic research (the first decade of the 21st century) coalesces and functions as a site of revolution despite the Cuban state's continued insistence on refusing full citizenship to its queer subjects. Regardless of this refusal, Allen claims, the modes and methods of constructing collectivity of friendship (a term he uses following Foucault's thoughts on the communal queer project in his interview, "Friendship as a Way of Life") constitute a survival mechanism that is more than merely an act of sustenance; rather, that mechanism functions as a potentially liberating experience.[75] By finding life-sustaining spaces amongst other "deviants," black Cuban queers find revolution in the arms of the queer networks that are available, even if only clandestinely.

Allen's method for exploring the queer presences in Cuba relies on the quotidian practices of queer individuals and the various homes or safe spaces that queers inhabit in order to function as a part of a revolution that continues to be, in certain ways, not far removed from what Walker encountered in 1962 and then recounted over a decade later. What Allen calls the everyday tactics of black queers in Cuba or what Juana María Rodríguez calls the queer gestures enacted by queer women of color fall under the radar of what Walker articulates as part of the problem of non-inclusivity in the revolution in

[75] As Foucault suggests in this interview, friendship becomes the relationality between men of all ages that allows for desire to circulate in institutionally-sanctioned ways. Homosexuality matters less for the individual and more through the kinds of relationality that homosexuality makes possible: "It would be better to ask oneself, 'What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplies, and modulates?' The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use ones' sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships. And, no doubt, that's the real reason why homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable. Therefore, we have to work at becoming homosexuals and not be obstinate in recognizing that we are. The development toward which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship" ("Friendship" 135-136).

Cuba.[76] Walker, despite acknowledging in multiple sections of her essay, that the utopian horizon of communist Cuba is unevenly developed for all Cubans, ultimately concludes that we should save our deepest critiques for a future time because the gains for the dispossessed that she witnesses in the moment are so substantial despite this unevenness. As she writes,

> Many Americans who visit Cuba complain that life there is hard. And it is. But they do not seem adequately impressed by the fact that poverty has been eliminated, or that nearly all the people can read: that a 300,000-copy printing of a new book can be sold out in days. They do not seem awed by a country that provides free medical care to all its citizens, and labors daily to provide decent housing for everyone. They do not say—as I feel—that a hard life shared equally by all is preferable to a life of ease and plenty enjoyed by a few. Standing in line for hours to receive one's daily bread cannot be so outrageous if it means every person *will receive bread*, and no one will go to bed hungry at night. (203)

Walker's argument here is compelling as a class-based or economic one; the state's protection of the most vulnerable rings as an ideal system for the majority of Cubans, even as it manifests at the expense of others. This particularly lopsided brand of egalitarianism, however, ironically operates on the basis of the exclusion of Cuban queers and Jehovah's Witnesses.[77] By calling attention to a "hard life shared equally," Walker dismisses the extra social burdens that Cuban queers experience in exchange for the very real economic benefits that they concomitantly receive under a communist regime.

Walker does not come to even this tacit acceptance of discrimination against queers in Cuba lightly. Her attachment to Cuba, while initially routed through Angela

---

[76] See Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (2014).

[77] Though this goes beyond the scope of this chapter, her reaction to the inequities that affect Jehovah's Witnesses marks an exclusion that gets much less attention in the essay as Walker actually seems to find such an exclusion acceptable given that one chooses their religion whereas one cannot choose one's sexual orientation.

Davis and her inspiring commitment to the eradication of the oppression that accompanies global capitalism, eventually becomes determined by a memory of her father that arises a week before she leaves the U.S. When she meets Pablo Díaz, a spokesperson for the Cuban group that has sponsored the trip, a man whose identity collapses with that of her father when he is first introduced, Walker becomes injected with a revolutionary spirit that conceptualizes oppression as a global rather than a parochial struggle.[78] For Walker, Díaz represents a patriarchal figure who can exist concomitantly with revolutionary practice in a way that her father never could.

While the figure of Díaz is important to the essay for a number of reasons (as Cheryl Wall argues, her connection with the older gentleman helps to foster "a spiritual reconciliation with her recently deceased father, from whom she had long been estranged" [294]), I wish to focus on the ideological and political frameworks that he speaks of and the way in which they help to bridge the gap between an Alice Walker who thinks about her small community in Georgia as an important site of local struggle and the Alice Walker that begins to think about struggle in global terms. Though she does not make the claim that Díaz introduces Walker to any of these figures or groups, many of the particular revolutionaries and thinkers that he speaks of would clearly have a profound effect on Walker's expansive and expanding sense of systemic oppression.

---

[78] The linguistic slippage that takes place when Walker first meets her principal tour guide can be somewhat disorienting for readers who think that they are reading a traditional essay with traditional narrative structure: "But the flight, four hours behind schedule, finally lifted us to Havana. And there, waiting for me on the patio of a lovely old mansion liberated from someone who had to have been shamelessly rich, was my father. The same dark, coffee-colored skin, the same large nose, the same vibrant and intelligent eyes. My father's name in Havana was Pablo Díaz, and he spoke in Spanish, which I do not understand" (213).

As scholars of the Cuban revolution suggest, the revolt against President Fulgencio Batista's installed authoritarian regime unfolded into a revolutionary project with global implications. Aside from implementing a domestic and foreign policy agenda that intended to impede the destructive effects of neoliberalism and globalization, Fidel Castro, the leader who rose to power after the revolution's success, often imagined Cuba as a country with utopic longings and potential that stood as an example on the world stage even as other socialist states failed.[79] Díaz, according to Walker, spoke about Cuba with a similar transnational revolutionary spirit that was simultaneously of and more than Cuba: "He spoke of the black *mambises* of the 1800s; of Jose Martí, the 'father' of Cuba; of Antonio Maceo, 'the bronze titan'; of the attack in 1953 on the Moncada Barracks; the exile in Mexico of the revolutionists; the fighting in the Sierra Maestra; the abdication of the tyrant Batista; the triumph of the revolution; and of Che [Guevara], Camilo [Henríquez], and Fidel" (214). For Díaz, revolution and oppression hold particular resonances across Latin and South American locales, bringing together a constellation of radical thinkers and writers who contributed to Cuban revolutionaries' continued insistence on relief for the exploited and subjugated.

One figure on this list that may have had profound effects on Alice Walker is José Martí, whose 1891 essay "Our America" would articulate a position on hemispheric and transnational solidarity against imperialism that resonates with an argument Walker would deploy for her own purposes some years later. In that essay, Martí introduces the concept of a mestizo America as a way of illustrating that a cross-cultural solidarity that

[79] See Luís Suárez Salazar and Carlos Pérez, "The Cuban Revolution and the New Latin American Leadership: A View From Its Utopias" (2009).

does not erase but actually maintains the lines of cultural distinction would be a premiere strategy for undoing and undermining the global forces of imperialism that have come to impact the Americas. The elaborate metaphor that he deploys for the service of making this point ends with an acknowledgement that the borders that we have constructed should not impede disparate groups from achieving the freedom that they have already fought for and continue to deserve:

> Our feet upon a rosary, our heads white, and our bodies a motley of Indian and criollo we boldly entered the community of nations. Bearing the standard of the Virgin, we went out to conquer our liberty. A priest, a few lieutenants, and a woman built a republic in Mexico upon the shoulders of the Indians. […] But heroism is less glorious in peacetime than in war, and thus rarer, and it is easier for a man to die with honor than to think in an orderly way. Exalted and unanimous sentiments are more readily governed than the diverging, arrogant, alien, and ambitious ideas that emerge when the battle is over. The powers that were swept up in the epic struggle, along with the feline wariness of the species and the sheer weight of reality, undermined the edifice that had raised the flags of nations sustained by wise governance in the continual practice of reason and freedom over the crude and singular regions of our mestizo America with its towns of bare legs and Parisian dress-coats. (292)

I quote this passage at length because Martí's use of the word "mestizo" (or as some have translated, "half-breed") to describe the Americas renders the term not as a pejorative, as it would often be deployed by Latin American leaders and intellectuals of the 19th century.[80] With an acknowledgement that so much of the history of the Americas has depended on cross-cultural contact of all kinds, rather than use race-mixing as a negative action in order to advocate for a purity that is more customary, Martí renders such

[80] Ana María Alonso argues that the 19th-century Latin American elite were suspicious of *mestizaje* and hybridity because of European debates on the subject that often concluded that race-mixing led to social degeneracy and dissolution. The United States' economic and cultural growth over the course of the late 19th century would also contribute to this Latin American discourse on *mestizaje* as many Latin American thinkers would attribute America's increased standing in the global arena to the violent exclusion and marginalization of people in color at home (Alonso 261).

intermingling as a component of living in the Americas that cannot be denied, even if it is not formally encouraged.[81] It is a recognition of the hybridity that already exists and has already existed since the conception of the nations that make up the Americas rather than a turning away from such hybridity in the name of a purity that has never existed that will allow for continued resistance against empire building. This recognition of hybridity and cross-cultural contact, Martí goes on to argue, must also include the hybridity and cross-cultural contact that has come as a result of the West's colonial impulses. America is the product of colonialism and resistance's refusal to acknowledge the colonizer's influence and to work with rather than against that influence, as he states, "delayed the advent of a logical form of government" (292).

Almost a century later, Alice Walker would write a letter that takes a similar stand—that is, if black people are the result of a number of biological and cultural mixtures, repudiating this mixture will decelerate any future progress. Though this letter and its invocation of José Martí's mestizo America may at first seem like a set of loose associations that could not possibly have had an effect on Alice Walker's writing, I wish to argue that placing "My Father's Country is the Poor" in conversation with this later writing reveals a pattern for Walker that leads her to the work and land of Latin America as fertile ground for thinking about the black diaspora. In a special issue on the convergence of black diasporic history and Latin American history, Ben Vinson III calls

---

[81] As Amaryll Chanady argues, Martí is not expressly urging indigenous populations, blacks or whites to have relations with one another: "This is a metaphor neither for the cross-breeding between European and non-European races, nor for the acculturation of Amerindians or Africans, since it is the collectivity that is personified as hybrid. […] On the contrary, intranational (Cuban) and intracontinental diversity is constantly emphasized by Martí" (21).

for productive collaboration between scholars of the black diaspora and Latin American historiographers. Vinson III cautions Latin Americanists to think about and account for blackness outside of a mestizo/hybrid framework as that facilely circumscribes how blackness actually circulates in the region. As he writes, when working with blackness only from within a discourse of hybridity, "black social actors can emerge as flat—as conduits to the activities of other, more 'important' groups. In a historical tradition where mestizos, natives, and whites have dominated, blacks can be seen as facilitating their history and interrelationships" (13). With this critique in mind, a novel like Walker's places blackness and mestizo discourse into dialectical tension precisely because black people do not have a history in which blackness is a pure and unadulterated category. For Walker, the attention to blackness in Mexico that she narrates produces a relationship in which both black discourse and mestizo discourse inform one another. Before I turn to *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, I will sketch out the framework of the mestizo/mestizaje discourse that informs the black feminist utopia she sketches in that novel.

Min(d)ing the Gap

> *So don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my own space, making a new culture*—una cultura mestiza—*with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.*
>
> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*

As I have suggested, almost a century after Jose Martí's call for Latin American nationalism to reject United States expansionism and Western imperialist influences for

the purposes of creating a cohesive and stable Latin America, Alice Walker would argue that African Americans must reckon with everything that has come to inform what blackness is, including whiteness. In 1987, Walker penned a direct and forceful letter titled "In the Closet of The Soul." In it, she addresses some of the loudest critics of her Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*. The story is well known and unsurprising; many black male and some black female critics at the time rebuked the character of Albert as being an unabashedly negative portrayal of black masculinity. Despite countless African Americans from myriad cultural, national, and socioeconomic backgrounds heralding the epistolary novel as affecting for telling the story of poor black women in rural Georgia, others lambasted it for not providing a respectable enough black male character for the world to see. The letter, which was first published in *Ms.* magazine, largely takes aim at those black male critics who refuse to see how black women's oppression is related but different from their own, rightfully accusing black men of focusing on the negative portrayal of Albert rather than addressing their own solipsistic approaches to racial justice.

The glib critique of Albert not being a good role model or a favorable representation of black masculinity keeps these critics from appreciating what is at the root of Albert's violent antagonism. As Walker suggests, an unwillingness to accept that misogyny exists in the black community reveals a "deep, painful refusal to accept the fact that we are not only the descendants of slaves but we are also the descendants of slave *owners*" (80; emphasis Walker's). As Walker puts it, those who will not acknowledge that Albert is the product of *both* black and white ancestry are willfully missing the point. Black freedom allows black people to not identify with their oppression or the oppressors

that may have sired future generations. This does not mean, however, that black people must deny their history; rather, it is that they must fully understand their history in order to reject that which must be rejected in an honest fashion:

> But critical to our development, too, it seems to me, is an acceptance of our actual as opposed to our mythical selves. We are the mestizos of North America. We are black, yes, but we are "white," too, and we are red. To attempt to function as only one, when you are really two or three, leads, I believe, to psychic illness: "white" people have shown us the madness of that. (Imagine the psychic liberation of white people if they understood that probably no one on the planet is genetically "white.") Regardless of who will or will not accept us, including perhaps, our "established" self, we must be completely (to the extent it is possible) who we are. And who we are becomes more obvious to us, I think, as we grow older and more open to the voices of suffering from our own souls. ("Closet" 82)

Walker's claim that we are the mestizos of North America should occasion some pause as the term does have a cultural and historical genealogy that does not necessarily include the condition of African Americans since slavery. Her use of the term "mestizo," however, is not haphazard. It is this concept of the mestizo and its relationship to blackness that allows Walker to think through a hemispheric blackness, one that is not counter to diasporic blackness but one that redeploys certain understandings of the black diaspora in order to call attention to the ways in which the notion of a "black consciousness" in North America depends on a redeployment and expansion of already extant diasporic metaphors. In this way, Walker's novel operates in the space of what Brent Hayes Edwards has articulated as *décalage*, the gap in time or space through which we should read diaspora. This gap allows us to think through diaspora as a set of discursive practices that reveal shared identity as well as difference:

> If a discourse of diaspora articulates difference, then one must consider the status of that difference—not just linguistic difference but, more broadly, the trace or the residue, perhaps, of what resists or escapes translation. Whenever the African diaspora is articulated (just as when black transnational projects are deferred,

> aborted, or declined), these social forces leave subtle but indelible effects. Such an unevenness or differentiation marks a constitutive *décalage* in the very weave of the culture, one that cannot be either dismissed or pulled out. (Edwards 13)

For Walker, that difference and that which cannot be or refuses to be translated is inequitably directed; American or Western practices are outright dismissed by the Mundo tribe while the Mundo tradition is accepted wholeheartedly in the afterlife as the one true religion. In effect, Western influences and institutions are antithetical to the black feminist queer utopia that the novel longs for and toward so everything from and between Christianity, heteronormativity, missionary work, and general sexual repression are not simply untranslatable; they are actively refused as unsustainable structures to be replaced outside of the geographical locations that support them.

In a way, Mexico and the Sierra Madre function as a space in which cultural hybridity thrives. In an essay discussing the process of creolization as understood through the work of Édouard Glissant and placing that in conversation with Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space," a space of cultural hybridity that occupies a position of difference that undermines the supremacy of what would have formerly been considered a unitary and dominant culture, Stuart Hall makes the claim that such a space is important for our understanding of the term "diaspora":[82]

> We must think of this emerging colonial space as constituting a distinct 'third space'—a space of unsettled, of conquest, of forced exiles, of unhomeliness. This

---

[82] Though my reading here turns to Hall rather than Bhabha or Edward Soja, I must cite Bhabha, who, through a reading of Fanon's work, argues that hybridity itself is a Third Space from which postcolonial culture and subjectivity can be constructed. This has profound implications for how we read and understand culture because it is through Third Space that new meanings can be made: "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (55).

> aspect is often missing in our accounts of creolization; creolization as the process of 'indigenization', which prevents any of the constitutive elements—either colonizing or colonized—from preserving their purity or authenticity; the critical interruption of hybridity, the rupture which breaks or interrupts the lines that connect the different *présences* to their originary pasts. This is the New World as the necessary site of *dis*-placement, of *diaspora*. (18)

Given this definition, then, why does Walker turn to *mestizaje* discourse instead of creolization, a similar term that has had more intellectual and citational purchase for black diaspora studies, a field that Walker actively engages with throughout her life? As Hall points out, creolization differs from *métissage* (a French translation of *mestizaje*) in that the latter accounts for the biological act of racial/cultural mixing whereas creolization refers to "an outcome of racialized *living together* which goes beyond racial coding through the contact of different affects, desire, energies and intensities that break the established normative order at the governance of diversity" (Hall 6). In "In the Closet of the Soul," Walker's understanding of blackness in the Americas exceeds that which creolization offers as she is particularly interested in those biological realities of race mixing that produce and afford black Americans the "third space" from which radical critique can occur. To return to the argument about Albert, Walker contends that the character's narrative use-value does not stem from an innate immorality or depravity that comes from being a black man; rather, his immorality and depravity are a direct result of the forced racial mixing that took place during slavery. Albert's violence and negativity are neither learned behaviors nor the result of a cultural mixing that naturally or organically takes place in mixed-race communities. The most negative aspects of Albert are biologically passed down as a result of what was simultaneously the most horrible

and the most central machination of the institution of slavery: the rape of black women for the purpose of producing more slaves.

I understand Walker's deployment of mestizo discourse as coming from a radical queer framework that is applied most fruitfully by Gloria Anzaldúa in her important work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. As the epigraph to this section suggests, Anzaldúa's use of the term willfully reclaims it for the purposes of constructing a new Mexican culture from the ground up. Hers is not a repudiation of what it means to be Chicana; rather, Anzaldúa means to wrestle her culture away from the vice grips of its most patriarchal and colorist elements. Though she loves being Mexican, she also wants to reimagine what that means from the perspective of the mestiza, whom Anzaldúa would describe as:

> Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision. (*Borderlands* 78)

What Anzaldúa calls a new mestiza consciousness foments as a result of making sense in the midst of this cultural clash. The figure of the mestizo fundamentally disrupts static categories of Chicano identity, white identity, queer identity, and gender identity, forcing such categories and those who stake claims on those identities to reckon with that which may not only be of that category but meaningfully contributes to it. In this way, the mestizo does not throw stable categories into confusion for confusion's sake; rather, these categories are broken down in order to highlight their crosshatching. Anzaldúa, thus, sees the mestizo and the queer as fulfilling similar roles in that both constitute "a blending that

proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls" (85).

Maria Lugones, a feminist scholar who is also heavily indebted to Anzaldúa's work, describes the truculently constitutive ontology of the mestizo as being like the cracking of an egg and the messy process that a spilled yolk occasions:

> When I think of mestizaje, I think both of separation as curdling, an exercise in impurity, and of separation as splitting, an exercise in purity. I think of the attempt at control exercised by those who possess both power and the categorical eye and who attempt to split everything impure, breaking it down into pure elements (as in egg white and egg yolk) for the purposes of control. Control over creativity. And I think of something in the middle of either/or, something impure, something or someone mestizo, as both separated, curdled, and resisting in its curdled state. Mestizaje defies control through simultaneously asserting the impure, curdled multiple state and rejecting fragmentation into pure parts. In this play of assertion and rejection, the mestiza is unclassifiable, unmanageable. She has no pure parts to be "had," controlled. (460)

This embrace of impurity, imperfection, and a state of being in-between may be culturally specific given that it traditionally refers to those of Spanish and indigenous ancestry in a Mexican context but heralding the space of the mixture as a site of resistance resonates strongly for Walker. Blackness in the United States is just as impure, the product of centuries of forced and voluntary racial and cultural mixing and it is from this position that she makes her strongest critiques against the nation.

With this in mind, Walker treats *mestizaje* and the black diaspora as related if not interconnected sociocultural formations by attending to race in a hemispheric context. Work by Theresa Delgadillo and Ifeoma Nwankwo turns to the debates around hemispheric studies and the hemispheric turn to find a place for African Americans in

that critical conversation.[83] The rise of transnational frames of analysis in literary and cultural studies has often too readily ignored the contributions of African American studies, arguing that the subjects of this field are too parochial in their scope and, thus, have little if anything to say about, for instance, the rise of globalization in the 20th century, a phenomenon that Paul Jay has argued is at least partially responsible for transnationalism's now cemented place in these larger fields.[84] Sharon Patricia Holland registers a suspicion of the transnational turn in critical race theory and queer studies in that the opening up of these fields has been accompanied with charges that focusing on race in the U.S. context is too problematically local.[85] Though Holland qualifies her suspicion by stating that she recognizes the enormously valuable work that has come out of transnational scholarship, I want to argue that my work on the hemispheric or the transnational in this novel operates around this critique by bringing a transnational or hemispheric approach to race to bear on the local intimacies that exist in the borderlands—in that way, this work is transnationally local without trying to privilege one side of this term over the other.

Walker's deployment of the term "mestizo" to describe the condition of blackness in the U.S. places black people firmly within discourses about hybridity and transnational cultural contact from which they have regularly been left out. It acknowledges a reality about blackness that Hortense Spillers has called "a locus of confounded identities," a

---

[83] See Theresa Delgadillo, "Singing 'Angelitos Negros': African Diaspora Meets *Mestizaje* in the Americas." *(*2006) and Ifeoma Nwankwo, "The Promises and Perils of US African-American Hemispherism: Latin America in Martin Delany's *Blake* and Gayl Jones's *Mosquito*" (2006).
[84] See Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (2010).
[85] See Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012), 71-73.

phrase that refers to the irreconcilable cultural scripts that are affixed onto the black female body.[86] Some of these identities are real, the result of the forced reproduction of biological material during slavery; some of these identities are imagined, the result of interpretive frameworks set up to produce a racial hierarchy that places the blame for the hardships of black people on a blackness or a "black culture" that has not yet been properly "tamed" by whiteness. It is a distillation of a brutal past that refuses brutality but accepts that which has fashioned black people into who they are—the good and the bad. The process of taking such an inventory, however, cannot take place in the background. By imagining African Americans as mestizos rather than hybrids, Walker is not only borrowing from the *mestizaje* discourse of Anzaldúa; she is building an alliance between African Americans and Mexicans by recognizing the ways in which both black people in the U.S. and people of at least partial African descent in Mexico have always already mutually informed each other culturally. With this, I will turn to *By the Light of My Father's Smile* in order to show how Walker's hemispheric consideration of the Americas is profoundly instructive in constructing human geographies that make queer black female sexuality not only more tenable and acceptable within black communities but shows how making black female sexuality vestibular to our considerations of blackness has forced African Americans to adhere to Western standards of propriety that were never constructed with them in mind or with their best interests at heart. In what follows, I will track how Walker's flirtations with the incest taboo in this novel and her development of a Mexican/black/indigenous spiritual framework that not only sanctions erotic acts that are redolent of incest but also promotes these acts as paramount for

[86] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987), 65.

healthy community building builds more constructive black affective affiliations while it also reinvests critical energies in the queer potential of blood kinship. In essence, by moving in and out of different national imaginaries, by having sexualities that are shaped outside of any one particular national framework, and by inventing a spirituality that calls for anti-nationalist erotic attachments to form, black women form more perfect sexualities that do not adhere to the strictures placed upon them by the heterosexual family or the nation.

Cosmopolitan Afrocentric Mestizo Intellectual

By the Light of My Father's Smile begins in two spaces, both of which exceed the spatial parameters of any one location, let alone country. The opening chapter takes place on two plains: a purgatory-like space in which recently deceased people contend with their unresolved issues by observing what continues to happen on Earth and an imagined and built environment inspired by the Global South but not actually of it. A father known only as Mr. Robinson has recently passed away and he narrates a scene in which one of his daughters, Susannah, is having dinner with her lover, Pauline. The couple is on vacation in the town or village of Kalimasa, a locale that does not exist on any actual map but probably is located somewhere in South Asia. Pauline, who the father describes as being sexually indifferent to men, flirts with the local boys to show Susannah that she is in a lustful mood. The teasing dance that Pauline plays with one of the waiters—she touches him inappropriately and embraces him off to the side in order to get a rise out of Susannah—evokes a history of Western imperialism for the father. Mr. Robinson dutifully explains how when Europeans first arrived in Kalimasa, they met the indigenous

population's sexual innocence with an extreme violence that has since been forgotten by the Kalimasans and European tourists alike. The father's recollection of how the Kalimasan people had to eventually reject the shame that Europeans introduced to them upon their arrival in order to regain their independence immediately sets up what becomes a sustained preoccupation throughout the novel with how Europe and Christianity's sex-negative ethos only brings destruction to the rest of the world.

In sharp contradistinction to European sexual repression, the father's brief summary of the oppressive history of Kalimasa sharply turns to a rather graphic narration of a sexual scene between his daughter and her lover that the novel makes clear is being narrated by the father and not an omniscient or impartial observer. After describing the beauty of the world and how Western attitudes towards sex makes that world paler, grayer, and uglier, the father immediately turns to how Pauline's tryst with the waiter awakens a burning and somewhat brutal lust between her and his daughter:

> [Susannah] listens to the woman softly snoring beside her, and then, switching off her mind, she begins to stroke her awake. The woman is responsive instantly, as if she'd never really been asleep. She permits my daughter free-roaming access to her heavy breasts, hot to the touch, and to her furry belly from which the scent of sandalwood floats upward through the sheet. My daughter places her nose in the crease of the woman's neck, which, like her breasts, is incredibly warm. The woman rolls over and is suddenly the aggressor, on top of my daughter, straddling her. […] Pauline flicks [Susannah's] clitoris with a tongue that seems made of suede, and Susannah begins to moan anew. It is a moan so animallike and guttural, so abandoned and shameless, so full of self-witness, a moan so unlike her day-to-day self, when a certain fastidious haughtiness is often commented on in her character, that it is comical. (9, 13)

I begin my analysis of this novel with this scene not because the vivid narration of sex in Walker's fiction should be considered particularly remarkable; nor is it the first time that Walker describes sexual trysts between female characters. Much ink, for example, has

been spilled on the erotic attachments between Celie and Shug of *The Color Purple* and many critics have written about the scene in which the former character teaches the latter about the pleasurable functions of the clitoris. Rather, the unsettling ambiguity of this novel's opening sets up the groundwork for a comprehensive reevaluation of the relationship between black fathers and black daughters along the lines of sexuality. The black feminist utopia that Walker will sketch in *By the Light of my Father's Smile* hinges at least partially upon the construction of a relationship between fathers and daughters that makes sexuality a knowable aspect of the attachment rather than a closed secret that needs to be violently suppressed. In writing a relationship that is reminiscent of incest but does not include representations of incest, Walker obliquely engages with a trope that proliferates in black women's fiction of the period, imagining a non-destructive and ultimately healthy relationship between black fathers and black daughters that incorporates the erotic rather than turn away from it because of the taboo implications.

As Gillian Harkins and Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman have argued, by the 1990's, incest became an instructive narrative tool for black women writers interested in representing all of the ways in which black girls have been systemically left unprotected.[87] Though critics of the trope would argue that these depictions of incestuous occurrences reflected poorly on black men and only served to reinforce stereotypes about their overabundant sexuality and violent tendencies, many of these novels are much more interested in engaging the larger systems and political groups that recurrently fail black women of all ages. The incest taboo, which can affect readings of even innocent instances

---

[87] Gillian Harkins, *Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America* (2009); Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet,* 114-150.

in which fathers and daughters acknowledge that sex occurs, estranges family members as the denial of even adult children's sexuality prevents kinfolk from fully knowing one another. For Walker, black men's refusal to accept their daughter's sexual selves has created a political impasse that can only be repaired once fathers realize that they are hurting their daughters by repudiating their sexuality. Constructing this healthier relationship between black fathers and black daughters without discarding the idea of family as a potentially beneficial institution even for black queers requires undermining the power of the incest taboo, which Walker does by articulating a hemispherist fantasy that takes blackness outside of a nationalist framework in order to rework what can be seen as an entrenched nationalist attachment between blackness and sexuality. This attachment has been dutifully constructed in the U.S. by governmental reports on the "failures" of the black family in modern society such as *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, privately-funded reports on the "failures" of the black family in modern society such as the Carnegie Corporation-funded *An American Dilemma*, and stereotypes about African Americans that treat broken families as an inherent lack of ability for black people to keep their families together rather than the result of state policies during and since slavery that have been methodically effective in dismantling black families and communities.

The incest taboo must be subverted for black women to be able to fulfill their most erotic selves. It makes virtually unthinkable the erotic intimacies that would dismantle the boundaries between black fathers and black daughters that have partially been set up by steadfast adherence to the taboo and mostly established by moral/spiritual frameworks that are sex-agnostic at best and sex-antagonistic at worst and would be

loosened by what we imagine as being clear lines about what is appropriate between members of the same family. In her work on sexuality in the postcolonial Caribbean, M. Jacqui Alexander describes "erotic autonomy" as a key component of black women's full liberation and citizenship, precisely because of black women's sexuality's high potential for disrupting dominant social institutions' ability to determine what is possible for certain kinds of bodies:

> Women's sexual agency and erotic autonomy have always been troublesome for the state. They post a challenge to the ideology of an originary nuclear heterosexual family that perpetuates the fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society. Erotic autonomy signals danger to the heterosexual family and to the nation. And because loyalty to the nation as citizen is perennially colonized within reproduction and hetero-sexuality, erotic autonomy brings with it the potential of undoing the nation entirely, a possible charge of irresponsible citizenship, or no responsibility at all. (22-23)

This threat against heterosexual families and the nation remains important for black women in and of the United States, especially given work on how the promise of citizenship has never been fully afforded to African Americans.[88] This prevailing cultural conceit that a successful citizenry is made up of nuclear families rather than other social arrangements continues to depend on a respectability model that even homonormative queers can aspire to but never actually attain. For Susannah, whose sexuality first germinates in Mexico and continues to grow in the United States where she lives and on various vacations to South Asia and Greece, the work of becoming erotically autonomous is mobile and builds upon developments that have occurred in previous elsewheres. By moving in and out of different national imaginaries, by having sexualities that are shaped

[88] For a consideration of how Alexander's thoughts on erotic autonomy are useful for thinking about black women's sexuality in a U.S. context, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), 168-170.

outside of one particular national formation, and by inventing a spirituality that calls explicitly for anti-nationalist erotic attachments to form, Susannah forms an erotic life that adheres to neither the heterosexual family or the nation even as she still finds kinship to be instructive rather than destructive for queer life.

It must be made clear at this point that no actual representations of incest occur in the novel. Incest itself has a slippery definition in this text. Its only outright reference occurs towards the end of the novel when Susannah hears advice from Irene, a little person who oversees the upkeep of the small church that her husband regularly went to as a child growing up in Greece and ultimately becomes something like a therapist for her. Susannah describes a dream to Irene in which two women offer her something to eat and as she is enjoying her meals, both women ruin what she has not eaten yet by pouring salt and sand over her food. Irene performs a tarot reading of the dream, coming to the conclusion that the two women are her sister and her lover. Her sister pours the salt; her lover pours the sand. The dream is meant to show how much Pauline and Magdalena resemble one another, a comparison that Susannah finds repulsive and "slightly incestuous" (202). Even the thought of noting a deep similarity between a partner and a family member makes Susannah want to vomit and this changes Irene's approach in relaying what ends up being a benign observation that both women are envious of her rather comfortable and happy childhood. Because Susannah forestalls the conversation with her disgust, Irene must rearticulate this specific part of her explanation for why Susannah is experiencing what Irene calls a spirit fracture. Focusing on Pauline and Magadalena, however, papers over another important conclusion that Irene comes to via this reading of Susannah's dream: "At many different points you might have reconnected

with your father, but there was a shaker of salt right by your elbow. Before you knew it, in all kinds of ways, Magdalena had unpalatably overseasoned your food. A word here, a whisper there. It should be a crime to be younger than anyone else in a family. If they want to, those who are older can feed you such distortions and lies!" (202). Susannah does not register the point that the novel makes most clear—namely, that Magdalena's hatred of her father foreclosed the possibility for Susannah to regain the strong relationship with her father that she had as a child and always wanted to reclaim.

Neither Pauline nor Magdalena hide the fact that they are envious of Susannah's childhood and would rather have it for themselves. The father's emergent conservatism, which manifests in myriad, often contradictory ways, reaches a critical point when he attacks Magdalena after finding out that she has been carrying on a sexual relationship with Manuelito, a young boy from the Mundo tribe that she had been friends with throughout her childhood. The two fumble through their bodies together, often satisfying their adolescent precociousness or attempting to understand their bodies rather than succumbing to their basest desires. Mag, who moves with her parents to Mexico as a curious six-year-old, grows into a curious teenager that refuses to succumb to her father's wishes that she be less inquisitive. When he eventually finds out about her relationship with Manuelito (though Mag is sure that he knew about her trysts long before), he beats her so severely with a belt that he draws blood.

Mag's beating at the hands of her father is one of the central events of the novel and takes place around the time the family returns to Sag Harbor after living in Latin America for almost a decade. This violence irradiates and reverberates, affecting each woman's attitudes toward the only male figure in their family as it also changes each of

their erotic lives during their transition back to life on Long Island. Mag reckons with the event for the rest of her life, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Her eating habits, which could have been characterized as indulgent as a child, become even more insatiable and she becomes known as the fat professor with colored hair and multiple piercings all over her body at her university. Magdalena's acceptance of her body is a refusal of the body shaming that she experiences as she moves through the world while it also stems directly from the attack on her body that severs all of the kin relationships of this family even if some of those disjunctures are temporary while others are permanent. In an argument with her sister, Magdalena makes plain that, though she entertained her father's requests to spend time with her, reconciliation was never possible precisely because of how much his attack took away from her self-confidence, her appreciation of her own sexuality, and her entire self. In response to a question about what she wanted her father to do to repair the relationship, Magdalena uncompromisingly responds, "I wanted to be made whole again, goddammit! He'd taken the moment in my life when I was most secure in its meaning. The moment my life opened, not just to my family and friends, but to me myself. The moment when I knew my life was given to me for me to won. He took that moment and he broke it into a million bits. He made it dirty and evil" (116). Though the dissolution of the relationship between Magdalena and her father is deeply complicated, Susannah's sexuality offers readers a rather queer entry point into how the novel theorizes black women's sexuality in a hemispheric context, allowing for new kinds of kinship structures that are not alternative to biological or genealogical kinship—that is, the arrangements of alternative family networks that some queers, forced out of their biological families, make when the bonds of biological family are

destroyed by homophobia. Instead, building a sexuality outside of the United States, one that is informed by a radically different spiritual take on how relationality can be constructed, allows for the queer bonds that already exist within biological families to operate for the purposes of the race rather than the state.

Susannah's queer horizon is made possible by the relationship she has Pauline, an accomplished black woman that she enters into a relationship with after she leaves her husband. Pauline's own early years were full of strife, most notably her survival of rape at fifteen. Susannah thinks habitually about how to reconcile Pauline's traumatic childhood experience with the strong personality and brazen attitude that she has cultivated in her adulthood. Even as the couple visits Mexican resort towns and gallivants across Europe as two women of some means, Susannah cannot figure out how anyone could truly move past such an event and become not only a functioning member of society but an entrepreneur with a successful upscale soul food restaurant. While Susannah continues to struggle with the sexual trauma that she experienced, a trauma that was refracted through her sister's beating at the hands of their father and coagulates into her own living wound, Pauline went on to have healthy sexual relationships and present herself as fully healed. Despite Pauline's accomplishments and displays of strength, her jealousy for Susannah manifests in their sex acts. When Susannah asks Pauline why it feels like Pauline is trying to kick her teeth in every time they make love, her response reveals exactly what she wants to take from Susannah's childhood: "You've had it all, she said. I try not to be jealous of your life. I try not to evny it. But damn it, I want it. I want trips to Mexico when I was little; discussions about culture and primitive art. I want

parents who'd never betray me, she said. When I made love to you I'm trying to take your life. Yes" (*Light* 108).

Pauline does not long for a childhood in Mexico because of its aesthetic beauty; rather, she envies Susannah because the Mundo religion amongst which she was able to grow up most closely aligns with Pauline's worldview on sex. For Pauline, sex is magically transformative. As Manuelito tells Mr. Robinson, the Mundo people found his proselytizing ineffective because they could not reconcile what he told them about chastity and sexual purity with all of the non-reproductive sex that he had with his wife. What they read as hypocritical and mendacious was life-sustaining for Mr. Robinson, especially in the way in which sex made him realize that pretending to be a priest was consuming him. I will return to this particular interaction between Manuelito and Mr. Robinson but it must be said that the life of a priest is made incompatible with the father's longing for sex, not as a means for gratification but in the network of affective belonging that sex sets up between him, his wife, and his daughters while they all live in Mexico.

Sex and sexuality's irreconcilability with Christianity is well documented in this novel and the examples are myriad. Mr. Robinson turns to sex in order to break away from the Christianity that is negatively affecting his relationship with his family. Sex within the marriage covenant between Susannah and her husband, Petros, satisfies him but ultimately leaves her "[s]atiated. But incomprehensibly empty" (45). Pauline ultimately realizes that sex and Christianity are more than irreconcilable; they are antagonistic. Her mother passes away after having too many children in accordance with her philosophy that a good Christian subject only has procreative sex and married people

must be fruitful and multiply. Though Pauline does eventually have a child, her mother's death and the sexual relationship that she has with a man who "could only impregnate me, and help them keep me at home" undoes the bond between reproduction and sexuality in a way that opens her up to the pleasurable possibilities of the queer sex that she always knew she wanted (101). For Pauline, queer sex configures relationality around shared and equal investments in pleasure. Sex must be pried away from Christianity precisely because Christian sex or the sex that would be sanctioned by Christian doctrine denies women the ability to take their own pleasure as a priority. Alternatively, queer sex strikingly opposes Christianity because it constructs a mode of affective belonging that is stronger than that which a relationship with God can provide.

Pauline explicitly identifies as gay during the same conversation in which she admits that she wants to steal Susannah's childhood from her every time they have sex. After the couple speaks about how Pauline came to procreate with a man that she never loved and how that child came to exceed any expectations that could be placed on him, she makes very clear that though her queerness comes to affect her relationship with her son, she refuses to compromise on expressing any aspect of herself. This is because the queer bonds that she has come to form in her adulthood produce the kind of sociality that makes her most whole. Susannah immediately reflects on how Pauline's emphatic commitment to her sexuality reorients the sexual acts between them from being about destruction to being about queer apotheosis:

> When you are being made love to by a woman who expresses such thoughts it is as if you are sitting butt naked on the earth. There is no illusion about anything. You don't fantasize and you don't have time to daydream. It's all right up close and personal. If she even thinks you're trying to evade reality, she fucks you so one-pointedly she brings you right back. Puts her knuckles places you didn't even

> know you could wash. Kisses you so hard you 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)

Susannah's claim that sex with a woman like Pauline and the love that is expressed by such relations eclipses the relationality that is possible between an individual and the Lord is not a repudiation of religion in toto. Queer sex disjoins with Christianity because Christianity cannot make sense of all that is recalibrated by a love that is this queerly deep. The queer lover comes in to stand in for Jesus, He with whom we should be most intimately involved. Queer sex exceeds the ambit of what is knowable and wrestles relationality and love away from the Divine but does not divorce it from all possible spiritual systems. Christianity, instead, is replaced with Mundo spirituality, a set of nonsecular beliefs that find nonnormative sexuality to not only be compatible with sacred belief but central to how community is imagined.

Sexuality coheres around Mundo spirituality in this novel while Christianity's violent repression of sexuality offers black families nothing but regression and severed relationships. In effect, Mundo spirituality mends the kinship relations that had been broken by Christianity's steadfast and abusive rebuff of even innocent sexual relationships. When the father passes away, he learns in the Mundo afterlife that the only way to actually come into contact with his loved ones who have also passed away is to come to terms with and allay the rifts that have separated them. When Magdalena passes away, the father can see her in the distance atop a horse that is moving rapidly in his direction but seems to not be making any progress. In preparation for meeting the

daughter that lost respect for him as a child, the father must learn an initiation song that makes clear that this relationship can only be healed by acknowledging and kissing the child's erogenous zones, a gesture that the Mundo take very seriously but is read in bad faith by Europeans who use it as evidence of a backwards culture that must be forcibly brought into modernity:

> We explained to [the priests that came] that at the ceremony of joining lovers together we burned sweetgrass to cleanse ourselves and our surroundings. That we used feathers to spread the smoke all around. That we used feathers to spread the smoke all around. That eggs were eaten in the hope that the union would be fertile, not just in children, but in ideas, creativity, bountifulness for the tribe. All those things they said they understood. However, they did not appreciate the idea of a mother and father touching the breasts and kissing the vulva and phallus of their grown children, even to bless them. We explained that the kissing was respectful, the lightest touch. But they did not care. Because we practiced this, they raised our villages, hacked off our heads with machetes, enslaved us to work in the gold and silver mines. Burned our children alive. (163)

Christianity brings pain, violence, and implausibility to what is seen as a backwards space by visitors who either come to study or conquest. It is incompatible with a people whose rich history has coveted bodies and sex as critical and basic components of a functional society. Though the father eventually confesses to his younger spirit guide that his Christianity was not supported by any genuine conviction, that the sponsorship money that he obtained required reports and detailed accountings for how successful he was at spreading the "civilizing" influence of Western religion, the only conviction that remains constant in both life and death is the erotic love that he had and continues to have in the afterlife with his wife. As Manuelito informs Mr. Robinson, the father's only true belief had been his belief in the women that surrounded him—namely, his wife and his children. This belief, unaffected by Mundo spirituality in life but fully understood

through Mundo spirituality in death, is cultivated and sustained by erotic relations more than anything else.

Sex is what produces every positive, lasting attachment in the novel. The Mundo respect Mr. Robinson not as a purveyor of Christianity, a religion that they do not find to be inspiring precisely because their priest has no actual stake or belief in what he is teaching, but as a man who loves his wife so much that he makes love to her on a regular basis. Manuelito makes this explicit in one of their longer conversations about what drew the Mundo people, who saw their fair share of visitors in the form of anthropologists and missionaries, to him. Despite an early realization by the tribe that Mr. Robinson did not practice what he preached, the Mundo had a high opinion of him while he was alive because his actions were in accordance with their own thoughts on the strong relationship between living morally and living erotically. As Manuelito tells the father, "At least, you loved Señora Robinson. You seemed to know that it is when making love that we make life. Alas, you became confused about this when your own daughter followed in your footsteps. Yes, he said, Magdalena knew just what you knew. She discovered this, I am proud to say, with me" (153). Mag learns precisely how to take care of herself and understands her place within a larger spiritual ecosystem because of Manuelito, the inquisitive, sensual, and loving boy who retains these qualities even as an alcoholic adult with PTSD that develops after fighting in the Vietnam War, rather than the father who should have nurtured her childhood sexuality rather than aggressively try to eradicate it.

It is only once the father realizes what Magdalena understood from childhood that he is able to reunite with her after she has passed. The Mundo inclination for making erotic life central to everyday practice has been sonically conveyed ever since he arrived

in Mexico and heard the initiation song that he finally actively listens to once he has passed. Mr. Robinson must learn the initiation song in the afterlife so that he may finally be reconnected with the daughter that he assumed he had lost forever in life. The song is not new to him; it is a tune that he has heard since his youngest daughter was growing up amongst Mundo boys who taught her about her body and what is possible to do with it. However, as the local priest, he refuses to allow this particular song into the church, a space that he arbitrarily tries to evacuate of all of its sexuality even as he himself knows that sex produces the deepest relationalities. The song, which Mr. Robinson describes while alive as having a "carnal message of unity with creation and no credit to a Creator," holds profound significance for the Mundo people and they refuse to give up on it in favor of Christian teaching (22). Because Mr. Robinson does not actually believe in Christianity, only becoming a priest in order to secure funding for this trip, his religious convictions end up being stultifying rather than beneficial for those in his immediate vicinity. His daughters find him to be hypocritical in recognizing the deep erotic intimacy between him and his wife while actively preventing them from making similar connections. His wife finds the lengths to which he will deny his daughter these bonds due to a religion that was meant to be a cover rather than actual practice abhorrent. Christianity becomes virtually incoherent in the mountains; Mundo spirituality, a set of sacred beliefs and practices that foregrounds the erotic connections that produce community bristles readily against Christianity's attempts to evacuate sex from most people's lives.

The erotics of sex here resonate with Chela Sandoval's reading of Roland Barthes' evocation of what he calls prophetic love, a love that can "change systems: no

longer to unmask, no longer to interpret, but to make consciousness itself a drug, and thereby to accede to the perfect vision of reality, to the great bright dream" (Barthes 60). Sandoval interprets this as a new form of consciousness, one that impacts how she reads women of color feminism from the 1980's and that body of work's turn to matters of the spirit and the soul. Where Barthes and these feminists of color converge, according to Sandoval, is in their desire for "a passage from narrative to an erotics of being," ushering in a differential consciousness that operates both from within and beyond dominant modes of being and thinking (146). This consciousness, marked by its concomitant attention to perversion and belonging, opens us up to the queer bonds that usher in new systems of meaning, new signifieds, and more useful ways of being.

This is not a simple replacement of heteronormativity with homonormativity. Sandoval briefly turns to Walker's "In the Closet of the Soul" as an example of the utility of radical love and radical *mestizaje* in a postmodern world built off of these lines of affinity that "undo the 'one' that gathers the narrative, the couple, the race, into a singularity. [Rather, it] gathers up the *mezcla*, the mixture that lives through *differential movement* between possibilities of being" (169). If we take Sandoval's reading of Walker, which is routed through Barthes, the methodical disarticulation of one black consciousness into its disparate parts and into lines of affinity that both constitute and exceed blood kinship ultimately produces a full blackness and a blackness that can better negotiate how it aligns with other social and cultural formations. The mestiza of North America, the group that lives on and constitutes the margins and the borders of the nation-state must recognize herself as having attributes that can be attributed to different affiliations that cross-hatch within and outside of the body.

So, to return to the scene in the opening chapter of the novel, Susannah's father's narration of her rather explicit sexual intercourse begins this rather complex novel with its ultimate conclusion—namely, that fathers must be accepting of their daughter's sexuality if we are to live in a non-patriarchal society. This fairly uncontroversial point gets delayed or ignored in early reviews of the novel written by even progressive readers, however. A *New York Times* review by Richard Bernstein scathingly critiques the novel, treating Walker's fictitious tribe's sexual and spiritual rituals and the novel's accounting for those rituals as an act of ethnography that will surprise anthropologists studying indigenous populations, presumably because such a spiritualist philosophy exists outside of the realm of possibility.[89] Likewise, Francine Prose describes the father's narration of his daughter's erotic encounters as being written in "dauntingly graphic detail" and, interestingly enough given Walker's early opinions on the subject, written with "the blowzy language of soft-core pornography"[90]

Reviews like those written by Bernstein and Prose, which refuse to engage with why Walker would choose to begin a novel in this way, are too seduced by the prospect of the incest motif and the disgust that results as a reading strategy for Walker's work. This delimits the work that Walker's novel does in its exploration of the possibilities of erotic attachments beyond national borders. By sitting in what I call the unsettling ambiguity of this opening, I argue that Walker opens readers up to the processes of defamiliarization that allow her to rewrite the coordinates of what is possible for black women's sexuality from this space of archival irrecuperability, critical fabulation, or

---

[89] Richard Bernstein, "'By the Light of My Father's Smile': Limp New-Age Nonsense in Mexico" (1998).
[90] Francine Prose, "Sexual Healing" (1998).

décalage. While I would be remiss to not address how this unsettling ambiguity can place readers in the uncomfortable position of not critically engaging with Walker's orientalist fantasies of the Global South and the ways in which her methods of constructing a black queer demonic ground rely on the exotification of places like Mexico, Walker's failures on these fronts to construct a black feminist utopia (as such a utopia would presumably not be built off of the exploitation of the Global South) do give voice to black feminist longings that have been forgotten and silenced. Much in the way that Jose Muñoz mines the failures of Heidegger in order to make the controversial philosopher's work serviceable for a horizon for queer futures, Walker's queer art of failure in *By the Light of My Father's Smile* not only should not only be read as a jumping off point for imagining black queer failures and possibilities; in fact, the failures that have been read into this novel give us more than such an assessment would seem to entail.[91] In what follows, I argue that Walker's rather ambitious task in this novel—that is, a reimagining of the erotic possibilities between African Americans in a way that turns to hemispheric belonging rather than national belonging in the face of Western epistemologies that inherently stifle what is possible for black women and their sexuality—can only be realized once we take what is ambiguous and potentially risky about incest seriously in our reading practices.

The New Black Normal

In a recent special issue of *differences* on resisting the anti-normative trend in queer theory and queer studies, Erica Edwards' piece on sex after what she calls the black

[91] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 15-17.

normal argues that representations of black women's sexuality have been used in the early 21st century to further neoliberalism's global clutches while it also constitutes an important resource for challenging regimes of neoliberal governance. Through readings of Condoleezza Rice's memoir and photographs of Rice found in Muammar Gaddafi's compound in Tripoli alongside Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, Edwards argues that black women's sexuality has been used to reinforce the United States' claims upon being the arbiter of global security. These claims crystallize at the same time that black women's narratives' attempt to reclaim sex as a tool for survival rather than yet another mechanism of the regulatory regime that tells them what is allowable for them to do with their own bodies. As Edwards writes in the concluding paragraph of the article, "if we keep our eyes on the unlikely places where an alternative iteration of security shines in the eyes of a black woman […] we might yet catch a glimpse of her gaining the insurgent ground on the edges of the normal or right in the middle of it, appearing in either case, at least in our wildest dreams, to have hot sex in the most unlikely of places on her mind. There, loosely clutching a secret, ears and eyes on the horizon, bathed in fire, she holds on and holds out after the black normal" (162). The black normal, which Edwards theorizes as "the constellation of narratives, images, and state discourses that tie black freedom to the nation-to-empire-building project through images and imaginaries of everyday black empowerment within state institutions, an empowerment secured through both sanitizing and pathologizing representations of black sex and sexuality," speaks directly to Walker's project in *By the Light of My Father's Smile* because black women's sexuality neither serves the state in any meaningful way nor adheres to respectability politics even as the black family surfaces as that which needs to be made whole (143).

The nuclear family plays a role in this new black queer feminist normal because black futures cannot afford to lose family as a useful arrangement of intimate and private relations despite a long history of the state using African Americans' intimate relations as evidence that they cannot be properly enfolded into the American citizenry. As scholars like Edwards and Roderick Ferguson have argued, the state and sociological discourses that heralded the black nuclear family as the primary tool for racial progress wrote figures that could not "properly" support that social structure out of the strategies for progressive political change.[92] If the black normal has been sutured together by the normativizing processes of state discourse, black queers have had to toe a line between the blood-related families that too often abandon them and the chosen families outside of kinship with whom they can be their queerest selves. As Elizabeth Freeman and Kadji Amin have argued, African American queers and other queers of color are less likely than their white brethren to construct "chosen families"—that is, a network of like-minded queers that resemble a traditional family model without the blood relationship.[93] The imperative to choose who one calls family relies on a level of privilege and access as many queers (especially young queers of color) rely on their families for financial support and housing if not affection and the emotional support that families of all configurations are theoretically supposed to provide.

If this normal is inherently tied to nation building, Walker constructs a new normal by turning to a hemispheric construction of the Americas as a way of releasing

[92] Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 112-113.
[93] See Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory" (2007), 302-303; and Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (2017), 119-120.

black female sexuality for African American women from the binds of the nation. If we take the scene of coitus from the novel's opening chapter as its prime (and primal) example of moving beyond the parameters of the nation in order to fill in the (w)hole of black female sexuality, black sex outside of the United States constitutes the kind of "geographic disruption" that Katherine McKittrick sees as "noting the alterability of our present geographic organization [and] takes seriously the possibility of more humanly workable geographies" (133). If such a disruption comes from demonic grounds that truly take black women and their experiences as central organizing principles, they can reorient human geographies in ways that attend to the on-the-ground concerns of black women. In this reading, Mexico matters less as an actual country with its own historical ties to blackness and more as a figurative borderland or, perhaps more appropriately as what Sylvia Wynter calls the demonic ground from which black and subaltern women reimagine and re-conceptualize human geography. This demonic ground, which imagines modes of being, feeling, and knowing that are articulated outside of what is actually knowable, centers the experiences of black women and imagine what is possible when their considerations are taken as constitutive of rather than vestibular to the strategies we concoct for making a future that rejects racism, sexism, and homophobia in all of its permutations.[94]

The sex that Pauline and Susannah engage in, which follows a meditation on the repressive regimes of sexuality forced upon the Kalimasan people under centuries of European imperialism that attempted to stifle their open appreciation for bodies and sex,

[94] See Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman.'" (1990), 364.

is unlocked by an eroticism that continues to resonate in the bodies of men struggling with the push and pull of restraint and liberation as they are ogled by tourists "surprised that so much life existed in a part of the planet they knew so little about" (*Light* 8). Though Pauline moves through this region much like an oblivious tourist, the lust that these men disenthrall within her that is immediately sublimated to erotic joy with Susannah forces the reckoning with sexuality that Susannah's father undertakes throughout the rest of the novel, a reckoning that is only made possible by a father watching his daughter while she is having sex. Susannah, a black queer woman who grows up in Mexico and lives a rather cosmopolitan life as an adult, resists the ways in which black female sexuality gets coopted by the state or proxy organizations like the church in support of consolidations of state power or by black feminist discourses of liberation that take black women's sexuality as the sole platform from which new imaginative possibilities can emerge. Susannah, a black queer woman who seems to have very little figured out as she wanders Mexico, the United States, and Greece, refuses to perform stability as conflicting confluent influences produce the uneven terrain from which a messy but useful womanist politics can surface. These politics are not ideal (none are) but they intend to fill up a (w)hole that allows black women to be of the world in a way that simultaneously strengthens kinship networks and produces the fledgling communities that queers who are often exiled from their families seek out after they have been made abject. It is only by forming attachments that flourish and function and flounder inside and outside of the boundaries of the family and the geographic limitations of the United States that a-normative (not necessarily normative and not necessarily anti-normative) coalitional politics can manifest.

Mr. Robinson's voyeurism only begins to make sense once Manuelito joins him in the afterlife and can properly apply Mundo principles to what Mr. Robinson feels compelled to watch. With this, I turn to the Mundo tribe, which presents an alternative model of kinship that does not rely on the familial structures that have been used historically to undermine racial equality. Though much black feminist criticism has challenged an adherence to traditional (white) kinship models, Saidiya Hartman's work presciently critiques how useful these family structures can be in any progressive racial politics since slavery:

> While the ability to forge and maintain familial relations must not be minimized, neither should the family be naturalized as a measure of racial progress. To the contrary, the utility of the family as a mechanism of state racism greatly tempers claims of progress. In fact, what is articulated at the site of the family is a shared concern about matters of racial hygiene, morality, and prosperity. In other words, the articulation of black politics at the site of the family is often consistent with the regulatory effects of the state. Therefore, the domestic articulation of a politics of racial uplift risks displacing the political, endorsing a repressive moral economy, and privileging the family as a site for the reproduction of racial values. (*Scenes* 157)

The nuclear family model and the ways in which religious institutions insist on this model of bourgeois respectability in their missionary work prove to be detrimental for the black family of *By the Light* because of a regulation of intimacy that refuses to allow the erotic to do its best and fullest work. She performs this task while attempting to sidestep some of the questions about the power differentials between fathers and daughters that are most often represented by violence against the vulnerable black girl when the faintest hint of an erotic relationality between parent and child emerges. Because family and heterosexuality are so tied to nation and nationhood, the erotic attachments between family members must be undone outside of the boundaries of the nation-state, in the

borderlands, where, as Anzaldúa suggests, "the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (3), destabilizing the master narratives of both the United States and Mexico.

Walker invents and introduces a spiritual framework that tries to walk this fine line between capitulating to the pathologizing arguments that proffer up strong black families as the panacea for racial equality and her sense that stronger black families, while useful in their construction of networks of care, need not serve at the pleasures of any one anti-black state formation. At its core, Mundo spirituality brings bodies together and emphasizes an *in-between-ness* that structures networks of bodies that operates at the core of social cohesion and interpersonal relationality. What reads as "erotic" and, thus, taboo under Christian interpretative systems, becomes life sustaining and affirming for the Mundo.

To conclude, the central metaphor of the novel, the one from which the novel takes its title, articulates what could be called a queer hemispherist fantasy. The initiation song, the song that gets Magdalena punished and allows people to finally cross over while they hang in purgatory, relies on a hemispheric orientation between the Americas and the cosmos that allows a space like Mexico to stretch towards and against the gendered and sexual norms of the United States. As I have mentioned, Mr. Robinson looks at the song askance all of his life and ultimately carries his misapprehension of the song with him into the afterlife. Whereas he had been singing "*Por la luz de los ojos de mi padre*" (By the light of my father's eyes), the actual lyric is "*Por la luz de la sonrisa de mi padre*" (By the light of my father's smile). The correction reorients the geography of relationality between Mr. Robinson and the Americas as it also forces him to realize the damage that he has done to both of his daughters by not affirming their sexualities

while he was alive. As Manuelito tells him, “Think of the smile as the crescent moon, he said, high in the night sky. Though turned sideways to North Americans, in our hemisphere it is turned into a bowl, or a boat, so that it is like a smile in a dark face, is it not?” (194). Mr. Robinson’s misreading of this operative line in the initiation song displaces Mexico from the rest of the Americas and places the origins of this transformative arrangement further South, into the Southern Hemisphere.[95] Though the space of the afterlife seems to relocate based on who is being watched by which character at any particular moment, it eventually settles in the Sierra Madre by the end of the novel. Further, the song Mr. Robinson sings in this other world originates in Mexico where the crescent moon would more traditionally represent the eye that Mr. Robinson assumes the song is figuratively describing. Manuelito’s explanation of the song, one that, as I have suggested, Mr. Robinson has heard and known since his oldest daughter was a child growing up in the mountains of Mexico, reorients that country’s relationship to the United States, producing the hemispherist fantasy that is a Mexico that stretches even further away from the United States than even the remote outpost of the Sierra Madre can provide. The fantasy pushes awkwardly up against reality but even the queer(ed) ecology of Mexico and speculative utopic longings implanted in Mexico as a space speak to the extent to which Walker commits to the construction of a differential consciousness that rejects the strictures upon black female sexuality not simply out of ignorance but out of a

[95] Mexico only moves even further south in this reading because of Manuelito’s description of how the Mundo see the crescent moon. In both the Northern and Southern Hemisphere, a crescent moon can either be oriented sideways or it can look like a boat. The ability to see this visual phenomenon depends on what time of year it is rather than where one is located. This is to say that the smiling moon may be observed in either hemisphere though it would be correct that, at any one time, the moon would be oriented differently at various latitudes. See Kim Long, *The Moon Book* (1998).

place of knowledge and willfulness that actively refuses the notion of sexuality that colonizers and missionaries have attempted to force on their tribe.

The Mundo believe in humankind's attachment to the moon as that which sutures together earthly and gendered attachments. Erotic desire amongst the Mundo is determined by lunar cycles because, as they theorize, menstrual cycles correlate with the phases of the moon. The Mundo engage in very little sex during the new moon because it corresponds with menstruation. Similarly, unless they want to have a child, they do not engage in sex during the ovulation period because they know that a growing population is unsustainable. Rather, erotic activity picks up during the new and crescent moons as these are the periods in the cycle in which women are more willing to accept sexual contact. Though other aspects of Mundo culture, like the appropriate time to wed, also follow the lunar cycle, what resonates most with Mr. Robinson and finally brings him to the eternity beyond this stage of the afterlife is the Mundo symbolism that proffers up the moon as intimately tied with erotic practices, pregnancy, and menstruation. The moon looks down upon female sexuality the way that all fathers should with their daughters:

> If you are in love, and going to meet your lover, to make love, you think of the moon as a father, happily looking down on you. For Mundo fathers *are* happy that their children, the girls as well as the boys, enjoy what your culture calls sex. And that is why a young girl sings, as she goes to her lover, just as does a young boy: 'by the light of my father's smile!' […] I finally got it. That this was what my poor daughter had been singing about, all those years ago! 'Por la luz… por la luz…' I could still hear her despairing cry. There had been an element of pleading in her song that I had ignored. She had been begging me to see, to witness, the light that she had found. To love and bless what she loved. But I had refused. I had brought her to a culture and a people I claimed to respect. She had fallen in love with them, and been betrayed when I myself stopped short. When I myself, in her eyes, had regressed." (210).

Mr. Robinson's recognition of the pain that he has put his daughters through requires a reading of Mexico as both proximate to the Americas and an elsewhere upon which new lines of affinity can be drawn and the whole of black female sexuality can be acknowledged, not because black women require the validation but because these intimate arrangements bulwark the construction of a system of relationality and belonging that refuses to reinforce a gendered hierarchy of erotic value or need. It wrestles sexuality away from reproductive futurism and makes sex about pleasure in the present. It shifts all sexuality into the realm of the sex that Pauline and Susannah have at the beginning of this novel, reclaiming sexuality for all black people in the queer elsewhere of this proximate nowhere.

As Gayatri Gopinath argues in the introduction to *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, queer diaspora doubly disturbs and disrupts notions of gender and erotic attachments in discourses of nationalism and globalization. Attending to queer diaspora or queerness in diaspora reignites the radical potential of the concept as it "recuperates those desires, practices, and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and nationalist imaginaries. A consideration of queerness, in other words, becomes a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora" (11). It has been my contention in this chapter that Walker's novel attempts to reach towards diaspora and finds the rubric of the hemisphere as another useful tool for throwing our static understandings of the relationship between race, family, taboo, and eroticism into recognizable even if unsettling discursive disarray. By turning to Mexico, by invigorating the borderland for a critical rumination on the upper bounds of what is

possible and allowable for black sexuality, Walker exposes the limits of nationalism, suggesting that the nationalist fantasies of kinship that flourish in the United States may be mobile but they cannot stand up to the basic scrutiny that the lurid proximity of the borderlands can provide for even the African American mestizo who is not.

Works Cited

Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah. *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race.* Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012.

Adams, Rachel. *Continental Divides: Remapping the Cultures of North America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Ahmed, Sara. "Affective Economies." *Social Text* 22.2 (Summer 2004): 117-139.

---. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others.* Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006.

Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred.* Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005.

Allen, Jafari. "Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture." GLQ 18.2-3 (2012): 211-248.

---. *¡Venceremos?: The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011.

Alonso, Ana María. "Conforming Disconformity: 'Mestizaje,' Hybridity, and the Aesthetics of Mexican Nationalism." *Cultural Anthropology* 19.4 (November 2004): 459-490.

Amin, Kadji. *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2017.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

Baldwin, James. "To Catch a Serpent." *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. New York: Vintage, 2011. 195-204.

---. *The Fire Next Time*. Ed. Toni Morrison. New York: Library of America, 1998.

---. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. New York: Delta, 2000.

---. *Just Above My Head*. New York: Delta, 2000.

Balon, Rebecca. "Kinless or Queer: The Unthinkable Queer Slave in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Robert O'Hara's *Insurrection: Holding History*." *African American Review* 48:1-2 (Spring/Summer 2015): 141-155.

Bambara, Toni Cade. *The Salt Eaters*. New York: Vintage, 1992.

Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2001.

Bataille, Georges. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986.

Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011.

---. "Love, A Queer Feeling." *Homosexuality & Psychoanalysis.* Ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. 432-452.

Bernstein, Richard. "'By the Light of My Father's Smile': Limp New-Age Nonsense in Mexico." Review of *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, by Alice Walker. *New York Times*, 7 October 1998, n.p.

Bersani, Leo. *Intimacies.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Bertelsen, Lone, and Andrew Murphie. "An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers: Félix Guattari on Affect and the Refrain." *The Affect Theory Reader.* Ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010. 138-157.

Best, Stephen. “Neither Lost nor Found: Slavery and the Visual Archive.” *Representations* 113.1 (Winter 2011): 150-163.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Bobel, Chris. *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2010.

Bouson, J. Brooks. *Quiet as It’s Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000.

Bradway, Tyler. “‘Permeable We!’: Affect and the Ethics of Intersubjectivity in Eve Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love*.” *GLQ* 19.1 (2013): 79-110.

Brown, Joseph. “I, John, Saw the Holy Number: Apocalyptic Visions in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Native Son*.” *Religion and Literature* 27.1 (Spring 1995): 53-74.

Butler-Evans, Elliott. *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP, 1989.

Byrd, W. Michael and Linda A. Clayton. *An American Health Dilemma: A Medical History of African Americans and the Problems of Race, Beginnings to 1900 (Volume 1)*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Cade, Toni. “On the Issue of Roles.” *The Black Woman: An Anthology.* Ed. Toni Cade Bambara. New York: Washington Square Press, 2005. 123-135.

Castillo, José R. Description of yarn paintings of José Benítez Sánchez. Alice Walker Papers, Circa 1930-2010, Stuart A. Rose Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Book Library (Box 101, Folder 21), Emory University Libraries, Atlanta, GA.

Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.

Chanady, Amaryll. “National Reconciliation and Colonial Resistance: The Notion of Hybridity in José Martí.” *Unforeseeable Americas: Questioning Cultural Hybridity in the Americas.* Eds. Rita de Grandis and Bernd Zilá. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000.

Chen, Mel. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012.

Chinn, Sarah E. “Feeling Her Way: Audre Lorde and the Power of Touch.” *GLQ* 9.1-2 (2003): 181-204.

Clough, Patricia. “Introduction.” *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Eds. Patricia Ticiento Clough and Jean Halley. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007.

Coleman, Monica A., et. al. “Roundtable Discussion: Must I Be Womanist?” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22.1 (Spring 2006): 85-134.

Collier-Thomas, Bettye, and V.P. Franklin. *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements*. New York: NYU Press, 2001.

Collins, Patria Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge, 2000.

---. “What’s in a Name?: Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond.” *The Black Scholar* 26.1 (Winter/Spring 1996): 9-17.

Combahee River Collective. "The Combahee River Collective Statement." *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. Ed. Barbara Smith. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2000.

Crawley, Ashon. *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*. New York: Fordham UP, 2017.

---. "Circum-Religious Performance: Queer(ed) Black Bodies and the Black Church." *Theology & Sexuality* 14.2 (January 2008): 201-222.

Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures.* Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003.

---. *Depression*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012.

---. "Public Feelings." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.3 (Summer 2007): 459-468.

Dalsgård, Katrine. "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review* 35.2 (Summer 2001): 233-248.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza.* New York: Zone, 1992.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

De Lauretis, Teresa. "'Habit Changes,' *differences* 6:2-3 (June 1994): 296-313.

---. "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities: *An Introduction*" *differences* 3:2 (Summer 1991): iiix-viii.

Delgadillo, Theresa. "Singing 'Angelitos Negros': African Diaspora Meets *Mestizaje* in the Americas." *American Quarterly* 58.2 (June 2006): 407-430.

Dixon, Melvin. *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature.* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

Duggan, Lisa. *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004.

---. "The Part for the (W)hole: Baldwin, Homophobia, and the Fantasmatics of 'Race.'" *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Edwards, Brent Hayes. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003.

Edwards, Erica R. *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota Press, 2012.

---. "Sex After the Black Normal." *differences* 26.1 (May 2015): 141-167.

Ellis, Nadia. *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2015.

Eng, David and David Kazanjian. "Introduction: Mourning Remains." *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. 1-28.

Faulkner, William. *Requiem for a Nun*. New York: Vintage, 1975.

Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Field, Douglas. “Looking for Jimmy Baldwin: Sex, Privacy, and Black Nationalist Fervor.” *Callaloo* 27.2 (Spring 2004): 457-480.

Flatley, Jonathan. *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008.

Fleetwood, Nicole. *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Foster, Guy Mark. “The Book of Luke.” *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*. Ed. Essex Hemphill. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991.

Foucault, Michel. “Friendship as a Way of Life.” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth.* Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: New Press, 1997. 135-140.

---. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, 1990.

---. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” *The Foucault Reader.* Trans. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. 76-100.

---. “Of Other Spaces.” *Diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986): 22-27.

Freeman, Elizabeth. “Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory.” *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studie*s. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 302-303.

---. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010.

Freud, Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia.” *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York, Norton, 1995. 584-589.

Frydman, Jason. *Sounding the Break: African American and Caribbean Routes of World Literature*. Charlottesville, VA: UVA Press, 2014.

Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005.

Griffin, Farah Jasmine. "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery" *Callaloo* 19.2 (Spring 1996): 519-536.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1994.

Hall, Stuart. "Creolité and the Process of Creolization." *Creolizing Europe: Legacies and Transformations*. Eds. Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Shirley Anne Tate. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool UP, 2015.

Hammonds, Evelynn. "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence." *Feminist Theory and the Body: A* Reader. Eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick. New York: Routledge, 1999: 93-104.

Harkins, Gillian. *Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Harper, Phillip Brian. "'Take Me Home': Location, Identity Transnational Exchange." *Callaloo* 23.1 (Winter 2000): 461-478.

Harris, Trudier. *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line: African American Women Writers and the South*. Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2009.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.

---. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe* 12.2 (June 2008): 1-14.

Hemphill, Essex. “Loyalty” *Ceremonies*. New York: Plume, 1992. 63-64.

Herring, Scott. *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*. New York: NYU Press, 2010.

Highmore, Ben. *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday.* London: Routledge, 2011.

Hilfrich, Carola. “Anti-Exodus: Countermemory, Gender, Race, and Everyday Life in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.2 (Summer 2006): 321-349.

Hoefer, Anthony Dyer. *Apocalypse South: Judgment, Cataclysm, and Resistance in the Regional Imaginary*. Columbus, OH: OSU Press, 2012.

Holland, Sharon Patricia. *The Erotic Life of Racism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012.

---. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.

hooks, bell. *All About Love: New Visions*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2000.

---. “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness.” *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990. 145-154.

---. *Salvation: Black People and Love*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2001.

Hubbard, Robert L. *The Book of Ruth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988.

Hughes, Langston. “Blessed Assurance.” *The Short Stories of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Akiba Sullivan Harper. New York: Hill and Wang, 1997. 231-236.

Ikard, David. *Breaking the Silence: Toward a Black Male Feminist Criticism.* Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2007.

Jay, Paul. *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2010.

Jagose, Annamarie. "Feminism's Queer Theory." *Feminism & Psychology* 19.2 (May 2009): 157-174.

---. *Orgasmology*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2013.

Jakobsen, Janet and Ann Pellegrini. *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*. New York: NYU Press, 2003.

Jenkins, Candice. *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Johnson, E. Patrick. "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African American Gay Community." *Callaloo* 21.2 (Spring 1998): 399-416.

---. "'Quare' Studies or (Almost Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned From My Grandmother." *Black Queer Studies.* Eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005. 1-17.

---. *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2008.

Kenan, Randall. *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stories*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1992.

---. *A Visitation of Spirits*. New York: Vintage, 2000.

Kingsbury, Paul. "Did Somebody Say Jouissance? On Slavoj Žižek, Consumption, and Nationalism." *Emotion, Space and Society* 1.1 (October 2008): 48-55.

Kostarelos, Frances. *Feeling the Spirit: Faith and Hope in an Evangelical Black Storefront Church*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991.

Levander, Caroline F. and Robert S. Levine. “Introduction.” *Hemispheric American Studies*. Eds. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2008. 1-17.

Long, Kim. *The Moon Book*. Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1998.

Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007.

Lorde, Audre. “Scratching the Treshhold: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speches*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007: 45-52.

---. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007: 110-113.

---. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007: 53-59.

Lugones, Maria. “Purity, Impurity, and Separation.” *Signs* 19.2 (Winter 1994): 458-479.

Lyne, Bill. “God’s Black Revolutionary Mouth: James Baldwin’s Black Radicalism.” *Science & Society* 74.1 (Jan 2010): 12-36.

Mackey, Nathaniel. *Bedouin Hornbook*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1986.

Manning, Erin. *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Martí, José. “Our America.” *José Martí: Selected Writings*. Trans. Esther Allen. New York: Penguin, 2002. 288-295.

Martin, Biddy. “Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary.” *differences* 6:2-3 (June 1994): 100-125.

Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002.

Mathes, Carter. "Scratching the Threshold: Textual Sound and Political Form in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*." *Contemporary Literature* 50.2 (Summer 2009): 363-396.

Matory, James. *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005.

Mayberry, Susan Neal. *Can't I Love What I Criticize?: The Masculine and Morrison*. Athens, GA: UGA Press, 2007.

McGuire, Danielle. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Vintage, 2010.

McKee, Patricia. "Geographies of *Paradise*." *CR: The New Centennial Review*. 3.1 (Summer 2003): 197-223.

McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

McRuer, Robert. *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities*. New York: NYU Press, 1997.

Melancon, Trimiko. *Unbought and Unbossed: Transgressive Black Women, Sexuality, and Representation*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple U Press, 2014.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge, 2002.

---. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. Alphonso Lingus. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1968.

Mitchell, Angelyn. *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002.

Moore, Marlon Rachquel. "Black Church, Black Patriarchy, and the 'Brilliang Queer': Competing Masculinities in Langston Hughes's 'Blessed Assurance,'" *African American Review* 42:¾ (Fall-Winter 2008): 493-502.

Moraga, Cherríe and Gloria Anzaldúa. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color.* 3rd ed. Berkeley, CA; Third Woman Press, 2002

Morrison, Toni. *Paradise*. New York: Plume, 1999.

Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Myrdal, Gunnar. *An American Dilemma, Volume 2: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2009.

---. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999/

Nash, Jennifer C. "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality" *Meridians* 11.2 (2013): 1-24.

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005.

Nguyen, Tan Hoang. *A View From the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014.

Nwankwo, Ifeoma. "The Promises and Perils of US African-American Hemispherism: Latin America in Martin Delany's *Blake* and Gayl Jones's *Mosquito*." *American Literary History* 18.3 (Fall 2006): 579-599.

Povinelli, Elizabeth. *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006.

Presley, Elvis. "So High." *How Great Thou Art.* RCA Records, 1967, track 5. *Spotify*, https://open.spotify.com/track/0Tj6DP5c4Y3p32h13CDESA?si=RhGjY2uoTb-Q4vJBsyhohg

Prose, Francine. "Sexual Healing." Review of *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, by Alice Walker. *New York Times*, 4 October 1998, n.p.

Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007.

Reddy, Chandan. *Freedom Without Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State.* Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011.

Reid-Pharr, Robert. *Black Gay Man: Essays*. New York: NYU Press, 2001.

---. *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual*. New York: NYU Press, 2007.

Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Pantheon, 1997.

Robnett, Melinda. *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights.* New York: Oxford UP, 1997.

Rodríguez, Juana María. *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings.* New York: NYU Press, 2014.

Romero, Chanette. *Activism and the American Novel: Religion and Resistance in Fiction by Women of Color*. Charlottesville, VA: UVA Press, 2012.

Salazar, Luís Suárez and Carlos Pérez. "The Cuban Revolution and the New Latin American Leadership: A View from Its Utopias." *Latin American Perspectives* 36.2 (March 2009): 114-127.

Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Savitt, Todd. *Race and Medicine in Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century America*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 2007.

Scott, Darieck. *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination.* New York: NYU Press, 2010.

Scott, Lynn Orilla. *James Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2002.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Tendencies*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993.

---. *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003.

Seigworth, Gregory J. and Melissa Gregg. "An Inventory of Shimmers." *The Affect Theory Reader*. Ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010. 1-28.

Snorton, C. Riley. *Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Spillers, Hortense. "'All the Things You Could be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother:' Psychoanalysis and Race" *boundary 2* 23.3 (Autumn 1996): 75-141.

---. “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words.” *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 152-175.

---. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer 1987): 64-81.

---. “Peter Pans: Eating in the Diaspora.” *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 1-64.

Spinoza, Benedict de. *Ethics.* Trans. Edwin Curley. London: Penguin, 1996.

Springer, Kimberly. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005.

Stanford, Ann Folwell. *Bodies in a Broken World: Women Novelists of Color and the Politics of Medicine*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2003.

Stockton, Katherine Bond. *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where “Black” Meets “Queer.”* Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006.

Thorsson, Courtney. *Women’s Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women’s Novels.* Charlottesville, NC: UVA Press, 2013.

Thrift, Nigel. *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2007.

Thurman, Sue Bailey. “How Far From Here to Mexico?” *The Crisis*, vol. 42, no. 9 September 1935, pp. 265, 274.

Townes, Emile. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Vinson III, Ben. "Introduction: African (Black) Diaspora History, Latin American History." *The Americas* 63.1 (July 2006): 1-18.

Walcott, Rinaldo. *Black Like Who?: Writing Black Canada*. Toronto, ON: Insomina Press, 2003.

Walker, Alice. *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. New York: Random House, 1998.

---. "In the Closet of the Soul." *Living By the Word: Selected Writings, 1973-1987.* San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.

---. *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*. New York; Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich. 1983.

Wallace, Michele. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Black Superwoman*. New York: Dial Press, 1979.

Warner, Michael. "Introduction." *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Ed. Michael Warner. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota Press, 1993. vii-xxxi.

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014.

Welch, Richard V. and Ruth Panelli. "Questioning Community as Collective Antidote to Fear: Jean-Luc Nancy's *Singularity* and *Being Singular Plural.*" *Area* 39.3 (Sept. 2007): 349-356.

Werner, Craig. *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race, & the Soul of America.* New York: Plume, 1999.

Wester, Maisha. "Haunting and Haunted Queerness: Randall Kenan's Re-inscription of Difference in *A Visitaiton of Spirits*." *Callaloo* 30.4 (Fall 2007): 1035-1053.

Widdowson, Peter. “The American Dream Refashioned: History, Politics and Gender in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.” *Journal of American Studies* 35.2 (2001): 313-335.

Woodard, Vincent. *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism Within U.S. Slave Culture*. Eds. Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride. New York: NYU Press, 2014.

Wynter, Sylvia. “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s ‘Woman.’” *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990.