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Interior Spaces, Spiritual Traces: Theorizing the Erotic in the Cultural Works and Creative Lives of Black Women Writers and Artists, 1930-1970

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Interior Spaces, Spiritual Traces: Theorizing the Erotic in the Cultural Works and Creative Lives of Black Women Writers and Artists, 1930-1970

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Gender Studies

by

Loron Melinda Benton

2020

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Interior Spaces, Spiritual Traces: Theorizing the Erotic in the Cultural Works and Creative Lives of Black Women Writers and Artists, 1930-1970

by

Loron Melinda Benton

Doctor of Philosophy in Gender Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2020
Professor Aisha Finch, Chair

This dissertation engages the theoretical and everyday utility of Audre Lorde's theory of the erotic on a spiritual plane. I follow Lorde's imaginative expansion of the erotic by developing a notion of spirituality animated by creativity, activism, and desire. I offer spiritual eroticism as an analytic point of inquiry for examining how Black women writers and artists in the mid-twentieth century—namely, poet and novelist Sarah Wright, journalist and author Ann Petry, and songwriter, pianist, and vocalist Aretha Franklin—create epistemologies and narratives that speak to the interior, social, and hopeful modalities for Black women. I assert that spiritual eroticism is but one way to engage the interiority of the self and the sublimity of the divine in order to imagine, reclaim, and experience a life in which one expresses their deepest knowledges to create within themselves and their communities spaces that are desirous, joyous and free.

The dissertation of Loron Melinda Benton is approved.

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2020

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my Grandma Ada

—a witty, pioneer woman with faith rooted in Jesus—

whose soul now enjoys uncloudy days forevermore.

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Introduction

Defining Spiritual Eroticism: A Genealogy of Audre Lorde's Theory of the Erotic as Interior and Imaginative

Some three decades ago, Audre Lorde articulated new ways of conceptualizing the erotic by decentering eroticism away from the pornographic and recentering it as both an epistemological and material bridge between the interior motivational energies and external political engagements of women. Lorde theorizes, "When I speak of the erotic, then I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives."[1] This reclamation of the erotic was part of larger feminist conversations between activists on both sides of the Sex Wars during the 1970s and 1980s. Feminist historians and queer theorists such as Jennifer Nash and Sharon Patricia Holland contend that during this time some feminists of color, particularly lesbian feminists of color, became odd bedfellows with mostly white, male and antifeminist religious and political conservative movements that aimed, in part, to contest and repair what were deemed moral failings in society.[2] But Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" did not and has not remained localized in an anti-pornography discourse; rather her pivotal essay and theorizing has been used to reclaim the erotic as a source of power and productive possibility for women's lives. Black feminists who have come after Lorde have

[1] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 55.

[2] The oddity being that these movements in the United States systematically aimed to control, exclude and make invisible women of color in society in other ways including economically, politically, and culturally. However, in anthologies such as *Against Sadomasochism* (1983) and *Pleasure and Danger* (1993), it is evident that the ideological overlaps did not end there between white, male conservatives and feminists of color. Feminists of color, white feminists, and queer feminists on both sides found moral and ideological kinship and some strife, with both challenging the blind spots in each other's activism—racist histories of sexual domination on one hand, and queer regulatory practices on the other.

engaged new and old uses of the erotic to challenge histories of violence and exclusion and reclaim spaces of sexual pleasure, political activism, and spiritual awakening both corporeally and corporately in order to imagine and actualize a more liberatory future for themselves and within their relationships. In this introduction, it is my intention to trace the intellectual and theoretical vestiges of Lorde's theory of the erotic and connect these varied epistemologies to liberatory Christian theology and new age spiritualism espoused in Black womanist discourse. In so doing, I contend that one use of Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" is to connect the erotic with the spiritual—two analytics that have at times been considered disparate concepts—thereby recognizing spaces of spiritual eroticism in the lives of Black women.

To that end, this introduction first offers an in-depth analysis of Audre Lorde's definition of the erotic, then moves into how Black feminists and scholars have engaged the idea of the erotic as an organizing theoretical framework to think about the pornographic, the interior, desire and pleasure, the everyday, and spirituality. I then engage texts from Black womanist theologians and Black women writers on Black women's spirituality that help to further explain and expand the notion of the sacred and divine as it relates to creative everyday practices and liberatory affirmations of the self and community. And at the conclusion of the introduction, I preview my three chapters—"Maternal Spiritual Eroticism," "Spiritual Eroticism Diffused," and "Spiritual Politics, Erotic Poetics"—that engage Lorde's call to use the erotic as a source of and for theoretical inspiration, social engagement, interpersonal connection, and personal creativity.

Audre Lorde and "Uses of the Erotic"

While I engage the multiplicity of ways that Black feminists have shifted the conversations around Black female sexuality and embodiment since Lorde's intervention later

and throughout this introduction, I want to first flesh out Lorde's definitions of the erotic and how her theorizing of the concept simultaneously aligns with conservative views concerning sexuality and pornography in some ways, while opening up new intellectually inventive spaces for thinking women, particularly Black women, as keepers of transformative spiritual and political power in other ways. Lorde recognizes that the very word erotic is synonymous with pornographic sexuality and the hegemonic expression of heterosexual desire available to women. She argues that the erotic has become synonymous with women in that it is often used in the service of men, while men shun it within themselves.[3] In this way, the erotic gets detached from everything except (heterosexual) sex, which allows larger systems of oppression to function that eschew human need for financial and societal gain.[4] But Lorde questions this hegemonic narrative of the erotic by separating out sensation and feeling. While "pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling," the erotic is closer to feeling than sensation.[5] This distinction is key to understanding Lorde's reclamation of the erotic away from the solely sexually pornographic, and into a realm of creative possibility and erotic exchange. The seemingly liberatory nature of the erotic under the specter of pornography veils the suppression of the erotic that occurs in other

[3] While Lorde is primarily concerned with the power of the erotic for and in women, she believes that the erotic is a force that exists within the whole of humanity. The shunning of the erotic in men and how to recover it is yet another direction in which to expand Lorde's theories.

[4] Lorde critiques a system that "defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need" and therefore "robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power...." While not explicitly stated, this reads as a critique of capitalist patriarchy and racism, and neoliberalism more broadly. What, then, is the viability of the erotic in a capitalist, neoliberal state? Lorde's critiques of the 1979 *Second Sex Conference* and its white feminist organizers as using "the tools of a racist patriarchy…to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy" in their marginalization of Black and lesbian women at the conference and in discussions of race, sexuality, class, and age difference further her arguments for why and how the erotic is so powerful. See "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 110.

[5]According to Raymond Williams, we access structures of feeling, or more aptly structures of experience, primarily through art and literature. "The making of art is never itself in the past tense. It is always a formative process, within a specific present," writes Williams in "Structures of Feeling," in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 129. The act of producing creatively in the present is resonant with Lorde's call to imagine the psychic space of the erotic outside the confines of the pornographic.

areas of our lives connected to our creative productivity, spiritual growth, political activism, and interpersonal intimate relationships with others of the same or different sexes.

To further her point about how the erotic gets evacuated from everything other than sex (and how to address it), Lorde further distinguishes the sexually pornographic from the sensually erotic by calling out the also false assumptions that spirituality, the political, and the erotic are "diametrically opposed." Lorde continues:

> There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Because of these attempts, it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical. "What do you mean, a poetic revolutionary, a meditating gunrunner?" In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth…. The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.[6]

From this passage we can draw several conclusions about the usefulness of the erotic. First, the pornographic and the erotic are two distinct ways that we converse about and experience sexuality. As I will delve into in more detail later in the introduction, the pornographic has been and continues to be a point of intellectual tension and possibility for feminists of the "second wave"[7] and beyond, while the erotic has often been deployed in queer studies as a site of transgression and a mark of nonreproductive life.[8] Second, the erotic works as a conduit

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[6] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 55-56.

[7] When I reference the second wave, I do so knowing the various arguments for and against its usage within feminism. Loosely, the wave refers to the growing entrenchment of feminism in the academy as a result of feminist activism during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly the calls of feminists of color for inclusivity.

[8] Sharon Patricia Holland states, "the erotic in queer hands works its magic because it functions in a very neat nonreproductive zone…. In many ways, the wrestling of the erotic from the zone of reproduction's inherent futurity has been a necessary move in feminist *and* queer scholarship, because it frees up the *gendered* body to do some extraordinary work." *Erotic Life of Racism,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 60. This sentiment is

between our political and spiritual beliefs, allowing both to inform one another, while also being the "lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence."[9] This scrutiny is facilitated by seemingly contradictory ways of engaging with the political and spiritual, as seen in Lorde's ironic questioning of the complex identities "poetic revolutionary" and "meditating gunrunner." The idea that erotic space is supposed to be shared is another important conclusion to draw from this passage. For Lorde, the erotic functions on two planes—first, it underlines one's capacity for joy in unbridled ways and second, it functions through the power in sharing a pursuit with another person.[10] For Lorde, the specificity of the interior formation of the erotic connects directly to the ability of two women to have a collective shared experience of the erotic. And finally, the erotic is a distinct epistemology—a way of knowing that is tied to one's capacity to share in love and knowledge with others and live up to the highest levels of joy and fulfillment in life. The passage above calls into question the notion that the spiritual realm is a stagnant "world of flattened affect" solely dominated by ascetics who engage in extreme forms of self-disciple in order to "feel nothing." Rather, Lorde is attuned to the ways in which the spiritual can be an activating analytic in the pursuit of the erotic.

"The erotic," Lorde writes "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."[11]

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similar to Lorde's call to disengage the erotic from the pornographic in order that women might fulfill the breadth and depth of their creative, political, and spiritual potential. But this sentiment must also contend with the historicity of the black female body as forcibly reproductive for the economic futures of Western civilizations.

[9] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 57.

[10] Ibid., 56.

[11] Ibid., 53. This is an early feminist articulation of affect theory. Although I know many affect theorists insist that affect should not be confused with feelings in the most reductionist sense, Lorde's recognition of the unexpressed is in the same vain as Raymond Williams' "structure of feeling" and later Veena Das' engagement with the unspeakability of violence in ordinary, everyday life in *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

One of the reasons Lorde cites as to why the erotic is often left unrecognized is the term's unyielding association with pornographic sexuality, particularly the valuation of female eroticism for the purposes of male pleasure. Lorde challenges this monolithic association of the erotic with sexual pleasure by remapping the connective tissue between the erotic and everyday, unexpressed feeling. It is here, that I too, explore why the erotic gets disconnected from everything in the everyday except sex. One explanation that Lorde offers concerning erotic detachments is this notion that as agents of erotic feeling we are often compelled to "look away" from or misname these feelings in order to convey rational knowledge. But the act of looking away from the erotic eclipses human needs and feeds into oppressive forces intending to suppress the erotic or appropriate it. By refusing to look away, "not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic."[12] It is those erotic feelings that become the basis for our knowing, and ultimately our activism, or as Lorde would say, "the nurturer of our deepest knowledge."[13] The ability to "live from within outward"[14] is a central tenant of what I am calling spiritual eroticism. Spiritual eroticism, as I am defining it, nurtures an epistemic knowledge of how to love and care, compelling a person to look inward, rather than away, at the power of the unexpressed to be a source of social change and personal pleasure.

[12] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 59.

[13] Ibid., 56.

[14] Ibid., 58. "But when we begin to *live from within outward*, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within."

A Theoretical Genealogy of the Erotic

Before returning to this new direction of spiritual eroticism at the end of this introduction, I want to now trace some of the histories of the erotic as it pertains to feminist and queer inquiries in the latter part of the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. In particular, the "strange bedfellows"—to deploy Jennifer Nash's terminology—of Black feminism and antipornography feminism are important when thinking about the association of the erotic with the pornographic.[15] Nash states unequivocally that "antipornography feminism's fingerprints smudge the lens through which black feminism examines sexuality, pornography, and pleasure."[16] This has happened, Nash argues, as a result of the constant reliance on the "Black Venus narrative" and the historiography of Saartjie (or Sara) Baartman. Taken from southern Africa and her Khoikhoi people by Hendrick Cezar, scholars such as Sander Gilman and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, have chronicled Baartman's presence in nineteenth century Europe as a part of exploitative freak show exhibitions that displayed her body, specifically her buttocks and genitalia, as sites of unusual anatomy for medical inquiry and societal spectacle.[17] The examinations, and subsequent research notes on the dissections and plaster moldings of Baartman's body by Georges Cuvier reveal what Sharpley-Whiting calls his "tempered eroticism" towards the "dark continent" of Baartman's body.[18] Cuvier's racialized gendered violences against Baartman's body not only significantly influenced "anatomical studies on

[15] Jennifer C. Nash, "Strange Bedfellows: Black Feminism and Antipornography Feminism," *Social Text* 26, no. 4 (January 2008): 51-76, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2008-010 (accessed June 26, 2014).

[16] Ibid., 52.

[17] See Gilman's *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Sharpley-Whiting's *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

[18] Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus,* 24.

black women throughout Europe, the Antilles, and the United States," but continues to be trafficked in as "curious spectacle capable of inciting sexual frenzy and fervor well into the latter half of the twentieth century."[19] The Hottentot Venus, along with other "controlling images,"[20] becomes cultural sign and symbol through which hegemonic meanings of Black female sexuality and bodies get formed and filtered, rendering alternative, radical, and liberatory meanings difficult but not at all impossible. And Nash argues that the effect of the Black Venus narrative has been two-fold—on the one hand, "black feminism has permitted a pernicious sexual conservatism, wearing the guise of racial progressivism, to seep into its analytic framework" and on the other hand, the relationship has produced "normative, rather than iconographic or analytical, engagements with racialized imagery in pornography."[21] Both effects, Nash contends, analytically and epistemologically immobilize Black feminist engagements with pornography and sexuality more broadly.

When antipornography and Black feminism are both theoretically wedded to the idea that racialized pornography "overexposes" Black women and other women of color sexually, thereby leaving all women in pornography in a perpetual state of objectification in the gaze of the white male viewer, these "sexualized representations" become one of the justifications for the "perpetuation of white supremacy and racial inequality."[22] This interplay has permitted some white feminists in the antipornography movement such as Catherine MacKinnon to form generalized claims of racial comparison that the presence of Black women's bodies makes

[19] Sharpley-Whiting, 31.

[20] Patricia Hill Collins first invokes the term "controlling images" in the 1990 version of *Black Feminist Thought* to define the modes of objectification and intersecting oppressions applied to African American women. These images included the Mammy, the Matriarch, the Jezebel, the Sapphire, and the Welfare Queen.

[21] Nash, "Strange Bedfellows," 52-53.

[22] Ibid., 58.

pornography "*more* sexist" without being particularly attuned to the implications of racial and ethnic diversity and racialized tropes at play in the visual field. Nash contends that even MacKinnon's call for erotica rather pornography on the premise that the former is more egalitarian is inadequate to address "what equality means in sexual representation, and an analysis of the plethora of pornographic products designed for the pleasurable consumption of women, couples, and sexual minorities."[23]

Nash argues that Black feminists such as Alice Walker and Patricia Hill Collins are critical of the "racial fetishism" that occurs in the space of white male spectatorship of pornography because this fetishism "renders particular body parts — the buttocks, in particular— a metonymy for the entirety of the black female body."[24] Pornography, then, becomes a vehicle for trafficking in histories of sexual and racial subjugation of Black women under slavery. Nash says the republication of Collins' essay "Pornography and Black Women's Bodies"[25] in anthologies on pornography continues because "it performs antipornography work under the guise of racial progressivism."[26] But this is only a guise, as Nash contends that the historical continuities in Collins's work do not neatly account for new visual technologies, Black spectatorship, and non-"fetishistic" white porn viewership:

> Considering the *differences* between the live display of Baartman's body in nineteenth-century Europe and the computer-mediated pornographic displays of black women's bodies in our current moment would allow an analysis of how technology shapes both racial fantasies and spectators' viewing pleasures.[27]

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[23] Nash, "Strange Bedfellows," 54, 61-63.

[24] Ibid., 61.

[25] Collins states that "the pornographic treatment of the bodies of enslaved African women and of women like Sarah Bartmann has since developed into a full-scale industry," *Black Feminist Thought,* (New York: Routledge Press, 2000), 137. It is this historical leap Nash contends is problematic.

[26] Nash, "Strange Bedfellows," 56.

[27] Ibid., 56.

Baartman's body becomes, what Collins has notably called, a "controlling image," a representation of Black female sexuality that gets reproduced in the production of sexist and racist historical and contemporary narratives, as well as in the discursive spaces of Black feminist and antipornography feminist theorizing against such objectifications. Rather than relying on the Hottentot Venus as a singular, hegemonic reading practice for thinking Black female sexuality, Nash offers up the less sexually conservative concept of "racialized iconography" which accounts for Black spectatorship and pleasure, as well as the historical specificities of visual technologies employed in the making of pornography.[28]

Sharon Patricia Holland builds on Nash's critique of "sexual conservatism" in Black feminism by further exposing the varied political alliances and theoretical absences between queer feminists, Black feminists and feminists participating in the Women Against Pornography movement. Holland describes Black feminists at the 1984 conference at Barnard College—which was the impetus for the *Pleasure and Danger* anthology—as being "wary of the move toward sexuality…fearing that the problems of inclusion and voice that had plagued feminism would carry forward."[29] The fears of some Black feminists were predicated upon the idea that the racial exclusivity enacted in early feminist movements might also be reflected in this move towards queering feminism. One of the contributors to both the conference and volume, Hortense Spillers, has most notably stated that, "black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb."[30] This metaphor speaks to

[28] Nash, "Strange Bedfellows," 69.

[29] Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 54; Nash, "Strange Bedfellows," 57.

[30] Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words." in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, London: Pandora Press, 1992), 74. Citations refer to the Pandora edition.

both the silences about sexuality within Black women's theorizing (with the exception, Spillers would say, of Black women in the blues tradition) and the absences of racial specificity in studies of sexuality. Another concern stemmed from the idea that "the move toward queer theory and away from feminism cast feminist ethics as 'moral' regulation," which could have the consequential effect of feminism abandoning any and all ethical considerations.[31] Nash contends that early articulations for and against pornography, particularly around the practice of sadomasochism in *Against Sadomasochism*, created riffs in feminism between what Judith Butler identifies as the "moral feminists and sm:"

> Like (Gayle) Rubin and (Eve) Sedgwick, Butler would come to see feminist ethics as "moral" and therefore part of the regulatory regime of knowledge and power unduly directed at queer bodies that queer theory set itself up to thoroughly critique. Somewhere in this moral bathwater, the black female body swirls.[32]

It is not only the Black female body caught in the currents of this "moral bathwater," but Black feminism itself which is how it initially gained its reputation for being conservative in its theoretical pursuits concerning sexuality. Black feminists after the second wave have had to grapple with the complex, intellectually messy residue of this "moral bathwater" as visual technologies have made access to Black bodies more possible for more audiences, and racism and sexism have become more veiled, yet more insidious in the nation-state. For Lorde, Alice Walker and bell hooks in particular, their responses to the acute racialized and gendered violences perpetuated against women of color in pornography was to make more explicit political linkages between anti-pornography and anti-racist movements to argue against the exploitative treatment of women of color. And although Lorde's pivotal essay is written in the midst of the political and moral conversations of the Sex Wars, has been critiqued for its

[31] Nash, "Strange Bedfellows," 57.

[32] Ibid., 55.

essentialist positioning on gender roles employed in pornography and its lack of textual and visual specificity as it relates to the medium,[33] that has not stopped Black feminist theorists from engaging her ideas about the erotic as it relates to political activism, spiritual acumen, lesbian desire, and yes, even the pornographic. "Uses of the Erotic" has not remained wedded to the strange and conservative times in which it was written; it has established itself as a theoretical text worthy of study in large part because of Lorde's expansion of the erotic itself. analyzes

Theoretical Uses of the Erotic

The erotic has been theorized through several frames of reference in feminist and queer studies—from the sexually explicit to the spiritually attuned. For Lorde, the erotic reads as a source of power and sensuality, experiences intended to be shared equally. Building on Lorde, Evelyn Hammonds reads the erotic as an extension of Black lesbian desire in need of articulation. For M. Jacqui Alexander and Patricia Hill Collins, erotic autonomy for Bahamian and U.S. Black women speaks to the potential discursive and material undoing of oppression against them. And later when Alexander speaks of the Soul and the Sacred, Lordean erotics echoes in the corners of her analyses. For Sharon Patricia Holland, erotic life is synonymous with (queer) desire and (racial) intimacies. When Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley speaks of the erotic, it is as a creative and material way of reclaiming geographical space for Caribbean women.[34] And Mireille Miller-Young theorizes illicit eroticism as a tool used by some working

[33] Nash references Andrea Plaid's "I Like the Erotic and the Porn: Looking Back at Audre Lorde's 'Uses of the Erotic'" (July 9, 2009, www.racialicious.com) where she argues that Lorde "doesn't directly address the industry or its products and players" and that women and men become essentialized into categories of good and bad respectively when analyzing the harmful effects of pornography.

[34] See also Opal Palmer Adisa and Donna Weir-Soley's anthology *Caribbean Erotic: Poetry, Prose & Essays* (Leeds, United Kingdom: Peepal Tree Press, 2010) which gathers and analyzes Caribbean articulations of sexuality, the erotic, and desire.

class Black women for economic sustainability and self-pleasure.[35] All of these notions of the erotic are wedded to a myriad of reclamation projects for Black women—recuperating histories of agency, autonomy, and activism that can connect our bodies to sites of pleasure, and not just pain.

In 1984, Spillers provocatively stated, "whether or not the captive female and/or her sexual oppressor derived 'pleasure' from their seductions and couplings is not a question we can politely ask. Whether or not 'pleasure' is possible at all under conditions that I would aver as non-freedom for both or either of the parties has not been settled."[36] This proclamation represents an alternative mode of engaging with the moral and theoretical questions attached to Black feminist continuities between nineteenth century representations of the Black Venus and the Black female body in pornographic ecstasy. While always attuned to the ways in which the captive body under slavery is fashioned as "ungendered" and under a constant state of violence, Spillers also leaves open the possibility for reading pleasure in sites that were once thought to harbor solely pain. The theorists listed in the above paragraph not only have their foundations in Lorde's theory of the erotic, but in Spillers's theory of the unasked, often unthinkable, questions of Black women's pleasure.

Evelynn Hammonds picks up this question of where and how we find pleasure, and how to newly engage it within a Black feminist context by discussing how exploitative political and economic practices of the state have helped to define the parameters in which we discuss Black sexuality. In turn, Black feminist writers have theorized about Black female bodies in

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[35] Mireille Miller-Young, "Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in Pornography,"
[36] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65-81. http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0300-7162%28198722%2917%3A2%3C64%3AMBPMAA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B (accessed December 27, 2006).

relationship to histories of sexualized violence, forced reproduction, and racialized sexism in order to combat the controlling images that get ascribed to Black women. Hammonds writes:

> To date, largely through the work of black feminist literary critics, we know more about the elision of sexuality by black women than we do about the possible varieties of expression of sexual desire. Thus, what we have is a very narrow view of black women's sexuality…. In the past the restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality have been emphasized by black feminists writers, while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone underanalyzed.[37]

Two Black feminist writers in particular—Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's analysis of the "politics of respectability" deployed by women in the Black Baptist Church between 1880-1920 and Darlene Clark Hine's analysis of the "culture of dissemblance" utilized by Black women during and after slavery to protect themselves from rape and the threat of rape—created two of the most salient analytical paradigms in which Black female sexuality have been framed. Both approaches hinge upon codes of respectability and silence as they relate to sexuality in order to counter narratives of immorality and promiscuity, as well as legitimate the citizenry of Black women. Hammonds offers a way forward in thinking about Higginbotham's "politics of silence" in relation to the silencing and invisibility of Black women living with AIDS, as well as Black lesbians. She argues for a critical feminist praxis between heterosexual Black women and Black lesbian women that "articulates the ways in which invisibility, otherness, and stigma are produced and re-produced on black women's bodies" and "details strategies for differently located black women to shape interventions that embody their separate and common interests and perspectives."[38] Hammonds employs Lorde's theorizing of the erotic in this moment to suggest Black lesbian sexualities as a "differently located" analytical space from which to start

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[37] Evelynn M. Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader,* ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 99.

[38] Ibid., 102.

conversations about Black female sexuality. She argues that Black lesbian feminists such as Lorde "foreground the very aspects of black female sexuality that are submerged—namely, female desire and agency" in their own work, which can help to evacuate the existing silences in the literature on Black female sexuality around the same analytics for all Black women.[39]

Black feminist articulations of sexual agency and erotic autonomy are moments of fissure in the narratives that traffic in silences and subjugations concerning sexuality. And sometimes those moments happen within the span of two chapters in the same book, as is the case in Collins's *Black Feminist Thought*.[40] Since Collins builds her analysis of erotic autonomy for Black women in the U.S. from Alexander's examination of the politics of regulating Bahamian women's public and private lives, I will begin there. In "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: Feminism, Tourism, and the State in the Bahamas," Alexander argues that Bahamian state fears of women's erotic autonomy precipitated by Bahamian feminist activism, led to the passage of the 1991 Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act in the Bahamas and a reconstitution of heteropatriarchy in the nation-state.[41] For the Bahamian state, erotic autonomy and particularly the fear of lesbian desire, poses a challenge to the trope of the nuclear family:

> 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

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[39] Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," 102.

[40] I find it fascinating that Collins, able to theorize about erotic autonomy in the space of love relationship between Black women and with men in "Black Women's Love Relationships", does not extend the same possibilities for erotic autonomy to Black women employed in the pornography industry in "The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood." Intended or not, Collins sets up a hierarchy in which one type of erotic autonomy for Black women is valued more highly than another without any attending to the historical specificities or varying visual displays within the site of pornography.

[41] Alexander states that the act "criminalized lesbian sex and move to reestablish primogeniture under the guise of protecting women against domestic violence." Of heteropatriarchy, she says it "was useful in continuing to perpetuate a colonial inheritance" and subsequently a 'process of recolonization" which solidified the continuities between "white imperial heteropatriarchy" and black heteropatriarchy in the determining of citizenship and the law, the prosecution of domestic violence cases, and within the booming tourism industry. Alexander, M. Jacquai. *Pedagogies of Crossings: Meditations of Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred.* Durham, North (Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 24-26.

> heterosexuality, erotic autonomy brings with it the potential of undoing the nation entirely, a possible charge of irresponsible citizenship, or no responsibility at all.[42]

Here, female citizens can be considered loyal to the nation-state if they subscribe to respectable middle-class values of family and womanhood, while sexual deviancy gets pegged on the bodies of the lesbian and the prostitute. But according to Alexander, erotic autonomy is permitted by the state insofar as it is "negotiated within the narrow confines of a disrupted heterosexual."[43] In other words, as Bahamian feminists called for the criminalization of male partners who committed acts of domestic and sexual violence, state lawmakers felt compelled to address the potential loss of patriarchal domination by way of violence and control in the home by ensuring that heterosexuality remained intact, hence the criminalization of homosexuality, the limits on erotic expression, and the erosion of property rights for first born Bahamian women.

While Alexander's research centers Bahamian Black women, Collins articulates how erotic autonomy functions for Black women in the United States. This sexual autonomy is rooted in an acknowledgement that "Black women learning to provide mirrors for one another that enable us to love one another comes face to face with the possible eroticization of such love."[44] In order to challenge some of these fears, Collins enlists three tenets for theorizing U.S. Black women's erotic autonomy. The first component entails the dismantling of the oppressive sexualizing terms of "hoochie" for straight Black women and "sexual deviant" for lesbian Black women.[45] This requires Black women to move away from a culture of dissemblance and a politics of silence surrounding their own sexuality, and move toward what Hammonds might call

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[42] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossings*, 22-23.

[43] Ibid, 63.

[44] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 167.

[45] Ibid, 168-169.

a politics of articulation.[46] The second part of moving closer to erotic autonomy is the redefining of hegemonic beauty standards to reflect the beauty of Black women, though unlikely due to the adherence of these standard to European aesthetic features. As a preferred alternative, Collins surmises that Black women should consider ascribing to "African-derived aesthetics that potentially free women from standards of ornamental beauty" and connect physical beauty with the sphere of mind, body, and spirit.[47] The third and final element in developing erotic autonomies is learning how to express love to and with other Black women as an act of resistance.[48] Collins argues that just as maternal love has been the impetus for much of the political activism of Black women, the potential to broaden the "spectrum of Black women's loving relationships with one another, including those that find sexual expression, may move Black womanhood closer to reclaiming the power of deep love."[49] As Collins states, one way to access narratives of deep loving for the purposes of experiencing erotic autonomy is through literature, an idea that I return to in chapters one and two of this dissertation..

In *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature*, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley works to reimagine tropes that work to control Black Caribbean and West Indian women by tying their productive labor with colonized lands and instead, using a language of belonging—women belonging to their land/labor/landscape and each other—to articulate a

[46] Hammonds writes, "In previous eras, black women had articulated the ways in which active practices of the state—the definition of black women as property, the sanctioned rape and lynching of black men and women, the denial of the vote—had been supported by a specific ideology about black female sexuality (and black male sexuality). These state practices effaced any notion of differences among and between black women, including those of class, color, and educational and economic privilege; all black women were designated as the same." "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," 98.

[47] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 169-170.

[48] Ibid, 170-172.

[49] Ibid., 170.

creative way of reclaiming geographical space through eroticism/sexuality. Tinsley states, "a central undertaking of my book is to draw parallels between women of color's sexuality and this manipulated canescape."[50] The title, which comes from the sweeping opening lines of Dionne Brand's novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, refers to a metaphorical comparison cane-cutter Elizete imagines after seeing her lover Verlia: "A woman loving a woman, she imagines, is like a cane cutter thiefing sugar."[51] The figurative meanings of thiefing sugar—Caribbean women as sugar, water, and flowers—used for material colonial projects of control, can also be used to open up possibilities of these tropes being reconfigured through women's Caribbean literature.

While *Thiefing Sugar* finds one of its theoretical foundations in "Lordean revolutionary eroticism," it is in her last chapter that Tinsley engages with the "biomythography" from one of the "island's most celebrated mythologizers, the black lesbian feminist poet warrior Lorde."[52] In *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name*, Lorde invents this imaginative space of Carriacou—an actual Caribbean island—where women love and live with other women. In the beginning of her text, Carriacou is rendered her literal motherland, the place where her mother was born and the place where her Aunt Anni still resides.[53] Concerning Carriacou, Tinsley surmises that Lorde's manifesto "looks to imagine somewhere that a black lesbian feminist could find the beyond-binaries on-land space…somewhere she/he could keep her tongue to speak and love."[54] The place of Carriacou is the first of two on-land spaces in which Lorde finds solace of the mind, but

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[50] O'mise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2-3.

[51] Ibid, 3.

[52] Ibid., 214

[53] Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1982), 14.

[54] Tinsley, *Thiefing Sugar*, 215.

not necessarily her body. The second on-land space is the "house of difference" which Tinsley describes as "Lorde's imagination of the diversity of her social spaces as a black lesbian in 1950s New York."[55] Lorde develops a sense of the intersectional identities available to her and oppressions forced upon her, as well as those identities and differences in her social circle:

> Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different…. It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather the security of any one particular difference.[56]

Tinsley contends that this house of difference becomes home for Lorde's narrator because in the end she can no longer call Carriacou her home, but rather a place she had never visited and only "knew out of my mother's mouth." Lorde ends, almost as if whispering, "There it is said that the desire to life with other women is a drive from the mother's blood."[57] Tinsley interprets these last few lines as narratives of loss in the machinations of creolization in the residue of slavery. The theme of loss, particularly in and among Black mothers and children, is an idea I return to in this introduction and throughout the first chapter.

While I have already referenced M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing* as it relates to erotic autonomy in a larger discussion of the genealogy of Lordean erotics, I now want to explore her theory of pedagogical crossing, especially as it converges around the idea of the symbiotic nature between the erotic and the Sacred. For Alexander, the act of crossing signifies several interwoven pedagogies, or ways of knowing/spaces of knowledge that are destabilizing from margin to center—physical crossings of bodily and material property through the Middle

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[55] Tinsley, *Thiefing Sugar*, 216.

[56] Lorde, *Zami*, 226.

[57] Ibid., 256.

Passage in the service of colonial logics and in the centuries-later residue of neocolonial projects; epistemological crossings between feminist genealogies from Caribbean feminisms' challenge of colonial legacies to British Black women's feminist movements to feminists of color critiques of white U.S. feminism; and binary-shattering convergences of seemingly disparate knowledges such as the "Sacred and secular…dispossession and possession...materialism and materiality."[58] It is this third interwoven crossing between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the erotic, that I want to posit my working theory of spiritual eroticism. In M. Jacqui Alexander's chapter "Pedagogies of the Sacred" she asks, "How is a Sacred interior cultivated, and how does it assist practitioners in the task of making themselves intelligible to themselves?"[59] Part of the cultivation process includes reclaiming the spiritually erotic interior spaces of one's self away from exterior forces that call on women (and men) to suppress their erotic selves or use their eroticism only in the service of men. The Sacred and the Erotic are not diametrically opposed energies, but rather they are informed by each other in ways that are attuned to both the cultivation and reclamation of an inner self, as well as how that personal/spiritual self may be accountable to or used in service of the political. It is here in the intellectual space between the Sacred and Erotic where spiritual eroticism begins to form within the interior of the Black self.

Sharon Holland shares and extends Alexander's concerns about the misaligned crossings between queer theory and U.S. liberalism that obfuscate the existence of "histories of colonialism and racial formation." They both argue that queer of color critique has been not only a corrective to traditional queer theorizing but a standalone theory in and of itself as it draws from "woman of color feminism to stave off" any attempts to ignore such histories of

[58] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing,* 7.

[59] Ibid., 298.

imperialism, racism, and racialization.[60] Holland offers the theoretical analytic of the erotic life of racism as "the bridge between theories of race and theories of sexuality" to interrogate the ways in which both the most seemingly mundane daily actions and our most intimate endeavors have traces of racism that bind the erotic and racialization together in ways that have not often been explored. While I return to this idea in the conclusion of this dissertation, I want to state here that what Holland is doing is in her words "alternative" and new. By grounding racism in both "the quotidian and intimate," she is asking how we might center or witness the erotic, or as she puts it "the personal and political dimensions of desire," in sites of historic and psychic pain or in sites that may seem all together incongruent with the erotic itself, including spirituality.[61]

Donna Aza Weir-Soley's *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance in Black Women's Writings* is instructive for how Audre Lorde's theory of the erotic offers a way to read Black women's writings as a corrective to and expansion of the possibilities of the Black female subject in both narrative life and actual existence. While the intellectual formation of my theoretical offering of spiritual eroticism came to be before I was aware of her book title and content, Weir-Soley's work informs and edifies this dissertation project particularly as it relates to her stated intent to "interrogate the multifaceted issue of black subject formation as it pertains to gender…[and] the interrelatedness of identity, autonomy, sexuality, and spirituality in black women's writings."[62] She argues that the formation of the Black female subject in Black women's writings is directly tied to African spiritual processes and that Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "begins the tradition of textually foregrounding African

[60] Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism,* 80.

[61] Ibid., 32.

[62] Donna Aza Weir-Soley, *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance in Black Women's Writings* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2009), 5.

spiritualty as central to black female subject formation."[63] Weir-Soley posits that Hurston's character development of Janie narratively embodies the reconciliation and possibilities between spirituality and sexuality that define the Lordean theory of the erotic. Weir-Soley contends that although Janie's spiritual journey is informed by Nanny's Christianity and folk wisdom anchored in African spirituality, it is Haitian Voudoun which "fosters Janie's liberation from all structures of patriarchal dominance" and subsequently encourages her to reach inwardly to her most spiritual and sensual self.[64] Building on Daphne Lamothe's theorization of Janie's character as a narrative model for the duality of the Haitian Voudoun spirit goddess Erzulie, Weir-Soley finds in Janie—and Hurston's writing more broadly— a foundational model for Black women writers who endeavor to create "black female characters whose autonomy and agency depend upon the full integration of sexual and spiritual selves, reclaiming the agency and transformative power of their African and New World spiritual legacies."[65] The synthesis between the spiritual and sexual within Janie as a character and Zora Neale Hurston as a writer, Weir-Soley argues, is a powerful political act, one that Black women writers after Hurston have modeled and emulated in ways that expand the material possibilities for Black women and girls, disrupt flattened narratives of Black femininity, and center Black women creators as purveyors of cultural critique and community uplift.

It can and has been argued that Ann Petry follows the Hurston literary lineage in *The Street* through the character development of Lutie Johnson that critiques the material cultures in

[63] Weir-Soley, *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance*, 7.

[64] Ibid., 69.

[65] Ibid., 78.

which Black women exists, [66] as well as expands the narrative and literary possibilities for Black women.[67] I argue in chapter one that Sarah Wright is also a part of this literary canon that offers a corrective to flattened narratives about Black women. In Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live,* Mariah Upshur is a figure of Black spiritual femininity that is not always centered in narratives about Black poverty and the Black rural working class.

The Erotic, the Everyday, and the Interior

Earlier in the introduction, I argued that spiritual eroticism is derived from the Lordean call to look inward at the power of the unexpressed to be a guiding source for personal pleasure and political change. This is an appeal to the interiority of the self. Elizabeth Alexander's theories of the Black interior figure prominently in this dissertation, particularly the interior spaces and public works of the Black creative. Her definition of the Black interior calls us to consider the "black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination."[68] Alexander asks us to imagine a "dream space" where Black poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes, public intellectuals like Anna Julia Cooper, and an actor such as Denzel Washington cultivate Black subjectivities that try to reach beyond truncated and stereotypical notions of blackness to reach into more unlimited possibilities of Black creativity, culture, and art.

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[66] See Carol E. Henderson, "The Walking Wounded': Rethinking Black Women's Identity in Ann Petry's *The Street*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 4 (2000): 849-867 for an analysis of Petry's focus on the "material enslavement" of the American Dream.

[67] Keith Clark writes that "*The Street*, was and is often still read as a landmark achievement of 'black protest' and 'black feminist literature,' both a female counterpart of Native Son and a gyno-centered intervention upon and 'corrective' of Wright's startling anti-black-woman classic." *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 26.

[68] Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2004), x.

Kevin Quashie builds on Alexander's concept of the Black interior to theorize the idea of quiet as "the inexpressible expressiveness of this interior."[69] Not to be confused with silence or complacency, quiet, Quashie argues, is dynamic expressiveness not necessarily born of or seeking the outcome of resistance as many forms of public Black expression are often read. Rather the theory of quiet finds its beginning in its "inwardness" and operates "watcherless" in a way that "helps us explore black subjectivity from beyond the boundaries of public expressiveness."[70] Contemplating the example of Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos standing with fists raised and heads bowed on the medal stand, Quashie asks us to "understand how their quiet works as a public gesture, without disregarding its interiority."[71] In other words, when the phrase "silent protest" is invoked, often more attention is paid to the resistance in the protest rather than the inner source of the action. I am interested in thinking through Quashie's theorization of quiet alongside Katie Cannon's description of quiet grace as a "virtue in the moral agency of Black women," [72] which I will say more about in chapter two of this dissertation that focuses on Ann Petry. The interiority of quiet signals a shift in how we can read the works of a famous writer such as Ann Petry who was known to value her privacy. And for both Elizabeth Alexander and Quashie it is the interior that remains hidden away as a creative and contemplative source and space for Black people who engage in cultural production.

Both Alexander and Quashie also note the attention to the ordinary in seminal works by Gwendolyn Brooks such as *A Street in Bronzeville* and *Maud Martha* as narrative paradigms of the interiority of Black women's stories and in our lives more broadly. In chapter one, I explore

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[69] Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 22.

[70] Ibid., 24.

[71] Ibid., 116.

[72] Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 125.

how Sarah Wright engages the everyday of Mariah Upshur's life and the lives of the characters in her novel *This Child's Gonna Live.*[73] And in particular, Mariah's internal dialogue and spiritual life animate the possibilities for exploring the ordinary and everyday life of a woman we hear from all too rarely in literature with any great detail—poor, rural, and Black. Co-founder of the Harlem's Writers Guild—of which Wright was vice president for several years—and Wright's writing contemporary, colleague and friend John O. Killens writes this of the everyday in which Mariah Upshur exists: "It is a world of sounds and smells and blood and sweat and love and hate and sugar and shit and poverty and heartache. But most of all the people, black and poor and beautiful."[74] It is this world that Mariah inhabits, it is in this literary space that Sarah Wright richly and heartbreakingly cultivates an interior life for her main character that sometimes leans into but often tries to guard against the bleakness and despair in order to preserve hope that she and her children might live. The ordinariness of one's life is connected to the ideas of interiority particularly in the face of external forms of violence and disruption that marginalized and maligned communities face in both the everyday and in the extreme. All three chapters of this dissertation engage in similar discourses concerning the interiority of Black women's lives in the everyday—through the fictive portrayals based in the specificities and horrors of their historical settings, as well as in the lived experiences of Black women artists grappling with the public-private dichotomy of their creative lives.

Veena Das's concept of the everyday and voice is also helpful in thinking about how communities of women from a multiplicity of colonial and postcolonial contexts find meaning in

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[73] Sarah Elizabeth Wright *This Child's Gonna Live* (New York: Feminist Press, 2002; Original: Delacorte Press, 1969).

[74] John Killens to Seymour Lawrence, correspondence, February 19, 1969, Box 2, Folder 1, Sarah Wright Papers 1944-2009, Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library, Emory University Libraries.

the ordinary to contend with erasures of and silences around their subjective and collective experiences with racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. In *Life and Words*, Das engages voice and voiceless on these layered levels of the psychosomatic in the everyday. Building on Stanley Cavell's theorization of voice, Das states that his account of voice is "not that of speech or utterance but as that which might animate words, give them life…"[75] Put another way, voice, whether attached to words or not, narrates the everyday, especially when violence is superimposed onto the everyday. In her critique of transcendalizing violence, or speaking of it in the abstract, Das proposes descending into the ordinary, the everyday by imbuing words with life in order to grapple with the materiality of violent events. Das cautions, "Words, when they lead lives outside the ordinary, become emptied of experience, lose touch with life—in Wittgenstein, it is the scene of language having gone on holiday."[76] In order not to lose touch with life, Das is all at once concerned with two violent events—the Partition of India in 1947 and the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984—that shaped the parameters of citizenship for women who were abducted, raped, and "recovered" in the aftermath of the Partition, as well as the ways in which the event(s) "attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary" in individual stories like that of Manjit.[77] Manjit is a Hindu wife and mother who was abducted during the Partition and later rescued by the Indian army and who, according to her family and Veena Das's own discussions with her, never verbally spoke about her abduction. Manjit's ability to engage in everyday life, Das contends, is "directly related to the fact that as far as the events of the

[75] Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 6.

[76] Ibid., 6.

[77] Ibid., 1-2

Partition were concerned, language just left her."[78] Although unable to verbally speak about the Partition, Das contends that Manjit remains on the "edges of speech" as she is able to construct a one-page written note "full of gory metaphors" and "famous instances" concerning the Partition.[79] By remaining on the "edges of speech," Manjit straddles between trying to keep the unspeakable violence of the Partition from creeping into the present and experience the everyday contours of her relationships which are necessarily shaped by memories of a violence past.

The image of language leaving and the notion of the unsayable, the unspeakable, harkens back to my earlier brief reference to Hine's theorizing around the "culture of dissemblance" and how we might read the silences of Black women as not only keeping hidden incidents of physical and emotional violence but also protecting an interior from the effects of that violation and cultivating a strategic ordinariness within their everyday living. Concerning southern Black women's patterns of migrating and fleeing to escape economic hardship and rape, Hine writes:

> Clearly, Black women did not possess the power to eradicate negative social and sexual images of their womanhood. Rather, what I propose is that in the face of the pervasive stereotypes and negative estimations of the sexuality of Black women, it was imperative that they collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self. A secret, undisclosed persona allowed the individual Black woman to function, to work effectively as a domestic in white households, to bear and rear children, to endure the frustration-born violence of frequently under- or unemployed mates, to support churches, to found institutions, and to engage in social service activities, all while living within a clearly hostile white, patriarchal, middle-class America.[80]

Hine argues that the material realities of racism and sexual violence during antebellum slavery and post-Reconstruction created the conditions and a collective imperative for Black women to

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[78] Das, *Life and Words,* 91.

[79] Ibid., 87.

[80] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, (New York: The New Press, 1995), 383.

look inwardly to form private ways of being and knowing within themselves and their communities in order to survive and thrive. This conception of the interiority of Black women's lives is somewhat contradictory to Lorde's conceptualization of the erotic as forming separately from external pressures. The erotic is not formed in response to the external but rather exists internally to "inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us."[81] I argue that the causal relationship of the erotic is less important than the source and function of the erotic itself. In chapter two of this dissertation I contend that adapting a culture of dissemblance as Ann Petry did throughout her life does not negate a thriving interior life. For it is out of the interior, erotic, that desire is expressed. Building on the expansive Lordean definition of desire, Claudia Tate writes "Desire here exceeds sexual pleasure to become consummate self-affirmation, as confirming life force charged with transformative power."[82] Desire is the manifestation of "our deepest feelings" and our most powerful epistemic knowledge which is the erotic.

When Audre Lorde articulates that it is erotic knowledge that is the bridge between the spiritual and political, I see these two entities—the political and the spiritual—as the most desirous and meaning-making spaces of inquiry and experience for a person, where we, as Lorde intimates, "scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives."[83] And although the erotic begins interiorly, it is not meant to be hidden away there; the erotic is first and foremost to be shared with one's self. Lorde realizes the real possibility that we may hide the erotic away from our own understanding of ourselves so the initial practice of sharing should be with ourselves in ways that rise to a level

[81] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 58.

[82] Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 105.

[83] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 57.

of honest scrutiny and evaluation of self. In other words, I am asking here how might we find ways to tap into our erotic knowledges that bridge the gap between the spiritual and political.

Black Women's Spirituality

One of the ways we can share the erotic with ourselves is through individual spiritual practice. Attuned to the ways Lorde's critique of the spiritual end of the bridge is in part based on the reduction of the spiritual to a 'world of flattened affect" by ascetic spiritual practitioners who not only "aspire[s] to feel nothing," but also endeavor to keep the erotic hidden away and limit its expression, I argue that living a spiritually erotic life expands the possibilities for and deepens our connections to self and the sacred realm. This expansion then guides our acts of service and care to others within intimate and interpersonal relationships, as well as inside political causes and radical movements of social change. This formulation of spiritual eroticism echoes Lorde's caution to not constrain the spirit realm to that of religiosity and extremist dogma. Gloria Wade- Gayles explains the difference this way:

> Institutionalized religion requires us to be a congregation following an unchanging order of worship and believing in a dogma, both of which have been linked to oppression throughout the history of human civilization. But spirituality frees us to worship wherever, however, and with whomever we so desire, each time anew and each time in celebration of the divine that is in us and in the entire universe.[84]

This distinction between entrenched religious beliefs and spirituality is key in part because the definitions of the spiritual that I employ in this project are more expansive and multidimensional than the rigidity of a singular religion and are sometimes not associated with any stated institutionalized religious context at all.

[84] Gloria Wade-Gayles, *My Soul is a Witness: African-American Women's Spirituality*, ed Gloria Wade-Gayles (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1995), 4.

My definition of spiritual eroticism relies most heavily on Gloria Wade-Gayles, Judylyn Ryan, Donna Aza Weir-Soley, and Akasha Gloria Hull's definitions of Black women's spirituality. Beginning first with Hull in *Soul Talk*, she brings together a series of interviews with nine Black women writers, including Alice Walker, with whom she has friendships and working relationships to ponder the question "*How do you see yourself as a spiritual being, and how does that spirituality manifest itself in your life and work?*"[85] Though Hull's conceptualization of the new spirituality of African American women is based on a burgeoning spiritual consciousness of the late 1970s and early 1980s that saw Black women creatives embracing New Age spiritual practices alongside more culturally resonant forms of spirituality, she acknowledges that the confluence between the political, the spiritual, and the creative has its roots in the lives of many Black women writers and activists. Hull's definition of Black women's spirituality helps to inform the direction of this dissertation because it illuminates the usefulness of the spiritual realm. Hull writes, "what makes this new spirituality of African American women truly remarkable is its three-pronged nature: its pronounced political and social awareness, eclectic spiritual consciousness, and creativity."[86] In this definition, the spiritual is synonymous with socio-political desires, personal edification and the cultural production that arises from an attunement with one's interior modalities.

In Wade-Gayles's sourcebook on African American women's spirituality, she intimates that the spirit realm often defies definition and for Black women in particular the dearth of written archives on personal spiritual experiences by enslaved foremothers leaves much to be

[85] Wade-Gayles, *My Soul is a Witness*, 9.

[86] Akasha Gloria Hull, *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International Press, 2001), 18.

desired in the way of foregrounding our collective discourses on spiritual practices rooted in African spiritual beliefs.

> Focusing on Black women's spirituality raises the question: If we cannot define spirituality, how can we, then, write about a spirituality that is distinctive to African-American women? Having acknowledged that we cannot see it, how can we suddenly ascribe to it such material qualities as race and gender? We cannot. *My Soul Is a Witness* does not. But we can, and should celebrate the way our connection to the Spirit bears the lineaments of our race, gender, and culture. The Spirit speaks in the voice of, sings the songs of, dresses in the symbols of, wears the face of, and moves in the rhythm of the people who receive it. Doing so for African-American women, it produces spiritual songs, spiritual chants, spiritual rituals, spiritual movements, spiritual symbols, spiritual needs, and spiritual energies that are distinctly Black and woman.[87]

This passage in particular makes me ponder where and how we might seek the spirit of the erotic and the spirit of the interior in the personal lives, character arcs, and creative works of Black women writers and artists particularly when the lives of these women are often witnessed through their cultural production. And although Wade-Gayles suggests that a definition of African American women's spirituality is not her intent, her insistence that the Spirit takes on the characteristics of the people who believe it and receive it, sharpens our ability to define with some specificity how spirituality operates in the lives and creative works of Black women, as well as how the erotic operates in the realm of the spiritual.

Judylyn Ryan theorizes that in Black women's literature and film spirituality is "recognizably African/Black but rarely conforms to any traditional African religion."[88] I argue that this nonconformity is a central component of Black women's spiritual eroticism. And as I submitted earlier in the introduction, interiority is also a crucial aspect of spiritual eroticism as well. Weir-Soley writes, "Interiority is a necessary component of spirituality because it

[87] Wade-Gayles, *My Soul is a Witness,* 6-7.

[88] Judylyn Ryan, *Spirituality As Ideology in Black Women's Film and Literature* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 23.

inaugurates self-reflection, mediation, and communion with the divine."[89] Just as the erotic is the bridge between the spiritual and the political in Lorde's original essay, I assert that the interior is what binds spirituality and eroticism together. In the chapters that follow I endeavor to do the work of centering not only the cultural production of Black women artists, but the interiority of the lives of Black women creatives, their writings, and the characters and compositions they create. Within each chapter, I will also do what so many Black feminists have done before and alongside me which is to explore the uses of the erotic in ways that reattach the erotic to the "most vital areas of our lives."[90] In so doing, the chapters in this dissertation are structured thematically rather than linearly in order to better explore the reach and possibilities of the theoretical underpinnings of spiritual eroticism.

Theorizing Spiritual Eroticism

In the first chapter, "Maternal Spiritual Eroticism: Black Mothering, Longing, and Desire in Sarah Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live*," I explore the politics of Black maternal desire and personal aspirations of Black mothers for their Black children. My methodology for this chapter includes literary and historical analysis, as well as some archival analysis. The main source materials for this chapter are a close reading of the lone published novel by Sarah Elizabeth Wright entitled *This Child's Gonna Live* and Wright's personal archives located in Emory University's Rose Manuscript, Archives & Rare Book Library. By connecting the canonical works of Toni Morrison and her literary prototypes on Black mothering with Black feminists engagements of her work and the politics of Black mothers in a Western, capitalist,

[89] Weir-Soley, *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance,* 73.

[90] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 55.

segregated context, this first chapter applies the theory of spiritual eroticism to desires that are not solely tied to intimacies connected to sexuality, but also intimacies born out of connections to one's children. I position Wright's protagonist Mariah Upshur within what Jacquelyn Grant calls "womanist Christology," a womanist theological framework that specifically challenges the inadequacies of biblical, liberationist, and rejectionist feminists in addressing racism, classism, and sexism that affect Black women's material lives. Through Mariah's sometimes contentious, sometimes hopeful, yet always yearning verbally and reflectively prayerful moments throughout *This Child's Gonna Live*, I argue that Mariah's relationships with God and Death exist in the very ways that Grant theorizes Jesus as an intimate friend to Black women and a knower of our pains and desires.

The second chapter, "Spiritual Eroticism Diffused: The Creative Privacies and Political Intimacies of Ann Petry's Interior Life and Works," is a discussion of how the interiority of Ann Petry's life shaped her sociopolitical stances, journalism, and fictional writings. My methodologies in this chapter include archival analysis that follows closely a narrative inquiry research framework, as well as literary and historical analyses. My intentions in this chapter are to purposefully expand, reconfigure, and in some ways decentralize notions of spirituality and spiritual work outside of structured religiosity and religious practice and into a more diffuse space of knowing and writing from the interior. Ann Petry's personal correspondence in the form of letters to her Aunt Helen James Chisholm,[91] as well as her columns in Black newspapers and her literary works paint a picture of a woman grappling with the socioeconomic and sociopolitical inequalities and global challenges of war in the world while maintaining a vivid and protected inner life. The biography written by Petry's daughter Elisabeth Petry—*At Home*

[91] Frank P. and Helen Chisholm Family Papers, 1846-1994, Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library, Emory University Libraries.

Inside: A Daughter's Tribute to Ann Petry—is an insightful textual herstory that mines with care the life of a writer and thinker who was fiercely private in her public facing life, but extremely caring and thoughtful in her interpersonal life. These notes of care, thought, and intimacy with her friends, family, and characters are how I conceive of a spiritual life that is connected to an interiorly erotic existence rooted in belonging within community, knowledge of people and their experiences, and a desire to speak directly to them through writing and activism.

And finally the third chapter necessarily follows a mixed methodology framework that includes textual, visual, music, literary and historical analyses, to explore the feminist and womanist poetry of Black women in the Black Arts Movement, and situates Aretha Franklin as integral to this movement space as well as my conceptualization of spiritual eroticism, with a specific eye to her 1970 album *Spirit in the Dark*. Larry Neal's characterization of the Black Arts Movement as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister" of the Black Power Movement[92] is reflective of the sisterly connections and spiritual rootedness that ground Franklin's songwriting and singing, musicality and messages. The creative kinship and meaningful interactions between Franklin and Nikki Giovanni is a major catalyst for how scholars such as Emily Lordi theorize Franklin's artistry within the narrative and creative space of the Black Arts Movement. This connection between women friends, as well as the relationships between Aretha and her sisters Carolyn and Emma is also part of the way I am theorizing spiritual eroticism as a shared, collective knowledge space between and among Black women for the purposes of joy-feeling, care-sharing, and burden-lifting, as well as personal edification and communal elevation towards a liberating existence.

[92] Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review: TDR* 12, no. 4 (1968): 29, doi:10.2307/1144377 (October 24, 2019).

This dissertation relies on a canon of Black feminist and womanist theoretical engagements with Black women's literature, spiritual practice, and political activism. It also contributes to a burgeoning Black feminist study of a politics of desire and the Black interior. The interdisciplinary nature of this study positions it between and amongst literary studies, feminist studies, religious studies, and cultural studies in ways that constantly bring to bear discourses of gender, race, and class in its analyses. Just as Elizabeth Alexander endeavored to do in *The Black Interior,* this dissertation has the potential to offer answers to questions posed by Ntozake Shange as to the existence of Black people as "the unconscious of the entire Western world"—"…where do we go? Where are our dreams? Where is our pain? Where do we heal?"—as well as another pivotal question, where is our pleasure?[93] The study aims to answer such questions by mining the possibilities of literary and artistic narratives created by Black women about Black people in ways that are highly attuned to narrative voice, historical context, and projected audience. As an answer to Shange's questions, I offer up spiritual eroticism—the idea that by engaging the interiority of the self and the sublimity of the divine we can begin to imagine, reclaim, and experience a life in which we express our deepest knowledges to create within ourselves and communities worlds that are creative, desirous and free.

[93] Ntozake Shange, *Moon-Marked and Touched by the Sun: Plays by African American Women,* ed. Sydne Mahone, (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1994), 323; Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2004), 4.

Chapter One

Maternal Spiritual Eroticism: Black Mothering, Longing, and Desire in Sarah Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live*

"Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours? 'If you want us to change the world someday, we at least have to live long enough to grow up!' shouts the child."

—Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," 1977[94]

In Sarah Elizabeth Wright's 1969 novel *This Child's Gonna Live*, the audience hears a narrative voice not often heard in American literature—a Black woman living during the early 1930s in the fictive eastern Maryland town of Tangierneck. In the midst of suffocating poverty, racism, and sexism during the Great Depression, Mariah's longings for pleasure in her love life and the survival of her children paints a portrait of a woman shaping her own subjectivity, while challenging oppressive white supremacist frameworks and the judgmental gaze of members of her own community. The depiction of Mariah as mother and the desires for her children that animate her choices throughout the novel are aligned with a Black mothering literary and cultural genealogy that Black women writers and thinkers have theorized from their lived experiences amongst their communities and in critique of hegemonic, pathological narratives of Black motherhood. This chapter engages Sarah Wright's only published novel, as well as some of her personally archived materials pertaining to her writing between 1950 and 1977 to explore the journey of main protagonist Mariah Upshur from a young and impressionable Black teen girl growing up in a rural fishing Maryland town to a self-assured, sometimes self-destructive woman with radical faith and warranted fears looking for a way to leave or change her hometown for a better life. To that end, this chapter begins with a discussion of the historical contestations

[94] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 38.

around Black women's bodies, then moves into an articulation of mothering and desire that centers Black women's relationship to and with their children in the midst of societal and economic hardships characterized by intersections of race, gender, and class oppressions in both historical and literary narratives. I then situate Sarah Wright within a canon of Black women novelists and conclude the first chapter by telling Mariah Upshur's story and anchoring it in a radical Black mothering tradition that I argue relies heavily on a womanist Christology framework that is both spiritually and politically inclined, as well as interiorly-oriented toward an understanding of Black women's subjectivity.

Contestations of the Black Female Body

Before centering Mariah Upshur as a literary example of radical spiritual mothering and maternal spiritual eroticism within a Black womanist theological context, it is important to historicize the contestations around Black women's bodies and their subjectivities as mothers. Because Sarah Wright's novel spans the temporal space of characters' familial and cultural knowledges from Reconstruction to the Great Depression, it is critical to study the vestiges of the enslavement of Black mothers in these historical contexts. Motherhood, particularly Black motherhood, in terms of an animating circuit of desires to have, care for, and protect children is often framed around the corporeality and usefulness of the female body. The Black female body remains a contested site of theorizing, in part, because of the parallel historical trajectory of Black women as mothers and laborers and how those subjectivities have consistently informed one another. The figure of the Black female body carries with it particular cultural currencies that make it legible in a multiplicity of historical moments. This legibility, though, is often framed across historical contexts as the subjective symbiosis between the acts of laboring and

mothering. For Black women, particularly during the captivity of slavery, these subjectivities—mother and laborer—were inextricably linked as their children became the products and source of exploited and enslaved labor.

Slavery is one such moment in which the captive Black body is subjected to extreme and constant forms of racial, sexual, and psychic terror and violence in order to satisfy the racist ideologies and ensure the economic futures of imperialist oppressors in the New World. Hortense Spillers states that this New World "marked a *theft of the body*," one in which African and indigenous peoples were reduced to the body, cut off from "its motive will, its active desire." Spillers continues, making a pivotal intellectual claim that later finds epistemological traction in feminist and queer studies, about the ungendering of the captive's body:

> Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join. This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses.[95]

These external meanings and uses conferred upon the captive body by captors render it simultaneously the purveyor of unbridled sexuality, falsely justifying its biological and racial otherness on the one hand, and "a thing" lacking a subject position, rendering it powerless in the social sphere on the other. The ungendering of the captive body in the New World marked an "absence *from* a subject position" for the slave.[96] This ungendering is particularly consequential for the enslaved Black woman in that the absence of a subject position as mother gets eliminated from the public sphere as a legible subject position, while that same subjectivity gets subsumed

[95] Spillers, Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.

[96] Ibid., 67.

in the context of labor and consumption and exploited in the economy of slavery. Some twenty-plus years after Spillers theorized that this ungendering is particularly tied to the divorcing of will and desire from the body, Stephanie Smallwood interrogates other possible readings concerning the theft and subject position of the captive body in *Saltwater Slavery*.

Saltwater slavery refers to the one-way, continual, forcible emigration of Africans crossing the Atlantic into the American Diaspora. Both American-born slaves and slaveowners used the term "saltwater Negroes" to describe newly arrived captive Africans coming into already established communities of slaves.[97] Smallwood sets out to use the quantitative and textual archival evidence from the slave trading business[98] along the Gold Coast to bring "the people aboard slave ships to life as subjects in American social history" rather than as solely objects of commodification in a burgeoning Western economy as they are written in the ledgers of the trade.[99] One of the ways that Smallwood sets out to rearticulate a subject position for African peoples enveloped in the system of slavery is to look at the familial ties and the various forms of social death within communities of African peoples. She posits that these sites of memory are pivotal to broadening our understanding of social relations for the saltwater slave and those left behind.

Before and while the saltwater slaves forcibly endured a terroristic journey to the Americas, Smallwood writes that they and their left behind loved ones experienced a "social death." She builds on Orlando Patterson's idea that social death under slavery "entails a process

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[97] Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 7.

[98] Ibid., 72. Trade companies such as the English Royal African Company kept meticulous records from 1675 to 1725.

[99] Ibid., 3.

involving the two contradictory principles of marginality and integration."[100] Smallwood explains that for the enslaved Africans that survived the crossing to America, the transition from natal to fictive kin was also a part of the exchange in their sociality as they experienced being marginalized subjects having to face the prospects of assimilating into established but ever-changing communities of slaves. For the captives' family members in Africa, theirs was a different kind of social death, one characterized by a negotiation of thought between their family member as ancestral being or existing in an unknown space.[101] The permanent disappearance of the slave created for the surviving kin the idea of a "liminal being," one who lives in the in-between, often not fully knowable spaces of life. For some African communities, "the liminal status of the slave empowered him to undertake roles in the spiritual world, such as handling the bodies of the deceased, that were dangerous to full members of society."[102] As the saltwater slaves transitioned for natal kin to fictive kin, the ties between Africa and America became all the more vital for survival of person and spirit. Smallwood writes, "At stake for Africans was whether an American generation of African lineage would emerge and, more important still, also *whether that generation could sustain itself by the fruit of its social networks, rather than by its labor*, as bought and sold on the market."[103] This notion of sustainability through social and familial ties was directly tied to the assimilation of saltwater slaves and the labor(s) of women Smallwood calls the "founding ancestresses of a wholly new people in diasporic Africa" who birthed a new generation of American born Africans.[104] These ancestresses passed on

[100] Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 59.

[101] Ibid, 59-61.

[102] Ibid, 59.

[103] Ibid, 199.

[104] Ibid, 200.

knowledges "from attending to medical needs to reestablishing rituals for mourning the dead and communicating with the ancestor" which signaled a lasting value for their familial and communal labor and care outside of the distorted and perverted value assigned to their forced reproductive labor and their children. This moment speaks to what Saidiya Hartman calls the "afterlife of slavery" and what Christina Sharpe refers to as Black existence "in the wake" of "slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding."[105] These communal ties remain particularly vital in the aftermath of slavery and into Reconstruction and the Great Depression precisely because of the ongoing vestiges and growing limbs of the diasporic and forced displacement of captive and enslaved Africans.

Prior to Smallwood's historical contributions that reconfigured the contours of the Middle Passage and Atlantic slave trade as it relates to the subject position of the enslaved peoples who progressed through from the Gold Coast of Africa to the slave trade market in the Americas, other Black feminist historians wrote about the roles of women in slave communities and their roles as mothers and laborers under chattel slavery. [106] In *Reconstructing Womanhood,* Hazel Carby explores these roles in relationship to the class, race, and gender divisions between white women of the planter class and Black female slaves under U.S. slavery.[107] She is particularly interested in the ways that differing ideologies about womanhood, motherhood, and property were hierarchized between both groups of women:

> White women of the elite planter class…were viewed as the means of the consolidation of property through the marriages of alliance between plantation families, and they gave

[105] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 13-14.

[106] For two other early examples, see: Angela Davis's "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," in *Black Scholar* 3 (December 1971): 2-15 and Marietta Morrissey's *Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press), 1988.

[107] Chapter two, "Slave and Mistress: Ideologies of Womanhood under Slavery," is devoted to exploring the racialized claims to and displacement from the "cult of true womanhood." Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1987.

> birth to the inheritors of that property…. As a slave, the black woman was in an entirely different relation to the plantation patriarch. Her reproductive destiny was bound to capital accumulation; black women gave birth to property and, directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves, and all slaves inherited their status from their mothers.[108]

Categorically, these two groups of women had very differing relationships to womanhood and motherhood and experienced opposing material conditions as a result. While white women's claims to property were shored up in family inheritances, the marriage contract, and the ability to have children, the enslaved woman's relationship to these same white patriarchal norms was that of giving birth to and being property.[109] Their children's inheritance of enslavement, and the real possibility of the slavemaster severing familial and geographical ties between mother and child, represents another form of social death that ruptured both natal and fictive kinships once slave communities were established. Just as Carby is attuned to the nuances of family structure, political and economic alliance, reproductive options, and socioeconomic status between white women of the elite class and enslaved Black women, other Black feminists scholars have also weighed in on the problematic realities of reproductive labors and socioeconomic outcomes for Black enslaved women.

In *Laboring Women,* the expansive historiography on the lives of enslaved African women in the diasporic locations of the English West Indies and North America, Jennifer Morgan employs archival documents from sixteenth and seventeenth century white European travelers to wills and probate documents from eighteenth and nineteenth century white slaveowners in order to relay the duality and brutality of African women's labor. She argues that

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[108] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 24-25.

[109] Saidiya Hartman would later argue that the possession of the enslaved woman "occurs not via protections of the patriarchal family and its control of female sexuality,"—as was the case for white women—"but via absolute rights of property." *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 100.

slaveowners developed contradictory and convoluted notions of gender, race, and humanity to procure and sustain their wealth. They were not just dependent on enslaved women's physical labor in the fields (which was evident based on the shifting sex ratios on plantations—from enslaved men to enslaved women as the majority), but their idea of sustaining and expanding colonial power was derived from the reproductive capabilities of African women.[110] By drawing the links between enslaved women's future children, the higher rates of mortality over fertility, and the economic destines of white slaveowners, Morgan is able to "dismantle the very category of reproduction when we apply it to the labor of black women" and instead offer a more complicated analysis of motherhood and the significance of women's reproductive ability that is missing in most historical texts concerning colonial slavery and the records kept from the time period.[111]

Just as salient to the colonial apparatuses of forced separation of families, the withholding of rights to one's property and marriage, and the lack of control over one's reproduction, was the presence of rape as a tool of sexual and social terror. Spillers locates the African female subject as an interconnected figure in these apparatuses as captive female subject was exposed to the same external and psychic terrors as the male subject, but while also enduring the "interiorized violation of body and mind" through rape.[112] Here, Spillers echoes Angela Davis's contentions in *Women, Race, and Class* that for slave women rape was a singular, feminized tool of torture enacted by slave owners and overseers,[113] but takes her analyses in a slightly different direction

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[110] Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women : Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 56-61.

[111] Ibid., 6.

[112] Ibid., 67.

[113] "As females, slave women were inherently vulnerable to all forms of sexual coercion. If the most violent punishments of men consisted in floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped.

to argue that "unprotected female flesh" rendered the captive female body "ungendered," or in other words, rendered unfeminine and further othered, while also (strangely) depicting the captive female body as one of human value tied the body's reproductive capabilities and its accessibility to white male subjects for sexual violence.[114] Carby also engages Davis's earlier work[115] on accusations of sexual complicity between Black women and white men under slavery. Carby surmises that because of these perceived complicities, "the institutionalized rape of black women has never been as powerful a symbol of black oppression as the spectacle of lynching. Rape has always involved patriarchal notions of women being, at best, not entirely unwilling accomplices, if not outwardly inviting a sexual attack."[116] This complete misreading of rape against enslaved Black women and the act itself by white men, indirectly worked to subordinate and psychologically injure enslaved Black men, and directly did the same for Black women while creating a false narrative of illicit and lascivious sexuality.

Some ten years later, Saidiya Hartman would take up these same questions that informed Carby's work concerning the supposed incapability of enslaved Black women being raped by engaging nineteenth century legal precedent on the crime of rape. Hartman argues that Black women were not protected against rape because slaves were not permitted legal rights under common law, which defined rape as "the forcible carnal knowledge of a female against her will

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Rape, in fact, was an uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholder's economic mastery and the overseer's control over Black women as workers." Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (Vintage Books, 1981), 7.

[114] Hartman helped me understand Spillers' nuanced distinction through her mediation of language and the term female. The twenty-sixth footnote for chapter three states: "…'female' does not refer to the presumed bedrock of gender—sex—but to the dominant construction of black womanhood in which sex and sexuality were foregrounded. The use of 'female' is an attempt to underline the ideology of the natural and the bestial that defined her status and her use within the sexual economy of slavery. *Scenes of Subjection*, 228.

[115] Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," in *Black Scholar 3* (December 1971): 3-15.

[116] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood,* 39.

and without her consent," and slave codes did not include provisions for the crime of rape.[117] This exclusion was predicated upon what Hartman calls the "discourse of seduction,"[118] which rendered the rape of Black women unimaginable and the criminal culpability of white male rapists invisible in the eyes of the law. Hartman posits that within the adjudication of the law "white culpability was displaced as black criminality."[119] She continues:

> Rape disappeared through the intervention of seduction—the assertion of the slave woman's complicity and willful submission. Seduction was central to the very constitution and imagination of the antebellum South for it provided a way of masking the antagonistic fissures of the social by ascribing to the object of property an ensnaring and criminal agency that acted to dissimulate the barbarous forms of white enjoyment permitted within the law.[120]

Hartman's theorizing around seduction is emblematic of her consistent narrative turns towards how the subjugation and spectacle of blackness gets folded into economies of white racist enjoyment and U.S. hegemony of the social and judicial, which leave the Black subject in constant states of abjection. One of the many questions for Hartman is whether or not and how Black pleasure is possible when the desiring of the Black subject is necessary for both the purposes of enslavement and freedom. Hartman finds a glimmer of hope in the Harriet Jacobs autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of the Slave Girl*, which Hartman states, "challenges conventional interpretations that deem issues of desire and consent irrelevant in the context of enslavement or celebrate desire as the triumph of the captive will."[121] In other words, the move

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[117] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 79-80.

[118] Ibid., 81. "The confusion between consent and coercion, feeling and submission, intimacy and domination, and violence and reciprocity constitutes what I term the discourse of seduction in slave law."

[119] Ibid., 79, 83. Here Hartman details the case against Celia, an enslaved woman who was accused of killing "the old man Newsome" after he told her he was coming to see her and she told him not to come or he would be hurt. To call what happened to Celia rape, Hartman says, is to "envision the unimaginable, excavate the repressed, and discern the illegible."

[120] Ibid., 87.

[121] Ibid., 102.

to disavow all manner of desire and pleasure from the framework of slavery is historically unproductive, but if said enjoyments are witnessed, they are always already mediated through the historical relations between slave and captor, free person and the state. Hartman asks us to think differently about how modes of agency might challenge hegemonic notions of captivity.

Harriet Jacobs and U.S. Black Mothering Narratives

Like Hartman, alongside the narratives of torment and isolation that I read in Harriet Jacobs' retelling of her years spent under the captive rule of Mr. Flint and in the garret of her grandmother home, I also read narratives of desire and longing in relation to the security of children. When speaking of mothering under the institution of slavery, Jacobs writes, "The mother of slaves is very watchful. She knows there is no security for her children."[122] Directly after this statement, Jacobs recalls the moment of being confronted by her mistress "concerning her [mistress's] husband" and her grandmother's initial reaction to label Jacobs "a disgrace to her dead mother" and dismiss her from the home. But in her reconciliation with her grandmother, Jacobs finds a listening ear and the protection and pity she sought from both her grandmother and her mistress. Hazel Carby points to Jacobs's early realization of the failures of white mistresses to empathize with the Black girls and women they enslaved in an effort to "[confirm] their own social position at the expense of denying the humanity of their slaves particularly when they were insecure in their own relation to patriarchal power."[123] Born out of the white mistress's insecurity, Jacobs writes, were her feelings and actions of "jealousy and rage"[124] that

[122] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861; reprint, Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2001), 50.

[123] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood,* 55.

[124] Jacobs, *Incidents,* 26.

primarily had to do with the rape and sexual violation of enslaved Black women and girls by their white masters and the children sometimes born as a result. Fears of miscegenation through rape or perceived consensual sexual relations were also top of mind precisely because a child's racial and social strata was determined at birth.

While Jacobs is able to acknowledge this fear within white women, Jacobs also considers the ramifications for herself and what agentive steps she might take to lessen the chances that her children be bought and sold into slavery. Concerning what and how her master Mr. Flint would react in the aftermath of her becoming a mother, Jacobs ponders:

> I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. I thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr. Sands, would buy me. He was a man of more generosity and feeling than my master, and I thought my freedom could be easily obtained from him. The crisis of my fate now came so near that I was desperate. I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my old tyrant. I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold far off to get rid of them; especially if they had children.[125]

Hartman's points about Linda's [Jacobs] level and capacity for choice in this perilous moment are of great import here, particularly as it relates Linda's desire to have and care for children. Hartman contends that Linda's stated choice is limited because of the condition of slavery and is not comparable to the "range of options available to white women."[126]

When her children Benny and Ellen are finally placed in the care of her grandmother, Jacobs is able to view them through the peepholes she creates. In *Demonic Grounds*, scholar Katherine McKittrick argues that Black women have contested and negotiated the conditions of their geographies, which runs counter to the narrative of complete alienation and annihilation in dominant geographies. The hegemonic narratives in dominant geographies claim that Black

[125] Jacobs, *Incidents,* 48.

[126] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 104.

women are "ungeographic" as a result of their displacement in the Middle Passage and under chattel slavery, but this narrative representation, McKittrick contends, is a "colonial fiction."[127] Drawing from an interdisciplinary well including human geography studies (Sylvia Wynter), Black feminisms, and Black literary and cultural traditions, McKittrick defines "demonic grounds" as spaces such as the slave plantation, the underground railroad, and the slave trade blocks and locations throughout the African diasporic from Canada to the United States to the Caribbean where the presence of Black women has informed and altered both present and past world geographies.

McKittrick's chapter "The Last Place They Thought Of: Black Women's Geographies" is a much-needed narrative mapping on the subject position and cultural sign of the Black female body and Black women's cultivated space. In this chapter, she is able to masterfully relay how new geographies were simultaneously invented by Black women and written on and in the bodies of Black women under the conditions of slavery. Harkening back to Hartman's intellectual engagements with Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, McKittrick, mostly using Harriet Jacob's authorship pseudonym Linda Brent, details how Brent found her grandmother's garret, the attic above the house, to be the safest place to get away from the gaze and sexual advances of Dr. Flint. McKittrick surmises:

> Importantly, she [Brent] claims that in the garret she is *not* enslaved and that her loophole of retreat is a retreat to emancipation. For Brent to declare that her emancipation begins in the garret—which she also repeatedly refers to as her dismal cell, her prison, and this dark hole—is evidence of how she uses the existing landscape and architecture to name the complicated geographies of black womanhood in/and slavery.[128]

[127] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And The Cartographies Of Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 5.

[128] Ibid., 41.

Jacobs' pleasure can be read in two ways here. In one way, there is a certain welcomed relief in her ability to escape the advances of Dr. Flint. Yet in that space of solitude she is isolated from her children and has to find the loopholes within the geographical space of the attic to continue to nurture the desires she has for herself and her children to be free. These themes of desire and pleasure within the framework of motherhood in some of the first recorded lived experiences of Black mothers living during slavery and Reconstruction are mirrored in the literary productions of Black women writers and novelists in the mid to late twentieth century.

For Linda Brent, writing under the pseudonym Harriet Jacobs, the tenuous status of motherhood under the slave codes threatens the physical attachments to her children for which she longs, while she yet expresses feelings of wanting to protect them and responding with agency when it comes to them. A similar understanding of the precarious nature of mothering Black children can also be surmised in the life of fictive character Mariah Upshur during the economic downturn of the Great Depression and the ways her desires for her children are animated by what Andrea O'Reilly calls [quoting Sara Ruddick] preservative love.[129] Preservative love necessarily requires Black mothers to nurture and love in conditions that are not always conducive for survival and thriving. This chapter on Black women's maternal spiritual eroticism asks and addresses specific questions related to how the vestiges of enslavement and economic bondage map onto the physic desires that Black women have for themselves and their children. What happens to a Black mother's desires for her children when she gives birth to a child under the system of slavery or in the aftermath of Reconstruction but lacks legal and social remedies to codify and solidify those desires for their protection and care? And what happens after the outcome of an unwanted sexual encounter or rape is the birth of a

[129] Andrea O'Reilly ed, *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, (Branford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2007).

child—perhaps one who is mixed raced—and how do the hopes and aspirations for that child's life and survival complicate the possibilities of desire for a Black mother? On whom can she rely and to whom does she turn for support and guidance in the raising of her children? Where does her help come from and how, if at all, does the spirit realm answer the call?

Black mothering and motherhood are pivotal themes in Black literatures, particularly written by Black women in the twentieth century.[130] Patricia Hill Collins contends that a Black women's standpoint is honed and espoused from the lived experiences of Black women on the margins and often living as "outsiders within" a larger hegemonic culture.[131] Collins' assertion that knowledge production that begins from Black women's lives is valuable as objective truth is not without theoretical critique, yet standpoint theory remains a useful sociological methodology when examining Black women's experiences.[132] A "U.S. Black mothering standpoint," Collins contends, emerged within the actuality of "specific social conditions associated with slavery, Southern rural life, and class-stratified, racially segregated neighborhoods of earlier periods of urban Black migration."[133] Following this particular framework for standpoint theory as it relates to Black mothering in the Unites States, Andrea O'Reilly argues similarly as Collins that

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[130] Gloria Thomas Pillow, *Motherlove in Shades of Black: The Maternal Psyche in the Novels of African American Women* (McFarland Publishing, 2010); Cecelie S. Berry, *Rise up Singing : Black Women Writers on Motherhood*, 1st ed (New York: Doubleday, 2004); Susanna A. Bisch, *"Sturdy black bridges" on the American Stage : The Portrayal of Black Motherhood in Selected Plays by Contemporary African American Women Playwrights,* (1996).

[131] In her essay "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," Collins surmises that the "outsider within" status was developed in a space where Black domestic workers employed in White households were at a unique vantage point to see "white power demystified" while simultaneously knowing that they "could never belong" to this whiteness (103). In essence, Black women working in white homes occupy a space that has the political and social potentiality to both inform and challenge oppressive forces relating to race, gender, and class.

[132] Because Black women produce this standpoint, it has been critiqued as being too ethnocentric to be considered objective knowledge. Collins addresses these critiques in *Black Feminist Thought* saying that the validation of different group standpoints is based on "each group using their epistemological approaches growing from its unique standpoint" that ultimately become the "most 'objective' truths."

[133] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* (New York: Routledge Press, 2000), 270.

Toni Morrison's understanding of Black motherhood in her novels has positioned Morrison as a "maternal theorist" who has developed a theory of motherhood that centers "a politics of the heart."[134] Similar to Collins, O'Reilly highlights three pivotal and interconnected junctures of rupture and disruption to these maternal relationships: slavery, migration, and assimilation. In particular, O'Reilly builds on Naomi Lowinsky's theory of the motherline—cultural stories that unite mothers and daughters through female oral traditions—to articulate the ways in which Black mothers are "culture bearers who mentor and model the African American values essential [to] the empowerment of black children and culture."[135] Both Collins and O'Reilly situate nurturance and resistance as critical components of a Black mothering framework that accounts for and combats the systemic ruptures in the Black mother-child experience.

While these ruptures begin with the violent disruptions of African families at the beginning of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the continuation of this theft of life and living on the trading blocks for human beings in the Americas, the traces of these separations and this collective lineage is often told through African diasporic narratives of the stranger or a child without a home. In her journey to Ghana, Saidiya Hartman discusses how three boys—Kwesi, Francis, and Isaac—mistook her for "the *kosanba*—the spirit child—who dies only to return again and again in a succession of rebirths."[136] Hartman's writing on the spirit child or the "come, go back, child" is similar to Smallwood's conceptualization of the liminal being in spirit, sometimes haunting, form in that the spirit child "shuttles back and forth between the worlds of the living and the dead because of the stories not passed on, the ancestors not remembered, the

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[134] O'Reilly, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 3.

[135] Ibid., 12.

[136] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 84-86.

things lost, and the debts not yet paid."[137] One of the things lost is relationship between mother and child as evidenced by Issac who wrote to Hartman "because of the slave trade you lose your mother, if you know your history, you know where you come from."[138] The stories told in relationship between Black mother and Black child are often animated in and with social and physical life as much as they are with death and the spirits that exists in the in-between and the liminal spaces. In *This Child's Gonna Live,* Sarah Wright's protagonist Mariah Upshur is not only gesturing toward the life of her unborn child but to all the children she has lost and may loss due to disease, famine, lack of adequate medicines and healthcare, and economic and environmental racism.

Sarah Wright in the Canon of Black's Women Writers

I situate Sarah Wright's writing in a literary canon on Black women narratives that has been heralded and honed by literary critics such as Barbara Christian[139] and literary giants such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. Wright's cultural production which includes poetry is also positioned within the Black Arts Movement, a movement I discuss in greater detail in chapter three. While I engage in some comparative character analyses concerning Black womanhood between Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Mariah in *This Child's Gonna Live* at the end of the chapter, I am primarily concerned with Mariah and the radical stakes she names, the battles she chooses to fight, the choices she has to make and the decisions she is forced into as a Black woman and mother to ensure her own and her children's

[137] Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 59.

[138] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother,* 85, 86.

[139] Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism : Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. The Athene Series (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

survival. To this end, I engage in the historical rootedness of Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* alongside Sarah Wright's main protagonist, Mariah Upshur as reflective of the Black-mothering histories that are illuminated within Collins's theoretical and temporal framework for a U.S. Black mothering standpoint. Therein, I am attuned to the social conditions that constrain their choices as women, and as mothers in particular, during and after slavery and the post-Reconstruction, Jim Crow era of the Great Depression, respectively. I contend that Mariah's story represents a narrative of spiritually radical U.S. Black motherhood and as playwright, novelist, and Wright's friend Alice Childress says a "vivid portrayal of a woman's heroic struggle against hopelessness."[140] Mariah's struggles against hopelessness find her seeking hope in her spiritual and inner life, as well as searching for an existence outside of the physical, economic, and environmental constraints of her town of Tangerineck from which she hopes to escape with her family and her very own life.

Sarah Elizabeth Wright was born in a similar time and location as her literary protagonist Mariah. Wright was born December 9, 1928 in Wetipquin, Maryland—a town on the Eastern Shore of Maryland about 120 miles southwest of Baltimore—to parents Charles and Mary Amelia Moore Wright who worked as farmers and in whom Sarah seems to draw inspiration for the story she tells about Mariah and Jacob and the work they do on the shores to provide for themselves and their family. In a set of undated biographical notes, Wright writes "My first years on earth were those of our Great Depression, and of course since my people, always poor, existed on a sustenance level. These years made an indelible impression on me and my writing."[141] The closeness in subjectivities and localities between Wright's life and the lives of

[140] Alice Children to Sirs (Seymour Lawrence Books/Delacorte Press), correspondence, March 17, 1969, Box 2, Folder 1, Sarah Wright Papers 1944-2009.

[141] Sarah to Marion, correspondence, no date, Box 1, Folder 1, Sarah Wright Papers 1944-2009.

the people in the fictive Maryland eastern shore town of Tangerineck reflect a narrative intimacy between creator and character that cannot simply be deemed ancillary to a reading of Mariah's character evolution. As I laid out in the introduction, *This Child's Gonna Live* is a picture of the everydayness of a community struggling with and against environmental racism, economic lack, and white supremacy in all its forms. And at the center of the story is Mariah Upshur who—as Wright described in a letter to Langston Hughes in 1958 some ten years before her first novel was published—represents "the special struggles of the Negro Woman with a respect and sympathy which I feel have not been sufficiently accorded her heretofore in American Literature."[142] Published in 1969, *This Child's Gonna Live* was well known at the time in literary and academic circles as evidenced by *The New York Times* editors selection of the novel as an Outstanding Book for the year[143] and a 1977 letter to Wright from Associate Professor of English at Norfolk State College Rita Dandridge inquiring about primary and secondary sources associated with the novel so that Wright's contributions as a "female Black American novelist" could be chronicled in the anthology *Black Women's Studies*.[144] Part of the project for this chapter is to recenter Wright's novel as part of the canon of Black women's writings.

Most of Toni Morrison's works have a through line that centers the complexities of Black mothering in Black communal contexts across different geographic areas and generational eras. Whether its Hannah and Sula in *Sula*, or Pauline and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye,* or Sethe and her children in *Beloved,* Morrison's exploration of the ruptures and continuities between Black mothers and their children, but particularly their daughters, has significantly enhanced the canon

[142] Sarah to Langston, correspondence, December 16, 1958, Box 1, Folder 4, Sarah Wright Papers 1944-2009.

[143] Sam (on behalf of Seymour Lawrence Incorporated) to Sarah, correspondence, December 4, 1969, Box 2, Folder 1, Sarah Wright Papers 1944-2009.

[144] Rita B. Dandridge to Ms. Wright, correspondence, July 15, 1977, Box 2, Folder 7, Sarah Wright Papers 1944-2009.

of literary theory and laid the foundation for theorizing rooted in Black women's subjectivities. Sarah Wright offers another Black maternal example to this canon in the figure of Mariah Upshur. With *This Child's Gonna Live,* I explore the ways in which notions of home and spirituality awaken Black women's desires around motherhood and womanhood, and how those desires and longings are forged in the depths of our interior lives and in community with others, and often disrupted by institutionalized anti-Black racism, classism, and sexism.

For Sethe in *Beloved*,[145] her initial escape from enslavement in Sweet Home, is disrupted by her former master coming to capture and reenslave her and her children. After trying to kill all of her children to avoid their return to slavery, but only succeeding in killing her oldest daughter, Sethe's connection to community through her children is almost irrevocably severed because of what she interprets as the haunting spirit of her beloved, yet murdered, daughter in her house in Cincinnati, Ohio. But it is of course the violent disruption of slavery that begins this severance of the mother-child bond and community. Toni Morrison writes that even the numerical description she employs at the beginning of *Beloved* is meant to signify "no posture of coziness or grandeur or haughty yearning of arrivistes and estate building for the parallel beautifications of the nation they left behind, laying claim to instant history and legend."[146] In other words, *Beloved's* opening "124 was spiteful" disrupts the notion of home—shuns it even—as something idyllic and welcoming, yet it is still knowable and illusive in its historical

[145] For more on the Margaret Garner, whose life experiences Toni Morrison drew from to create the narrative character of Sethe see: Mary E. Frederickson, Delores M. Walters, Mary E. Hine, and Hine, Darlene Clark. *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner* (New Black Studies. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Mark Reinhardt, *Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Taylor, Nikki Marie. *Driven toward Madness: The Fugitive Slave Margaret Garner and Tragedy on the Ohio*. New Approaches to Midwestern Studies (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016).

[146] Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," (lecture, The Tanner Lectures on Human Values at The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, October 7, 1988), 160.

proximity to slavery's venomous sting. Morrison sets *Beloved's* opening scene up in this way as much for the reader as she does the characters in the novel to literally approximate the displacement and theft of African cultures, African people and their involuntary and violently enforced movement from slave ship to slave auction to slave quarters, from place to place.

In Sarah Elizabeth Wright's 1969 novel *This Child's Gonna Live*, Mariah's desires for community are inextricably linked to her desires for her children and herself to escape the boundaries of poverty and survive outside the limits of Tangierneck and the graveyards of Cleveland's Field. In similar ways, Sethe's longing for her children to escape slavery are tied to her own feelings of abandonment by her own mother and loss of community which Beloved helps to conjure up in memories. In Sethe, the audience hears the voice of a mother once enslaved now free yet disquieted by a spirit named Beloved and the memories of her mother and daughter. In Mariah, the audience hears the unconventional yet rooted narrative voice of a Black woman living in a rural fishing town on the eastern shores of Maryland living in the vestiges of slavery and the throws of Jim Crow trying to protect herself and her children from all manner of disease and degradation. She too is haunted by the spirit of Death and children she has lost. In Sethe, we also witness a mother whose impetus to protect her children leads her to try to kill all of them so that they are not subjected to the horrors of slavery. Mariah is also confronted with the personal and internal choice between living and dying and in every instance—the blue pills and the River of Jordan, she is either spiritually disrupted or disquieted in her attempts.

Reading Mariah and Radical Black Mothering

For Mariah in *This Child's Gonna Live*, the social conditions of the Great Depression constrain her mobility financially and socially within the community of religious women who

stand in constant judgment of her, but also expand her mind to the possibilities of migrating up North because as she tells her husband Jacob, "they got a different set of white people in them cities up North."[147] Jacob, in his decision to stay on land which once belonged to his family, knows that his brothers are having a difficult time up North and all three eventually succumb to the harsh working conditions. In *Subjectivity in the American Protest Novel*, Kimberly S. Drake writes that "These two different versions of 'home' are based on individualistic notions of self; they hide Mariah's and Jacob's mutual (though mostly unacknowledged) desires for a more communal life."[148] I argue that their separate versions of home are also based in Jacob's fears of physical displacement from contested family lands and Mariah's spiritual hopes for a better home for herself and her family. The notion of home—which I return to in chapter three—also has a spiritual meaning for Mariah in terms of heaven as a home.

Part of what makes Mariah Upshaw a compelling character and central to my analysis of spiritual eroticism in the literary text is her consistent internal dialogue with herself and between God. Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant offers a useful framework for how to think through Mariah's sustained spiritual practice of communicating in word and thought with the divine. In *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus,* Grant's theoretical argument centers on how biblical, liberationist, and rejectionist feminists' answers to the following questions: "Can women redeem Jesus? And can Jesus redeem women?" are inadequate in the lives of Black Christian women. She offers instead a womanist theological tradition that begins with Black women's literature, speeches, and sermons, is grounded in the "tri-dimensional experience of

[147] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live,* 6.

[148] Kimberly S. Drake, *Subjectivity in the American Protest Novel* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 162.

racism/sexism/classism,"[149] is conscious of God as revelatory in individual devotional time and experiences that reflect Biblical truths, and roots itself in the compassionate works and brutal suffering of Jesus.[150] Womanist Christology must challenge the oppressive language and masculinist theological symbolism that defines normative Christology and move towards a more egalitarian Christology that applies not just to Whites and males,[151] but must "explore more deeply the question of what Christ means in a society in which class distinctions are increasing," and do "constructive Christology" that supports a liberatory theology that is consistent with liberating Black communities as a whole.[152] I contend that Mariah's trajectory through the story of *This Child's Gonna Live* reflects a womanist Christology that challenges, though imperfectly at times, the injustices in the world around her. Those injustices include environmental injustices, economic inequality, geographical and employment limitations, violent physical and sexual violations, and sexist gendered divisions of labor. Many of these social ills converge at the nexus of her marriage to her husband Jacob as their competing notions of home and desires for their family are often at the center of Mariah's spiritual longings for herself and her children.

Mariah and Jacob's lives are affected profoundly by the social conditions of the Great Depression and it plays out tangibly in scenes throughout the novel. In one scene, Mariah observes women preparing for Christmas by using their welfare tickets to buy shoes for their children, but Mariah explains that she "didn't have no Welfare tickets for to get any shoes for

[149] Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Scholars Press, 1989), 209.

[150] Ibid., 211-217.

[151] Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 219.

[152] Ibid, 221-222.

nobody."[153] As with many eras of high unemployment in the United States, Black unemployment during the Great Depression was two to three times higher than white unemployment, and in Northern cities about half of Black Americans were out of work.[154] And because of racial discrimination in housing and public spaces, many Black families were excluded from sources of government aid. Of her own upbringing, Wright explains that she comes from "waterway people, mainly oystermen and fishermen" and this is the primary form of sustenance for the people of Tangierneck. But even in this water-reliant industry, the discrimination and inability to get ahead is evident as Jacob's Uncle Johnathon says to him, "Water was never divided fair in the first place."[155]

While the water provides a singularity to their economic sustainability, throughout the novel water is also a symbol for their actual and potential demise. Mariah's own self-immersion into what she calls the River of Jordan—which is in all likelihood the Nighaskin River that flows directly into their town of Tangierneck—at the end of novel acts as a culmination of her communications with capital "D" Death throughout the novel as she ponders, "Didn't know how cold death was before" and then says aloud "Lordy, I didn't know."[156] But Mariah's reference to the Jordan River also suggest a baptism of sorts as Wright writes that Mariah "caught herself saying that thing on the road back home."[157] This same Nighaskin River, in name and history, stands as a constant reminder of the perils that potentially await Black people in the town due to disease and violent encounters with white mobs.

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[153] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live,* 197.

[154] http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/depwwii/race/

[155] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live,* 113.

[156] Ibid., 272.

[157] Ibid., 272.

In retelling the story of the events that happened in the aftermath of Jacob's grandfather and Upshur family patriarch Bard Tom's murder, Uncle Johnathon describes the vigilante violence that also forced the matriarch of their family—Mamma Margaret—off the family land and ultimately to her lynching at the hands of her white male family members in September of 1875:

> Had her all tied up into a two-mule team horse cart, but she wiggled a-loose part of the ways and jumped from that cart…. We even saw Mamma go down in this Gut when the horses hove onto the ferry. Heard her hollering, 'Hold on to the land…. Keep up the Church your Daddy left you….' And so on and so forth until the water closed her mouth clean up….[158]

Mamma Margaret's appeal to her sons, Johnathon and Percy—Jacob's father—to preserve the family land and community establishments threads throughout the novel as a symbol for rural Black people's insurgent fight to maintain what vestibules of freedom they obtained after the Civil War and during the period of Reconstruction. The land became a actualized symbol of freedom that was codified in United States law through the establishment of agencies such as the Freedman's Bureau in 1865. Yet Margaret and Bard Tom's lynchings, most likely by violent drowning, demonstrate the violent lengths to which white mobs in the same rural communities would go to maintain the white supremacist status quo. As Mamma Margaret was the daughter of an enslaved mulatto woman and a slave owner's son in the Haim family, she was welcomed by some members of the Haim family such as her cousin Ella, but was mainly tolerated by other white family members until she married a Black man, Bard Tom Upshur. Once married, the land bequeathed to Margaret by her father became part of her and Bard Tom's bequest which was untenable for many members of the white slave owning Haim family. In acts of violent and unjust retaliation, Jacob's uncle Johnathon retells the experience of how "Ella's brothers and a

[158] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live*, 111.

half brother of Mamma's [Margaret]" lied about their father Bard Tom, saying the white brothers had seen Papa "sail away from here on an ocean-going boat." Yet the Haim housekeeper, who also happened to be Jacob's Aunt Saro Jane, said that "blood was all over their clothes" when she went to do their washing after Bard Tom disappeared. And Mamma Margaret's own search for the truth led her to follow "the sky trail of the buzzards up to the Royal Oaks tree and found the bones and things" which she tried to get Countess Ann to investigate to no avail. In the span of two months, white mob members of the extended Haim family terrorized and lynched the patriarch and matriarch of the Upshur family because in the words of the Upshurs' son Johnathan, "They wanted this land back and wasn't gonna be satisfied until they got it." [159]

The Haim family's incessant and violent terrorizing of the Upshur family would last for generations, effectively leaving the Upshur family in a land barter system with the white members of the same family. Ella's daughter Bannie represents the generational manifestation of this genealogical land owning and water working arrangement as she remains a figure of unchecked authority in the town of Tangierneck until her death. Although Ella's daughter Bannie and Margaret's sons Percy and Johnathon grew up playing together, their adult relationships took on more complicated tenors. As Percy and Bannie grew up, their close relationship began to worry her father Jim Dudley so much that he sent her away to a city up North according to Uncle Johnathan. The secondhand retelling of Percy and Bannie's relationship both foretells a part of the narrative story that is whispered about in various parts of the novel, as well as draws a historical linkage between these two characters and one of the chief white racist fears of Reconstruction—miscegenation. Sarah Wright's ability to weave one of the most devastating legacies of Reconstruction into her narrative through the pulled together family

[159] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live,* 111.

recollections of post-slavery land distribution to formerly enslaved Black people and the violent and systematic commandeering of that same land by their former slave owners and, in some cases family members, is one of her more impressive feats in her novel. Wright's attention to post-slavery interracial relations—particularly the sexual relationships between white women and Black men and the financial relationships with white land owners and white-owned banks and Black workers—as part of the way a violent backlash to Reconstruction was instituted by rural white mobs against their Black neighbors is pivotal to understanding the familial and economic circumstances in which Mariah and Jacob find themselves and from which Mariah desires a permanent reprieve.

The acts of racial terror that befell Jacob's grandparents, Bard Tom and Mamma Margaret, in the 1860s were visited upon him and Mariah some 70 years later in the 1930s when after Miss Bannie Dudley's death, her brother and other white male family members and acquaintances come to terrorize the Black people living in Tangierneck. In chapter thirteen, Aunt Saro Jane informs Mariah that the Paddy Rollers are "coming around…Bannie's death ain't setting easy with 'em" and that "White people's getting mean here, children. Getting mean all over these counties."[160] Unable to sleep, Mariah ponders how she might escape the coming terror and thinks to herself, "get a-hold of some money. "In a hurry, Lordy, Jesus. In a hurry! But Jesus didn't help her to get a-hold of any money in a hurry and he didn't show her any sign."[161] When the white mob finally shows up at Jacob and Mariah's home, they have already violently attacked and attached to their truck Willie Reid who they say they plan to lynch if the Upshurs' do not offer up someone as Bannie's murderer. While Sarah Wright details the reasons

[160] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live,* 213-214.

[161] Ibid., 214.

why Jacob might want Bannie dead and Mariah's fleeting mention of murder, Wright never fully confirms to the reader who might have actually killed Bannie. Haim and his band of white male vigilantes begin to terrorize the Upshur couple, first with racist verbal taunts and then with physical violence. As they are being beaten, Mariah is faced with the prospects of having to defend her husband from being brutally attacked, as well as protect her children when they hear the commotion and come to the front of the house. She yells out "Take me, take me!.... I done it! I done it! My baby child's gotta live! All my children…" and her pleading is violently interrupted with "a booming and a great thundering crack on her skull."[162] In this scene in particular, Wright deftly avoids the narrative assumptions that lynching and acts of racial terror were solely a Black man's burden by also centering the violence that Black women in the novel encounter and endure at the hands of white mobs, white male rapists, and white female complicators.[163] Early in the novel, Mariah's father embodies this male-centric understanding of racial terror saying, "They lynching colored men every day by the wholesale lot just south of this swamp, and up there in them cities, too. But in a different sort of way." Mariah response, "But what about the colored *woman*?" is met with verbal and physical violence as her Pop Harmon pushes her while yelling "see my scars!" as a way of superseding his experiences with racism above and beyond hers as a Black woman.[164]

Sarah Wright is attuned to the vestiges of what Hortense Spillers calls the "ungendering" of the captive Black female body which simultaneously hinges on the abuse and control of a Black women's body for her reproductive and economic labor while legally and socially

[162] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live,* 219.

[163] See Angela Davis's canonical essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (The Black Scholar, December 1971).

[164] Wright, 8.

eliminating her subject positions as a woman, partner, and mother. Mariah asserts her subject position as both wife and mother in a valiant attempt to save her family, even if it means sacrificing her life for theirs. Candice Jenkins argues that the Black subject is often always in a constant state of vulnerability—both intimate and racialized—and that the Black female subject, in particular, relies on a "salvific wish" to make whole what has been broken in community:

> In the Christian religious tradition, spiritual salvation for all human beings is won through the sacrifice of the 'lamb' of God, Christ—a voluntary scapegoat for the sins of the world. The salvation alluded to in the term 'salvific wish' also depends upon voluntary sacrifice, but in this case that sacrifice is political and social, and the scapegoat black women themselves. According to the salvific wish, black women (and, to a much lesser extent, black men) could pay with their bodies, or rather with the concealment and restraint of those bodies, for the ultimate 'safety' of the black community as a whole.[165]

Mariah places herself in the sacrificial crosshairs of the unidirectional violence from the white mob to her Black family. In so doing, Mariah expresses a particular longing for a reprieve from the violence that has unjustly met her and those she loves and for her life to change or end, which is a constant refrain in Mariah's prayerful and haunting musings throughout the novel.

It is not until Uncle Isaiah sets fire to the schoolhouse in the community to warn all of the Tangierneck residents that Haim and the other men get scared and run from the home, leaving Willie Reid in the u yard. And it is in the aftermath of this violent episode that Mariah is able to make the connections between not only the terror and the avenging of a white woman's death, but the violence and the land.[166] Wright demonstrates the personal and communal costs to Black people when acts of white supremacist terror are used in service of creating and sustaining power structures to keep land ownership in the hands of the white and the rich, upholding distorted standards of white female purity, and maintaining false narratives of a Black male rapist. After

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[165] Candice Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 13-14.

[166] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live*, 226.

the abolishment of slavery and in the midst of Reconstruction, these racist discourses were deemed even more necessary by white power structures in the upkeep of racial hierarchies, especially in rural areas where white and Black people lived and worked in close proximity to one another, oftentimes approximating the same discriminatory land and water arrangements that existed for families under slavery. The fear of interracial relations, and miscegenation in particular, became the main animating feature of this white reign of terror, and through the characters Bannie and Dr. Grene, Wright is able to show the gendered contours of racism.

Sarah Wright's character development of Dr. Grene encapsulates the white racial fears of miscegenation as well as Black skepticism of racial harmony and white bestowed freedoms in the advent of Reconstruction. When Bannie's father sends her away on account of her relationship with Percy Upshur, it is implied that their relationship may be sexual in nature. Uncle Johnathan's account says they "grew closer and closer" and that Bannie was "chunked…up in the cities."[167] It is left to the reader to interpret the circumstances of Bannie's banishment to the cities, but Wright gives us many clues in the figure of Dr. Grene as to a possible pregnancy being the reason.

When Dr. Grene comes to the Upshur home to care for Mariah before she gives birth, Jacob describes him as "citified-looking." In the same scene, Jacob expresses a disdain for his father, Pop Percy, being called "Father" by Dr. Grene. "Calling him 'Father' like it meant something to him in that deceitful way most citified people had of acting when they had to deal with the country people."[168] The symbiotic nature of Bannie's time in the cities and Dr. Grene's citified attitude is but one clue as to the nature of their potential mother-child relationship to each

[167] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live*, 112.

[168] Ibid., 171.

other. And Dr. Grene calling Percy "father" may just be a figure of proper address, but it might also be that Bannie communicated who his father was before her death. Percy Upshur certainly had an idea of his possible paternity of Dr. Grene and based on rumors of Bannie's will, others in the Tangierneck community had an interest in the triangular relationship between the three as potential parents and child. In one scene, Mariah is walking to work at her new job with Emma and Tillie as they are "talking about some strange rumor they'd heard that Bannie left a will giving back the land to Jacob's papa and all her other property to that Dr. Grene."[169] While Mariah makes nothing of this conversation between her friends, she hears the same story from Jacob as he describes going down to the Calvertown Bank so they can "show him the papers on the land" as he heard that Bannie left a will "giving his papa back the land."[170] When Bannie's death is thought to be homicide, her white family members come into Tangierneck looking for someone to blame and exact their revenge upon. After terrorizing all of Tangerineck, they hone in on Dr. Grene, taking him into custody. When Pop Percy Upshur goes looking for where Dr. Grene has been taken, Ol Jefferson tells Jacob:

> I'm trying to tell you Jacob…your papa told me how he found out from some white folks that Dr. Grene had been arrested on account of Miss Bannie's death. Said to me he was gonna prove Dr. Grene didn't do it. Couldn't have murdered his own mother. Kept saying over and over that they was trying to frame Dr. Grene…they stole a will…trying to take away the land that Dr. Grene had come into…and your papa, too! I don't know Jacob.[171]

This constant reference to and speculation of Bannie's will that includes land inheritance for both Percy and Dr. Grene moves from mere rumor to tentative confirmation when Ol Jefferson says

[169] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live*, 207.

[170] Ibid., 209.

[171] Ibid., 230-231.

that Percy's last words to him before going into the courthouse after Dr. Grene were 'they wasn't gonna kill no son of his…was gonna tell the whole thing…"[172] Though told through second hand recollections, Sarah Wright positions the reader for this revelatory moment by foretelling so much of Bannie and Percy's early story together and focusing intently on the mystery of Dr. Grene's ethnicity and his rumored sexually coercive interactions with Black women in Tangierneck, including Mariah. Bannie's authority over Tangierneck and the initial tacit complicity of Black men in the town like Percy and the lukewarm resistance of men like Jacob to this exploitative financial arrangement also leaves Mariah very few options for escaping the same economic plight. But I argue that Wright positions Mariah within a womanist Christology framework as an informed, inquisitive, and sometimes agentive voice on the perils of childbirth and childrearing, white racial animus, inequitable gender dynamics, and religious hypocrisy.

At the beginning of the novel, Mariah is the mother of three living children—William known as Skeeter, Horace known as Rabbit, Gesus known as Gezee—and children who died in utero or shortly after childbirth including Mary who died as an infant because she was not able to take in her mother's breast milk and is buried in the town's Cleveland Field. By the end of the novel, their middle son Rabbit has died, Bardetta is born and they have taken in four other children, one of which Mariah tells Jacob is his with her friend Vyella. The contestation around the question of paternity is a substantive through line for many characters in the novel, but especially Mariah—from the conception of Mariah's first child Skeeter to the circumstances of Bardetta's conception remaining in question by her parents, particularly Jacob, her siblings, especially Rabbit, and the people in the community. Dr. Grene, the main doctor for Black women in Tangierneck, is at the heart of many of these paternal questions as he is the subject of

[172] Ibid., 231.

rumors throughout the community that he may be the child of Bannie and Percy as established earlier in this chapter, and that he has inappropriate sexual relations with his patients. The first inkling we have that Mariah has had an unwelcomed, and perhaps sexually coercive, encounter with Dr. Grene is in the first chapter when she describes wishing she had run right past him when she needed medical attention and gone to the Calvertown Hospital Clinic in the next town. But she says, "Didn't believe they'd treat me right though, Lord. Thought it'd be easier to talk to that new colored doctor about my headache—tell him about the screaming that backed up in my head when Mary died…Jesus!"[173] Here, Mariah's experiences as a poor Black woman lead her to believe that she may have better healthcare outcomes if she is in the care of a colored physician and not in the care of the white medical professionals in Calvertown Hospital. But as Mariah finds out, her identity and circumstances in life also make her susceptible to what Deborah King theorizes as multiple jeopardy and Kimberlé Crenshaw theorizes as interlocking systems of oppression. Mariah's position as a rural poor Black woman subjects her to the intersectional oppressions of sexism, classism, and racism. In this moment of internal dialogue, Mariah expresses both her financial and bodily vulnerability and the limitation of her choices because of external systems of power—a main hospital controlled by white people in the adjacent town and a male doctor with whom she feels violated. Mariah's general unease with Dr. Grene is not mitigated even when she needs care during her pregnancy with her daughter Bardetta. When her Aunt Cora Lou ask, "How come gal? He's right good they tell me. Best colored doctor anywhere around" Mariah first gives the excuse "Ain't got no money for to pay him." And then when her aunt inquires as to how she has money to pay the hospital bills and not

[173] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live*, 12.

Dr. Grene, Mariah trails off in a sentence that begins and ends with "Jacob'll…"[174] Dr. Grene's standing as a colored man and his social status as a doctor make his access to Mariah and the other Black women in Tangierneck possible, but it is also his simultaneous proximity to whiteness that makes his potential sexual violation of Black women more than conceivable.

Much of the speculation around the circumstances of Dr. Grene's own birth and his interactions with Black women in the community has to do primarily with the color of his skin. Almost every mention of Dr. Grene by the characters in the novel includes a discussion of his color. Mariah's father, Horace Harmon, describes Dr. Grene this way:

> It ain't a better or smarter doctor ever hit this peninsula…and he's a black man! White-looking, but he's black. People's going around saying he's passing for colored so as to get the colored people's business. But he's black. I'd swear by that from the way they tell me he argued with the cops down to Bannie's this afternoon.[175]

In Baz Dreisinger's *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture*, she examines the phenomenon of "reverse racial passing" that was first associated with the Reconstruction era and the need for white people in interracial relationships to avoid harsh miscegenation laws.[176] The idea of reverse passing also has cultural significance for white artists interested in traditionally Black art forms such as jazz. The relational, cultural, and artistic proximity to blackness has been cause for some white people to participate in a system of reverse passing that by way of color approximation, dress, or artistic interest, has caused them to self-identify as Black. But as stated earlier, while his parental origins are not stated as fact, Dr. Grene is most likely the son of Bannie Dudley, a white woman, and Percy Upshur, a Black man. In the eyes of many Black

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[174] Ibid., 99-100.
[175] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live*, 177.

[176] Baz Dreisinger, *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).

folks in Tangierneck, Dr. Grene's skin color allows for the more readily indefinable racial passing of Black to white. It is the color of Dr. Grene's skin that makes it more than plausible that he is Bannie and Percy's son. And it is also the color of his skin that seemingly allows him to evade the blame for Bannie's death as well as take advantage of his looks and citified persona to either take advantage of or engage in mutually sexual relationships with Black women in Tangierneck.

Dr. Grene's racial identity and interactions with Black women are such oft-discussed topics by the people of Tangierneck, that even Mariah and Jacob's children think to question the paternity of their own sister Bardetta. During her pregnancy with Bardetta, Mariah contemplates writing a letter to Jacob's brother Levi and telling him her most tortured thoughts including that if the baby dies she will be accused by the Committee of her Judgment of killing it because "it was Dr. Grene's." She also considers communicating to Levi what she overheard Rabbit repeating from the people working in the fields that "Every baby coming in the Neck right now is more than likely Dr. Grene's."[177] And when Bardetta is birthed, Rabbit talking to his older brother does indeed exclaim, "Skeeter, don't that baby look the same color as Dr. Grene?"[178]

As for Mariah and Jacob, the question of Bardetta's paternity is so fraught that Sarah Wright chooses to mostly convey their thoughts through internal dialogues and conversations with and through other characters in the novel. In one particular thought sequence when Mariah is in labor, Jacob fantasizes about confronting both Mariah and the doctor about the paternity of Bardetta as women from Tangierneck stream into their home to help tend to Mariah but also be in the presence of Dr. Grene. On what he perceives as Black women's infatuation over Dr.

[177] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live*, 93.

[178] Ibid., 172.

Grene, Jacob contemplates, "Taking over his house, his children, and finally just swamping that citified-looking Doctor Grene—kind of white-looking colored man that colored women got excited over anyway—who swaggered into his house to attend to Mariah."[179] In the midst of tending to Mariah, Jacob says that the question "how much do I owe you?" follows him, haunts him even. The implications here being that Dr. Grene is owed, or perhaps responsible, for more than just his professional medical services. After Bardetta is born, at the end of his fits of frustration with Dr. Grene, the women in the house, and his children commenting on the color of the baby's skin, Jacob hollers out "Shit, shit, shit! Cut it out! Don't want that white shit in my face." Jacob immediately feels physically and spiritually convicted, after already trying to justify in his mind any whiteness in the baby by recalling that there is white in their family. In the moment, Jacob also recalls that "Mariah was good little woman. Life just hurt her too hard. Only thing for him to do was take care of her. And he was gonna take care of his new girl child, too."[180] While not explicitly articulated, this quiet revelation by Jacob that Mariah has been hurt by and/or in life suggests that he may be aware of or at least considers the possibility of Dr. Grene's sexual violation and rape of Mariah.

As for Mariah, the same sort of ambiguity and agony as to her interactions with Dr. Grene exist from the beginning of the novel. Waking up from a troubling dream, Mariah feels for her baby moving inside her and thinks, "Jacob's your daddy, honey. I talked it over with Jesus. Know he wouldn't lead me wrong."[181] Though she is prayerfully hopeful, Mariah's uncertainty causes her to focus on the nature of her pregnancy as sinful. Describing herself as

[179] Ibid., 170-171.
[180] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live*, 172-173.

[181] Ibid., 12.

"nothing but a woman filled with sins," Mariah makes her first attempt to end her pregnancy and perhaps also her life by readying herself to take a bottle of Febrilline. But it is again her intimate relationship with Jesus that she calls upon and ultimately stops her from indulging.[182] Once Bardetta is born, the reader again sees Mariah conceptualize her daughter's existence as her own personal sin as a mother and woman apart from her difficulties in caring for and feeding her other three children at the turn of the year 1930 and in the early months of the Great Depression. Pleading with Jesus to "take me right now" and not leave her daughter behind to suffer a similar fate of sickness and sadness, Mariah silently prays for the resources to care for her four children, including her daughter who Mariah calls, "this flesh of her sin."[183] But Mariah's teetering faith is bolstered not only by her reliance on prayers and pleading, but also her strategic work to hide cans of food and spices from both Jacob who will question her desire to work because he wants to maintain a gender hierarchy in their marriage and the Welfare people who will question the economic and social needs of her children and family. Mariah's conception of sin is complicated in that while she questions the sexist idea that the price of sin falls more heavily onto women than men and the racist idea that holy living is in the purview of white Christians, she carries some shame as to the perceived sins of poverty, the potential sin of infidelity, the sin of sexual violation, and the "sin" of sexual pleasure. Womanist scholar Katie Cannon argues that the verbal compositions of Black male preachers are often either void of acknowledgement or critical of the lived experiences of Black women. Instead, Cannon argues, male preachers rely on "androcentric" or male centered Biblical, narrative lessons that center men as the normative spiritual being and women as peripheral or sinful foil. Womanist hermeneutics seeks to "place

[182] Ibid., 13.
[183] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live*, 202.

sermonic texts in the real-life context of the culture that produced them" so that patriarchal oppression may be rooted out.[184] In her discussions of sinfulness, Mariah's interiority is disquieted in ways that are not always readily able to decipher between her personal subjectivity and the sermonized subjectivity of Christian womanhood in which she has been instructed.

Mariah's internal contemplations get at the root of her thoughts about sin when in the narrative voice she allows herself to remember "the days before her guilt was established before the throne of God…."[185] The "days before" that Mariah speaks of are the days in the spring of her youth when she, Jacob, and Levi played in the swamps and "new grass" landscapes in a town over called Haimawalkin. Reminiscing on the birds in the spring air, Mariah describes a sexually pleasurable experience with Jacob, one in which she felt touched a "secret place in my soul."[186] Here is one of the few moments in the novel where Mariah's spiritual eroticism is imbedded squarely in her own sexual desires and internal exploration of connection between herself and a man whom she desired. Kimberly Drake argues that Mariah's "ecstasy here is characterized by communication with and connection to Jacob and by her feelings of disintegration… Yet she preserves her sense of identity by speaking during intercourse."[187] This point by Drake is important, in part, because Mariah's narrative voice is often filtered through her prayers and thoughts which she does not always vocalize in totality to the other characters in the novel, namely her husband Jacob, her friend Vyella, and her children. However this memory of rapturous, erotic pleasure is mitigated by the aftermath of her judgment before the women in

[184] Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (Bloomsbury Academic Press, 1998), 121.

[185] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live*, 75.

[186] Ibid., 87.

[187] Drake, *Subjectivity in the American Protest Novel*, 159.

the Church. Pregnant with her first child and alarmed by the Committee's treatment of her friend Rosey—who died along with her baby under their gaze on the grounds of the church after hiding her pregnancy for as long as she could—Mariah finds herself answering the call of the Church for all to come forward "who have sinned and are heavy laden."[188] Even though Mariah knows her fate will be the judgment of the women in her church, it seems plausible that her fear of meeting the same fate as Rosey compels her to come forward perhaps more so than the conviction of spirit through the women sitting in judgment of her. Gloria Wade-Gayles notes that in response to the Church's admonishment of her because of her out of wedlock pregnancy and the narrow-mindedness of the women sitting in judgment, Mariah "catalogues in her own mind the various sins of men in the community and the deliberate blindness of women to those sins."[189] But rather than abandoning her religious life and spiritual beliefs wholesale, Mariah cultivates a more intimate and steadfast spiritual relationship within herself and with Jesus. While some scholars like Trudier Harris have argued that Mariah's spiritual life turns from a sacred Christian practice to a secular humanistic one,[190] I contend that it remains rooted in a womanist Christian ethos that shuns the perversion of the faith for racist and sexist reasons and centers a life of travailing under and prevailing over difficult circumstances of which Jacquelyn Grant draws out in her theory of womanist Christology.

Mariah's spiritual subjectivity never fits neatly into a narrative of victimization and shame precisely because of the moments where she asserts her autonomy as a working mother, questions the sexist division of labor in her home, derides the judgmental gaze of the women in

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[188] Wright, 80.
[189] Gloria Jean Wade-Gayles, "The Narrow Space and the Dark Enclosure: Race and Sex in the Lives of Black Women in Selected Novels Written By Black Women, 1946-1976" PhD diss., Emory University, 1981), 224.

[190] Trudier Harris, "Three Black Women Writers and Humanism: A Folk Perspective," in *Black American Literature and Humanism*, ed., Miller R. Baxter (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1981), 52.

the Committee of Her Judgement, attempts and ultimately rejects suicide, and welcomes fleeting, yet memorably pleasurable experiences and instances of longing. Mariah's articulation of these narrative ruptures often come in the form of communing with Jesus and wrestling with Death, sometimes indistinguishable from each other. And when she is talking to her husband Jacob, the same dichotomous tension exists as part of their dialogue. When Mariah comes to herself after a bout of delirium and sickness after giving birth to Bardetta, Jacob comes home to find her talking about going into town to pick up prescriptions, attending her Aunt Cora Lou's funeral, and going back out into the fields to work. After trying to talk her down by calling her "Rah" and telling her to rest, Jacob's aversion to their family's reliance on her labor ratchets up and he says "you ain't going out in no fields last of next week or first of the next or either bass-ackward way to want to put it till you get well."[191] For her part, Mariah responds with "Jacob, is you cussing?" outwardly, but internally muses that she "wanted to kiss him. Wanted to kill him. Wanted to tell Jesus all about how she done sinned against him…him, Jacob!"[192] The clarification of the "him" she feels she has sinned against is key because Mariah often feels like the sins she has committed and the sins perpetrated against her are in direct conflict with her personal relationship with Jesus. This moment with Jacob is also an acknowledgement of the tenderness of their relationship that harkens back to the time of their first sexual encounter. When Mariah felt that initial pain, she told Jacob he was hurting her and he comforted her by telling her it would get better. In the moments after, Mariah reflects that he "gave me all of his tenderest life. Gave it all to me all in my thighs and my back and my heart."[193] Spiritual eroticism entails the ability to

[191] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live*, 183.

[192] Ibid., 184.

[193] Ibid., 87.

recall moments of joy and pleasurable fulfillment particularly with others with whom you cherish in times of travail and hardship and this part of Mariah and Jacob's marriage reflects that.

One of the major themes throughout *This Child's Gonna Live* is the desire of the people to hold on to and reclaim land and water that has been unjustly taken by white landowners and ravished by environmental maladies. One of the pivotal parts of Mariah and Jacob's relationship is their often incongruent connection to the land on which they live, work, and raise their children. Mariah's consistent and prayerful refrain throughout the narrative is an expressed desire to leave Tangierneck. And as readers, we come to understand that her desires to leave are by any means necessary. In one early instance, she admonishes and hits her middle son Rabbit across the mouth because he reads her lips as she is talking to the Lord about leaving.[194] The scene, like many other inner moments for Mariah throughout the novel, makes clear a sense of the anguish that befalls her for being unable to care for her children in the ways she would like, while intermittently blaming herself and Jacob and asking Jesus for forgiveness for how she may have contributed to her own plight. While Rabbit internalizes his Mamma's wailing as her attempt to punish him, Mariah makes clear throughout the novel that her children are her highest priority. When Mariah is finally able to leave Tangierneck, Mariah's attention to her children and her ability to find work for their sustenance becomes even more of a priority.

When they do briefly make it out of Tangierneck to a place called Chance, Mariah is met with the same judgments and jeers that she left behind. But more resolutely in the face of it, she proclaims, "*Anybody turn my children against me is gonna have to meet up with me first. Ain't gonna be no more setbacks for my children."*[195] Mariah and Jacob's move to Chance was

[194] Wright, *This Child's Gonna Live* 30-31.

[195] Ibid., 251.

precipitated by the death of his brother Levi. When Mariah does find a job, Jacob begins to ask her about making more money than she is letting on. Mariah describes Jacob's concern with her money in this way: "Even had got to the place where he worried her about her chewing-gum money. [His] Family short of money, let 'em bury Levi in a pine box!"[196] Mariah's desire to have a semblance of autonomy when it comes to her finances is similar to the autonomy that Janie seeks in her first two marriages and is able to achieve after her second marriage to Jody Starks and in her third marriage to Tea Cake.

In some ways, this brief journey to Chance and Mariah's journeys of the mind to escape the direness of her circumstances mirrors that of Janie Mae's geographical and relational journeys in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Though Janie and Mariah both express their discontent for the sexist and gendered dynamics of their relationships, their geographic, economic, and relational stations in life make their individual choices and opportunities for mobility very different in the end. Mariah Upshur's Black female spirituality can be read in similar ways to Donna Weir-Soley interpretation of Zora Neale Hurston's depiction of Black female sexuality in the character of Janie. While Weir-Soley argues that "Hurston could not rely on Christianity as a spiritual foundation since…it clearly separated sexuality from spirituality,"[197] interiority becomes the vehicle through which Janie "inaugurates self-reflection, mediation, and communion with the divine."[198] I maintain that Black women's spirituality, and subsequently Mariah's spirituality, is more expansive—particularly interiorly—than the rigidity of Christianity would suggest. A womanist theological framework—such as Jacquelyn Grant's womanist Christology or Katie Cannon's call for womanist hermeneutics that are invested in

[196] Ibid., 244.
[197] Weir-Soley, *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance*, 40.

[198] Ibid., 73.

both personal spiritual progress and the critical analysis and elimination social ills—has the possibility of reframing conversations about Black women's spiritual and erotic subjectivities, as well as narratives of Black mothering in ways that are spiritually healing, socially altering, and theoretically sound.

Chapter Two

Spiritual Eroticism Diffused: The Creative Privacies and Political Intimacies of Ann Petry's Interior Life and Works

"I'm a black woman writer, because I understood that they were trying to suggest that I was 'bigger' than that, or better than that. I simply refused to accept their view of bigger and better. I really think the range of emotions and perceptions I have had access to as a black person and as a female person are greater than those of people who are neither. I really do. So it seems to me that my world did not shrink because I was a black female writer. It just got bigger."[199]

—Toni Morrison, *The New York Times,* 1987

While the first chapter explores the idea of spiritual eroticism through the framework of the spiritual subjectivity and interior life of working class mother Mariah Upshur in Sarah Wright's in *This Child's Gonna Live*, this chapter focuses on spirituality as intimate connectivity and the erotic as creative interiority in the life and works of Ann Petry. This chapter is an intentional stretching of what spiritual eroticism can be as Petry's life does not neatly lend itself to an outwardly expressed traditional spiritual life. Much of my understanding of Ann Petry's personal life comes from the revealing and intimate memoir *At Home Inside: A Daughter's Tribute to Ann Petry* by her daughter Elisabeth Petry, as well as her letters to her Aunt Lou. According to her daughter, Petry's journals served as her "sacred space where she recorded her private thoughts."[200] Because of her skepticism around the collection and distribution of her journals, writing drafts, and correspondence, Ann Petry destroyed many of these documents. She did, however, keep most of her drafts and notes of her literary works and her daughter Elisabeth was able to read and retrieve other documents that were kept in personal storage. The culture of secrecy and dissemblance within Ann Petry's life makes her a promising yet

[199] Toni Morrison, "Toni Morrison, In Her New Novel Defends Women," by Mervyn Rothstein, *New York Times,* Aug. 26, 1987.

[200] Elisabeth Petry, *At Home inside: A Daughter's Tribute to Ann Petry*. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 13.

challenging study for the creative productivity and sociopolitical activist aspects of spiritual eroticism.

The period between the Harlem Renaissance and the modern day Civil Rights Movement is often overlooked in the historical conception and examination of Black political thought and cultural production in the United States. However this era is marked by historians for its proximity and intimacies to wartime, as the period between the two World Wars is known as the interwar years, and after World War II to the late 1960s known as the postwar years. One of the most telling signs of this period's historical omissions around Black culture production is its lack of a readily recognizable or catchy moniker that epitomizes the influence and contributions of Black American cultural life and America's understanding of Black culture. This era, which approximately lasted between the years of 1935 and 1960, is characterized by a political and economic climate that was grappling with the effects of the Great Depression, the influence of communism, and the ever looming prospects of war. Leftist artists and writers of this period included Richard Wright, Chester Himes, and Zora Neale Hurston and their work reflected the dire socioeconomic situations of many Black people during this time. Although the characters in their novels reflected the lived experiences and complex subjectivities of working to lower class Black people, some of the authors themselves lived lives of relative comfort as middle to upper class writers and scholars. Ann Petry was one such author. Elisabeth Petry describes her mother as an "ardent supporter of labor unions and the working class" who along with her husband and Elisabeth's father George David Petry were contributors to and supporters of the Harlem Left.[201]

Although Petry had a healthy skepticism for personal labels such as leftist and feminist, and stopped short of associating herself with communism, her work, especially the critically

[201] Elisabeth Petry, *At Home Inside,* 8.

acclaimed *The Street*, engaged the difficult socioeconomic and sociopolitical issues facing Black people and particularly Black women in 1940s Harlem. Petry's work and personal letters reflect the war-ridden times and the race, gender, and class oppressions that many Black people, and especially Black women, experienced. But before and after *The Street* was published in 1946, Petry produced a plethora of short stories, newspaper columns, and articles that chronicled Black political and social life and relationships between Black and white people in these spheres.

When tracing Petry's work in the realm of Black newspapers in the early 1940s, it is evident that she is intent on honing her investigative journalism skills and that her burgeoning interest and activism in Harlem's social scene is part of her life's work. Petry's written correspondence with her Aunt Lou show her concern with politics, the consequences of war, and everyday joys and sorrows of life. And the limited yet useful criticisms of her work during this time help to illuminate the intellectual progression from her journalism career to novel writing. An engagement with Ann Petry's personal and intimate correspondence, her public career, and published criticisms of her works garners a deeper understanding of how her social consciousness was formed, transformed, and raised over time. Petry's life—and particularly her activism informed by her relationships with Black women in her family—encapsulates what Audre Lorde said about recognizing "the power of the erotic within our lives…to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama."[202] By reading her journalistic texts and personal letters alongside her short stories, "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon," "Like a Winding Sheet," and "In Darkness and Confusion," what becomes evident is that Petry's concern with finding the depth of feeling in the characters in the drama in her everyday life is of great import in her writing and activism.

[202] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 59.

The issues that Petry chose to write about it her nonfiction work, were often similar to the realities of the Harlem environment that she covered weekly in the news and in letters to her Aunt Lou. Ann Petry's feminism, anti-war activism, and keen sense of Black domestic life allowed her to meld together a challenge to racism, sexism, and classism in the form of Lutie Johnson in the classic, yet unconventional novel *The Street*. Prior to the novel's publication, Petry established her intellectual curiosity and political prowess that would shape much of her life's work. Ann Petry's subject position as a Black woman journalist and nonfiction writer in the 1940s is important to this project on the development of erotic subjectivities through Black women artists' cultural and political production because of the time period in which she wrote, the subject matter that she tackled, and her interpersonal connection to movements against racism, sexism, and war. And it is in these pivotal parts of Ann Petry's story and work where I want to begin to expand the scholarship on one of the most important literary and journalistic figures of the twentieth century, as well as connect her and her most well-known character, Lutie Johnson, to a Lordean understanding the erotic through what I am calling spiritual eroticism.

Born to a father who was one of the first certified Black pharmacist in Connecticut and an entrepreneur mother, Petry entered the world in 1908 with economic and social opportunities and hopes afforded her because of the life her parents established. But as was the case for many upwardly mobile Black people at the turn of the century, anti-Black racism was often an inhibiter to this progress, particularly in terms of housing options and in other public arenas, no matter what ones educational background or social standing. In Petry's case, she understood her positionality as a Black woman born and living in the northeastern part of the United States and experiencing more tacit forms of racism. In an encyclopedia entitled *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, Petry said the following about her geographical upbringing:

> To borrow a phrase from the Society of Friends, from the Quakers, I am a birthright New Englander, specifically a Connecticut Yankee. But, of course I am not. I am by birth an outsider, a maverick. I am not a member of the club. I am not a part of the establishment. I have a tenuous, unsubstantial connection with New England.[203]

Although she was born into a life of relative privilege in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, Petry felt and knew what Du Bois coined "double consciousness" as she described the "twoness" she felt of being both Black and American. Petry understood that her financial and spatial privileges in New England, like attending predominately white, wealthy public schools, were limited by her marginalized status as a Black women living in a majority White community and region. She experienced the taunts of white, male classmates and the stares of other white people in the community. The "unsubstantial" nature of Petry's relationship to the place where she was born and raised proves to be very insightful as to why she sought Harlem to be her new place of residence as a young adult.

Petry garnered a great sense of Black women's extraordinary, changing, and sometimes difficult place in the world through her mother and aunts. Her mother, Bertha James Lane, owned a flourishing business entitled "'Beautiful Lines for Beautiful Homes'" and was also proficient in the art of hair care.[204] When she and her siblings were younger, Petry's mother would read bedtime stories to them and Petry described these pivotal moments with her mother saying that "her voice transported us out of the black community into a world of magic…"[205] Ann Petry would take these intimate and magical moments as a child and incorporate them into her desire to nurture those around her as she got older. Her daughter Elisabeth regards Petry's

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[203] Ann Petry, "Ann Petry," in *Contemporary Authors: Autobiography Series*. Vol. 6, ed., by Adele Sarkissian, 253–269 (Detroit: Gale, 1988), 254.

[204] Ibid., 260.

[205] Ibid., 254.

soul nurturing as one her best qualities as both mother and human being in the world around her. "Mother had an ulterior motive in all her nurturing. She possessed an overwhelming desire to understand people, to know what motivated them, and she used her caretaking as a way to observe them."[206] This characterization of Ann Petry's nurturing is reflective of Lorde's call to nurture within ourselves our deepest knowledges of self, but to do so also in communion with others to engage the most erotic parts of our being.

Petry learned at an early age how to mentally escape from the physical woes of racism and feelings of racial and gender inferiority through the vessel of her mother and the act of reading. Petry's aunt, Anna Louise James, was the first female graduate from the Brooklyn College of Pharmacy in 1908, which was the same year that Petry was born. Her aunt Anna Louise taught her how to sew and she, along with her father, inspired Petry to pursue a career in pharmacy. Of the women in her life, Petry wrote:

> My mother and her sisters (Anna Louise James, Helen James Chisholm), were extraordinary women. They abandoned the role of housewife in the early part of the twentieth century. All three of them became successful businesswomen, financially independent.[207]

Petry praises her mother and aunts not only for their ability to be economically independent of men, but their ability to transcend traditional roles of womanhood and domestic life. The Black women in Petry's life, as with many Black women during this era and in previous eras, reflected a feminist posturing that demonstrated the limited scope of what Betty Friedan would later call the feminine mystique. While many middle to upper class white women fought to find value and employment in work outside the home during the first second modern waves of feminism in the United States, many Black women were already in social and economic positions that required

[206] Petry, *At Home Inside*, 11.

[207] Petry, "Ann Petry," 261.

them in some cases and gave them the leeway in others to do both private care work in their homes and work in the public sphere.

Although assisted by their economic mobility and social access, the matriarchs in Petry's life were not working and creating a life for themselves and their family that was altogether novel for Black women of any socioeconomic class. In a 1930 edition of *Opportunity* newsmagazine, lawyer and activist Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander wrote and published an article entitled "Negro Women in Our Economic Life." In the article, Alexander responded to the false assumption that there was a "new woman" who was altering the economic terrain at the beginning of the Great Depression. Rather, it was the "rapidly developing social order" that was altering the role of women inside the home from one of permanence and perceived value to one of necessity that was often devalued. Alexander writes:

> Modern industrial processes, having robbed the home of every vestige of its former economic function, left in the home to be performed by the woman only those services which are as 'valuable' and 'priceless' as air and water but not recognized as *valuable* in a price economy, where standards of value are money standards.[208]

The work of women in the home began to lose value as the value of the industrial dollar began to rise. For Black workers, especially Black women, race discrimination went hand in hand with wage discrimination. But employment opportunities, such as factory work and other manufacturing positions were often more highly paying that positions of domestic servitude that characterized the job prospects of many Black women in the early twentieth century. It is worth noting that although Petry's mother's business was focused on the household and domestic services, there is no mention of her ever having been a domestic servant.

Petry's mother and aunts navigated these changing economic times by starting and investing in their own businesses. Unlike many Black people during the 1940s, they had the

[208] Sadie T.M. Alexander, "Negro Women in Our Economic Life," *Opportunity* (July 1930): 201.

excess financial and social capital to do so and find relative success. Ann Petry found her own measure of success when she began excelling in English class in high school. While in high school, Petry said, "I was paid five dollars for a slogan that I created for a perfume company. This came as a revelation—I could actually be paid for putting words to paper."[209] Even after deciding to go to pharmacy school, Petry continued writing mainly in the form of short stories. In February of 1938, she married George Petry in her family home and soon after moved to New York to start a new life as a journalist, writer, and wife.[210] Public synopses of Petry's life do not indicate specifically why she choose to leave her career in pharmacy and move to New York, but one can assume that these new living arrangements were more desirable for the newlyweds and for Petry in particular to pursue her long-held interests in writing and hone her pursuits as an activist and journalist. Petry's daughter Elisabeth alludes to these changes in her mother's life saying, "After her marriage, Mother's name underwent a metamorphosis" which shifted the spelling from Anna to Ann after a numerologist told Petry: "You will never be successful unless you drop that final 'a.' You must use the name 'Ann.'"[211] Petry's reliance on spiritual numerology and mysticism is but one way in which she expands for me ideas about spiritual eroticism and diffuses notions of Black women's spiritual practice.

After moving to Harlem, Ann Petry continued to stay in contact with her family in Saybrook, Connecticut. Specifically, Petry's Aunt Helen James Chisholm—affectionately known as Aunt Lou in their letter correspondences—kept most, if not all, of the letters that Petry sent her over a nearly fifty year period. Also while in Harlem, Petry delved into the

[209] Petry, "Ann Petry," 263.

[210] Ibid., 264.

[211] Petry, *At Home Inside*, 46.

newsmagazine business first as an advertising salesperson for *Amsterdam News,* a position she held from 1938 to 1941. Then Petry honed her skills as a writer in publisher Adam Clayton Powell Jr.'s weekly newsmagazine the *People's Voice*. Under the leadership and vision of Powell, the *People's Voice* was the mouthpiece for his political activist and campaigning group "The People's Committee." During this period between 1941 and 1944, Petry worked as the editor and covered general news items for the women's section of the *People's Voice*. In these letters and newspaper columns, Petry's passion for writing, publishing, and social issues is evident. It is in her professional work as well as her personal correspondence with her beloved Aunt Lou that Ann Petry further cultivates her nurturing voice in the pursuit of complex storytelling and social change.

Petry's Personal Letters

Ann Petry and her Aunt Lou kept in touch by way of letters for forty-seven years. In Margaretta Jolly's *In Love and Struggle*, she argues that letter writing between women writers and activists during the second-wave feminist movement is an understudied literature. While this dissertation focuses on the letters between Petry and her Helen Chisholm written prior to the conception of time known as second wave feminism (approximately 1960 to 1988), their letters to each other reflect what Jolly calls a "culture of relationship" that was intimate and meaningful.[212] I contend that the intimate and personal connectivity of letter writing is a form of spiritual practice that lends itself completely to my theorization of spiritual eroticism. The expressions of the interior self and the usual solitude in which they are written, make letters from one person to another one of the most intimate spaces there is. Though they have an aunt-niece

[212] Margaretta Jolly, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 3.

and not mother-daughter relationship, Jolly's conception of daughters writing letters as a way to "rhetorically negotiate needs and duties that are emotional as well as practical, expressing the way that love and nurture…have been the terrain and language of socialization"[213] articulates the kind of sustained and loving interaction that Petry longed for when she moved away from home. Over that almost fifty year time period, these moments of sustenance are evident in what Aunt Lou chose to archive including Ann's letters and newspaper clippings pertaining to her successful career as a writer. Aunt Lou, also known as Helen James Chisholm, married Frank Pierce Chisholm, a prominent community leader who served as the Northern Field Representative for Tuskegee Institute. He also served as Booker T. Washington's private attendant from 1901 to 1912. Petry was aware of her extended family's political influence and their close relationship to Booker T. Washington remarking in several letters that the Chisholm family ought to write an autobiography on Washington. Petry put pen to paper and wrote in October of 1945:

> But the real excuse for this letter is the item from the NY Times about Booker T. Washington. It occurred to me that sometime within the next year would be the ideal time for the release of his biography, and that the Chisholm's—mother daughter, father—ought to get such a book together and submit it to Doubleday Doran for their $2400 Carver Award which stays open indefinitely for any book, fact or fiction, offered to them which they believe will help toward the understanding of the Negro…. Booker T.'s life ought to be used all over the country for a long time. Wish you'd do something about it even if the rest of your family have no enthusiasm about it; because I think you could put some sparkle in it and some of your own philosophy would creep in and it should make awfully good reading.[214]

As an educated intellectual and avid reader, Ann Petry would have read W.E.B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* and been aware of the growing sentiments that Booker T. Washington's perceived

[213] Jolly, *In Love and Struggle*, 101.

[214] Ann Petry to Helen Chisholm, letter, October 2, 1945, Box 7, Folder 8, Frank P. and Helen Chisholm Family Papers, 1846-1994, Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library, Emory University Libraries.

position as an accommodationist and loyal friend to the white political and philanthropic elite in the United States, was problematic for many middle to upper class leaders in the Black community. But at the turn of the century, after Frederick Douglass' death in 1895, Booker T. Washington became an appointed and proclaimed leader of the Negro race according to historian Kevin Gaines who writes that Washington "…captured the spirit of uplift ideology, transforming freedmen's education into his program of industrial training."[215] Many Black elites and northern Black city-dwellers, however, shied away from what they interpreted as the more socially conservative leanings of Washington because they harkened back to a not so distant time of a reliance on the labor of enslaved Black people in a farming economy.

Even as an upwardly mobile Black northerner, there is no indication that Petry fit neatly into the segment of the African American population which challenged the teachings and philosophy of Washington. According to Gaines, "There was a regional cast to the political and ideological factions of black leadership, which, along with personal and gendered differences and divisions, placed the phantom of a unified black middle-class male subject imagined by racial uplift ideology even further out of reach."[216] Gaines's contention is that the myriad of social and political objectivities for Black middle-class and upwardly mobile people was entirely dependent on the geographical spaces they occupied and gendered notions of progress. Although Black people in northern cities dealt with racial discrimination and economic oppression, the mob violence and white supremacist terrorism remained an acute part of the racism experienced by Black people in the Jim Crow South. Much of Petry's political and social understanding of Washington came from her interactions with her uncle and aunt who knew the prominent,

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[215] Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 37.

[216] Ibid., 43-44.

national figure personally. But her ideas about Washington's philosophy were also informed by her experiences as a middle class Black woman in the North.

Just as Petry does not blatantly oppose Washington's political influence, she also does not show signs of being in complete alignment with his politics either. In her letter written in October 1945, Petry states that "Booker T.'s life ought to be used all over the country for a long time" which is indicative of her awareness of his popularity and influence within the Black community, not that she herself supported his politics. She does, however, support her aunt and uncle contributing to and perhaps writing their own biography about him. As she says in her letter, Petry encouraged her Aunt Lou to write and submit this biography for the Carver Award, aptly named after scholar and agricultural scientist George Washington Carver. Petry believed that the Chisholm's relationship with Booker T. Washington was valuable, worthy of documentation and would be a great edition to a biographical canon on Black leadership. Although Petry's family's ties would seemingly support a reading of her politics as conservative, in a letter written to her Aunt Lou in 1938, Petry's political leanings seem to be in the center, leaning towards neither the conservative or the liberal sides. In speaking of a candidate for governor in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Petry writes:

> If elected he will probably clear up the present discriminatory practices in the state—if not elected he might he might pull enough votes to make the Democrats and Republicans stop and think. It seems to me shameful that under the present state Negroes haven't a chance in Connecticut's civil service. Couldn't Uncle Frank drop a kind work for him in barbershops, clubs, churches, etc. wherever large numbers of Negroes congregate?[217]

The name of the candidate is illegible and his race is not indicated, but Petry supports him because he seems like the most likely and qualified candidate to address pressing issues

[217] Ann Petry to Helen Chisholm, letter, October 15, 1938, Box 7, Folder 7, Frank P. and Helen Chisholm Family Papers, 1846-1994, Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library, Emory University Libraries.

concerning race and discrimination in her hometown. She urges her Aunt Lou to persuade Uncle Frank into talking to the local Black population in order to garner their support for the gubernatorial race. It is clear from this letter that Petry is dissatisfied with the state of local politics as she calls out both the Democrats and the Republicans for not doing enough politicking and legislating on issues concerning the Black community in Bridgeport.

During the years of World War II, Petry is also very vocal about her sentiments towards the ineffectualness of politics and the shortcomings of government. In another letter to Aunt Lou in October of 1945, Petry details her skepticism as to the role her husband is tasked to fill in the war and how living without him since he deployed in 1943 has caused her to question the notion of winning in war. She wrote:

> It's wonderful to have my husband back again. He was gone exactly two years and four months and I'm afraid I'll never be wholly convinced that the winning of the war was furthered by 1) drafting him 2) sitting him down at Camp Lee booking dance bands in and out of the post and running amateur shows—but then there's much that Uncle Sam does that I fail to understand.[218]

Petry's personal reasons for not supporting the war inform her political reasons as she decries the drafting of her husband into the armed services and the boot camp practices and rituals that the U.S. Army employed to boost the morale of its soldiers. She wholeheartedly believes that neither his drafting nor the dancing shows and parties he is tasked to organize and put on would significantly aid the United States in war efforts abroad or the nation-building at home.

In a subsequent letter in the following year, Petry again expresses her frustrations with the realities of having a spouse who serves in the military. Concerning her friend Esther, whose husband Bert was beginning his fifth year in the military, Petry laments that their present marital

[218] Ann Petry to Helen Chisholm, letter, October 15, 1945, Box 7, Folder 8, Frank P. and Helen Chisholm Family Papers, 1846-1994, Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library, Emory University Libraries.

separation "seems to me enough to dampen the enthusiasm of any normal female."[219] In the same letter, Petry expresses her specific political grievances against the Truman Administration for their ineptitude and incompetence as United States foreign policy and governmental leaders. Petry states:

> I'm enclosing an article that sounds sensible—the League of Nations [illegible] suggests sending Byrnes to the Rivera. I think they ought to send him off on an island by himself until all of the peace treaties are written up and signed, by that time there'd have been another election and we'd have a hard-won Secretary of State, who might be faintly intelligent. And poor dear Truman off on his yacht in Bermuda pretending to be President ought to stay there getting twenty-one gun salutes until the end of time.[220]

The Byrnes of whom Petry speaks is James Byrnes, one of President Truman's chief foreign policy advisors who was appointed to the United States Secretary of State position towards the end of World War II. Due to the political differences between the president and secretary of state, Byrnes privately submitted his resignation letter in April of 1946, although he did not leave until after the peace treaties took effect.[221] Because these peace treaties did not pass until the end of year, Petry—like many other politically informed United States citizens during the war—was looking to her government officials to steer the country in the right direction politically more quickly. Petry exclaims that Byrnes and Truman might as well surrender their positions because their political clout in terms of foreign policy had diminished. Petry's politics, and particularly how national politics impacted the communities and people she dearly loved, are a part of her

[219] Ann Petry to Helen Chisholm, letter, August 23, 1946, Box 7, Folder 8, Frank P. and Helen Chisholm Family Papers, 1846-1994, Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library, Emory University Libraries.

[220] Ibid.

[221] Roy M. Melbourne, review of *The End of an Alliance: James F. Byrnes, Roosevelt, Truman, and the Origins of the Cold War,* by Robert Messer, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 464 (1982): 191-92. (accessed August 21, 2019. www.jstor.org/stable/1043828).

diffusion of spiritual eroticism that is attuned to the ways in which deep knowledges of the self can influence acts of service and engagement with the community and the world at large.

Not all of Petry letters to her Aunt Lou, however, have to do with war and politics; Petry also shares stories with her aunt about the daily activities of her life in Harlem. In one letter Petry talks about making one of her rare trips into downtown New York City and seeing all of the women, presumably white women, dressing and walking as if they "just stepped out of the pages of *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*."[222] Many of their correspondence deal with the happenings in the lives of their extended family members as well such as Petry's uncle Bill. Petry asked her Aunt Lou to watch over her family when she moves to Harlem, New York. In a letter dated soon after her arrival in Harlem, Petry writes, "Incidentally I shall be so grateful if you keep a watchful eye on my family…. If you could find time to make them laugh long and loud every once in a while I think that might help a lot. They're all too nervous, too tense."[223] Petry's close relationship to her Aunt Lou reflects the type of expansion of the erotic that Lorde explores in her essay "Uses of the Erotic." Together, the letters that Petry and her Aunt Lou send to each other reflect the notion of "sharing deeply any pursuit with another person."[224] In their pursuit for connection, maintaining familial ties, and wrestling with the issues of the day—war, intersectional inequalities, gender divisions and expectations—Petry and Helen Chisholm garner an spiritual connection that spans decades. Their sharing of stories, difficulties, and joys through letter writing reflects a particular ethics of care for each other, their family members and their

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[222] Ann Petry to Helen Chisholm, letter, October 15, 1946, Box 7, Folder 8, Frank P. and Helen Chisholm Family Papers, 1846-1994, Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library, Emory University Libraries.

[223] Ann Petry to Helen Chisholm, letter, June 29, 1939, Box 7, Folder 7, Frank P. and Helen Chisholm Family Papers, 1846-1994, Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library, Emory University Libraries.

[224] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 56.

work lives that connects them to understandings of the world around them and their interpersonal lives and how those two entities inform one another.

Along with swapping family stories and strongly encouraging her aunt to write and publish a biography of Booker T. Washington, Petry shares her professional accomplishments with her aunt Helen Chisholm and discusses her own career as a writer. Concerning her impeding novel, Petry excitedly writes:

> There are two more chapters of my novel to be completed and I shall have a sigh of relief when it's done though I'm quite certain I shall write the last sentence with reluctance for during the writing of it the characters became very real to me.[225]

Undoubtedly, one of these real life characters was none other than Lutie Johnson, the main character from *The Street*. In these letters to her Aunt Lou, Petry demonstrates her passion for family, writing, and politics. This passion and compassion also manifest itself in her professional career as a reporter and columnist for the *People's Voice.*

Petry's Journalism Career

Adam Clayton Powell Jr.'s progressive newspaper *People's Voice* was an important outlet for news on national civil rights efforts and social happenings in Harlem during the early 1940s. Powell, who followed in the footsteps of his father and became a preacher at the renowned Abyssinian Baptist Church, used *People's Voice* as a mouthpiece for his views on social issues. According to historian Dominic J. Capeci, Powell was both a champion of Black political activism and integrationist tactics, but argues that he would not go as far as to call himself a Communist. Capeci writes:

[225] Ann Petry to Helen Chisholm, letter, March 22, 1945, Box 7, Folder 8, Frank P. and Helen Chisholm Family Papers, 1846-1994, Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library, Emory University Libraries.

> Although Powell associated himself with Communist Party members, he was not a Communist. As an ordained minister, he could not accept the implications that Communism held for Christ's teachings. Nor could his capitalistic values and aristocratic style be reconciled with Marxist-Leninist theory. Imperfect and unjust, the democratic form of government remained 'the cream of the crop.[226]

Powell believed that the interracial politics and partnerships within the Communist Party were noteworthy examples to political players in the United States on how to successfully deal with race relations. But Powell, however, was unable to buy into everything that Communism stood for politically and socially. Petry's political sentiments are more consistent with those of Powell's in that she was not an outward Communist, but was a supporter of integration and profited off of her successful relationships with white people in the publishing and literary worlds.

Though the *People's Voice* was a short-lived publication in existence from 1942 to 1948, the one consistent feature of the newspaper's women's section was Ann Petry's column "The Lighter Side." This column acted as her stream of consciousness for all things related to parties, celebrations, benefit concerts, church events, marriages and childbirths. "The Lighter Side" reflected what her daughter Elisabeth describes as her mother's "unique ability to empathize with others, to visualize with great accuracy and in minute detail how people felt."[227] Her column included synopses of recent events and publicized upcoming events. Oftentimes, Petry highlighted parties held by distinguished political, activist, and cultural groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Council of Negro Women, the National Urban League, and historically Black fraternities and sororities. Petry describes one such celebration hosted by the Negro Actors Guild as a swanky, who's who affair,

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[226] Dominic J. Capeci, "From Different Liberal Perspectives: Fiorello H. LaGuardia, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and Civil Rights in New York City, 1941-1943," *The Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 2 (April 1977): 163.

[227] Petry, *At Home Inside*, 17.

writing, "In case your social secretary forgot to get you dressed in time you can get a pretty good idea of the affair from the pictures on page 17. The theatre great and the socially elect came in droves."[228] She goes on to name names of luminaries and entertainers, such as blues singer Ethel Waters and the wife of Bill Robinson otherwise known as Bojangles, who would grace the guild's ball with their presence. Petry notes that these Black performers were prominent in their entertainment fields of singing, acting and dancing and were often able to cross over racial divides with their performances.

Along with parties, Petry also covered weddings. Many of the marriage announcements reflect the war-ridden times of the early 1940s. Announcement headlines read "College Teacher Weds Soldier,"[229] "Hunter Girl Weds Sergeant,"[230] and "NYU Graduate Weds Soldier."[231] These announcements focused mainly on the marriages of socialites and/or soldiers who, by all accounts, were well-educated, middle to upper class Black people. Announcements about the financial contributions of a group or a person were also very important news items. One "Lighter Side" item read "The New York chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity contributed $25 to the Harlem Boys Club of the Children's Aid Society"[232] while another headline read "Marian Anderson Awards $2,700."[233] Renowned contralto Marian Anderson's appearances and concerts were followed closely by Petry's column, not only for Anderson's talent, but also in reaction to

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[228] Ann Petry to Helen Chisholm, letter, March 22, 1945, Box 7, Folder 8, Frank P. and Helen Chisholm Family Papers, 1846-1994, Emory University Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, & Rare Book Library, Emory University Libraries.

[229] *People's Voice*, 31, Oct. 1942: 21.

[230] *People's Voice*, 28, Nov. 1942: 26.

[231] *People's Voice*, 12, Dec. 1942: 26.

[232] *People's Voice*, 16, May 1942: 16.

[233] *People's Voice*, 30, Jan. 1943.

the snub she received in 1939 from the group the Daughters of the American Revolution who cancelled her concert in Washington D.C.'s Constitution Hall because it was to in front of an integrated audience. Petry felt a particular responsibility to speak out on injustices such as Marian Anderson's snub by writing about the talents and philanthropy of Black artists.

The column "The Lighter Side" was just that—light, good news that often provided readers a respite from harder news stories and the daily struggles of life. "The Lighter Side" is also reflective of the two main ways in which the erotic functions for Audre Lorde, namely the power of sharing in a pursuit with another person or people and the capacity for joy personally and communally in open and fearless ways. "The sharing of joy," Lorde says, "forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference."[234] Often, Petry focused squarely on the picturesque portrait of life in Harlem, from weddings to charity events. Although "The Lighter Side" columns primarily focused on the social, entertainment, and philanthropic spheres, Petry's career as a journalist proves her range and that she did not shy away from social and political issues altogether. Many of the parties and benefits that she highlights were in recognition of Black organizations and prominent people who contributed financially to the community. Petry even went as far as giving an unofficial award entitled "The Lighter Side award for "gettin' things done" to the Citizen's Sponsoring Committee for raising funds for a new art center in Harlem.[235] Many of Petry's news pieces outside of "The Lighter Side" focused on the welfare of children, the well-being of women, the ills of war, and the daily trials and tribulations of Black life in Harlem. It is also in these news articles that we see the fruits of her labor and activism.

[234] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 56.

[235] *People's Voice,* 7, March 1942: 18.

In the May 2, 1942 issue of the *People's Voice*, Ann Petry wrote an article entitled, "Harlem Urged to Attend First Meeting of 'Women, Inc.'" about the inception of the women's activist group she cofounded called Negro Women Incorporated. In her short biographical notes, Petry writes:

> Dollie Lowther Robinson, a great friend of mine, and I created a consumer's group in Harlem, composed on women; its object: help women get their money's worth for everything from hats to groceries to furniture. It was called Negro Women Incorporated—a name that someone once said is arrogantly all-encompassing.[236]

The group's mission and goals were just that—all-encompassing with the rallying cry for organization being: "Women Inc. has been organized because Harlem needs an all-out woman effort of defense."[237] At the end of the announcement in the *People's Voice* for the first meeting of Negro Women Incorporated, it exclaims, "Let's Go Places!" Literary historian Farah Griffin posits that this call to Black women in Harlem reflected "the sense of movement, action, confidence, and political optimism" of the time that saw Black people migrating from the South to urban cities in the North for more diverse employment and housing opportunities.[238] The group endeavored to educate Black women on everything from their job training and financial independence to personal safety, childrearing, healthy eating habits, and emotional and physical well-being. All of these services would to be available in this central women's auxiliary group. Situating itself as a voice for "Harlem Negro women's concerns," Negro Women Incorporated's rules stated that their only membership requirements were that "you be a woman and that you believe in a fighting program for the rights of Negro women" and the group's most pressing goal

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[236] Petry, "Ann Petry," 268.

[237] *People's Voice*, 2 May 1942: 17.

[238] Farah Griffin, "Ann Petry's Harlem," *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, ed. Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2015), 132.

and hope was that "women will turn to this group for help, advice, for information on any problems they may have."[239]

Negro Women Incorporated remained active in Harlem some months later as they are mentioned in one of the opening ceremony speeches for another activist group that Ann Petry became involved in known as the Harlem-Riverside Defense Council. Under Petry's "The Lighter Side" it reads:

> One of the best speeches on civilian defense we've heard in many a long year was the one Ann Arnold Hedgeman of the regional office made at the opening of the Harlem-Riverside Defense Council…for she mentioned the AWVS, the nurses aide program under Mabel K. Staupers and Grace Jones,…Negro Women's Incorporated's consumer corner in the library—and all the varied activities being carried on by volunteers.[240]

One of the goals of Negro Women Incorporated was wartime preparedness in the case of a destructive bomb. The call for the initial meeting stated that "If and when New York City is bombed it is possible that Harlem might be wiped out of existence because the women in Harlem did not know how to protect themselves.[241] Here Petry is responding to the fears of atomic bombs and the ensuing war overseas and addressing concerns that affected everyone deeply during World War II. In the case of an emergency, people were asking themselves where can I go to get food and where can I bunker-down to be safe? Petry, as well as the other Black women comprising the Negro Women, Incorporated board, felt it their duty to ensure that the Black women in Harlem were prepared for whatever may come to their city. And as the wife of a military servicemember herself and in her critiques of the United States government's handling

[239] *People's Voice*, 2 May 1942: 17.

[240] *People's Voice,* 17, Oct. 1942: 16.

[241] *People's Voice*. 2, May 1942: 17.

of their wartime efforts, Petry was particularly attuned to the ways that Black people may encounter scenarios in which they are forced to fend for themselves.

During the mid 1940s, Negro Women Incorporated continued to grow in their mission to aid Black women in Harlem, New York. In the October 27, 1945 issue of the *Chicago Defender*, a reporter described one of the auxiliary group's accomplishments saying, "Negro Women, Inc., To Buy Home In N.Y." The home was to be a haven where "women of the community may socialize and indulge in recreational and cultural activities."[242] No longer one of the main leaders of the organization, Ann Petry was listed as one of the Program Committee members along with her friend Dollie Lowther who helped her establish the group. Petry's participation in Negro Women Incorporated and other clubs and programs geared towards the needs of Black women in the Harlem community showed her willingness and steadfastness to seeing and enacting social change within her community. Her focus in the organization, like many Black women founded club organizations during and prior to this era, was community uplift through the means of self-help. The aims of Negro Women Incorporated were in some ways a continuation of frameworks for respectability politics that dominated Black women's social groups and organizations at the turn of the twentieth century during Reconstruction. As Evelyn Higginbottom surmises, the proliferation of Black women's clubs, particularly those originating out of the Black Baptist Church, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to undo narratives of Black female sexual and moral impropriety and replace them with narratives of Black women's respectability and "proper" womanhood. Members of the Black women's club movement aimed to simultaneously fight against the oversexed, immoral discourse which racist, white factions used to denigrate Black women of the day and regulate Black women who

[242] *Chicago Defender*. 27, Oct. 1945: 15.

might undermine their endeavors by not living up to their standards of respectability. But what Higginbottom and scholars such as Brittney Cooper have continued to articulate is that politics of respectability were often borne out of struggles to survive and a desire to be seen as fully human in the body politic of society without having to sacrifice their Black female subjectivities.[243]

In creating Negro Women Incorporated, Ann Petry and Dollie Lowther Robinson did mirror the types of organizing and platforms that were characteristic of the first Black women's clubs in that they focused on mothers caring for children, women learning new skills, and obtaining education to better their social and economic opportunities for themselves and their families. But they also responded to the times in which they found themselves which included the beginning stages of the Civil Rights Movement and the middle of World War II. Historian Kevin Gaines states that after the war years "Race riots, lynching, and antilabor violence surely contributed to New Negro militant consciousness. But so did black social advances in higher education and the professions."[244] Although Petry's efforts and the efforts of Negro Women Incorporated revisit the Booker T. Washington narrative of social self-reliance and the beginnings of the strictures of Black women's organizations after slavery, Petry and Dollie Robinson make a progressive Black feminist statement about Black women's involvement in issues pertaining to war, their health, their safety, and the well-beings of their communities and their children.

Petry infused much of her journalism with her interests and passion in women's and children's issues. She often covered news stories from the perspective of the women living

[243] See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

[244] Gaines, 237.

within the Harlem community. One such story ran in the *People's Voice* on August 15, 1942 entitled "Harlem Women Wax Indignant Over Latest 'Crime' Campaign." Petry was assigned to cover the story from the perspective of Black women in Harlem. Her news piece was in reaction to a *New York Daily News* story which reported that government officials allegedly ordered all white soldiers to be barred from Harlem for fears of their participating in prostitution with Black women. One of Petry's interviewees, Isabelle Spiller, said that she felt "the barring of white soldiers from this area because of prostitution was an insult to Negro womanhood."[245] And indeed this act, whether it was official or otherwise, had the potential to vilify a community of women and Petry wanted to ensure that these women's voices were heard. This news item, which made its way into Petry's short story "In Darkness and Confusion,"[246] also informed her conception of Lutie Johnson in *The Street*. In "Ann Petry's Harlem," Farah Griffin contends that "concerns about the relationship between racialized stereotypes of black women's sexuality and the public policies that resulted from them"[247] make their way into Petry's fictional work in a way that is attuned to her social responsibility as an artist and journalist.

Petry continues to show concern during wartime in another news report written for the January 9, 1943 edition of the *People's Voice*. In "Point Rationing—How it Works," Petry details the new ration system set forth by the government institution, the Office of Price Administration (OPA)—a WWII agency that gauged price controls for scarce commodities during World War II. This information was especially important to her female readers who bought the majority of the groceries and other household necessities. By March of 1943, not

[245] *People's Voice*. 15, Aug. 1942: 3.

[246] Petry, *Miss Muriel*, 252.

[247] Griffin, "Ann Petry's Harlem," 131.

only was Ann Petry writing for her column "The Lighter Side," but she also began editing a news column entitled "National Roundup" which dealt with more hard-hitting news such as court case rulings in the South and the mal-treatment of returning Negro soldiers. As the she was writing on different aspects of the war, the battlefield came into her own life when her husband was drafted to serve overseas. With her husband at war and the *People's Voice* is its last throws, Petry decided that she would "spend a year working on a novel and other things and during that year I would work only for myself or at jobs that didn't require too much intellectual effort."[248] And yet, Petry continued to exercise her skills to write short stories that mirrored the life and times of Black people in 1940s Harlem who had to deal with the growing fears of communism, the incessancy war, and fractured race relations in their own backyards.

Ann Petry's Literary Texts

In order to better understand Petry's literary work, it is important to spend time with and extrapolate from her journalistic news reports and personal letters which lend credence to her political leanings and social passions. Though spiritual eroticism begins from an interior place, as Lorde says, the erotic is meant to be shared in ways that uplift ourselves and those around us. Petry's own critical and intimate engagements with her work is also central to understanding her place as a novelist and writer. In her essay "The Novel as Social Criticism," Petry defends the necessity and cyclical nature of the sociological novel, particularly for Black writers. Concerning themes of violence in the writings by Black authors, Petry writes:

> The arguments used to justify slavery still influence American attitudes toward the Negro. If I use the words intermarriage, mixed marriage, miscegenation, there are few Americans who would not react to those words emotionally. Part of that emotion can be traced directly to the days of slavery. And if emotion is aroused merely by the use of

[248] Petry, "Ann Petry," 264-265.

> certain words, and the emotion is violent, apoplectic, then it seems fairly logical that novels which deal with race relations should reflect some of this violence.[249]

While presumably American is synonymous with white readers and critics, Petry is speaking to a larger audience about the sociopolitical life in which novels and other works of fiction operate. What is also implied, but not explicitly stated here, is how Black characters living under conditions of violence subsume those traits in their own narrative stories. This idea of violence at intimate intersections of Black life is evocative of Sharon Holland's theory on the erotic life of racism which I discuss in the introduction to this dissertation. In both the most seemingly mundane daily actions and the most intimate endeavors, Holland argues that there are traces of racist violence and racist intimacies that bind the erotic and racialization together in ways that have not been fully explored. I contend that Ann Petry's development of characters such as Annie Mae in short stories like "In Darkness and Confusion" is one way in which these racialized intimacies can be theorized.

In the midst of writing letters to her Aunt Lou and editing the women's section of the *People's Voice*, Ann Petry penned a melodramatic tale entitled "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon" that was published in a 1943 issue of the *Crisis*, the news outlet for the NAACP. In "On Saturday" a Black man repeatedly comes home to find that his wife, Lily Belle has left their children unattended to visit her boyfriend. He promises her that the next time he comes home to find his children neglected he will kill her. But the next time he comes home, he does not find them at all. Instead, the janitress by the name of Cora tells him that there was a fire and the children are at Harlem hospital. Subsequently, the man, who is never named, chokes his wife

[249] Ann Petry, "The Novel As Social Criticism," in *The Writer's Book,* ed. Helen Hull (New York: Harper Brothers, 1950), 38. "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon," "Like a Winding Sheet," and "In Darkness and Confusion,"

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with a black veil and then mysteriously makes his way to the train station and throws himself under to his death. Throughout the entire narrative, a siren, which at first seems to be the sound of an atomic bomb drill but a closer reading suggests that it could be the sound of fire trucks, is incessantly going off. This short story, which serves as cautionary tale against child neglect and gendered violence, would catch the eye of an editor at Houghton Mifflin and would ultimately appear to lead to Petry's "meteoric success" in the literary world.[250]

"On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon," in which the Black man is only named by his ominous, violent actions and the Black woman is depicted as lasciviously neglectful of her responsibility towards her husband and children, begins, in its most extreme and violent form, a narrative script that Petry comes back to again and again which is Black men's "dependence on hyperphysicality as a form of self-actualization."[251] Set near 133rd Street in Harlem, Petry positions the story in a place of familiarity for her readers. And yet, the plot of the story is far removed from the narrative realities of her personal life. In her career as a journalist, Petry would have covered incidences such as house fires and spousal murder and suicides during 1940s Harlem. And yet the themes of hypermasculine physicality and child abandonment recur in the narratives scenes of Petry's most well-known novel *The Street* in which Lutie knocks Boots over the head and leaves her son in a boarding school to fend for himself.

Petry's 1945 short story "Like a Winding Street" was also published in the NAACP's *Crisis* newsmagazine. This tale of domestic violence between Mae and her husband Johnson is spurned by racial discrimination on the job. In trying to convince Mae to go to work on Friday the thirteenth, Johnson makes himself late for work. He reasoned that although it took time to

[250] Hazel Arnett Ervin and Hilary Holladay, "Introduction" in *Ann Petry's Short Fiction: Critical Essays,* ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin and Hilary Holladay, (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2004), x-xi.

[251] Keith Clark, *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 62.

get Mae to see things his way, "he couldn't bring himself to talk to her roughly or threaten to strike her like a lot of men might have done. He wasn't made that way."[252] But two instances of disrespect bring Johnson to a breaking point. On his job, a White female supervisor chastises him for being late and then uses the word nigger haphazardly. Johnson has to swallow down his anger and an urge to lash out at her. Then in a diner on his way home, Johnson perceives that he is snubbed by a White waitress who refuses to serve him coffee. Again, he feels the sudden and strong urge to hit her. He goes home and is greeted by his wife Mae. Without warning, all of the anger that Johnson had suppressed from the previous situations of the day comes out in a fit of violence against his wife.

As readers, we are not privy to Mae's reaction to this vicious attack; all we receive is a narrator's view of Johnson's stream of consciousness:

> He had lost all control over his hands. And he groped for a phrase, a word, something to describe what this thing was like that was happening to him and he thought it was like being enmeshed in a winding sheet—that was it—like a winding sheet. And even as the thought formed in his mind, his hands reached for her face again and yet again.[253]

Johnson is unable to give verbal expression to his gruesome actions and his wife is rendered silent for the entirety of the beating. The inability of Johnson's character to give words or meaning to his actions is reminiscent of Richard Wright's character Bigger Thomas in the critically acclaimed 1940 publication *Native Son.* Both characters find it difficult to articulate their oppression in constructive, nonviolent ways. But Petry does allow Johnson a certain amount of cognitive space to create the psychological metaphor of the winding sheet for his anger. Winding sheets are sheets used to wrap the dead in before burial. Petry seems to be saying that the racial decay and depravity of the conditions in Johnson's life has made his mind a

[252] Petry, "Like a Winding Street," 317

[253] Ibid., 317

burial ground for these deathly, destructive thoughts, one in which Mae becomes the victim of his violent pummeling. Petry literary scholar Keith Clark interprets Johnson's physical and cognitive unspooling in this way: "…hence Mae (*Man?*) becomes a viable and legitimate target for his repressed, pulsating raced, *and* gendered neuroses."[254]

It is also worth noting that there is seemingly no end to the depravity as the story ends with "yet again." The winding sheet metaphor allows the husband and wife to be suspended in this place and time of violence and brutality. Petry's social commentary here is key. Johnson is described as bound to this act, even though when he initially thought about his wife, he could not fathom laying a violent hand of her. It was not until after he goes out into a white world and comes face to face with blatant and tacit forms of racism and discrimination, that Johnson discovers (or rather it finds him) this place of hatred, anger, and racialized gendered violence.

There is nothing distinctly feminist about Petry's "Like a Winding Sheet" or "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon." But the issues of domestic violence and women's agency, or lack thereof, are most definitely feminist concerns that Petry gives credence to at different junctures of her journalistic and literary careers. As mentioned earlier in her career as an editor and journalist for the *People Voice*, Petry covered the rising tensions in Harlem as soldiers, both Black and white, came home from the war. In the summer of 1942, one such tenuous issue involved the supposed ban of white United States military servicemen from Harlem for fear of their participation in prostitution with Black woman. As Petry detailed in her news report, the Harlem community was outraged by the negative characterization of the Black women in the community. By the next summer, tensions over this issue and the maltreatment of Harlem citizens by white policemen boiled over. The Harlem Riot of 1943 impacted Ann Petry in such a

[254] Clark, *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry*, 68.

way that she devoted a short story, "In Darkness and Confusion," about one man's response to the riotous atmosphere, to the memorialization of the riot.

William Jones and his wife Pink worry that they have not received a letter from their son Sam who is off fighting the war. William is concerned that his daughter, Annie May, is running the streets participating in all types of rebellious, lascivious acts. He not only deals with heartache at home, but William also experiences hardships in the world. Petry scholar Deirdre Raynor says that "Petry shows how both African American women (e.g. Annie May and her friends) and men (the youthful Sam and his friends) become 'sport and game' for inhabitants of the ghetto and possibly outsiders. In doing so, Petry further demonstrates that William (who cautions Annie May and Sam) understands the nuances and dangers of life in an urban community."[255] Just as in *The Street*, Petry shows how the degradation of the urban street can seep undetected into the consciousness of the people living therein. The perceived sexual availability and promiscuity of Black women and their bodies is also something that Petry intentionally revisits in many of her narratives, including *The Street*.

Although Petry cannot claim to have lived most of the events that she writes about, she creates fictional worlds out of the real life narratives of some Black women in Harlem, New York. In her critically acclaimed novel *The Street,* Ann Petry chooses to position Lutie in the familiarity of her childhood home Saybrook, Connecticut. On Lutie's trip from Harlem to Saybrook, Petry writes:

> She noticed that near the cities the houses were small and mean-looking, for they were built close to the railroad tracks. In Bridgeport the houses were blackened with soot and smoke from the factories. Then the train stopped in New Haven and stayed there for all

[255] Deirdre Raynor, "'Ain't No Room for Us Anywhere: Reading Ann Petry's 'In Darkness and Confusion' as a Migration Narrative," in *Ann Petry's Short Fiction: Critical Essays,* Hazel Arnett Ervin and Hilary Holladay, eds. (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 107.

> of ten minutes. She looked at the timetable and saw that it was a scheduled stop for that length of time. Saybrook was the next stop. That's where she was to get off.[256]

Ann Petry envisioned a woman named Lutie, not unlike the women she sought to help under Negro Women Incorporated going into the predominately white town of Saybrook, Connecticut to work as a domestic servant. At first, it seems a bit reductionist for Petry to play into the stereotypical narrative of the Black woman as a domestic servant. But Petry equips Lutie with personal agency and Victorian mores that allow her to walk away from that subordinate job and never look back. In "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon," both main characters die tragically, a wife is murdered by her husband who then throws himself onto train tracks to die. But Petry seemingly seeks to redeem this doubly fatal narrative with *The Street* by portraying Lutie Johnson, a woman who is perceived to have the perfect racially oversexualized physical attributes and live in just the right working-class conditions that could warrant her employment as a prostitute. But Lutie ultimately works to reject and escape the sexual exploits and advances of Mrs. Hedges, Boots, Jones the super, and Junto while also sitting in judgment of women who seemingly fail to live up to the standards of white feminine virtue and Western ideals of success. As Kimberly Drake states, while "Petry certainly doesn't romanticize street life for a single woman" she also through *The Street* and later in *The Narrows*, maintains that "the attempt to perform white domestic ideology destroys the African American family."[257]

I contend that reading Ann Petry's personal letters and journalistic texts in conjunction with her short stories and novel *The Street*, makes possible a spiritually erotic reading of her life as an activist and writer that accounts for the ways she bridges the spiritual and sociopolitical by tapping into the uncomfortable and sometimes unexpressed social ills and joys in Black life.

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[256] Petry, *The Street,* 35.

[257] Drake, *Subjectivity in the Protest Novel*, 107.

Ann Petry not only covered the troubling realities of Black women in Harlem in the 1940s, but she sought to rewrite certain narratives about Black women's sexuality and agency as well. Petry's own desires for a private facing public life did not seem to dampen her desires for deep emotional and spiritual connections with the people in her life to whom she was closest. Her letters to family members like her Aunt Lou about family, war, and activism offer a portrait of a woman attuned to the deepest knowledges within herself and the world around her, with a desire to say and do impactful work even as she worked to maintain her own private spheres of intimacy and pleasure.

Chapter Three

Spiritual Politics, Erotic Poetics: Aretha Franklin's *Spirit in the Dark* and the Black Women Poets of the Black Arts Movement

The Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s harnessed and fostered emerging avenues for Black artists to explore, create, and utilize a capital "B" Black aesthetic to express a myriad of Black experiences. Many of the artists most associated with the movement, such as Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni, were greatly influenced by and had a great impact on the Black Power Movement and the struggle to create and maintain identity, equity, and art for and by Black people. As in many other movements for racial justice, the male voices in the movement could sometimes seem to have preeminence over the voices of women in the movement. Although the male perspective is thoroughly visible in the works of artists such as Baraka and Haki Madhubuti, the standpoint of women in the movement holds its own. Unifying around their Black experience, the works of both men and women poets of the movement tackle many of the same issues pertaining to racial struggle, uplift, and equality. But many of the women poets also have perspectives informed by Black feminism, womanism, women of color feminisms, and are concerned about gendered assumptions about public and private labor, sexuality and spirituality, the needs of Black children, among other intersectional concerns. Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez and Carolyn Rodgers along with other women poets, engage with their feminist ideologies and their racial identities to create work that is responsive to the movement and the moment in which they find themselves. Through their work, the women of the movement show an intersectional understanding of the racial and gender tensions that exist in both their field and in the larger context of society.

The 1960s were a tumultuous time for the American establishment. Black people were, in the famed words of Fannie Lou Hamer, "sick and tired of being sick and tired." Initially, the tenets and practices of the Civil Rights Movement, which endorsed Gandhi's teachings of passive resistance, governed the politics and rhetoric in the fight for equality. But as the movement progressed, and the violence against Black people became more prevalent, many in the Black community—particularly those of a younger generation—became incensed and turned from nonviolent tactics to more militant forms of protest. One such turn occurred in 1966 at a Greenwood, Mississippi rally protesting the death of University of Mississippi student James Meredith. After the speeches of Southern Christian Leadership Conference leader Dr. King and Congress of Racial Equality representative Floyd McKissick, Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, who had been arrested earlier that day, took the stage. Carmichael "urged the audience repeatedly to demand, instead of freedom, "Black power." This public declaration of private sentiments erupted in Black communities causing many to claim their blackness as an identity of beauty and strength, and to denounce anti-Black political, social, and economic systems of the United States. With the emergence of the Black Power Movement and Black Nationalism, Black artists were not exempt from embracing their Black identities within their cultural production and having complicated feelings and radical politics towards the hegemonic white establishment. In fact, it was imperative for Black artists, especially poets to use Black aesthetics in order to imbue their poetry with messages of Black militancy and Black Pride so that the Black audience could see their experiences articulated through a Black artistic perspective.

In Larry Neal's essay "The Black Arts Movement," he describes the movement as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister" of Black Power.[258] In so doing, Neal argues that the arts—particularly a Black art aesthetic—can be an agent of awakening within the larger movement and an antidote to the social and political unrest of the moment. New writings on the Black Arts Movement offer more nuanced explorations of the racial and gender politics at play within the movement.[259] I contend that the Black Arts Movement represents a model for how larger movement politics and aims can not only be filtered through an aesthetic arm, but become foundationally generative of the movement politics themselves.

Black Women and the Black Arts Movement

The poetry of women artists in the Black Arts Movement is often responsive and agentive concerning the state of Black people, and the particular creative and social spaces that Black women occupy. Art, both the visual and the written, became a necessary and accessible instrument for expressing Black pride and self-love based in community. In Barbara Mahone's poem "What Color is Black?," she writes that the color black is "the feeling that we share / the love we must express / the color of our strength."[260] Mahone crystalizes blackness as an expression of what Audre Lorde defines as the erotic—deep and abiding connection to one's self and the shared pursuits with another person in the service of joy. That black is the foundational color of one's self love and love for our "brothers sisters" in all "shades of black" lends itself to my own centering of spiritual eroticism in Black women's literary and musical traditions.

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[258] Larry Neal. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Drama Review: TDR* 12, no. 4 (1968), 29. 28-39. doi:10.2307/1144377, 29.

[259] See Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, eds. *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

[260] Arnold Adoff, ed, *My Black Me* (New York: Dutton's Children's Books, 1994), 68.

Mahone's emphasis on other colors that show up along black ("the grey streaks / in my mother's hair…my yellow cousin's smile") wittingly gives black a complexity and beautiful connotation by associating it with aging and a slightly tarnished, yet still visible smile. In a racist system of beauty that denotes white skin as the hegemonic standard for beauty and associates negative images with the color black, it was imperative for the works of Black artists in written, visual and performative forms to proclaim that "black is beautiful." In her poem "Do Not Think," Carol Freeman admonishes her reading audience to not be afraid of being pulled into "Blackness" by the artists and revolutionaries of the day because "we only want to bring you home."[261] Home becomes the place where Black beauty, love, and pride are cultivated and through art a narrative story of home can be told.

The Black Arts Movement mirrored the aims of the Black Power movement which meant that many of the issues concerning gender equity and respect that were of ideological and practical importance to Black women a part of the movements were addressed in their art as well. Nikki Giovanni's poem "Universality"[262] demonstrates the narrative inseparability of Black women, men, and children in society where anti-Black racism persists:

> You see boy
> is universal
> It can be a
> man
> a woman
> a child
> or anything—
> but normally it's
> a
> nigger
> I was told

[261] Adoff, *My Black Me,* 69

[262] Nikki Giovanni, *Black Feeling, Black Talk/Black Judgement* (1968; repr., New York: Morrow Quill Paperback, 1979), 64.

According to certain Black aesthetic tropes, Giovanni's poem is collective in that it unites all Black people around the use of the word "boy" by white people. Although the term is usually reserved as a derogatory label for Black men, for Giovanni, its use transcends gender and becomes a derisive label that devalues all Black people. Black women poets often used their art to denounce white imposed images and stereotypes such as "boy." The following lines from Sanchez's "Homecoming"[263] demonstrate that fact as well:

this is for real.
black
niggers
my beauty.
baby.
i have learned it
ain't like they say
in the newspapers.

By situating the words "black" and "niggers" and "my beauty" a part from the other lines and staggered together, Sanchez attempts to deconstruct the racist and limiting connotations of nigger and create a new and radical meaning that rejects the stereotypes of Black people that exist in the racist white imaginary. The last two lines of the poem identify Sanchez's "outsider within"[264] positioning within her blackness as she has witnessed that the images of Black people portrayed on the outside, or rather those perpetuated by white-driven media, are not congruent with the images that she has become accustomed to within the "home" of blackness. Instead of associating blackness with inferiority, malevolence, and ugliness, Black poets during the Black Arts Movement made it part of their mission to use their poetry to lovingly critic, uplift, and call their people beautiful.

[263] Sonia Sanchez, *Homecoming* (Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1969), 9.

[264] See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

The Black Arts Movement was not immune to the influence of the most visible Black leadership in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. When history documents Black leaders during the period of the 1960s, the names that most often appear are Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. These two men, while living and especially after their assassinations, had a profound impact on the subject matter of Black poetry. Many Black women poets devoted significant poetic space to express their feelings about these two men and their intellectual engagements and critiques of their doctrines. Giovanni's poem "The Funeral of Martin Luther King Jr."[265] is a sobering statement about the condition of the world even after Dr. King's efforts for social justice:

> His headstone said
> FREE AT LAST, FREE AT LAST
> But death is a slave's freedom
> We seek the freedom of free men
> And the construction of a world
> Where Martin Luther King could have lived
> and preached non-violence

By quoting the famous lines from Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech that are written on his epitaph, the first three lines of the poem seem to be an ideological criticism of Dr. King's nonviolence rhetoric with the critical conjunction "but" signifying the dwindling of his peaceable civil rights message into that of a slave's blessed exclamation of hope. Giovanni questions the very notion of Black people having to wait to obtain freedom posthumously in heaven. Moreover, she interrogates the passive resistance teachings of the Civil Rights Movement and calls on Black people to more forcibly seek freedom while they are alive and able to experience it as a free people. For Giovanni, it is only when freedom has been obtained by Black and free

[265] Giovanni, *Black Feeling, Black Talk/Black Judgement*, 56.

people that peace can be had by all which is reflective of Reverend Dr. King's message that "No one is free until we are all free."

Some of Sonia Sanchez poetic work, in particular, seems to be extremely effected by the life and death of Malcolm X. In 1972, Sanchez aligned herself with the Nation of Islam and its separatist teachings, but would later draw away from the organization because of their stances on Black women's rights. In the last stanza of her poem entitled "malcolm,"[266] Sanchez writes:

> do not speak to me of living.
> life is obscene with crowds
> of white on black.
> death is my pulse.
> what might have been
> is not for him/or me
> but what could have been
> floods the womb until I drown.

When she interjects that living would be obscene with "white on black," Sanchez is seemingly quantifying her concerns and objections to integration. It is the lost dream of Black separatism that seems to have died in the wake of Malcolm X's death that consumes her. Sanchez's poetry is also critical of her people, especially Black men. "to all brothers"[267] expresses interracial relations between Black men and white women, while "to a jealous cat"[268] speaks to men who are not secure enough to trust their women. In "to all brothers." Sanchez addresses Black men who are propositioned by "grey chicks" who want to "integrate their blackness." These grey chicks she speaks of are presumably white women who try to insert themselves into the lives of Black men by using their perceived physical attractiveness. And as a concerned sister who is trying to protect the "authentic blackness," Sanchez ends by saying "this sister knows and waits"

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[266] Sanchez, *Homecoming,* 15.

[267] Ibid., 10.

[268] Ibid., 13

meaning she is waiting on her brothers to return home. In "to a jealous cat," the trust issue extends beyond a man imagining his partner possibly cheating: "you imagine me going in and out some other cat." The poem seems to suggest a larger issue of Black men trying to assume their dominance over Black women. But Sanchez flips it and at the end of poem calls the brothers out by saying, "perhaps you ain't the man we thought" implying that the "head negro in charge" syndrome is simply a cover-up for the insecurities and inadequacies that Black men feel in a society which seeks to psychologically castrate them. It is this particular power dynamic that exist between Black women and men—men feeling that women should take the back seat in terms of racial equality, while women want the freedom to drive and create their own futures including a future of desirability—that Sanchez is speaking to critically in the above poems.

One of Don L. Lee's poems[269] demonstrates Black woman's assumed subjection under the will of her Black man:

> blackwoman
> is an
> in and out
> rightsideup
> action-image
> of her man. . . . . .
> in other
> (blacker) words;
> she's together,
> if
> he
> bes.

His poem implies that a Black woman's every thought, attitude, and action should reflect that of her man, and to a larger extent, the whole of the Black community. The structure of the first two words indicates that her blackness and womanliness are inseparable. And the fact that "black"

[269] Cheryl Clarke, *"After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 49.

comes first in his description of the Black woman and the word "blacker" is set apart from the rest of the poem suggests that race takes precedence over any other intersecting identities of Black women. A Black woman, Lee would contend, is complete only if she is attached to the destiny of a Black man, and there is no alternative option for her relational existence. Scholar Cheryl Clarke puts it this way: "No space for black women's multiple identities is given between race and gender in the best of all possible Black (male) worlds."[270] Although many of these paternalistic and patriarchal attitudes were prevalent for some time within certain movement spaces dominated by men, the public and sustained articulation of these attitudes was often always a direct response to the women's rights movement and women's vocalizations for autonomy and equal treatment. While many Black women artists were concerned with how their creative and political work might impact their communities, I argue that the impetus for that work often stemmed from their inwardly cultivated creative lives and the relationships they nurtured amongst each other.

During the 1960s, not only was the fight for civil and equal rights and racial justice intensifying in the United States, but the women's liberation movement was gaining renewed momentum as well. As I explained in the introduction, particularly around ideas of sexual conservatism and antipornography activism, mainstream White feminists and feminists in the Black community often became in Nash's words "strange bedfellows." Clarke summarizes the women's movement's influence on Black women writers this way:

> The visible gains of the Women's Liberation Movement were not lost on black women writers within the circle of the Black Arts Movement as they began to distance themselves from its dictates. Though they openly claimed to share an equitable power relationship with black men, black women—activists, academics, and artists alike—began to identify with feminists on issues of hierarchy…and re-

[270] Clarke, *"After Mecca,"* 49.

cognition for the work they were doing "within the circle" and in the Movement.[271] The circle that Clarke speaks of is the circle of blackness in which every Black person who seeks to be culturally informed and enlightened can enter and dwell. The problem that Clarke sees with this circle is that "the boundary of that 'innermost circle' of blackness was heavily policed by the 'new black nationalist patriarchy.'"[272]

The sentiments of many of the men in the movement were that the feminist cause would impede the progress in the fight for racial and social justice which was similar to the struggles for emancipation and liberation in the early twentieth century which often narratively pinned the issues of abolition and suffrage against each other. But what was not always understood by Black men in the Black Arts Movement was the fact that Black women dealt with intersectional oppressions including race, gender, and class that converged at the nexus of their identities. Black women writers were oftentimes overlooked in the innermost circle of "male blackness" and their presence in the circle of (white) womanhood was oftentimes marginalized. It was not enough for Black women to stand in the shadows of Black men as their "action images" or be relegated to an inferior subject position in relation to white women; Black women wanted and demanded the freedom of being included within this spaces, as well as treated equally on the peripheral and outside the margins. Women writers of the Black Arts Movement moved within both the gendered and racial spheres in their social and activists lives and they intended to express their multifaceted identities in those spaces and through their poetic works as well.

From the beginning of the Black Arts Movement, the poetry of Black women was attuned to the political, racial, and feminist demands and desires that they sought. Many of the poems attacked the paternalism within the social movements in the Black communities. As Patricia

[271] Ibid., 84.
[272] Clarke, *"After Mecca,"* 49.

Hills Collins puts it, "African American women intellectuals have been 'talking quite a bit' since 1970 and have insisted that the masculinist bias in Black social and political thought, the racist bias in feminist theory, and the heterosexist bias in both be corrected."[273] Black women poets sought to address and correct these very biases in their work by asserting their unique feminist experiences and viewpoints into their poetry.

Audre Lorde, whose poetic voice permeates the Black Arts Movement, wrote a long poem in 1979 in the form of a chorale entitled, "Need: A Chorale for Black Woman Voices."[274] The irony of the poem is that a chorale in the Black community is usually meant to be a song of praise sung in a church by a group of people. But in Lorde's interpretation, the women singing are expressing the loss of their voices both physically and spiritually at the hands of violent men. The first stanza is applicable to the state of all Black women in a White, patriarchal, male dominated society when the poet sings:

> This woman is Black
> so her blood is shed into silence
> this woman is Black
> so her blood falls to earth
> like the droppings of birds
> to be washed away with silence and rain.

Marginalized by race, gender, and oftentimes class, Lorde articulates that a Black woman's existence is not only silenced in life, but also in death as even the most horrific of crimes go undocumented and forgotten. This speaks to an even larger issue of hegemonic erasures of Black women's perspectives and experiences from movement politics and in history more generally.

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[273] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 8.

[274] Audre Lorde, *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 199-206.

As Clarke puts it, Audre Lorde challenged the "black nationalist orthodoxy and white feminist exclusion"[275] and inspired other Black feminist to do the same. In particular, Lorde introduced to some and broadened the perspectives of others on the subject of lesbian feminism. In "Love Poem,"[276] the sexual innuendos abound as she implores earth to "make sky flow honey out of my hips." By the end of the poem, she is so enticed by "earth," otherwise interpreted as woman, that she keeps coming back for more: "I swing out over the earth / over and over again." But for Lorde, it is not only about physical contact and sexual attraction between two women, but also the interpersonal relationships that are experienced between friends, grandmothers, mothers, daughters, aunts, sisters, and every other bond in between. "Love Poem," originally published in Lorde's 1973 poetry collection *From a Land Where Other People Live*, is an early articulation of the erotic as a deep level of feeling that can be sexually pleasurable or sensually platonic, with both spaces providing intimate levels of joy and care between the women sharing in that space together.

"Black Mother Woman"[277] is an ode to a mother from her daughter who, as the mother ages, also ages into the image of her mother's "once-delicate flesh split with deceitful longings." As the poem progresses, the reader gets the sense that their relationship has been strained due to the natural aging process—a mother's attempt to hold on to her past self and a daughter's break from youthfulness. Lorde describes the mother's contempt as the "center of fury" which she has used to "hang" her daughter in silence. But after what seems like years of the mother secretly

[275] Clarke, *"After Mecca,"* 161.

[276] Lorde, *Undersong,* 141.

[277] Ibid., 100-101.

envying her daughter and the daughter believing that it was just "heavy love" that her mother displayed towards her, the daughter addresses the mother saying:

> I have peeled away you anger
> down to its core of love
> and look mother
> I am a dark temple
> where your true spirit rises
> beautiful tough as chestnut
> stanchion against nightmares or weakness

The daughter reassures her mother that for all of her "long-suffering," she has created a "dark temple" in the person of her daughter for which her beautiful spirit is free to live and thrive. The last sentence is very illuminating and signifies that tension between mother and daughter still exist: "I learned from you / to define myself / through your denials." Assuming Lorde is speaking about her experience with her own mother, the implications are that it was her mother's denial of her daughter's sexual preference that put a snag in their relationship and initially forced Lorde to define herself negatively through the eyes of her mother. Moreover, like any mother who has hopes and dreams for her daughter, to have those dreams go unfulfilled is oftentimes hurtful and hard to even imagine. Lorde sits with that tension in "Black Mother Woman," echoing tensions that she would draw attention to later in "Uses of the Erotic" when articulating that sometimes the "erotic charge is not easily shared" when the consciousness of either woman has not be awakened to new interpretations of the erotic itself.[278]

Carolyn Rodgers' poem "Portrait"[279] is another example of a mother having dreams and wanting more for her children. The speaker of the poem is a child looking back on the childhood memories of her mama's "gallon milk jug" in which she "saved pennies / fuh four babies /

[278] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic." 59.

[279] Adoff, 36-37

college educashun." The purpose of the misspelled words is perhaps to show how vital it was for children to be educated at that time or perhaps that they did not take full advantage of the opportunities provided them. The repetition of the phrases "fuh four babies", "college educashun", and "mama's pennies" are used to show how faithful mama was in saving money and seeing to it that her children got the best education money could buy. By the end of the poem, the reader gets the sense that mama has not dreamed any dreams for herself:

> mama spent pennies…
>
> and one life.
> mama spent her life
> in uh gallon milk jug
> fuh four black babies
> college educashuns.

Mama invested not only the pennies, but her whole life into the lives of her four children. The whole notion of women as mothers and caregivers returns to ideas I articulated in the first chapter concerning maternal spiritual eroticism. As the audience, we read Mariah's narrative in *This Child's Gonna Live*, take in mama's life here in the poem "Portrait" and the notion of time filling the space of a gallon milk jug, and our first reaction may be to pity them. But undoubtedly, mama had settled within herself a long time ago that her dreams would come true in the realities of her children—one penny at a time. Mariah, on the other hand, was doing everything she could to not have to wait for her desires to be fulfilled in the form of her children.

"Nikki-Rosa"[280] by Nikki Giovanni is written like a snippet from the biography of a Black person's childhood. Beginning with "childhood remembrances are always a drag / if you're Black," Giovanni plays with the idea of the Black experience being typecast as a less than enjoyable experience. But then she begins to ponder the notion of one day becoming "famous or

[280] Giovanni, *Black Feeling, Black Talk/Black Judgement*, 58-59

something" and what would be said of a Black child's home life. She uses the pronoun "they" in the sixth line as a substitute for white person and proceeds to explain that they would never understand the happiness of having "your mother / all to yourself" or taking baths in "big tubs that folk in chicago barbecue in" or "your father's pain as he sells his stock / and another dream goes." And despite poverty and "father's drinking," all that matters is the fact that "everybody is together" celebrating "happy birthdays and very good Christmasses." It is with this sense of collectivity that Giovanni implores:

> and I really hope no white person ever has cause
> to write about me
> because they never understand
> Black love is Black wealth

Although they may be lacking in monetary means, they are never poor in spirit. Although the material may not always materialize, their lives are richer because of their love and togetherness. Because Black love can enrich the texture and experience of Black lives, the story of that collective experience should be defined and told by Black people. In *After Mecca,* Clarke states, "'Black love is Black wealth' is the wish that Black people take control of their stories."[281] Rather than being misrepresented by outsiders, Black people must return "home to Blackness" and represent themselves.

Whether self-identified as feminist, heterosexual, lesbian and/or revolutionist the common thread between each of these Black Arts Movement women poets is that they are indeed Black and write from within a Black aesthetic. That fact and their experiences as Black women grounds their works in community in ways that are deeply spiritual and communally corrective. So the fact that the voices and words and works of these women have sometimes been overlooked and/or not always validated in the literary canon of the civil rights, nationalist,

[281] Clarke, *"After Mecca,"* 74

and feminist movements is problematic. As I have explained in the beginning of this chapter, poets such as Giovanni, Freeman, Mahone, Lorde, Sanchez, and Rodgers allow their works to do what Karenga's definition of the Black aesthetic implores of the artist—to be "functional, collective, and committing" to blackness.[282] Black women poets achieve that element vividly by writing about Black experiences in a ways that lovingly teach, uplift, and admonish the Black community. But their work has another, very necessary element ascribed to it which is their multifaceted and intersectional feminist perspectives. Lorde describes the fluidity and intersectionality of Black women's existence in the poem "Now" proclaiming that, "Woman power / is / Black power / is / human power."[283]

Nikki Giovanni and Aretha Franklin

As the title of the chapter indicates, the spirit of the erotic is not only evident in the voices of Black women poets of the era, but it is mirrored by Black women musicians of the era as well and their dual and sometimes triple subjectivities of womanhood, blackness, and working and middle class. Cheryl Clarke explains that while the symbiosis between Black music and Black literature did not begin with the Black Arts Movement, "the homage to black music was part of the process of cultural revivification" within the movement precisely because "black music literacy was also a measure of one's authentic blackness" which is a key component of movement politics.[284] The Black women creatives of the Black Arts era call for liberation and equality, individual and community based knowledges produced through an interior engagement

[282] Ron Karenga, A Response to "Ron Karenga and Black Cultural Nationalism," *Black World/Negro Digest* 17, no. 3 (January 1968): 5-9.

[283] Lorde, *Undersong*, 162.

[284] Clarke, *"After Mecca,"* 61-62.

with the erotic. While Clarke highlights a noted tradition of Black women poets paying homage to Black women singers,[285] for the purposes of the scope of this dissertation and in particular my deepening theorization of spiritual eroticism, I focus on the synergetic relationship between Nikki Giovanni and Aretha Franklin.[286]

One of the voices that becomes integral to the Black Arts Movement is a poet in song, Aretha Franklin. Following in the ideological framework of Clarke, Emily Lordi makes a strong case for situating Franklin as not just a peripheral part of the movement, but as an active and inspirational participant of the era in large part because of Nikki Giovanni's insistence on memorializing Franklin and her artistry in the activities of the era. In January of 1970, Nikki Giovanni wrote the poem "Poem For Aretha"[287] which she published in her collection *Re: Creation* in October of 1970. In the opening stanza, Giovanni writes:

> Cause nobody deals with aretha—a mother with four
> children—having to hit the road
> they always say "after she comes
> home" but nobody ever says what it's like
> to get on a plane for a three week tour
> the elation of the first couple of audiences the good
> feeling of exchange the running on the high
> you get from singing good
> and loud and long telling the world
> what's on your mind

First we see Giovanni articulating a certain distant knowingness for the lack of attention and concern paid to Aretha Franklin's sacrifices made in order to make a living and entertain audiences of people around the country and indeed the world. Aretha's sister Erma explained to

[285] Clarke, *"After Mecca,"* 62-68.

[286] In most instances I have chosen to refer to Aretha Franklin as Aretha rather than Franklin in this section of the dissertation when speaking of her in grammatically possessive terms in part because of the reverence given to artists known solely by their first names and when discussing her and her sisters together in the space of the text.

[287] Nikki Giovanni, *Re: Creation*, (Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1970), 17.

biographer David Ritz that Aretha would sometimes call her or their younger sister Carolyn or their brother Cecil to "talk about getting away from it all. She'd say she was going too fast, that the demands were too great, that too many people were pulling her in too many different directions."[288] While Franklin's performance is about telling the listening audience what is on her mind, Giovanni intimates people listening might not be ready to deal with and Aretha may not be willing to talk about her experiences of being who she is, particularly as a mother. Concerning her children and family, the next stanza reads in part:

> the singing the same songs night after night day after day
> and if you read the gossip columns the rumors that your
> husband
> is only after your fame
> the wondering if your children will be glad to see you and
> maybe
> the not caring if they are scheming to get out
> of just one show and go just one place where some doe-doe-
> dupaduke

While the conjecture around Franklin's love songs and her relational status are fodder for the rumor mills and biographies alike (which I will address later in this chapter), I focus here on the lines centering her children for it is here that Giovanni demonstrates a level of desirous choice that includes the idea of Franklin possibly longing to go to "just one place" for a break not just from performing on stage but performing duties as a mother and wife. Giovanni leaves space for "wondering" and "not caring" whether or not her children will be happy to see her. As both an admirer of her work and later as a doting friend, Nikki Giovanni would have been aware that Aretha had her first child at a young age[289] and that her touring kept her away from her children for long periods of time and in the care of loving women in her family back in Detroit.

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[288] David Ritz, *Respect: The Life of Aretha Franklin*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2014), 224.

[289] Dobkin's book states that Aretha had her first child at fourteen, while Ritz's biography states that birthed her first child two months before her thirteenth birthday.

Part of Giovanni's meditations of Franklin's schedule and responsibilities is a deep and abiding desire that her life and the outcome of her living not reflect that of "billie holiday's life" or "dinah washington's death." This stark recitation of care and concern is central to what Lorde ascribes to the erotic as a shared experience that elevates through the love and care for others. And while Giovanni is attuned to the ways in which the demands on Franklin's life and work may be part of a pattern for Black women performers, she acknowledges how she as a lover and listener of Franklin is implicated in the cultural and consumerist production of her work:

> she's more important than her music—if they must be
> separated—
> and they should be separated when she has to pass out
> before
> anyone recognizes she needs
> a rest and i say i need
> aretha's music
> she is undoubtedly the one person who put everyone on
> notice

Much is made about Franklin's voice and its arresting quality and ability to grab listeners' attentions away from whatever it is they may be doing and hearing elsewhere. But what Giovanni does so eloquently and pointedly in the next lines of her poem is to position Franklin as an innovator and shifter of Black culture into a more authentic space. Giovanni lists a number of artists for whom Franklin, whether proximally or directly, influenced their creative choices or lack thereof:

> she revived johnny ace and remembered lil green aretha
> sings
> "I say a little prayer" and dionne doesn't
> want to hear it anymore
> aretha sings "money won't change you"
> but james can't sing "respect" the advent
> of aretha pulled ray charles from marlboro country
> and back into
> the blues made nancy wilson

try one more time forced
dionne to make a choice (she opted for the movies)
and diana ross had to get an afro wig pushed every
Black singer into Blackness and negro entertainers
into negroness you couldn't jive

This particular portion of the poem in particular mimics what Clarke calls the "teachin-rappin"[290] style which is a the foundational aspect of Giovanni's poetic panache in both written and oral form. It is no wonder that Emily Lordi argues that "no single work of this era embraces Franklin as a Black Arts ally as explicitly as Giovanni's "Poem for Aretha."[291]

Aretha Franklin's influence on Nikki Giovanni's life extends beyond this one poem in *Re: Creation*. In her poem "Revolutionary Dreams"[292] in the same collection, Giovanni writes that she used to only dream "militant" and 'radical" dreams about "taking over america" and being the revolutionary to "stop the riot and negotiate the peace" until, she writes:

then i awoke and dug
that if i dreamed natural
dreams of being a natural
woman doing what a woman
does when she's natural
i would have a revolution

The last lines of Giovanni's poem are seemingly a direct evocation of one of Aretha Franklin's most popular songs "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" which was released in September of 1967. By centering some of the key phraseology in Franklin's soulful rendition of a song written for her by Carol King and Gerald Goffin, Giovanni's poem ponders what it means to embrace the narrative concept of a "natural woman" in a time of Black radical movement

[290] Clarke, *"After Mecca,"* 66.

[291] Emily Lordi, *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 182.

[292] Nikki Giovanni, *Re: Creation*, 20.

building. In "A Natural Woman," Franklin embodies the essence of a woman looking for peace of mind and desiring to feel alive and yet feels so uninspired, tired and at times lost in the midst of the everyday ordinariness and struggles of life. It is either self-love, the love of a person, perhaps too the comfort and care of a spiritual being, or a combination of the three that awakens the mind, body, and soul of the natural woman to her deepest feelings and knowledges of herself. As Aretha, her sisters Erma and Carolyn, and the Sweet Inspirations repeatedly sing "you make me feel" to close out the song, the listener is left to ponder as Giovanni does in "Revolutionary Dreams" what it means to be and feel like a natural woman. While there is no quantified assessment of what it means to be a natural woman in the last lines of her poem, there is a tacit gesturing by Giovanni towards her inspiration Aretha Franklin's soul-bearing in the song. One of Giovanni's answers to this question of what it means to be a natural woman seems to be that for a natural Black woman being herself, dreaming her dreams is a revolution unto itself.

According to Nikki Giovanni, she and Aretha Franklin were tied together because they were "two career women trying to make sense of it all."[293] In a foreword entitled "A Song for Me" for Matt Dobkin's book that details the making of what *Rolling Stone* calls one of the greatest soul albums of all time *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You*, Giovanni details the—small in number but large and meaningful in impact—encounters she had with Franklin. Being about a year younger than Aretha, Giovanni details being so nervous to meet her for the first time. Giovanni was invited to one of Aretha's performances at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem in June of 1971[294] where she was asked if she brought a copy of the poem she had written for

[293] Nikki Giovanni, "A Song for Me," foreword to *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You* by Matt Dobkin, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), xii.

[294] While Nikki Giovanni does not specify the date of the performance, she does say that Ellis Haizlip, the producer of *Soul!* a Black variety show, invited her. *Soul!* was produced from 1968 to 1973, and during that time period, Franklin performed at the Apollo Theatre in June of 1971. (C. Gerald Fraser, "Aretha Franklin 'Soul' Ignites

Aretha. Giovanni did not noting apprehensively, "What if she [Aretha] didn't like it? What if she thought it was an intrusion?" although it had already been published in her poetry collection *Re: Creation* a year prior so the chances that Aretha might have read it were high. Of that initial meeting backstage at the famed Apollo Theatre, all Giovanni is willing to recount is "So I met Aretha." A few years later Giovanni describes watching her perform at the Lincoln Center and from the stage Aretha said, "Hi, Nikki" to which Giovanni writes, "I was so totally thrilled! I'm still all smiles about it."[295] While Giovanni writes she "didn't know Aretha" in reference to someone asking if she might be able to secure Aretha for a fundraiser, the two artists' circles overlapped from time to time and in important ways, whether as parents of sons attending the same school or in causes such as freeing Angela Davis. Giovanni even writes about receiving a call from Aretha inquiring why she, Nikki, did not come backstage after one of her shows at the Apollo Theatre. Giovanni describes Aretha's voice as "totally distinct" as she contends that Aretha Franklin and Lena Horne have the two most unique female voices. According to Giovanni, they talked about Aretha's piano playing in the performance and whether she should keep so much of it in the show, with Nikki telling Aretha that she wished she could make "an album of only piano playing."[296] While they might not have been the closest of friends, certainly as artist and admirer, poetry subject and poet, Nikki Giovanni and Aretha Franklin were close, so much so that Giovanni wrote "I'm very protective of Aretha's gentle and fragile spirit, too."[297] The narrative of protection and privacy would become more important for Aretha Franklin as the

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Apollo," *The New York Times*, June 4, 1971, https://www.nytimes.com/1971/06/04/archives/aretha-franklin-soul-ignites-apollo.html).

[295] Giovanni, "A Song for Me," xi.

[296] Ibid., xii.

[297] Ibid., xii-xiii.

lights of fame became brighter, the press became more intrusive, and as her own personal life began to change. Her sisters Erma and Carolyn and her brother Cecil were often there not only to see her through but to make lasting contributions to her musical legacy even as they tried to create their own.

Franklin Sister Synergy

As sisters, Aretha, Erma, and Carolyn's bonds were forged through their parents' tumultuous marriage and subsequent divorce, their collective grief of losing their mother at early ages, their time growing up in church, and their father's insistence on their independence when they became young adults. For Aretha and Carolyn in particular, this sisterly bond would grow beyond family ties into a fruitful collaborative writing partnership and as I argue a shared, symbiotic, and spiritually erotic relationship as creatives. The breadth of Aretha Franklin's professional work spans decades and while a holistic study of her discography is warranted the remaining focus of this chapter continues to contextualize her contributions to and influence of movement art and politics, and centers her working and personal relationship with her sister Carolyn and the specific spiritual eroticism of Aretha's writing, musicality, and performance on her 1970 album *Spirit in the Dark*. Aretha's 1971 performance of the title track from this album at the Fillmore West in San Francisco with Ray Charles is of particular significance to my formulation of the spiritual erotics that Aretha employs throughout her career but particularly in her seventeenth studio album and her second album during the year 1970 for Atlantic Records.

A little over two years apart, Aretha and Carolyn were the youngest two children that Reverend C.L. Franklin and Barbara Siggers Franklin shared along with Erma and Cecil. The four of them grew up during what Aretha Franklin came to know as the Golden Age of Gospel

during the 1950s in Detroit. Her early musical influences also included jazz, rhythm and blues, and classical music which she listened to alongside her older sister Erma and Smokey Robinson's niece Sylvia Burston.[298] In her autobiography that she cowrote with David Ritz, Aretha offers several illustrations of how the influence of different musical stylings and her experiences in church shaped her level of comfort and closeness to her own musical abilities. Her first solo in church took place at the age of nine or ten and was a performance of Sam Cooke's version of "Jesus Be a Fence Around Me." Aretha recalls Big Mama—as she affectionately called her Aunt Rachel—and her paternal grandmother nodding and shouting during her solo. She internalized their reactions to her performance as support and approval as she witnessed their same responses during her father's sermons and as they listened to others singing the gospel.[299]

Soon after her first solo, at the age of ten, Aretha and her siblings would lose their mother to a heart attack. Reflecting on that time, Aretha writes that "I cannot describe the pain, nor will I try. Pain is sometimes a private matter, and the pain of small children losing their mother defies description."[300] Fondly she describes herself, her mother, and Carolyn sitting together after her mother would come home from work and she would "talk to [them] softly of better things to come."[301] Details like this fly in the face of what many on the outside looking in saw as a desertion of their family by Aretha's mother; but Aretha would describe her mother's decision not as a desertion of her children but rather a forsaking of her marriage to C.L. Franklin.[302]

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[298] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 18.

[299] Ibid., 13.

[300] Ibid., 20.

[301] Ibid., 21.

[302] Mark Bego, *Aretha Franklin: The Queen of Soul* (1989; repr., New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2012),, 8.

When Aretha had children herself, she had to contend with the feelings of leaving her children for long periods of time as she went on the road with her father to sing during his preaching engagements. Her children stayed at the large Franklin family home with her Big Mama and the other women in the family who cared for the younger members of the family.[303]

An important part of understanding Aretha Franklin's life is appreciating the levels of independence, artistry, and privacy which she sought to achieve at the earliest stages of her professional and personal life. In her biography, she states that "Daddy had raised independent and ambitious daughters. Erma, Carolyn, and I all wanted musical careers."[304] While her first professional album, *Songs of Faith*, was released in 1956 on Chess Records, Aretha came into mainstream music consciousness when she signed with Columbia Records and released her self-titled album *Aretha* in 1961. At the time of this career choice, Aretha had the option to sign with Motown considering her hometown roots in Detroit and her close friendship with Smokey Robinson, but her father wanted her to sign with Columbia Records who guided the careers of Mahalia Jackson, Doris Day, Duke Ellington, and Johnny Mathis. C.L. Franklin saw what he viewed as the stalled trajectory of Della Reese's career out of Detroit and did not want Aretha's career to originate from the city and potentially face the same fate.[305] When the time came for her to leave Columbia Records, the management of her career was primarily being handled by her then husband Ted White. When the two of them sat down with famed Atlantic Records producer Jerry Wexler, they did so with no lawyers or agents, and he was immediately drawn to Aretha. "She was very pretty, personable, and intelligent. She's very smart. She didn't run over

[303] Ritz, *Respect*, 61.

[304] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 73.

[305] Ritz, *Respect*, 77.

with excitement. It was business: Okay, let's make some records."[306] Wexler continued to explain to writer Matt Dobkin that he almost set up Aretha Franklin to produce music with Stax Records rather than Atlantic because he thought the Memphis sound might better suit Aretha's voice, but ultimately he said that Jim Stewart of Stax passed on the opportunity to work with her.

Aretha and those closest to her describe her transition from Columbia Records to Atlantic Records as pivotal to her growth as an artist and as Aretha. She explains that her first album for Atlantic served as a model for how she would try to orchestrate the rest of her career. Aretha writes in her biography:

> With Jerry's [Wexler] help, I selected the songs. I also wrote many of them. At Columbia I had written only sporadically. Back in the early sixties, I had sold my publishing rights to Aaron Shroeder for a few hundred dollars, trying to earn my own money without consulting my dad. Being a novice, I didn't know any better. I didn't really understand the mechanics of the music and didn't really care to. As a young woman, I was into music and music only. My favorite place was the studio.[307]

Aretha's father orchestrated the beginning of her career at Columbia, but it was Aretha who propelled her legacy forward at Atlantic. Her siblings all describe her transition to Atlantic Records as musically liberating in many ways for Aretha. "We realized that our sister was on the brink of letting the world know what we had always known—that she was hands-down the scariest singer in the world," Carolyn is quoted as saying.[308] Aretha's burgeoning confidence as an artist in this moment reflects specific aspects of spiritual eroticism that are born out of the most creative, interior, and conscious spaces within an artist. Writing in her autobiography, Aretha reflected on the powerful effect of her gifts on others "…some were saying that in my

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[306] Matt Dobkin, *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You: Aretha Franklin, Respect, and the Making of a Soul Masterpiece*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 88.

[307] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 110.

[308] Ritz, *Respect*, 158.

voice they heard the sound of confidence and self-assurance; they heard the proud history of a people who had been struggling for centuries."[309] She explained that although she did not set out to have this type of impact, she was humbled by it and took it seriously, particularly when it came to her version of "Respect" which I will address a little later in this chapter.

Although her business acumen was oft questioned under the management of Ted White, as well as admitted to by Aretha herself, Aretha's vocal arrangements, instrumentality, and musicality, as well as her producing, writing, collaborating abilities set her apart in ways that cemented her in the annals of soul music. Aretha's reflections on her time at Atlantic suggest, however, that the valuation of her skills by herself and others was not initially recognized or properly designated or compensated. With Jerry Wexler primarily steering her career at Atlantic Records, he was also the primary producer of her initial albums for the record company. Aretha's biographer David Ritz described her professional relationship with Wexler and Atlantic Records in this way:

> The template for however many albums she did with Atlantic is there: She goes in, she sits down at the piano, the charts come together because she's the engine driving the locomotive. She's got it in her head—she's got the groove, she's got the harmonies. She's really a coproducer, and I think it was an inequity of the times that it just wasn't done that way. I think Jerry's great intelligence as a producer was that he kicked back and let her coproduce with him.[310]

The inequities that Wexler speaks of are recounted by many Black artists and musicians before during, and after Franklin's era as many of them did not receive their proper and earned credits as producers and writers of their music. Cultural theorist Mark Anthony Neal argues that the popularization of "race music" in the 1930s created a "tumultuous marriage between black cultural production and mass consumerism" that lead to appropriation of Black musical sounds,

[309] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 113.

[310] Dobkin, *I Never Loved a Man,* 192.

genres, and styles and outright commandeering of Black musicians' songs by white artists.[311] Those closest to Aretha, including her brother and manager Cecil Franklin, felt that her producing work on her albums warranted acknowledgement and compensation. Cecil recognized that Aretha's approach to the situation was to preserve her professional relationship with Wexler who had proven himself to be a strong marketer of Aretha's talents. She was not inclined to upset that arrangement at the time. And yet Aretha herself reflected on these unfair music business practices in her autobiography:

> As much as I appreciate the soulful studio environment in which Atlantic placed me and the sensitive musicians who played by my side, one point was deceptive and unfair: I was not listed as a co-producer. Wexler was the producer, and later Dowd and Mardin were co-producers. Looking back, I see that I certainly fulfilled a co-producer's role. At the time I didn't realize the crucial significance of my function. And in the music business few people tell you anything, particularly if you don't ask. No one volunteers pertinent information.[312]

It was not until Aretha devoted her time to making *Amazing Grace*—which would become her highest selling album ever—that she had her first credit as a co-producer on her own album. In her memoir, she explains that during the time of this recording she also worked to get the Spinners—a male rhythm and blues group out of Detroit—to Atlantic Records after their contract expired with Motown Records. Aretha reflects that she should have received some sort of bonus for bringing such a talented group onboard for a record label for which she had done and was doing so much. She credits Ken Cunningham, with whom she shared a relationship and affectionately called Wolf, with backing her up as she asked her record label for proper credit as a producer on her work.[313]

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[311] Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*, (New York: Routledge Press, 1999), 17.

[312] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 111.

[313] Ibid., 150

In her follow-up album to *Amazing Grace,* Aretha was also listed as a producer alongside Quincy Jones on the 1973 release of *Hey Now Hey (The Other Side of the Sky)* her tenth album with Atlantic Records and her nineteenth studio album. Although it was one of her lowest chart-topping albums, it produced one of Aretha's most noteworthy hit songs "Angel." Written by Carolyn Franklin, their oldest sister Erma describes "Angel" as a "prayer with wings" and expressed their family's collective pride in Carolyn's "divine" song-writing abilities.[314] Aretha explained that her dialogue in the beginning of the song was inspired by her very first listen of the song that her sister Carolyn wrote, a song she said "combined loneliness and hope in a way that spoke directly to the heart."[315] The fact that *Hey Now Hey* is the first album on which Aretha is credited as a producer is—as Aretha said—unfair. Her ability to arrange melodies, play the piano, and write, particularly with her sister Carolyn, warranted producing credits especially at the start of her time with Atlantic Records having already established herself as an in-demand and skillful soul artist.

The album *Spirit in the Dark* is one such body of work that would have rightly warranted a producing credit for Aretha as the instrumental arrangements and her piano solos, directional and lyrical subject matter, and writing credits have her finger prints all over them. She singularly wrote four songs and cowrote another with Carolyn on the album, which is the greatest number of songs that she has ever written on one album.[316] In recounting his fight to get Aretha album producing credits, her brother Cecil explained his stance in great detail to Franklin's biographer David Ritz:

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[314] Ritz, *Respect*, 263.

[315] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 157.

[316] Bego, *Aretha Franklin,* 107.

> I started pushing for Aretha to get producer credit around the time of *Spirit in the Dark*. Everyone knew that she was the key element in putting those records together. But if you look at the albums, you keep seeing the names of Jerry Wexler, Tommy Dowd, and Arif Mardin as producers. It's true that Jerry was the man in charge. It's true that Tommy was a great engineer and Arif a great arranger. But Aretha had the big vision for how the songs should sound. Aretha had the arrangements—both instrumental and vocal—in her head. She provided the harmonies, she provided the grooves, she had the musical vibe that made her records distinct. But Aretha didn't want to rock the boat.[317]

While Aretha would say in a 2011 interview with CBS News that her songwriting is secondary to her singing, she left room for her writing to be acknowledged if only in a complimentary way: "I would love to go to a BMI dinner and receive a plaque or something, but if it doesn't happen that's all right. It's nothing that I think about every day…. I was recognized in the way that I wanted to be and that was as a singer, so that [songwriting] would be secondary."[318] Part of the reason I center Aretha's writing in my analysis of spiritual eroticism on the album *Spirit in the Dark* is that her lyrics offer up additional layers of intimacy and performative fervor that mirror how she discusses and performs the written works of her sister Carolyn. In the late 1960s, as her career was soaring at Atlantic, Aretha said that Carolyn "broke out with some serious writing" and that by recording her sister's compositions she [Carolyn] was able to make a "a beautiful living."[319] However, before exploring the spiritual erotics of *Spirit in the Dark*, it is important to follow the connective tensions and narrative eases in which Aretha, Carolyn and Erma operated as sisters, collaborators, and gifted artists, as well as contextualize the personal and political historical moments of this time.

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[317] Ritz, *Respect,* 233.

[318] CBS News, "Aretha Franklin's Underrated Songwriting," CBS News YouTube Channel, video file, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4pU2_3DT8w (accessed November 10, 2019).

[319] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 116.

On Aretha's earliest albums at Atlantic Records, Carolyn wrote and collaborated on several of Aretha's biggest chart-topping songs. From her first Atlantic Records album in the spring of 1967, *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Loved You*, she and Carolyn skillfully and memorably reworked Otis Redding's 1965 composition "Respect" to create what would become a global anthem for women's empowerment. Building on the Black feminist theoretical concepts of June Jordan, Patricia Hill Collins argues that the "emphasis on respect is tied to a distinctive Black feminist politic."[320] Even when listeners attempt to strip the historical and racial specificity of Franklin's "Respect," it's nearly impossible to do so because of the song structure and lyrical chooses of Aretha Franklin and her sisters. With the aid of background vocals from her sisters Carolyn and Erma, and future member of the Sweet Inspirations Cissy Houston, Aretha flexes her vocal and writing skills to establish herself as the Queen of Soul. Together Aretha and Carolyn transformed the Otis Redding song from one that expressed the musings of a man looking to be unquestionably and unequivocally respected by the woman in his life to a song that situated Black women's desires for at least a modicum of respect, but really with an eye towards much more of it in their intimate relationships and public lives. Music theorist Victoria Malawey puts the difference in subject matter of the two versions in this way: "While Redding projects a protagonist who assumes a male role within a heterosexual relationship, Franklin portrays a female protagonist who responds to the character that Redding has created."[321]

[320] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 116.

[321] Victoria Malawey, "'Find Out What It Means to Me': Aretha Franklin's Gendered Re-authoring of Otis Redding's 'Respect'," *Popular Music* 33, no. 2 (May 2014): 191, www.jstor.org/stable/24736804 (Accessed November 18, 2019).

One of the most significant changes to the song are the moments of call-and-response between Franklin and her background singers. A distinctive discursive form employed in African American speech and communication, call-and-response has roots in a history of slavery, the Black Church, and lining hymnals. Collins surmises that the practice of call-and-response is "composed of spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements, or "calls," are punctuated by expressions, or "responses," from the listener."[322] But oftentimes in the composition of music, the form is not necessarily spontaneous for the lead singer and backing vocalists. When Aretha and Carolyn added the bridge "sock it to me," they did so as a nod to their familial, communal, and musical roots in Detroit. Carolyn's explanation of the implementation of "sock it to me" captures the essence of its meaning not only within the song but to the listeners of it as well:

> Obviously Otis wrote the song from a man's point of view, but when Erma and Aretha and I worked it over, we had to rearrange the perspective. We saw it as something earthier, a woman having no problem discussing her needs. It turned out that it was interpreted in many different ways—having to do with sexual or racial politics. Far as I'm concerned, all those interpretations are correct because everyone needs respect on every level.[323]

The symbiotic convergence of sisterly telepathy, regional Black vernacular, and soul music literally shifts the whole trajectorial meaning of the song, seesawing between deep desires and defiant demands for women to be given the respect they deserve in their public and private lives. And through listeners' differently situated lives, "Respect"—once solely wedded in the moments of writing and reworking the song to three Black sisters looking for theirs—signaled to all those who would hear it that they can and should demand it for themselves both personally and politically.

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[322] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 261.

[323] Ritz, *Respect*, 162.

Emily Lordi's breakdown of the lyrical differences in both versions is instructive for how we might read Aretha, Carolyn, and Erma's intentionality in the remaking of "Respect." For example, Lordi notes that similarly situated lyrics establishing the nature of the relationship between the woman and man in the song converge around the idea of who enjoys and exercises sexual and economy autonomy within the relationship. Otis's version states: "Oh, your kisses are sweeter than honey, and I'm about to give you all my money." And Aretha's version declares: "Ooh, your kisses are sweeter than honey. But guess what? So is my money." Lordi argues that while Redding's song "essentially establishes a relationship between a sugar daddy and the woman he comes home to," Aretha's version creates the conditions of a woman with some form of economic independence who awaits at home for the arrival of her man.[324] And unlike Redding's version, Franklin's cover was "widely embraced as an anthem of black power, and more specifically of black female power, upon its release."[325] And upon its release, recent college graduate Nikki Giovanni describes her giddiness to get to the record store because everyone heard that "Aretha's covering Otis." Giovanni situates Aretha's "Respect" at the nexus of the movements for Civil Rights and Black Power stating that "The Civil Rights Movement was *burning*. And I was aware that this was going to be *it*. And it actually is. I think the music has shown that Aretha capped an era."[326] Giovanni describes Franklin's version as the capping of the Civil Rights Movement era, though I consider it more of an ideological bridge particularly in the refrain "just a little bit" by Erma and Carolyn Franklin singing the background vocals which mirrors the strategic pragmatism that in part helped to define civil rights movement

[324] Lordi *Black Resonance*, 199.

[325] Ibid, 200.

[326] Dobkin, *I Never Loved a Man,* 190.

ideology. Whichever eras the song falls into or in between, Giovanni's assertion that "Respect" is akin to James Brown's "(Say It Loud) I'm Black and I'm Proud," as both are "so black" and songs for "the dispossessed" makes disconnecting "Respect" from notions of blackness and Black pride a difficult exercise.

For Lordi, Aretha Franklin's versions of songs like "Respect" and "The Thrill Is Gone,"—first made popular by Otis Redding and B.B. King, the soul and blues men who sang them before her respectively—place Franklin in a Black musical lineage of "women singing to other women" such as Bessie Smith and one of Aretha's strongest musical influences Dinah Washington.[327] When Franklin was on the club circuit, she had a few brief run-ins with Washington, but most of Franklin's knowledge and affection for Washington came through music. So when Dinah Washington died tragically in at the age of 39 in 1963, Franklin was left "stunned" and in the following year recorded a tribute album entitled *Unforgettable*.[328] On the album's track "Soulville," Franklin would experiment for the first time in her career with the process of overdubbing—the process of prerecording a portion of a song, replaying it and then recording another portion to go along with the previously recorded part. In her memoir, Franklin explained that it was her gospel training under the tutelage of her mentor James Cleveland that gave her the confidence to implement the dubbing technique which allowed her to add "a number of voices, usually in harmony, to the main vocal."[329] Franklin would continue to use this technique throughout her career to enhance her vocal delivery. For example, on "I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You" which was her first single for Atlantic Records, Matt Dobkin notes

[327] Lordi, *Black Resonance*, 185.

[328] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 95.

[329] Ibid, 96.

that in the breaks between the punctuating notes of the trumpets and the brass thundering in, Franklin decided to fill the space with her voice, her background singers which included Franklin sisters Erma and Carolyn, and Cissy Houston, as well as "her own overdubbed background vocals" as they sung "loved a man the way that I loved you." This choice demonstrated a level of technical musical talent that impressed her fellow musicians in the studio.[330] Franklin's choice reflects not only her desire to carry on a tradition of women singing to and about other women, but her "commitment to singing *with* other women" as well.

Victoria Malawey's theoretical and technical reading of Franklin's "Respect" reflects the same commitment to singing alongside other women that Lordi establishes as one of Aretha's signature contributions to music. Malawey argues that Franklin's transformation of Otis Redding's original song is a "gendered re-authoring" of the tune that "revises the song's melodic content, including its scale-degree structure, pitch collection and rhythmic properties; presents a powerful and elastic vocal delivery; and adds new musical material and lyrics, which impact the song's form and meanings."[331] Malawey's ability to dissect the technical and lyrical differences in Redding's and Franklin's version is expertly done and is an example of type of research that can be extended to the compositional interpretations of many other Aretha Franklin remakes.[332] For example, she notes that Franklin's use of blue notes (or using a minor note in a song where a major note is expected), in the melodic structure of the song is done so "more emphatically" and on "the first and highest note of the passage" than in Redding's version.[333] And just as several

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[330] Dobkin, *I Never Loved a Man,* 131.

[331] Malawey, "'Find Out What It Means to Me'," 186.

[332] Michael Awkward's *Soul Covers: Rhythm and Blues Remakes and the Struggle for Artistic Identity* positions Dinah Washington as a direrosect predecessor to Aretha Franklin and the tribute album as an opportunity to both honor a lineage of Black women singers and to boost Franklin's career.

[333] Malawey, 187.

Black singers and musicians rely on the call-and-response method in their songs between themselves and their background singers, accompanying instrumentation, and the listening audience, Malawey interprets Redding and Franklin's respective versions as "intertextual call-and-response."[334] In both lyrical structure and content, Franklin is able to imprint upon the song a response to Redding's call for the woman he lives with and refers to as "honey" and "little girl" to respect him, which has been interpreted as him demanding a narrow patriarchal respect not just in the home, but specifically in the intimate space of the bedroom. Franklin's response speaks back not in a mimicking way, but rather in a way that centers a woman—herself—who makes her own money and demands respect that is directly tied to her intimate and political desires.

By including the call-and-response of a chorus of women speaking back to and with the woman who is the subject of the text, Franklin positions herself squarely in a Black women's blues tradition. Angela Davis writes, "Call-and-response persists in women's blues through the constriction of fictional subjects who assert their sexuality in a variety of ways. Such subjects permit a vast array of individual women to locate themselves within a blues community without having to abstract themselves from their personal lives."[335] Aretha Franklin quite literally inserts her own convictions about mutual and intimate respect saying "I ain't gonna do you wrong while you're gone" and following that up soon after with "All I'm asking is for a little respect when you come home." By locating herself in the same intimate space of the home, but also intimating that she leaves the home to make money in some way, Franklin is gesturing to financial autonomy as an important aspect of a woman's ability to navigate the potential

[334] Malawey, "'Find Out What It Means to Me'," 195-196.

[335] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 56.

disrespect of a man. And the constant refrain of "re, re" or "ree-ree" further envelopes Franklin into the soulful depths of the song as her nickname amongst those closest to her was Ree or Re Re.[336] In her memoir, Franklin situates her version of "Respect" squarely in movements for human rights, and specifically as "one of the battle cries of the civil rights movement," as well as in the intimate aspects of relationships between women and men and their expectations for each other.[337] By spelling out R-E-S-P-E-C-T with resoluteness and positioning herself as the woman for whom respect is required, Aretha Franklin draws the listeners closer to the interior spaces of her life, even as the song rest in a nebulously interpretive, yet grounded space for listeners.

While Lordi establishes Aretha Franklin as a key figure in the Black Arts Movement through her proximity to Nikki Giovanni's poetics as I have shown earlier in this chapter, Lordi also does so by centering the covers of songs that Franklin has made not only her own, but foundational texts for movement building and shifting. Lordi positions Franklin's choices as an artist and arranger of songs as central to her significance in the musical cannon. I endeavor to do similar work by centering Aretha Franklin's sisterly and womanly collaborations within a theoretical framework of Lordean erotics on a spiritual plane—spiritual eroticism—that considers the shared creative space amongst sisters as spiritually cathartic practice.

Aretha's rise at Atlantic would not just cement her talents as an singer and writer, but it would also launch the solo careers for her two sisters, Erma and Carolyn. "Since Atlantic Records had Aretha, RCA Records quickly signed Carolyn to her own record deal, and Erma released several songs for Shout Records and for Brunswick Records.[338] Carolyn's biggest hits

[336] Lordi, *Black Resonance*, 200.

[337] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 112.

[338] Bego, *Aretha Franklin,* 89.

would come in 1969 and 1970 with the songs "It's True I'm Gonna Miss You" and "All I Want to Be Is Your Woman" respectively. Erma and Carolyn both cite their entrée into the music business as singers as upsetting in some ways to their sister Aretha. Erma says that even as they were singing background for Aretha—and in Carolyn's case writing for and collaborating with her—Aretha seemed to sometimes be distantly proud at best and ambivalent or resentful at worst that they sought to exit her shadow and move into the spotlight. Erma shared with Aretha's biographer David Ritz the following assessment of the nature of their sisterly strain, while also revealing an important attribute of Aretha:

> We also shared Aretha's drive to be noticed, appreciated, and paid…. I only wish that we all could have sat down and discussed these issues—Carolyn and I were certainly eager to do just that—but Aretha was not one to verbally express her feelings. She kept everything inside until it was time to sing. Then she put her every last emotion smack in your face. This served her art but it did not serve our sisterhood. Except for these wonderful occasions when our focus was on our beloved father, we tended to fall into misunderstanding. This sisterly strain, together with the sisterly love and concern, went on forever.[339]

The scene Erma paints of Aretha's lack of emotional expressiveness and somewhat passive aggressiveness towards her sisters' desires for solo singing careers was particularly acute in her relationship with Carolyn. After the massive success of "Ain't No Way" in 1968 from Aretha's twelfth album *Lady Soul*, Carolyn says that Aretha strongly suggested that Carolyn focus on her writing rather than her singing. Carolyn's own attitude was "*Why not do both?*"[340] and seriously pursued her solo career with the release of her debut album *Baby Dynamite*. Carolyn asked Aretha to write her liner notes

And that emotional distance in Aretha's personality is not only noted by some of those closest to her, but with the media as well. After interviewing her for a *60 Minutes* profile,

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[339] Ritz, *Respect*, 140.

[340] Ibid, 208.

reporter Ed Bradley would later tell Franklin's biographer that, "When it came to personal revelations, she was completely shut down. Given the openness in her music, that shocked me. There was no introspection whatsoever. So when I learned that she was planning to write her autobiography, I was surprised. I couldn't imagine her making any emotional disclosures."[341] Aretha's unease about press coverage of her life stemmed from a *Time Magazine* cover story of her in June of 1968. Ritz's biography details how the portrayal of her mother as a deserter of their family, her father as a big-speeding, women-loving pastor, and herself as a woman in a depressive sometimes drunken state for most of the day affected Aretha deeply. Her booking agent Ruth Bowen tells Ritz that the stories effected Aretha deeply, so much so that she slowly drew back from interviews all together including the more amenable press like *Jet* and *Ebony.*

Spirit of the Erotic in the Dark

In August of 1970, Aretha Franklin released *Spirit in the Dark* on the heels of her sixteenth album *This Girl's In Love With You* which she released in January of that same year. Many music critics and biographers of Aretha Franklin at the time assessed the public accounts of her marital separation and divorce from Ted White as the ultimate fuel behind her music during this year. But as Aretha explains in her biography, she was On *Spirit in the Dark*, Aretha penned four songs including the title track and the songs "You and Me," "One Way Ticket," and "Try Matty's," as well as cowrote "Pullin'" with her sister Carolyn and Jimmy Radcliffe. Unlike her previous albums with Atlantic, Franklin's main music producer Jerry Wexler considered *Spirit in the Dark* a concept album. At the time of its release, *Rolling Stone* writer Bill Amatneek wrote that the album "made a strong return to her gospel roots" in part because of

[341] Ritz, *Respect*, 382-383.

Aretha's punctuating skills on the piano and her bluesy-gospel covers of blues musician B.B. King's original songs "The Thrill is Gone" and "Why I Sing the Blues." Amatneek continued, "Aretha's piano work on 'The Thrill is Gone' typifies her unique gospel way of interpreting blues material."[342] The foundational elements of gospel in Aretha's signature sound and piano playing make the album *Spirit in the Dark*—and in particular the song's title track—a sacred secular piece of art that explores the joys and pains of finding the spirit of the soul in the darkness, the familiar, and the everyday.

One way that the album touches on the everydayness of life is in a song like "Try Matty's." While it is not one of Aretha Franklin's more well-known songs, it does hold significance for how and where she grew up and places like it in Black neighborhoods across the country. In her autobiography, Aretha writes: "'Try Matty's' was something I wrote about a hot soul-food hangout on Dexter in northwest Detroit. Some of the best ribs you've ever wrapped your lips around."[343] The song starts with Aretha playing in the F major scale an octave lower than the standard F4 piano chords. It sounds markedly different and more bluesy than many of Aretha's other piano introductions to songs in part because of the chords and also because of the force with which she combines her piano playing and pedaling. When she comes in with the lyrics "Everyday I'm making my way to Matty's in the morning," her voice is also in her lower register as she begins to sing. Later in the song the listener is left to ponder if Aretha is talking about a 24-hour establishment or a hangout spot that opens late and stays open even later into wee hours of the night. After a bluesy piano as she sings:

(What's going on?) What's going on, that's got the people talking?

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[342] Amatneek, Bill. Album Review for *Spirit in the Dark*. November 12, 1970. *Rolling Stone,* https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/spirit-in-the-dark-252738/

[343] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 139.

(What's going on?) What's going on, that's got them ridin' and walking?
(What's going on?) What's going on, that's got them so mystified, yeah
Early in the morning, late in the evening
Check it out yourself if you can get inside of Matty's
This morning

The "What's going on?" are called out by a backing vocal group other than the Sweet Inspirations yet still consisting of all women—Evelyn Greene, Wyline Ivy, Almeda Lattimore, and Pat Lewis—which Aretha relies on throughout most of her albums including this one. Aretha answers them each time with articulating that Matty's is clearly the place to be as it has the people in the community clamoring to get in if they can get in at all, and some are even surprised by the foot traffic in and out of the establishment. Aretha explains that all manner of humanity makes their way to Matty's and she wants to be counted in the number, singing: "I'm gonna be all up in there, there's gonna be a group of people from everywhere in Matty's." Lyrics like this are similar to the sentiments expressed in the title track of the album "Spirit in the Dark." The idea of coming together in one place that is "kinda lowdown" yet still welcoming is part of the spirit of Matty's. While there may be some shenanigans from time to time, Aretha acknowledges the deep epistemological and anthropological lessons that are learned at Matty's, a communal place for soul food and social bonding.

Concerning the origins of soul food and communion in Black communities, Tracy Poe writes "What there was in urban black neighborhoods, was an African American culinary tradition that centered on two principles: Southerness and commensality."[344] For many African Americans moving from the southern part of the United States to the northern and western portions of the States during the Great Migration between 1910s and 1960s, the food traditions including gathering, seasoning, and preparation styles traveled as well. In major northern cities

[344] Tracy N. Poe, "The Origins of Soul Food in Black Urban Identity: Chicago, 1915-1947," *American Studies International* 37, no. 1 (1999): 4-33, www.jstor.org/stable/41279638 (accessed October 24, 2019).

such as New York City and Harlem, Chicago, and Detroit, Black people populated surrounding cities and neighborhoods such as Highland Park and Pontiac in metropolitan Detroit. Aretha Franklin's family was a part of this migration story as her father C.L. Franklin was born and raised in Sunflower County, Mississippi but moved to Memphis, Tennessee where he began his preaching career and also where Aretha was born on March 25, 1942. Aretha writes in her biography, "You had a huge migration from the South; hundreds of thousands of black Americans, my dad and grandmother among them, had traveled north to the Motor City—and to Chicago, Pittsburg, Cleveland, and New York—in search of a better life for themselves and their families."[345] For a time, Aretha's Big Mama and several other family members lived on Hawthorne Avenue in Highland Park in Metro Detroit and she and her siblings spent many summers in Chicago with their father's "lady friend" Lola. Aretha writes that she and her sisters found a role model in Lola after their mother passed away and says that she learned the art of canning and preserving fruits and "cooking the old-fashioned way, from scratch" from her as well.[346] These lessons speak to a larger narrative of social and geographical migration for Black people, particularly Black women, and the transitions not only from city to city, but the fluid movements of food knowledges and traditions that were passed on from family to family and down through generations within families.

While Poe's research centers the "Southern foodways" of Black Chicagoans, it was and still is true that many African American migrants in cities across the northeast created "the grocery stores, butcher shops, and restaurants that catered to these food preferences and the

[345] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 19.

[346] Ibid., 25-26

community that sustained them."[347] Aretha speaks directly to sustenance not only in terms of food, but also in terms of economic sustainability, spirit and consciousness raising, and finding home and love in community with others, particularly when you may not feel or get those necessities of life where you currently live and with whom you long to love:

> (Try Matty's) try Matty's when your money is running low
> (Try Matty's) try Matty's when you don't have nowhere to go
> (Try Matty's) try Matty's when your true love is gone
> (Try Matty's) try Matty's when you can't go home

"Try Matty's" is not just a call to those with hungry stomachs looking for food and commensality, but to those hungry souls yearning for community and a place to call home. So in her foreword "A Song for Me" to Dobkin's *I Never Loved A Man*, when Giovanni wonders in writing how it is that Aretha Franklin's soulful voice with its "smoldering quality" has made its way into our collective consciousnesses, she ponders what salves Aretha's mother and grandmother made for her when she was sick as a baby and what foods Aretha must have eaten when she lived with Mahalia Jackson:

> It must have been the blues that made Aretha mean so much to everybody…. Maybe it was the jowl bacon in the pinto beans with a side of cold water corn bread, or maybe fried fish with hush puppies. There had to be okra 'cause she lived with Mahalia Jackson, so there must have been stewed okra with tomatoes or just good old collard greens with a splash of hot vinegar. Fried chicken. I couldn't have forgotten the fried chicken. Try Matty's, she said. And we all did.[348]

Nikki Giovanni's poetic connections between food sustenance and vocal gifts, healing salves and mindful soulfulness highlights the significance of a place and song like "Try Matty's" in an album entitled *Spirit in the Dark*. From early in the morning to late in the evening, Matty's is place to go to have some of your deepest desires met and most acute needs fulfilled. Aretha playing in lower, more bluesy piano chords and singing in her deeper vocal register help to

[347] Poe, "The Origins of Soul Food," 10.
[348] Giovanni, "A Song for Me," ix-x.

illuminate the depths of a song that has gotten little attention in the discographic soul canon that embraces so much of the Queen of Soul's work, including the covers of other peoples' songs.

Like most of the songs she covers, Aretha's covers on *Spirit* are made all her own because of her captivating voice and distinct piano arrangements. While some music critics and biographers have confined the topical narrative of "The Thrill is Gone" to Aretha's complicated and ultimately dissolved relationship with her former husband Ted White,[349] scholar Cheryl Clarke rightly asks us to consider a different interpretation that does not solely center the ending of Aretha's marriage as the source of her ability to sing the song with such conviction in melody and lyricism. Clarke asks, "Is she evoking 'The Thrill Is Gone' as black people's 'swan song' to white regard and their own faith that white people would finally embrace them as citizen of the American project?"[350] The answer here can be yes as Aretha's lyrical invocations along with her frequently called upon background singers Margaret Branch, Almeda Lattimore, and Franklin's cousin Brenda Bryant include the refrain, "Thank God almighty, I'm free at last." Here, Aretha is potentially drawing from her gospel roots and referencing an old Negro spiritual hymnal "Free At Last" or Reverend King's recitation of that very hymn in one of his most well-known speeches, "I Have A Dream" which he gave at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. Aretha calls out "free" in different tonal notes each time, somewhat mirroring the modulated preaching tones of Dr. King, while Margaret, Almeda, and Brenda maintain their slightly harmonized, yet unmodulated note of "free" in response:

> And I'm free (free)
> Free (free) free, free, free, free from all the pain
> (Free at last)
> Oh, yes I'm free (free) yeah, I'm free, I'm free, I'm free, I'm free, I'm free, I'm free (free)
> Hey, yeah I'm free from this pain (Thank God almighty, I'm free at last)

[349] Bego, *The Queen of Soul,* 107.

[350] Clarke, *"After Mecca,"* 9.

These lyrics which come about three-fourths of the way through the song and then again in the closing moments of the song make way for a reading of Aretha's version that can be the thrill leaving for good in an interpersonal relationship or in relationships with entities like a country not living up to its ideals and denying the rights of its citizens.

Though the lyrics at the beginning of the last stanza "And as I leave you, baby, all I wanna do is just wish you well" mirror some of Aretha's stated feelings about Ted White, this cover song and the album as a whole cannot and should not be solely relegated to a theme of heartbrokenness and a final kiss-off for divorce with Ted White.[351] Indeed, by the time Aretha started making *Spirit in the Dark* their marriage had already ended, Aretha was in a new relationship with Ken Cunningham, with whom she had a son Kecalf and who was born five weeks prior to the start of making the album. Ken Cunningham, whom Aretha affectionately called Wolf, served as an inspiration for songs such as "Call Me" on her album *This Girl's In Love With You* which she finished when she was seven months pregnant with their son. While it is not out of the realm of possibilities that Aretha Franklin's creative and tonal fervor in "The Thrill is Gone" was her divorce to Ted White, I contend that leaving open the possibilities for other interpretations is key to understanding the breath of her reach as an Black artist and creator.

While Aretha Franklin's "The Thrill is Gone" slows down the cadence, instrumentation, and rhythm of B.B. King's bluesy version, her tale of unrequited love on "One Way Ticket" picks up the pace ever so slightly. Sounding almost confidently hopeful in the aftermath of finding out that her love has not appreciated or reciprocated from the beginning, her piano playing during the chorus becomes more hurried as if to mirror her realization. After the slow drumbeat and snare, Aretha's voice comes in singing "I remember you've forgotten to

[351] Bego, *The Queen of Soul,* 107.

remember" with pauses after both remembers and forgotten as if to emphasize the error of both their ways—her blind love for him and his inability to remember how their love started:

> You were lonely, without a friend
> That was when our romance began
> Baby, it was just a, just a (one-way ticket to love)
> Ticket to love (one-way ticket), ooh

Their relationship, while it may have begun in a mutual place, it unexpectedly and seemingly quickly moved into a space where the songstress found herself to be the only person on the way to love. Aretha's voice strains then cracks in a way that is uncharacteristic of her wide-ranging vocal ability on the second singing of the refrain:

> Like the dew on the mountain
> Like the foam way out on the sea
> Like the bubbles on the fountain
> You're gone forever from me, baby, don't do it

When she sings "mountain," it is not even in her upper most vocal range, but she puts so much emphasis on the word that is sounds strained. Then in the next line, when she stretches out her singing of "out," her voice cracks on a note that sounds similar to the note she hits in "Think" when she goes into her upper register for "IQ." Though these vocal idiosyncrasies are very noticeable and seem somewhat out of vocal character for Aretha, they seemingly fit precisely because of the subject matter and the permit nature of outcome of the one way relationship. As Margaret and Brenda sing out the rest of the "one way ticket" refrain, Aretha adlibs "I'd rather not believe it" in reference to how she loved her partner "honest" and "true" but now so swiftly it has come to an end. Aretha's expression of longing to believe that she had not given her best in vain is emblematic of many of the songs she has written and sung which express a woman giving without getting what she needs and deserves in return. This was true in her relationship with Ted

White, but also as I detailed earlier in the chapter, in her relationships with her record label and producers and her lack of producing credits early and midway through her career.

While "One Way Ticket" and "The Thrill is Gone" anchor the unrequited love portion of the album, "You and Me" is an ethereal composition that floats on air both rhythmically and lyrically of Aretha's piano playing and soulful singing. The song begins with Aretha's using what sounds like the damper and Sostenuto pedals together to stretch and echo the piano cords. As she twinkles the keys and the guitars come in, the Sweet Inspirations come in with a harmonized "you and me" that sounds like it is descending from the heavens. In a turn of their usual call and response arrangement, the Sweet Inspirations seemingly call out to Aretha and she answers by singing "will always be joined together for eternity." The first verse reflects a shared understanding of the obstacles a partnership between two people may face, as well as a mutual desire to do whatever it takes to not just survive but thrive in their relationship together:

> We've got each other's love and understanding
> That's what it takes to make love grow
> We've got our strength, and our love for all mankind
> But most of all, we've got peace of mind
> I know people are gonna try and knock us down
> But we're gonna be strong, ain't gonna let nobody turn us around!

As the Sweet Inspirations provide the "oohs" during the first verse and the "aahs" during the second voice in the background, their collective voices gradually lift above the instrumentation, with eventually the voices of the Sweet Inspirations leading the listener out of the song. However, midway through "You and Me," the listener is treated to a delightful piano solo by Aretha that is punctuated by the drummer keeping the beat on the cymbals and the keyboard and guitars coming in on the fourth down beats only. The solo sounds like the music that would be playing in the background as a couple or a parent and child take a stroll in a park. "You and Me" is reminiscent in sound and material to "Call Me" a song also written by Aretha for her first

album of 1970 *This Girl's In Love With You* which became one of her biggest R&B hits. Aretha notes in her biography that she did indeed write "Call Me" after witnessing a couple who seemed quite in love walking hand in hand down Park Avenue on "one of those rare Manhattan afternoons when the air is fresh, the sun bright, the sky a cloudless blue."[352] And she somewhat demurely admits that she was also thinking about her burgeoning romance with Ken "Wolf" Cunningham as she wrote one of her sweetest love songs.

After the piano solo in "You and Me," Aretha begins the second verse acknowledging that temptation "works on us too." It is unclear if the "us" is in reference to women experiencing temptations from other potential lovers while in relationships or if she is referring to "us" in the sense of the interpersonal relationship between the couple. In her autobiography, Aretha does discuss her ongoing friendships with Dennis Edwards, famed lead singer for The Temptations, and a man named Mr. Mystique. Although she describes Dennis as "so sexxxxxxy and just plain beautiful" and who had given her a platinum diamond ring that she eventually sent back to him, she explained that "out of consideration and respect for Wolf, I decided to pass on both Dennis and Mr. Mystique."[353] In "You and Me," Aretha describes the pull of temptation in this way:

> You know temptation, it works on us too
> But we're too strong to let it get us down
> I've got your love, baby, and you've got mine
> And the Lord knows we're gonna be together 'til the end of time, yeah, hey

While there is room to interpret the meaning of "us," what is ostensibly unambiguous is the synergetic love transfer between two people, the present and eternity which Aretha is attuned to not only in the songwriting by in her choices on the piano. As I referenced earlier, Aretha's lyricism, elongated piano notes, and the sustained longingness in the sounds of the Sweet

[352] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 133.

[353] Ibid., 133.

Inspirations offers the listener a soothing yet assured message that love can not only withstand the complications of its present context, but it can exist beyond them and in a hopeful space of eternal bliss. Aretha's hopefulness for the couple is not limited to an afterlife however, as she says "And the Lord knows we're gonna be together 'til the end of time" suggesting that a sacred vow in the present is a gateway of sorts to their everlasting love. "You and Me" is a beautiful example of the usefulness of the erotic in that it underscores moments of pleasure both lyrically and instrumentally, and it encourages the shared pursuits of relationship and pleasure with another person.[354] Though it may seem like an intellectual stretch, there is space in this song for romantic or Eros love, as well as agape and familiar love, and love of a collective righteous cause that also bring people together. In the same ways that "Try Matty's" is about preparing and making the necessary space for community and togetherness, "You and Me" is anchored similarly even if its interpretative landing spot is the intimacy of two people, in love, taking a stroll, basking in the present and building their own shared space for growth and understanding that is not only sustainable but flourishing.

If "Try Matty's" is a song about the joys of sharing in community with others in food and fellowship and "You and Me" is a song about the pleasures of intimacy between two people in love, "Spirit in the Dark" combines the two—communal fellowship and the intimate space, or lack of physical space, between one person and another person or spirit—in a way that moves the entirety of the album into a realm of soul music classics. "Spirit in the Dark" operates in a modality that may be incongruous to listeners unfamiliar with the merging of spirituality and secularism in Black musical traditions. There are emerging bodies of literature that have been created around these convergences in Black music and literature, spiritual practice, and

[354] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 56.

sexuality.[355] Here I want to bring into focus E. Patrick Johnson's seminal essay "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community." Building on Michael Eric Dyson's call for a 'theology of queerness" in the Black church that bridges the gap between the Black Christian body politic and the Black gay Christian community that draws on their mutual positionality at the margins of hegemonic societal structures, Johnson argues that Black gay Christians who feel alienated should build bridges for themselves between their Black spiritual traditions and songs, and more welcoming spaces such as night clubs.[356] Johnson writes that in creating and nurturing this bridge of connection,

> African-American gay men embed their own secular traditions—house/club music, vogueing, dragging, snapping—within black sacred traditions to provide a more liberating way to express all of who they are. The result is an affirmation of their faith in God—a God who sees them as His children—and an affirmation of them as sexual agents.

The liberation of which Johnson speaks is directly related to the merging of secular and sacred traditions that both emerge from Black epistemological knowledges in the specific locations of the night club and the church. As listeners we hear these convergences in "Spirit in the Dark" reflected not only in Aretha Franklin's piano playing which echoes the her gospel foundation but in the lyrics themselves and the images the music conjures up in the imaginary.

"Spirit in the Dark" begins with two notes of the piano that reverberate as Aretha holds down the pedals and smoothly sings "I" which pours through the speakers and oozes in live performances with the same sort of memorable resonance, as the rolling, thumping piano notes at

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[355] See Anthony B. Pinn, and Dwight N. Hopkins, eds. *Loving the Body : Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*. Paperback ed. Black Religion, Womanist Thought, Social Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Carol E. Henderson, *Scarring the Black Body Race and Representation in African American Literature* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

[356] E. Patrick Johnson, "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community," *Callaloo* 21, no. 2 (1998): 399-416, www.jstor.org/stable/3299441 (accessed November, 14, 2019).

the beginning of her song "Think" released two years prior to "Spirit in the Dark." Although the songs use different piano scales, Aretha's arrangements on both are sophisticated grooves that make you want to think and dance. The Sweet Inspirations provide the backing vocals for this track and play an integral part moving the song between tempo changes. Emily Lordi says that Aretha's choice to use women singers only in her arrangement of non-romantic songs, and most of her songs for that matter, was different than many of her contemporaries. And in so doing, "Spirit in the Dark" is not concerned about a group of women singing to a male audience of one, but instead "the song stages a scene of worship in which men are democratically recognized right alongside women."[357] The egalitarian nature of the spirit experience is evident in several lyrical and narrative choices within the song. After Aretha sings "I'm getting the spirit," and the Sweet Inspirations sing in knowing unison "hmm-hmm" two times, Aretha describes "people movin' oh and we groovin'." She then opens the first verse by singing, "Tell me sister, how do you feel? Tell me, my brother, brother, brother, how do you feel?" And at the end of the song when she symbolically and sonically takes the listeners to church, Aretha and the Sweet Inspirations open up this foot-stomping, hand-clapping portion by singing "All of my brothers (move with the spirit); All of my sisters (move with the spirit)."

While there is, like Lordi argues, something very democratic about the song as it places men and women alongside one another in platonic ways, it also leaves room for the intimacy of moments on the dance floor within oneself or with a partner. Concerning the sacred and secular nature of "Spirit in the Dark" Johnson writes:

> As we saw in Aretha Franklin's song, these black bodies in motion conjure and inspire not only a 'holy' spirit, but a sensuous and sexual one as well. When congregants 'feel

[357] Lordi, *Black Resonance*, 208.

> the spirit,' their bodies are flung into motion in ways that transform the sacred body into a very secular body, a body that weds the spiritual with the sexual.[358]

I agree with Johnson here that the image Aretha Franklin paints in word and arrangement is one of Black bodies in motion feeling the spirit in and through their bodies in ways that are both spiritual and sensual. And yet I also think that part of Aretha's project here, and particularly in live performances of the song, is to transport the listener to the deepest parts of themselves—to spaces in the interior that may reach beyond what the eyes can see, what the body can touch, what the brain can know, and what the heart can feel.

In *From These Roots*, Aretha writes about her legendary performance at the Fillmore West in San Francisco, California. And while most music critics and concert goers have rightly given attention to her performances of "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" and the closing number "Reach Out and Touch (Somebody's Hand), Aretha's recollection of this concert experience in her biography mostly centers around her performance of "Spirit in the Dark" with Ray Charles. She exclaims, "I couldn't resist the idea of a duet" when she heard he was at the Fillmore but she knew it would take her personal persuasion to get him to come on stage. And on stage he came with Aretha writing that although Ray did not know the lyrics to the song, "The Right Reverend made up his own, and, between the two of us, soul oozed out of every pore of the Fillmore. All the planets were aligned right that night, because when the music came down, it was as real and righteous as any recording I'd ever made."[359] Ray Charles would later tell Franklin biographer David Ritz that he rarely went out to see any of his music contemporaries perform but that there were certain women that he loved to hear sing: " There are many female singers I like—I love me some Gladys Knight, I love me some Mavis Staples—but Aretha is my heart. It also doesn't

[358] Johnson, "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark," 402.

[359] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 139.

hurt that Aretha is the name of my mother."[360] He too acknowledged that while he did not know the words and had never played the song before, "Aretha's spirit was moving [him]" to the point where it did not matter and ultimately he gave permission—after Aretha personally called and asked him if it was okay—to include the recording on the live album *Aretha Live at Fillmore West*. Aretha also seems to set their performance apart from the rest that night and even the original version of the song, writing "the version with Ray was something special."[361]

Aretha Franklin's (and Ray Charles's) Fillmore West live performance of the song and the song "Spirit in the Dark" itself embody the trajectory of spiritual eroticism that I have done my best to theorize in the space of this dissertation. Lorde's original essay "Uses of the Erotic" is an invitation to think and theorize differently about the erotic. Franklin's instrumentation, vocals, and lyrical beckoning on the song "Spirit in the Dark" are the musical interpretation of what Lorde says about locating the erotic in herself: "I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience."[362] This energy that Lorde draws our attention to here is what I have theoretically interpreted as whatsoever is deemed spiritual and joyful. "Are you gettin' the spirit?" Aretha asks us, and then "And are you gettin' it in the dark?" because she is already "gettin' the spirit." She has been there. The spirit exists here. Aretha Franklin's music, and this song in particular, exist in a space where I desire for this text to be—in a spiritually erotic and sensually divine generative and interpretative space that is Black, feminist, desirous, and free.

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[360] Ritz, *Respect*, 236.

[361] Franklin, *From These Roots*, 139.

[362] Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 57.

Conclusion

Where the Spirit Is So Am I, So Are We

In this dissertation, I endeavored to theorize the erotic in the cultural production of Black women creatives in ways that are attuned to the interiority of the self, the integrity of the spirit, and the impact on community. There were many intellectual entry points into this endeavor. As I conclude I would like to discuss one of those entry points. On July 6, 2014, I went to the Williamsburg neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York to witness an art piece by one of my favorite artists Kara Walker. I had seen some pictures on social media sites and read a brief description of *A Subtlety* that made it sound unlike anything Walker had done before to date in her career and on a road trip up the east coast, I wanted to see it for myself.

Kara Walker's art has been described as provocative, offensive, a betrayal, and iconic. But rarely, if ever, has her work been described as subtle, at least until May 6, 2014 when Walker debuted *A Subtlety, Or the Marvelous Sugar Baby an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*. In *A Subtlety*, Walker explores, as Kimberly Wallace-Sanders does, "how the mammy survives as a cultural force that influences and reflects a national conscience."[363] To say that the historical rootedness of the title, the thirty-five foot tall sugar sphinx sculpture, and the sugary molasses throughout was ambiguous to some of the artwork's spectators, is an understatement, as hundreds of photographs and videos were uploaded to social media sites with people posing and making sometimes lewd gestures towards the sculpture. In an online interview in response to a question about whether she thinks this work will be less controversial than her previous ones,

[363] Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), page

Walker answers: "I wouldn't count on it being less controversial. I think there is a play on dominance here, on my part. I have been making an effort in my own practice to own, understand, and undermine the intended readings of the mammy…."[364] Through her art, Walker desires to understand the future meanings of historical caricatures and how present and the presence of Black women's bodies fight against and sometimes fold back into complex cultural and racialized signs of the past.

Born in 1969 and a distinguished MacArthur fellow at the age of 28, much of Kara Walker's work is distinctive because of the black cut-out silhouettes and depictions of racial and sexual exploitation, seduction, violence and the grotesque in antebellum slavery in the U.S. South. While artistic renderings by Black artists have tended to treat the subject matter of slavery and the rape of Black women with "mourning and outrage appropriate to a cultural tragedy" as Arlene Keizer writes in "Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory," Walker's art does something decidedly different and some older Black critics have argued damaging, as she plays up the lurid, the unspeakable, and perhaps even the pleasurable modes of relationality between enslaved Black women and a white male ruling class. One such example is her work *The Battle of Atlanta: Being the Narrative of a Negress in the Flames of Desire—A Reconstruction*. Kara's Walker's piece is an artistic reimagining of a painting rendered in 1888 of the Battle of Atlanta that started on July 22, 1864 and ended on September 2, 1864 when the Confederates completely surrendered to Union forces and Fulton and Dekalb county came under Union control. Walker's work entitled, "*The Battle of Atlanta: Being the Narrative of a Negress in the Flames of Desire—A Reconstruction*"

[364] Kara Walker, Interview by Antwaun Sargent, *Complex Magazine*, "Interview: Kara Walker Decodes Her New World Sphinx at Domino Sugar Factory," May 13, 2014, http://www.complex.com/art-design/2014/05/kara-walker-interview (accessed July 6, 2014)

was created in 1995. As a person who spent her latter teen years living in Stone Mountain, home to one of the largest monuments to the Confederacy in the world and the rebirth of the KKK in 1915, Walker often uses the horrors of white supremacy in service of her art to shift the lens of historical narratives ever so slightly as to bear witness to other possibilities of existing in the antebellum South. Keizer argues that for some viewers of Walker's work they may consider her representations "confounding because these women often appear to be assenting to their violation and receiving pleasure in the process or display no readable affect."[365] I argue that Walker's work is acutely affective if read in the context of Black feminists such as Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, and Sharon Patricia Holland. When reading Walker's work through a Black feminist lens, Holland's theory of the erotic life of racism, which troubles the ruptures between racism and sexuality by asking where can pleasure be found in systems of abject imperialism, becomes the grounds on which Walker's work can be understood.

While many scholars have remarked on the state of abject peril and pain that the Black body, but particularly the Black female body, finds itself under in the extreme brutality of slavery and Reconstruction, Holland's analysis extends to thinking about this abjection "in the midst of somewhat quotidian scenes of pleasure."[366] In interpreting this part of Hartman's argument, Holland wants to draw back from what she deems a "foregone conclusion" in the work of Hartman and Spillers that argues for "a more absolute abjection" of blackness under colonial slavery, and instead rearticulate the connection between racist practice and the erotic life, attending to queer theory's object of inquiry, sexuality.[367] In so doing, Holland wants to

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[365]Arlene R. Keizer, "Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory," *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1649-1672. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501968 (accessed, February 22, 2018), 1661.

[366] Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism,* 46.

[367] Ibid, 46.

disengage from scenes of absolute, abject pain and engage in the possibilities of reading narratives of race and racism connected to and outside of a desire/fear dichotomy of social miscegenation. These new engagements give rise to the possibilities of belonging to one another across critical race, queer, and feminist theories, in between the black/white binary, and hopefully, eventually an understanding of "not only racism but potentially our erotic selves."[368]

Because the site of abject injury under slavery is held in tension for contemporary conceptualizations of the Black female body, I want to give more space here in the conclusion to some ideas I first explained in the introduction in terms of relaying a more than thirty year trajectory of Black feminist theorizing on pain and the Black female body. For Spillers, the Black captive body signals physical ruptures of the flesh and prospects of transferable psychic injuries from one generation to the next. Hartman calls for a recognition of loss and memory of Africa as "a phantom limb, in that what is felt is no longer there."[369] In this way, the pained body exists as breached flesh rather than actualized wholeness in its transfer from enslaved subject to freed subject. While both Spillers and Hartman cite this transfer of history and injury as having an undue burden on the Black female body, Holland asks why this is the case. In a most nuanced way, Holland inquires why we think enslaved women's bodies and sexuality outside spaces of pleasure, and squarely in sites of pain. She then suggests that we make an even bolder intellectual leap by thinking critically how historical injuries altered the sexual experiences, not just for Black women, but all [read white?] subjects in the transatlantic slavery of the Americas. All three scholars wonder, albeit from differing and overlapping analytic

[368] Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism,* 14.

[369] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 73-74.

vantage points, how and if these transfers of psychic pain and ambiguities of pleasure collide to form freedom narratives of sexual agency and political autonomy.

One way to explore these possibilities is by considering how to enter and engage with the archived narratives of Black women differently. The work of Katherine McKittrick and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley on geographical space ask whether or not it is possible to decolonize landscapes through the reclaiming of Black female subjectivities. In particular McKittrick argues that Black women have contested and negotiated the conditions of their geographies, which runs counter to the narrative of complete alienation and annihilation in dominant geographies. The hegemonic narratives in dominant geographies claim that Black women are "ungeographic" as a result of their displacement in the Middle Passage and under chattel slavery, but this McKittrick contends is a "colonial fiction."[370] One way in which McKittrick works to dispel these fictions is through a reengagement of Harriet Jacobs's [Linda Brent's] time spent in the garret which I explained in detail in the first chapter of this dissertation. McKittrick argues that Brent's expressions of freedom in the confines of the garret is evidence of how she [Brent] "uses the existing landscape and architecture to name the complicated geographies of Black womanhood in/and slavery."[371] McKittrick's theorizing of Jacobs archive necessitates that one consider how to differently enter the historical archives of enslaved and formerly enslaved Black women's lives.

In "Searching for Climax: Black Erotic Lives in Slavery and Freedom," Treva B. Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson provide another entryway into these complex sets of questions that center enslaved and free Black women's humanness rather than the conditions of slavery.

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[370] McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds,* 5.

[371] Ibid., 41.

Instead of dismissing outright the "The Harriet Tubman Sextape"—a digital parody sketch produced in 2013 that was met with much ire for its depiction of Tubman engaging in multiple sex acts with a white plantation owner in exchange for the freedom of enslaved peoples—Lindsey and Johnson consider how the erotic lives of Tubman and Black women in the times of slavery and freedom get evacuated, rendered invisible and often implausible when the focus of their existence is limited solely to the conditions of captivity. Of Tubman, they ask "what roles did sex, intimacy, and desire play in how she sustained and affirmed her humanity?"[372] Their contention is that Black women's erotic lives are as much about their gaining bodily autonomy as they are tied to obtaining liberation for all Black people. One example of this they say, is Tubman's desire to return south for husband John:

> Her role as wife proved powerful enough for her to return south for John and to attempt to support his journey north. It is easier to consider her bound by duty or loyalty, religiosity or love. It is more difficult to imagine she returned out of lust or loneliness. We must ponder: is desire enough to propel a body across slave lines?[373]

In this passage, we are asked to contemplate the utility of desire and longing in a space between captivity and freedom. A theorizing of the erotic is a place to begin answering such questions, as well as interrogate what it means to hold space for the figurative Black bodies that signify affective modalities of not only pain and the perverse, but the possibilities of pleasurable and spiritual freedoms.

Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* also opens up a possibility for these affective modalities as the perverse and pornographic are definitely in the space, as well as the specter of the scared and the erotic. Walker calls our collective attention to the spectacle of this public moment, where you

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[372] Treva B. Lindsey and Jessica Maria Johnson, "Searching for Climax: Black Erotic Lives in Slavery and Freedom." Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism 2014, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 169–195], 175.

[373] Ibid, 187.

can even find pictures online of people using their hands to gesture in the air towards the sugar sphinx in the same way they would at the Leaning Tower of Pisa or the Eiffel Tower. In the same vein, she calls on us to ask what we're doing here and how this monument, this moment came to be. *A Subtlety* Walker's first sculptural piece is an example of the continued existence of the Black female body as a complex cultural sign in the public imaginary, all at once, objectified and freed in the space of a Domino Sugar factory. With the mammy figure of the sugar sphinx, Walker opens up the possibilities of her body but also folds in the history of Black women and children's labor in sugar cane fields. To return briefly to the introduction, in Laboring Women Jennifer Morgan writes about the gargantuan sugar cane industry in Barbados during the seventeenth century. On the island, the white populations decreased from a high of 35,000 in the 1640s to 20,000 by the end of the 1660s, while Black Barbadians outnumbered them at least 2 to 1 by this time.[374] White slaveowners used these population shifts to justify harsher and more violent treatment of enslaved peoples which had a direct effect on the reproductive outcomes of enslaved African women and the kinship ties between African women, children, and men. Morgan writes, "Even when women's proportional representation in the slave trade declined…(and) even though they were outnumbered in the population as a whole, women constituted more than half the work force—half the visible source of sugar's cultivation."[375] And this cultivation of sugarcane made Barbados the richest European colony in the Caribbean for nearing a century. So it is no wonder that when Walker was commissioned by Creative Time to cultivate a public art project in the space of an abandoned Domino Sugar Plant in

[374] Morgan, *Laboring Women,* 96.

[375] Ibid., 154.

Brooklyn New York, her early sketches included a sphinx in the shape of a woman with African diasporic features and a head scarf.

In an interview on the making of the sculpture, Walker says that her use of the Mammy figure is meant not to reinscribe a history of asexual subjugation, but to build to a historical monument of sorts where the Mammy "gains her power by upsetting expectations one after the other."[376] Questioning how critics and viewers of her work engage with her work, Walker argues that it better to say her work is consumed by and with history than just simply dealing with history. In the same video, Walker culminates her retelling of the making of *A Subtlety* by stating: "So I think it's very important to look back. I don't think we do it often enough. I think sometimes looking back leads to kind of depression and stasis, which isn't good. But looking forward without any kind of deep historical feeling of connectedness, is no good either." In this dissertation I have endeavored to similarly engage in the deep rootedness of existing knowledges and narratives of Black women to extend current and future discourses on Black women's spiritual and interior lives, and spaces of desire and pleasure for ourselves and those we love.

In so doing, the first chapter centers Black mothering as a theoretical formulation of desire and care. A close reading of Mariah Upshaw's character in *This Child's Gonna Live* positions her within a framework of what Jacquelyn Grant calls womanist Christology. Her consciousness of the divine through her prayerful communications with God and her challenging of the status quo within her community position Mariah as a disruptive Black feminist figure that adds to our understanding of and cannon on Black women's spirituality. I ask and hopefully provide some answers to the question of whether desire borne out of desperation is truly desire? What does that type of desire look like and what are the spaces of possibility for that desire to

[376] Kara Walker: "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby" | Art21 "Extended Play," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRkP5rcXtys#action=share

grow in places of despair? Sarah Elizabeth Wright's narrative odyssey of Mariah Upshur's life helps to answer these questions by centering the double consciousness of Mariah's spiritual and prayer life in which she finds herself wrestling with God and Death to ensure the continued existence of her children.

The second chapter looks at the interiority of a life seemingly untethered to institutionalized religious practices and attuned to a diffused spiritual realm. Though Ann Petry's most centralized work is *The Street*, her earlier writings, her intimate letters and her daughter's retracing allow us to see a Black women creative who while practicing a culture of dissemblance within and around her own life, created work and promoted community uplift in ways that reflect the "live from within outward" modality of Lordean erotics. While I do not spend a lot of time writing about the implications concerning the dearth of Petry's archive, it is worth exploring how her elimination of some of her writings and the environmental destruction of others contributes to our understanding of her as a writer and activist. In my efforts to treat the archive with care, I chose in this chapter to focus on what she wanted the world to have in the form of her journalism. Petry's desires for privacy, her closeness to her Aunt Lou and the Chisholm family's relative social stature made my decision to include the Chisholm family archives in this chapter a complicated one. While I am grateful for the access afforded to scholars like myself, I am however, concerned that Petry's letters to others which have been archived in several locations may be a violation of her desires for privacy that has yet to be fully fleshed out. Elisabeth Petry's book *At Home Inside* greatly helped me in my decisions on what stories and experiences of her mother's to include in my dissertation.

And finally, the third chapter set out to position the Black Arts Movement as a spiritually erotic movement where Black women writers created space and art for themselves and

community that endeavored to reflect an authenticity of blackness and proclamations of Black feminism that were uniquely their own. I argue that by placing the artistry of Aretha Franklin, particularly her years as an artist at Atlantic Records, in the canon alongside poets like Nikki Giovanni as Emily Lordi so expertly does, we can imagine a world in which Franklin's creative spirit is one fueled in part by a close sisterly relationship with Carolyn and Erma Franklin and an abiding desire to make music which reflects her deepest and most personal feelings and experiences. Her album *Spirit in the Dark* is a bridge between her spiritual and gospel music foundations and her abiding love of rhythm and blues, as well as part of the connective theoretical tissue that builds my theory of spiritual eroticism together.

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