ABSTRACT

Title of Document: FEELIN FEMINISM: BLACK WOMEN'S ART AS FEMINIST THOUGHT

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This dissertation contends that the systems of racism, (hetero)sexism, and classism are felt in the body, mind, and spirit and that resistance to these systems must be felt as well. Feelin, a term rooted in U.S. Black culture and derived from Black speech (as in "I'm feelin that!"), is deployed as a way of knowing through which Black women engage and create life-affirming art. I argue for understanding black women's creative production as a site of Black feminist thought, one that continuously negotiates, shares and acknowledges emotion as a form of knowledge that, in Audre Lorde's terms, galvanizes radical thought into "more tangible action."

In this project I negotiate these issues through close reading and analysis of the work of three artists: photographer Renee Cox, poet Lucille Clifton, musician Avery*Sunshine. In Cox's photography I examine the ways in which she re-imagines racial shaming and Black motherhood through her own body and mothering practice as represented in her work. Through Clifton's words, poetry, and spiritual and creative

practice, I trace a theology of joy. And, I analyze expressions of sacro-sexual ecstasy in Avery*Sunshine's genre ambivalent music. These themes of shame, joy, and ecstasy are prominent not only in the work itself, but also in the artists' experiences of creating that work and in the artists' discussions of their work and worldview. Feminist scholarship and affect theory frame my engagements with feelings and emotions as knowledge.

Finally, I propose a methodology for engaging Black women's knowledge production that mandates that we take Black women's anger seriously and interrogate from there. This project practices the modes of knowledge production that it presents. Furthering its argument that Black women's art is a site of feminist knowledge production, research is conducted and presented through poetry, mixed media, and personal narrative in addition to academic research methods and prose.

FEELIN FEMINISM: BLACK WOMEN'S ART AS FEMINIST THOUGHT

By

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Disclaimer

Dedication

For
Ella Juanita
Laura Ella

and all the wisewomen whose names I do not know.

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I am the great granddaughter of the
darker sister who, under the shadow of
a fairer sibling, could not go to school.
Instead, she brought from the earth a
kindling. Bore nothing but daughters
educated them all, and your children too.
She is, I am, brown skin brilliant
forever facing our fury, charred in books

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Introduction: You Feel Me?

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RITUAL OF ANGER: IN SPECIAL COLLECTIONS READING THE NEGRO A BEAST

October 28, 2008

The Negro is a beast but created with articulate speech, and hands, that he may be of service to his master—the White man.
- Title page of The Negro A Beast or In the Image of God by Charles Carroll, "Revelator of the Century"

What I am uncovering is the scalpel deep in flesh. Another finding becomes a feeling: a medium between the "Revelator of the Century" and my mother's anger. To see the present absences is an unfortunate gift.[1] It is understanding science and the ghost's exhale. Another finding becomes a feeling: God and the idea of God's Absence. There is a spiral here, a sadness. Who would lay hands?[2] Why would they if God is dead? Whom would they be in service to? Another finding becomes a feeling: Perhaps, there is no Negro. No White man. Then what would hold us here—returning to checkout? To know if our skin is still ablaze?[3] Another finding becomes feeling: She is in the page. I am turning myself.

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I wrote the above poem in reflecting on a visit I took to The University of Maryland's special collections. I was looking for *The Negro A Beast*. This was a book my mother checked out when she attended The University of Maryland, Baltimore County in

[1] In *Ghostly Matters* Avery Gordon states that research must reckon with the ghost, or the haunting subject of research "out of a concern for justice." (See Gordon 64.)
[2] "Laying on hands" is a spiritual practice utilized in many Black Christian churches that is based on the belief that healing can happen through the hands of one with good (Godly) intention. As Carolyn Mitchell notes, this act of touching "stabilizes a person physically while freeing the troubled soul to soar spiritually." (See Mitchell 262.) It is also referenced in Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf.*
[3] In the last lines of her poem "Workshop on Racism" Toi Derricotte writes of children who have learned to reference a little girl in terms of her race: "Already at five the children understand,/ 'black' is not a color, it is a/ blazing skin." See Derricotte lines 11-13.

1970. She recounted to me throughout my childhood her practice of going to the library and checking it out, fueling her own anger at racism and its convergence with religion on every visit. My visit to special collections in 2008 was to research her anger. To feel what she felt—to experience what she repeatedly visited and actively researched. I went to special collections to understand why so many years later, she would recount this "ritual of anger" to me—her daughter—who would eventually attend the University of Maryland as a graduate student. Our interests have some parallels: my mother would get her BA in Psychology and African Studies. I would study women and gender, focusing my research in affect, feminism and Black women's art.

One could say that I research *my mother's anger*. More broadly, I research my mother's many affects, one of which is anger in order to know what she felt, feel what she knew. In the poem above this statement is literal, yet also figurative because in this project and as an artist, I am interested in Black women's feelins. My inclination to explore feelins in Black women's art is influenced by tenets of Black feminist thought that center Black women's feminist and anti-racist theorizing through experience. In this project, I ask questions about Black women's experiences, how Black women's art has evidence of the ways racism and sexism are *felt* yet also of how resistance is felt.

Researching Feelins and Ordering Emotions

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.

–Audre Lorde in "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 53)

Feelin Feminism is interested in how racism, (hetero)sexism, and classism are felt and how these feelins are connected to Black feminist thought and action. In this project, I contend that Black women's art and their production of art can be identified as a site of Black feminist thought. As Black feminist thought in the creative, Black women's art and artistic production functions particularly through the messiness of emotion. It negotiates, shares and acknowledges emotion as a form of knowledge that, in Audre Lorde's terms, galvanizes radical thought into "more tangible action." (37) By looking at Black women's art, I contend that we are also looking at the processes of affect through which Black feminist thought engages mind, body and spirit as knowledge. This study asks: How is emotion tied to the life-affirming work of Black women artists? How do Black women artists negotiate the subtle politics of anti-black racism and sexism via artistic production? And finally, how does Black women's creative production negotiate emotion through a politics of life-affirming work?

This study attempts to answer the aforementioned questions by exploring the photography of Renee Cox, the poetry of Lucille Clifton and the music of Avery*Sunshine with a focus on the themes of shame, joy and ecstasy. These themes are prominent not only in the work itself, but also in the artists' experiences of creating that work and in the artists' discussions of their work and worldview. While I analyze their art as a researcher, I also consider what the artists say about their work.

The Artists

Visual artist Renee Cox was born in Colgate, Jamaica, and raised in New York. Known for her large, precise and beautifully executed photographs, Cox started her career as a photographer in the fashion industry. Most of her photography features herself

as the model, sometimes nude. She uses a crisp aesthetic, developed by her days as a fashion photographer, to create visually dynamic, personal and confrontational images. While she was at the Whitney in the late 1980s for a fellowship program she was pregnant with her first child. Because of her impending motherhood, she received a lot of questioning about whether or not she would be able to pursue her career as an artist. It is for this reason that much of her early work deals with themes of motherhood and her role as an artist.

In 2001, she received national attention and criticism for her five-panel photograph titled "Yo Mama's Last Supper." This photograph, which revisions Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper," features an all black cast of disciples (with the exception of Judas) and herself in the nude as Christ. Viewing it as an attack on Catholicism, then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani sought to institute a "Decency Commission" for museums that were supported by tax dollars. (18) Interest in her work increased after this controversy. Cox's imagery and public persona as "Yo Mama" (news media conflated the artist with her alter ego and referred to Cox as "Yo Mama") illustrate the ways in which public shaming of Black women's bodies is intrinsically tied to racist notions about Black women's sexuality and motherhood. Cox engages the feelins of shame and anxiety around the Black mother figure through her photography—often placing her body at the center of processes of reclamation and transcendence of racist Black mother tropes.

Lucille Clifton's concept of joy features prominently in her work and served as a mantra throughout her life. She was born Lucille Sayles in Depew, New York. She was the eldest daughter of a working class family. Clifton went to Howard University during a time when her classmates included Roberta Flack, Toni Morrison and Amiri Baraka.

She majored in drama on a scholarship but dropped out after losing it due to poor grades in Chemistry. After this, she returned home to Buffalo, New York, where she met her husband, Fred Clifton. They moved to Baltimore, Maryland, and raised six children together. Clifton continued to write in Maryland and became the Poet Laureate of the state in 1979—the third in its history. (Archives par. 15) Her poetry is known for its themes of resilience, spirituality and self-love and was recently collected by poet Kevin Young, who procured her papers for archiving at Emory University's Manuscripts and Rare Book Library. She died in 2010 on the anniversary of her mother's death, February 13, at the age of 73.

I selected Lucille Clifton's work for this study because she insisted on "Joy!" in her life and work. In her signature, her readings and even in my personal encounters with her she repeated this word with deep conviction. "Joy!" however, was a complex concept for her as demonstrated in her interviews and her poetry. Describing the failure to choose joy as a sin, Clifton articulates a theological perspective in which her a-religious metaphysical beliefs meet her creative practice. I explore this theological concept of joy in chapter three.

Avery*Sunshine is an independent R&B recording artist from Chester, Pennsylvania. She studied philosophy and piano at Spelman College and continues to live in Atlanta, Georgia. A single parent and working artist, she lives with her children and parents, and works as a choir director. Her music style is categorized as R&B but has a clear house, gospel and soul influence. Her lyrics are often autobiographical and themed around love, family and everyday experiences. Sunshine never had the intention of becoming a solo artist. In fact, she considered herself to be a pianist and was one part of a

musical duo called Daisy Rue. The group broke up after her co-member received the opportunity to perform on Broadway. Since, Sunshine has worked closely with her partner Dana, co-writing, producing, and performing for live audiences. She accompanies herself on piano while singing for her audience in lively and interactive concerts. Although this research was conducted early in her career, she has already traveled the world for her hit house song titled "Stalk You." In 2011 she released her first self-titled album. Her single "Ugly Part of Me" was well received and debuted at #37 on the Billboard R&B Audience chart. (Sunshine, *We Made* par. 1) She continues to record and is currently working on her second album. As a secular artist who also creates and works as a musician in religious settings, Sunshine exemplifies the ways in which many Black women artists have incorporated the sacred and secular in their music.

I explore how Sunshine's music, which straddles the lines of sacred and secular, navigates the feelin of ecstasy as both a spiritual and sexual experience. Sunshine's musical ambiguity as it relates to the sacred and secular is reflected in her stage name which is drawn from two fictional characters that own and exude sex, sensuality and feminine spiritual power: Shug Avery of *The Color Purple* and Sunshine of *Harlem Nights*.

I selected Avery*Sunshine for this study because the arc of her career and her music exemplify the link between spirituality and sexuality. As a choir director and secular musician she claims to experience the divine in both secular and sacred genres of music. Also, as my interview with Sunshine reveals, her personal philosophy about music shares this understanding of the divine and sensuality.

While the experiences of shame, joy and ecstasy are examined for the specific ways these artists engage them, they are by no means unique to Cox, Clifton and Sunshine. As this study will demonstrate, these artists are in conversation with other artists and scholars whose work addresses similar experiences. They will act as chorus and talk back to what is explored here, adding to the close readings of Cox's, Clifton's and Sunshine's work.

Urgency of Research

The convergence of the fields deployed throughout this study—affect theory, Black feminist thought and criticism, and Black women's art production—is imperative to this project for four central reasons. First, Black women's art contains the narratives and expressions that describe Black women's lived experiences. (Bobo, *Black Feminist* xv; Christian 41; Davis, A 217) Black women's art is ripe with valuable discourse on Black women's emotional experiences and embodiment. Feminist anthologies by women of color that emerged out of the 1970s and 80s demonstrated the direct link between feminist knowledge production and creative production by publishing books that featured image, poetry and prose such as *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa; *Home Girl*s, edited by Barbara Smith; and *The Black Woman,* edited by Toni Cade Bambara. Black women's creative work has been imperative in a struggle toward highlighting our multilayered experiences. Black women's writings became the focal point of what is now called Black feminist literary criticism because it is through these writings that the stories of Black women's lives have been told. Black women's experiences are shaped by race, class, sexuality and gender, among other things, and Black women's creative work, through its inventiveness and willingness to engage in

the complex, diverse and difficult matter of Black women's lives, challenges the idea of a monolithic category of woman. (Christian 29) By looking at Black women's art through the lens of affect, I specifically engage with these Black women's inner life experiences.

The second reason why I explore the study of affect along with Black feminist thought and criticism is that, while a handful of recent theorists explore race and its convergence with affect (Anne Cheng, Kara Keeling, Rebecca Wanzo and Debra Walker King are examples), studies usually attribute affect to the individual, ignoring how racialization, racism, sexism and colonialism shape the experiences of such individuals. Bodies experiencing emotion are not universal. The above systems shape the meaning of the body and one's relationship to her body. Omissions of the site of the body from discourses of affect ignore the effects of racism on the bodies of people whose experience is negatively shaped by race, gender and class. This project seeks a more holistic understanding of the ways Black women have experienced race and gender at the site of the body.

Third, Black feminist scholarship and criticism calls for new lenses, approaches, and lexicons for exploring the work of Black women artists. (Griffin 488; McDowell 16; Davies 32) My task in *Feelin Feminism* is to explore the work of Black women artists and continue to develop a language to discuss their work: a language that focuses on their discourses through affect.

Finally, this project argues that through the art of these selected artists we can see how Black feminist thought already engages the body, mind and even something they describe as the spirit. Because of this, I use the colloquial term *feelin* to talk about Black feminist thought not merely as an intellectual endeavor but as a holistic practice that

incorporates knowledges that are holistically (mind/body/spirit) understood. Deploying the word *feelin* denotes how this holistic practice is a knowledge embedded in Black U.S. culture. It gives this project a voice that is holistic and homegrown.

This introduction will further describe the foundations by which I explore feelin by outlining how affect theory provides useful language for discussing feelin as knowledge production. I will then expand on feelin as a concept, grounding it in U.S. Black ways of knowing and speaking as well as discourses in affect. Attentive to the ways in which the concept of mind/body/spirit may be problematic for describing knowledge, I will discuss the deployment of "spirit" in this articulation of feelin by taking up Jacqui Alexander's concept of "sacred subjectivity" which is useful for describing the ways in which subjugated knowledges travel and emerge.

Instructed by the means of knowledge making that are creative and holistic, this project proposes new and interdisciplinary ways of engaging Black women's creative work, including archival research, close reading and art practice. This approach, though newly described here, is grounded in work produced within feminist thought that supports the relevance of affect as knowledge and creativity as knowledge production. Further, it is supported by discourses within art education, which describe the ways in which the art studio acts as laboratory in creative projects.

On Emotions, Feelins and Sensations

Audre Lorde greatly influences my understanding of feelin. I understand Lorde's essays, "Uses of the Erotic," "Poetry is Not a Luxury," and "Uses of Anger," to be Black feminist engagements with what is now being discussed as "affect theory." Writing in 1984 Lorde cites the erotic as a source of knowledge of systemic forces, as well as

knowledge of the power within us. She states: "In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information in our lives." (Lorde 53) Black women's affective lives can be seen, heard, touched, "felt" through Black women's art. As Angela Davis notes in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, "Art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge." (Davis, *Blues Legacies* xiii) Feelin is a thing that I trace through close readings the works of Black women artists who explore the visual, the literary, and the audile.

Such close readings are informed by Black feminist criticism—scholarship that is particularly invested in the ways in which Black women make meaning through the creative. I deploy Black feminist criticism as a lens, which allows me to wade through material that shares themes, motifs, and language that these artists have used in their creative meaning-making processes. Because I am particularly interested in how Black women artists have utilized the creative to negotiate systemic forces, I also deploy the works of Black feminist theorists who research Black women's lives. Black feminist theoretical texts serve as a companion here to the theoretical substance I already see in Black women's art. Together, with art, Black feminist criticism assists in creating a foundation for talking about how Black women reveal the workings of their inner-lives and make meaning of it in the world.

Emotions are messy. They are not visible and often described as unreliable. So when discussing emotions, many practitioners have gone to the body as the sight of evidence of them. For example, Teresa Brennan describes affect as "the physiological

shift accompanying a judgment." (Brennan 5) Beginning her inquiry on the transmission of affect with the curious question, "Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the atmosphere?" (1), Brennan explores affect through neuroscience and biology, attributing the transmissions of affect to hormones. Her argument challenges the western notion that humans are contained, singular beings, citing the body as a physical place where affects are transmitted. According to Brennen, emotions are *biologically* shared. (6) It would be more fitting to call them "sensations." Such sensations can lack order or language, yet they have profound meaning that is momentarily indescribable.

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You are crying and you don't know why.

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Brennan separates the concept of affect from feeling, noting that feeling requires cognition, language, discernment—feelings are "sensations that have found a match in words." (Brennan 140) Affect for her, is pre-feeling, as affect must be filtered, discerned or judged in order to become feeling. Sarah Ahmed cites Descartes and David Hume for being fore-grounders of the concept that emotions are tied to the body. These scholars understand that "Emotion is the feeling of bodily change," that sensations are made into feelings through language. (Ahmed 5) She uses fear as an example: "We feel fear, for example, because our heart is racing, our skin is sweating." (5) Emotions are also described as cognitive judgments "which are irreducible to bodily sensations." (5) They are reactions to particular objects or stimuli. It is the *judgment* that something is frightening that induces fear. Key to these judgments is the influence of language and

culture. In this view, emotionality happens outside of the body and as relationships between objects.

Current scholarship on affect is largely influenced by Raymond Williams who, in 1977, argued that social structures are constantly being created by what he called "pre-emergences." When we look at society then what we must consider are "structures of feeling," that is, the ways in which ideologies are formulated by something other than intellectualism or even conscious cognition. "We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone," he states, "specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought […]" (Williams 132) Williams' concept of structures of feeling foregrounds the ways in which the interrogation of affects is imperative for examining social matter. He offers its use as methodology. He states that, "[…] a 'structure of feeling' is a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such [affective] elements and their connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence." (133)

My interest in feelin takes into consideration the ways in which what is *out there* as structures of feelin exist in opposition to, and in relation to Black women's inner lives. If there are "structures of feeling" that exist in the social world where the legacies of slavery, colonialism and genocide intersect as emotional foregrounds for the perpetuation of racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism, then the emotionality of Black women and the texts Black women artists produce out of a subjectivity in which mind/body/and spirit are acknowledged may offer different forms of knowledge that affirm their lives.

Just So I Know That You're Feelin Me: Defining Feelin

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ON THE HOLINESS OF BLACK LANGUAGE
- Regards to Ralph Ellison

In high school there was a white girl who stopped me in the middle of a sentence because she claimed that it was against her religion for me to say "I Am." While the Hebrew translation of אהיה אשר אהיה* reads into the future "I shall be, as I shall be," perhaps it is fitting that I could say, "I Be" and not offend her by speaking myself into past, present, and future existence.

*Often translated as "I Am that I Am," the answer God gave to Moses at the burning bush when he asked for God's name in Exodus 3:14.

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Language and Feelin

Language matters and Black English is useful as a subversive way of speaking and knowing that asserts, as the above poem does, one's history and self-knowledge. You will find that I use the standard term *feeling* here to describe sensations as they are widely understood, but *feelin* is a term I use to describe holistic sensory experiences as knowledge. As a verb, *feelin* encompasses cognitive understanding as well as affective, bodily response to an object. It is different from "understanding" an object, in that *feelin* brings the subject into active, identity shaping response but more aligned with the concept of "overstanding," which means that something is understood more deeply. *Feelin* is a term rooted in U.S. Black speech.

Linguistic scholar Geneva Smitherman discusses the importance of style and shifted meaning across time and identity in her book *Talkin and Testifying.* The verb "to be," for example, marks habitual or continuing conditions when the word "be" is used and stressed. However, the word is omitted when such conditions are not recurring. (Smitherman 19) In order to denote the stylistic and phonetic uses of the term, I've dropped the "g" in "feeling" to say and mean *feelin. Feelin* sounds this way in the mouth, and dropping the g in what would be a gerund fixes the term in the present progressive. *Feelin* is most always used after the verb "to be," and most often after the phrase "I am." In the present progressive, *feelin* marks identity and time.

Feelin denotes a moment of identification and experience. In an instant, she who experiences feelin acknowledges sensations in the body. Something touches her in a core of knowing and identity in time. *Feelin* signifies something deeper than its English standard corollary feeling, which is defined in verb form as the ability to "perceive, examine or search by touch," "experience (an emotion or sensation)," "have a belief or impression;" and in noun form as, "an act of feeling," "a sensation given by an object or material when touched," or "the impression given by something." (def. 1- 3) *Feelin* appropriates and elevates "feeling" through emphasis and context. Or as Smitherman would say, "[…] the African cultural set persists, that is, a predisposition to imbue the English word with the same sense of value and commitment — 'propers,' as we would say accorded to Nommo [Malian ancestral spirits] in African culture." (Smitherman 79) *Feelin* incorporates this standard definition while giving particular emphasis to the experience as one that happens in a place beyond tactile sensation, emotion, or thought.

To be feelin something is to touch, experience, be impressed upon, and sense something in the soul.

Feelin, interested in the soul and emerging from the souls of Black folk, is a part of what Claude Brown would call "soul language." Its meaning is inferred in the way that it is pronounced, and that pronunciation signifies its connection to spirit and soul. The sound of feelin has its own pitch and cadence, and therefore, it is important in my written rendering to approximate it as such. Feelin is pronounced FEEL-uhn rather than FEEL-een. Feelin interrupts the gerund in written word and utterance. This interruption of sound and attention to the music of the word is important to soul language. According to Brown, "[…] it can be asserted that spoken soul is more of a sound than a language. It generally possesses a pronounced lyrical quality, which is frequently incompatible to any music other than that ceaseless and relentlessly driving rhythm that flows from poignantly spent lives." (Brown, C 234) The rhythm of feelin, its music, signifies and vibrates with the souls of Black folks.

Feelin in the Body

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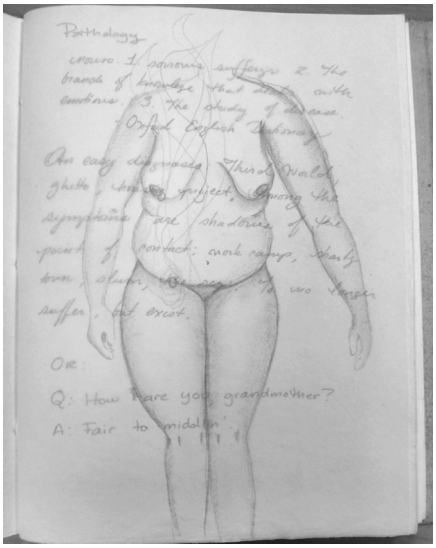

Fig. 1. Bettina Judd. *From "The Book of Measures,"* 2012. Paper, graphite and leather.

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I am not talking about ghosts here. I'm not even talking about dead people for most of this work, but I am talking about souls and what souls experience. In order to do this I talk about a rather ghostly experience, but through the energies of someone who is alive. I look for my mother in an archive because there is something I know but want to verify—something I want to feel and see for myself. It is a residue of feelin I call anger. Its object: a book titled *The Negro a Beast*. I go to the library to have the experience my mother had over thirty years ago. I am looking for vibrant essences. I want to know how it made her angry. What I found was a book, just a book, but the feelin stayed with me because I walked into Special Collections with it already in my skin.

In *Ghostly Matters,* Avery Gordon talks about real live (real dead) ghosts and their importance to sociological research and understanding. Being haunted describes "how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities." (Gordon 8) So perhaps it was my mother who was haunted, but once again *who died here?* No one, or perhaps a whole lot of people

died; the ideological formations behind this ridiculous book are endemic to the history of racial violence in the U.S. I'm not sure she was there for them—the ghosts anyway. My mother was drawn for a reason (anger), the residue of which I was chasing (anger). This isn't a ghost. It is a feelin, stirring up in the soul, welling up into bona fide, righteous anger. Feelin is a reality, a deep-down-in-your-bones way of knowing that, like haunting, is not "cold knowledge" but "transformative recognition." (8) *To be feelin* is to experience, to be open to experience, and to identify, be identified. It is a way of being called, chosen. In the library, I and feelin are one as *feelin*—a nexus of body and spirit, an embodied way of knowing.

To render feelin more visible, take the moment someone hears a new song on the radio. Listening to its lyrics, rhythm and melody, the listener may exclaim, "I'm feelin this!" and proceed to dance, bob her head, or sing along with the tune. Conversely, if she exclaims, "I'm not feelin this!" the response is generally to turn the station or turn the radio off entirely. Both instances of feelin result in action, one positive (engaging with the tune) and one negative (actively disengaging from the tune). Feelin is an experience that incites positive, negative, or even ambivalent responses, but it demands action. Yet feelin is more than a response to stimuli. The person who "feels it", identifies for reasons that are both personal and political; the object jibes with desires, memories, traumas, and metaphysical experiences that may or may not be able to be articulated. Feelin involves yet another inner bodily response that can have a range of descriptions. Feelin can evoke tears of joy or tears of sadness; it can evoke a sigh of relief, the hot flash of anger, the blood flushing sensation of fear, or the soaring of the spirit.

There is also the use of *feelin* in the form of a noun that signals moving inward to sort through thoughts, emotions, and feelings as in the phrase, “I got in my feelins.” This means that one has taken something personally. To get in one’s feelins is to make the decision to reflect, to acknowledge that emotions are giving one information, and to listen closely to that information. It acknowledges the interconnected aspect of knowing and sensation as it happens in the body. The body may experience lethargy, hunger, loss of appetite, bloat, sudden bursts of energy, all of which signal emotions packed with information. To get in one’s feelins demands cognitive pause and reflection. To return to the example of our radio listener, the song’s rhythm, lyrical content, or melody may trigger some of these sensations. All of these sensations build to create the distinct identity of the person who has them and influence the subsequent active response to them. To cry out of joy for a love song, to be sexually aroused by a tune with heavy bass tones—all are responses that speak to a subject’s identity and embodiment.

To speak of feelin is to deal with states of being across mind/body/spirit. Feelin implicates all three at once. As a bodily way of knowing, it reverberates in the spirit and the mind. In order to navigate through feelin, I engage aspects of experience that cross these boundaries of mind body and spirit. It is at the site of creative production that the artists I discuss articulate these reverberations. Therefore, in order to engage with their work I have to engage with what M. Jacqui Alexander calls "sacred subjectivity."

Sacred subjectivity is a particular way of knowing that allows for subjugated knowledges to emerge. According to Alexander, it is a way of knowing by which many women understand their lives. (Alexander, MJ 299) *Feelin* is a form of sacred subjectivity, a way of knowing through the body, memory, and something called the soul.

The use of the terms soul and spirit here signify on experiences that can be described as existential—identity as it exists outside of the realm of the mind. Deployed here, they are not intended to bind the subjects in a particular understanding of religious experience or even a particular mode of understanding one's identity. Instead, they are deployed here to give room to the many ways in which the artists' work explored here experiences and articulates consciousness and human experience differently.

As sacred subjectivity, the full meaning of feelin and its linguistic dimensions become clearer. In a language where "I am" is articulated as "I be," the power of feelin marks time in the present while also implicating the past and the future. Alexander describes Spiritual time and space in this way:

> Spirit brings knowledge from past, present, and future to a particular moment called a now. Time becomes a moment, an instant, experienced in the now, but also a space crammed with moments of wisdom about an event or series of events already having inhabited different moments, or with the intention of inhabiting them, while all occurring simultaneously in this instant, in this space, as well as in other instants and spaces of which we are not immediately aware. (309)

The moment of feelin only acknowledges currents already running through an individual. However the acknowledgement of getting in one's feelins, or feelin something marks time. One is feelin in the moment, getting in one's feelins for a moment, but time is not linear. The moment at which one is feelin something encompasses the ringing of familiar (memory and the past), what is experienced in the present and what may be known or felt in the future.

As an experience through which body mind and spirit inform at once, feelin makes identity. One, "is" or "be" through feelin because it occurs at the core of one's self. The moment one acknowledges feelin, it is a signal to move inward, continuing a process

of knowing. Something already within an individual has been struck or awakened into speaking. Alexander speaks of a similar experience through diasporic iterations of African spiritual systems like Voudon and Lucumi. To know oneself in these spiritual systems is to know the currents, Orisha and spirits, already running through the mind/body/spirit nexus. To know these spirits is important business for practitioners because without knowing, Alexander states, "we could indeed not address subjectivity of any kind." (310) Therefore to "know who follows you" is to truly know the self. This process of knowing is tenuous: "Knowing who walks with you and maintaining that company on the long journey is a dance of balance in which the fine lines between and among will and surrender; self-effacement and humility; doing and being; and listlessness and waiting for the Divine are being constantly drawn." (311) To know who follows you mandates going inward, what she calls "traveling to the interior," and surrendering oneself to spirit.

Each of the women I describe here, discuss spirit and the mind/body/spirit nexus differently as they represent a diverse set of conceptualizations of spirituality. Such views vary from spirituality connected to a spirit or soul, to emotional experience that is not cognitive or intellectual. By discussing mind/body/spirit these women reveal such complexities and diversity. While all three of them have autobiographical connections to religious experience within Christianity, they also reveal varied relationships to spirituality, concepts of divinity and religion generally. Lucille Clifton, raised Baptist and admittedly influenced by "good preaching" (Troupe) in her poetry maintained a rather a-religious lifestyle and did not attend church as an adult. Her archives and poetry reveal a very complex sense of spirituality that included a belief in an afterlife and a sixth sense in

which conversations with spiritual beings she calls "The Ones" were possible. Moreover, her articulation of joy in itself reveals her roots to religious language (she speaks of joy in terms of a divine force and sin) but does not tether her to a particular religious doctrine.

Although her work has remained controversial in Catholic circles because of the so-called anti-religious "propaganda" (Reyes 48) imagery in *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, Renee Cox identifies as a Catholic while maintaining an intellectual approach to its doctrine. In my interview with her she particularly favored the Jesuit tradition for its intellectual approach to Catholicism. Cox recalls learning that the divine (she uses the term "God") resides within her during childhood from a Catholic priest. She says, "I grew up Catholic, I think he must have been a Jesuit, obviously, that said, 'You don't have to go to church because your church is here.'" (*Personal Interview*) While Cox's relationship and framework with spirituality has its roots in her Catholic upbringing, she is clear about separating that from the religion and critiques of Catholicism.

Avery*Sunshine continues to identify with Christianity and holds a working position within the church. She too, however, discusses spirituality as transcendent—existing beyond religious doctrine. Her positions as choir director and secular artist make her perspective all the more valuable for this conversation in which Black women's experience with ecstasy in itself can be read as both within what may be viewed as the more asexual confines of religiosity in the Protestant Christian church and outside of it as sexual *at the same time.*

By no means do these women represent the whole of Black women's understandings, experiences, or perspectives on spirituality or emotional experience. But I do hope, within the context of this study, the diverse ways in which they approach the

concept of spirit reflect a range, rather than a singular and essential spiritual experience. Feelin is offered here as a spiritual subjectivity that has the potential to speak to these complex and diverse experiences with emotionality and the spirit.

Feelin is a subjectivity that occurs at the site of the body through the work of doing and being. As an experience, one exists in feelin. Feelin, like possession, *happens to* a person. It is seemingly involuntary, yet one must surrender to its vibrations. (Re-imagine the moment of rapture in our car.) Through surrender, feelin is also a "doing" that allows and facilitates response, the first of which is to surrender to feelin itself. As one vibrates, exists through, and identifies with feelin it also "does." The experience of feelin calls for active response—"going in"—being one immediate iteration of response. Forms of active responses are individualized, but they do make meaning in the outside world. One may be feelin or getting in one's feelins about the same object as another individual, which has implications for the political.

For Black women, racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, *the somethings* that converge in Black women's lives, reverberate in forms of feelin. As I explore feelin as a concept, I am not merely discussing the ways in which Black women may choose to embrace, reject, or be ambivalent about feminism as a whole. When I say feelin feminism I am interested in the ways that feelin signals moments of going in, reflection that speaks to collective understandings of Black women's subjectivity. That is, I am interested in how, for these Black women artists, going inward, *getting in they feelins*, are sites of knowledge production.

Feelin as Knowledge Production

The Black women's creative work I explore here negotiates with inner feelins and those inner feelins lead us toward much more complicated engagements of feminist thought. The very process of creation mandates navigating the inner self. It is for this reason that Black feminist theory has looked to Black women's creative production as material for understanding the lives of Black women. Conversing with the sacred, feelin is inherently implicated as an informant of creativity. As Alexander observes, "The Sacred is inconceivable without an aesthetic." (Alexander, MJ 323) *Feelin Feminism* looks at the creative process through which Black women experience, engage, and resist aspects of oppression that seek to destroy us at our core.

This project is also influenced by the feminist politics of women of color broadly, and has implications for the homegrown ways in which feminists of color have articulated their ways of knowing. The women that I study in this project are Black women living in the U.S. Lucille Clifton and Avery*Sunshine were born in the United States, Clifton in Depew, New York, and Sunshine in Chester, Pennsylvania. Renee Cox was born in Colgate, Jamaica. Although these artists live in the U.S., I agree with Carole Boyce Davies' assertion that Black women writers are migratory subjects, and that their work "[…] should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound […]." (Davies 3) I understand this concept to include the work of black women artists and musicians. It is my view that these national, ethnic and geographical border crossings are intrinsically linked to spiritual and sacred border crossings.

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INDIGENOUS TO NO LAND

black female bodies inhabit the liminal space of death
- h.s., s.h., m.w.

you say
i belong
not to this
nor that
but to the sea

yes.

but
i cannot
swim

yes.[4]

§

These artists politically identify as Black, some more strongly than others, and express this identification in the context of their creative work. The racial, cultural, and spiritual subjectivities of these women are interwoven in their work. It is for this reason that their words are placed in conversation with those of other Black women artists and their work discussed in the context of their experiences and lived worlds. As an example, Cox's spiritual, racial, and cultural identity as both U.S. and Jamaican crops up as an important factor when considering her Queen Nanny series, in which the artist takes on the ghost of a Jamaican hero, Grandy Nanny of the Maroons. Not only does Cox address the history of a Black woman folk hero who fought against slavery, but she also depicts Nanny's spirit as everlasting in the series. Nation and spirit are interwoven in the series.

[4] Blacks in the U.S. are indigenous to no land. A version of this poem can be found in Meridians. See Judd 240.

Sacred subjectivities are a part of our fleshy reality. This is not to essentialize particular bodies, especially bodies that are Black and woman, but quite the opposite. As Alexander notes, the spirit is forever shifting in its "permanent impermanence." (327) Nothing can fix itself into the mind/body/spirit mode of knowing that is feelin. We must acknowledge the mutability of the spirit *within* that body, resisting the impulse to dismember it, as is the mode of disembodied ("I think therefore I am") knowledge. Taking up Chicana feminist Cherrie Moraga's "Theory in the Flesh," Alexander observes that "[…] the contemporaneous task of a theory in the flesh […] is to transmute this body and the pain of its dismemberment to a remembering of the body to its existential purpose." (329) Transformative theories of the flesh operate at the mind/body/spirit nexus. Moraga states that a theory in the flesh "[…] means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity." (Moraga and Anzaldúa 23) To know, truly, through feelin is to: *know (mind), that I know (body), that I know (spirit).*

Affect and Knowing

Current scholarship has increasingly become interested in the connection between emotion and knowledge. Revisiting theories in psychoanalysis, philosophy and even neuroscience, scholars in the study of culture have appropriately noted the importance of emotion, feeling, and sensation in the order of social life. What is agreed upon is the fact that there are ways of knowing that exist, transmit, and extend beyond language. That thought, at the very least, interacts with the body on a subtle level. This turn in scholarship, which Patricia Clough calls the "affective turn," is influenced by the persistent feminist discussions of embodied knowledge and the emergence of queer

theory and its ephemeral objects of analysis, while also "occurring at a time when critical theory is facing the analytic challenges of ongoing war, trauma, torture, massacre, and counter/terrorism." (Clough 1) All of these factors invite and demand the negotiations of subtle knowledges which shape social life—flesh realities. Affect, for Clough and her cohort, refers to "bodily capacities to affect and be affected or the augmentation or diminution of a body's capacity to act, to engage, to connect, such that autoaffection is linked to the self-feeling of being alive—that is, 'aliveness' or vitality." (2) The concern for many of these scholars is how affect impacts human interaction in the social, and how affect itself impacts, shapes, and, well, affects humans in the real world.

Sarah Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* may be counted in this "affective turn." Concerned with the ways in which objects, such as nations, can be characterized by emotion, Ahmed explores the dimensions of sensation as they are projected onto something as contained as the nation-state. Ahmed provides a framework for understanding how nations act, and how the people within them are shaped by emotion. Ahmed's inquiry involves examining how objects are acted upon and shaped by emotions. (Ahmed 5) As a way of knowing, the cultural politics of emotion are modes of knowing that create a kind of common sense for the actions of nations, whether it be shame as the "appropriate" emotion for truth and reconciliation processes, "soft touches"[5] for immigration policies, or grieving nations. (2)

For Ahmed, emotions are effects of social life—existing outside of the body and in the world. (196) While she concedes that emotions are personal, her investment in her

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[5] Ahmed begins *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* with a discussion of a poster from the British National Front which talks about immigration policies. It characterized Britain as have a "Soft Touch" on immigration. Ahmed asks, "How does a nation come to be imagined as having a 'soft touch'?" (2)

project is understanding emotions through the social structures in which they act upon people and the relationship between people and the social on the axis of emotion. (198) Therefore social justice movements, as an example pertinent to this project, can and do mobilize emotions such as anger as a mode of organizing, transmitting, and articulating information.

Ahmed gives room to the interiority of emotion when describing anger within feminist politics. The articulation of anger within feminist analyses and actions are the modes by which we read pain. Feminist thought deploys an affective method of anger in order to craft what it is against. As Ahmed states, "If feminism is an emotional as well as ethical and political response to what it is against, then what feminism is against cannot be seen as 'exterior' to feminism. Indeed 'what' feminism is against is 'what' gives feminist politics its edge." (174) What Ahmed calls "against-ness" is identified by anger, and the investigation of anger involves reading pain. Such readings of pain have the potential to become transformative. Reading Lorde's speech "The Uses of Anger," Ahmed comments, "If anger pricks our skin, if it makes us shudder, sweat and tremble, then it might just shudder us into new ways of being, it might just enable us to inhabit a different kind of skin, even if that skin remains marked or scarred by that which we are against." (175) Pain is attached to the skin, anger is a way of reading pain, and anger is a mode of moving for feminist action.

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HOW TO MEASURE PAIN I

In the woman it is a checklist:

Can you imagine anything
worse than this?

If the answer is no, ask again.

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Both pain and anger, however, are perceived differently according to race in the U.S. If pain and anger are important for feminist struggle, then the understandings by which we read pain must be investigated. In *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*, Debra Walker King explores something called blackpain—the particular phenomenon in which Black bodies in the U.S. are intrinsically tied with pain. However, this understanding of pain and Black skin are independent of the humanity of Black people. When black pain is read, it is often devoid of the Black skin which suffers it. King states, "Blackpain has a metonymic function as a sign of social, economic, and cultural woundedness that can be co-opted by anyone suffering in a manner associated historically with black people." (King 17) King continues by noting the way in which white first wave feminists deployed Black pain as a mode of "reading" their own struggle for visibility and the vote. Here, the movement that occurs when anger (a mode of reading pain) is activated[6] by feminists is constructed on the pained backs of Black people.

Operating as a metonym, blackpain is so tied to black bodies as a *symbol* that pain on Black *bodies* cannot be read. Rebecca Wanzo's *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Storytelling* argues that stories of African

[6] Ahmed argues that feminists identify pain and thus the way one would move away from physical pain is to create move(ment) away from it. See Ahmed 173.

American women's suffering are often left in obscurity. She states that, "[…] African American women are often illegible as sympathetic objects for media and political concern […]." (Wanzo 2) This disembodied understanding of pain in which pain and suffering exist in the social (even as currency as Wanzo notes) implicates pain's symbolic attachment to *bodies* of black women. Symbolic attachment does not include the real flesh and blood of those bodies in pain, but further obscures the blood and flesh, internal experience of Black women. Black women's pain can never be *read* on the bodies of Black women because Black women are symbolically and perpetually bodies of pain.

Reading pain in the social in this way highlights why it may be that Black women's anger is also read as simultaneously endemic and symbolic. Taking up the symbol of the Strong Black Woman in American culture, Sheri Parks notes that the angry Black woman is an extension of embedded archetypes of the Sacred Dark Feminine. (Parks 110) However, the archetype of the dark feminine divine in American culture is also marred by deeply entrenched racism, which does the work of dismemberment and dehumanization that further obscures the visibility of Black women's flesh/emotional/spiritual pain. In order to discuss pain, suffering, and indeed the feelings of Black women and the way in which they inform Black women's knowledge production, studies in affect must grapple with the ways in which emotionality and sensation through the social are read through raced and gendered bodies. However, that is but one layer of understanding the importance of politics and the emotional for Black women. The next layer is acknowledging and *reading* emotionality in the work of Black

women who have re-membered Black women's mind/body/spirits. It is this work, this re-membering, that makes the task of feelin in Black women's art a Black feminist project.

Black Feminist Theory and Black Women's Experience

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas.
- Audre Lorde (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 37)

Feelin Feminism highlights the ways in which Black women encounter and counter racism and sexism through the deeper aspects of the mind, the spirit and the body. Black feminist perspectives on Black women's experiences are key in my exploration of "feelin feminism." Black women's experiences of affect that reflect traumas, memories, hauntings, as well as pain reflect their multidimensional experiences of being both Black and woman. These multidimensional experiences are made most evident in Black women's creative work.

Central to Black feminist thought is the idea that Black women's everyday experiences and everyday resistance are a part of their feminist thinking and activism. An offshoot of Black feminism, "womanism" defines this perspective and focuses on its holistic intentions. First defined by Alice Walker in her book of essays *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, a "womanist" is a "black feminist or feminist of color." (Walker, "Womanist" 19) Walker grounds her description of such a woman in folk tradition "From the black folk expression of mothers to female children…" and community with other woman: "[…] loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture." (19) Womanism is also defined in terms of having and feeling

a connection with other human beings and nature as well. Layli Phillips Marapayan later defines womanism as:

> […] a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (Phillips, L xx)

This holistic approach to womanism highlights the ways in which Black women have not only thought about their positions as women in society, but as humans in the world. By connecting justice with nature and spirit, womanism's concern is not only with political action, but with the health of women's minds, bodies and spirits.

Womanism's focus on the everyday experiences and resistances of women of color is important for this project in that both are concerned with the inner lives of Black women. To further quote Walker, a womanist "appreciates […] women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter)" and "Loves the Spirit […] Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless." (Walker, *In Search* xi) Walker's stress of the word regardless is important here. That word acknowledges the fact that there are forces, oppressions, that would otherwise like to wipe out that self-love, and emphasizes resistance to such forces.

Lucille Clifton notes this same kind of oppression in a poem that begins "won't you celebrate with me" in her 1993 collection *The Book of Light*: "come celebrate/ with me that everyday/ something has tried to kill me/ and has failed." (Clifton, *Celebrate* 11) In these lines, Clifton, too, acknowledges the hostilities against Black women and other women of color (she states earlier in the poem that she is born "both nonwhite and

woman") and celebrates the success of her own survival. Clifton cites her black female body as the place at which systemic forces seek to wipe her out. Her ideas, her memory, and her body are targets of attempts at erasure. Yet, this poem does not lament in being targeted. It asks for celebration of her survival. It is this kind of urgent knowing about the "somethings" that try to kill Black women and the importance of their survival that is embedded in creative work by Black women. The "somethings" (systemic forces) named and unnamed have met Black women at the body and the psyche. *Feelin Feminism* is interested in how Black women have described, named, and explored the "somethings" in their lives.

In my exploration of *Feelin Feminism*, these "somethings" make their impact at the site of Black female bodies. I explore how racism and sexism are experienced (felt) through the body, and thus, how feminism for Black women must be holistically "felt" for it to be a viable kind of resistance. Theoretical work about Black women's acute experiences of racism and sexism on the body are important for such an exploration.

I frame this research within the context of feminist and particularly Black feminist theories on standpoint which argue for scholars to examine the particular lived experiences of subjects of their research. It is my contention, as Jacqui Alexander would agree, that such lived experiences include the spiritual. Under the umbrella of experience, the spiritual, intellectual and affective lives of Black women artists are explored here as imperative data—information that I call *feelin*. It is this information that shapes the creative work of these artists and reveals the interweaving of spirit and emotion in the production of knowledge that affirms their lives.

Feminist Interventions on The Social Construction of Thought

Feminist scholars, of color and white, have long debated, discussed, and outlined the means by which women produce thought, often confronting the Eurocentric and Enlightenment privileging of mind and masculinity in the production of reliable knowledge and ultimate truth. For example, Audre Lorde reminds us that the "irrational" knowledge of the erotic is a powerful force within women. The erotic is defined as a way of knowing that is embodied, intellectual and spiritual, that has been demonized by patriarchal forces that privilege "rational" thought over emotion and masculinity over femininity. As such the erotic knowledge within women is a subjugated knowledge that, according to Heléne Cixous, could be released from the body and in the written word. Writing is, "[a]n act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her naïve strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal […]." (Cixous 880) To write from the body or, *écriture féminine*, is to make what did not yet have adequate language effable.

It has, therefore, been understood that knowledge is deeply connected to women's embodiment; debates over the methods by which that knowledge is made into language and action are ongoing. Susan Bordo's "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity" encounters the female body as a site of knowledge and contestation. The female body visually represents pushes and pulls over control and power between the woman and society. Such pushes and pulls are literal embodiments of feminist as well as anti-feminist agendas. (Bordo 23) Though Bordo admittedly focuses on a specifically white and middle class woman subject, this particular lens on the female body as a site of

contestation is instructive for the ways in which Black women's bodies are always contested on the grounds of race, class, gender, sexuality and shape from within and the outside.

In negotiating the Black female body as a site of knowledge about Black women's experiences and culture, scholars have noted that upon first negotiating the Black female body, one immediately encounters the gendered and racial politics already projected upon and within that body. As Evelyn Hammonds notes in her article "Black (W) holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," discussions about Black women's sexuality in particular are in terms of its absence. (Hammonds 131) Theorists Black and white have widely discussed the lack of scholarship on Black women's sexual subjectivity, noting it as being missing, or represented without much detail.

Such silences have a history. Because Black women simultaneously experience racism and sexism, we historically have had to curtain any evidence of our sexuality in order to protect ourselves from these forces. In a complicated sort of resistance, Darlene Clark Hine asserts, Black women adhered to a kind of "culture of dissemblance" where "the behavior and attitudes of Black women […] created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors." (Hine 912) I say this is a complicated sort of resistance, because this "culture of dissemblance" leads to a very hazy view of the inner lives of Black women. Where we do get clear representations of Black women's inner lives, especially as it relates to violence and the threat of violence, is in creative work by Black women.

Elizabeth Alexander names and explores the inner lives of Black folk in *The Black Interior.* Coming to the project from another creative project—a series of dream

poems—Alexander contends that even in her dreams categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality continue to have meaning. She states, "I imagined that in dream space I was somehow 'neutral' self, but I found no such neutrality there." (Alexander, E 5) Alexander contends that such categories in the dream space do not necessarily mean that one is limited. In the dream space, the meanings of those categories are expanded from those meanings made in the eye of the outer world. She goes on to say, " 'The black interior' is not an inscrutable zone, nor colonial fantasy. Rather, I see it as inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn't, or should be." (5) The Black interior is the space where the Self is able to imagine differently its relationship to the world. It is not neutral, for it is always aware of its racialization but it is also not hemmed in by that racialization. The possibility for such an inner space to exist chips away at marketed ideas of what constitutes woman, what constitutes black, what constitutes lesbian, et cetera. What Alexander dares to take up as a project is the possibility for other meanings for such categories. Here, I take up how Black women specifically have dreamed themselves.

Black women dreaming themselves involves how they dream their bodies. "When invoking the term 'body,'" says Carla Peterson, "we tend to think at first of its materiality—its composition as flesh and bone, its outline and contours, its outgrowth of nail and hair. But the body, as we well know, is never simply matter, for it is never divorced from perception and interpretation." (Peterson ix) This perception and interpretation for Black women has always been in terms of the confining social constructions of gender and race. Black women's bodies are a political sign of racial

difference. This theme in Black feminist criticism is exemplified in Lorraine O'Grady's poignant assertion:

> The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of "woman." (O'Grady 174)

The Black female body is not only a body with meaning unto itself, but a body that carries meaning for the bodies around it. Where the Black female body is cast as inherently strong and masculine, the white female body is cast as particularly frail and feminine. Where the Black female body is considered inherently sexually deviant, ideals of innocence and piety continue to be the expectation of white women's bodies. The history of slavery has given the Black female body a distinct signification, separate from that of white women or Black men. Peterson states that "[i]n the eyes of dominant culture what resulted was a simultaneous masculinization and feminization of the black female body" (xi). Such perceptions allowed for slavery and other abuses on Black women's bodies to be justified.

Black women art historians have noted the link to slavery and colonization in how Black women's bodies are represented and interpreted. Through photographs Deborah Willis and Carla Williams document the ways in which the history of slavery and colonization in Africa have influenced how the Black female body is represented in art. These historians, who are also photographers themselves, begin at the history of colonial conquest and slavery. They note how the Black female body was a sign of the qualities of sexual depravity and savageness, understood to be the qualities of African people as a whole, as well as a symbol of the continent of Africa—savage and conquerable. (Willis

8) They go on to document how Black women artists have reclaimed images of Black women in ways that confront and challenge these outside views of Black women's bodies.

Feminist Standpoint Theory does the work of challenging claims of reason and truth in the enlightenment mode. By locating truth within individual women's experiences feminist scholars further challenge assumptions of knowledge production that would insist on one ultimate ("objective") truth. Through a feminist standpoint feminist scholars are able to negotiate power relations in the production of knowledge and privilege the knowledge held by those who are disempowered. (Collins, *Comment* 381; Harding 381) Feminist standpoint is central to Patricia Hill Collins' articulation of Black feminist theory in her highly influential text *Black Feminist Thought.* Collins expands the notion of Black feminist knowledge production by citing the ways in which Black women's actions and everyday experiences are instances of Black feminist knowledge production. (Collins, *Black Feminist* 14) Under Collins' democratizing decree not only are prototypical figures such as Sojourner Truth progenitors of Black feminist thought, but women otherwise unnamed in history--domestic workers, mothers, my grandmother--are producers of a particularly Black feminist way of knowing.

Sites of such knowledge necessarily exist outside of academia. Black women's experiences, and thus their feminist thought, are found in the places wherein Black women have most been able to create. According to Collins:

> An historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory—it can take the

> form of poetry, music, essays, and the like—but the purpose of Black women's collective thought is distinctly different. (9)

The purpose of Black feminist thought extends beyond feminist actions for social or civic equality but even more deeply to affirm Black women's humanity on a deeply personal level. Black women's creative and life affirming work also taps into Black women's inner lives. According to Collins, "U.S. Black women intellectuals have long explored this private, hidden space of Black women's consciousness, the 'inside' ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality […]" (98) In her influential call for a Black feminist criticism, Barbara Smith notes that the deep desires and lived experiences of Black women, otherwise rendered invisible in the real world, are legible in Black women's writing. (Smith, *Truth* 4) These interconnections indicate that feminist action and feminist thought are interwoven with "the state of Black women's literature" and that a Black feminist movement would "open up the space needed for the exploration of Black women's lives and the creation of consciously Black woman-identified art." (6) Therefore, in developing a robust body of scholarship that centers the lives of Black women and their feminist work, Black feminist intellectuals have had to develop a distinctive Black feminist criticism, one which considers the hefty business done in Black women's art.

Black Women Talking Amongst Ourselves

Black women have long possessed 'magical' powers and told their daughters stories.
– Marjorie Pryse (Pryse 3)

The rich legacy of Black women intellectuals engaging with the literary work of Black women writers in a way that is both academically rigorous and familiar informs the mode of this project. By approaching Black women's art in the genres of literature, photography and music this project engages with the concept of Black women's literary traditions while also attempting to expand the analysis. While there is also a blooming body of work that looks at Black women visual artists, and a smaller body of work on Black women musicians, I contend that the critical work on Black women's literature is deeply valuable to the production of modes of criticism of Black women's creative production across genres. Instructive here are the familiar and rigorous engagements with Black women's creative production.

Farrah Jasmin Griffin wonderfully encapsulates this approach to engaging Black women's work in her aptly titled essay, "That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know their Names." According to Griffin, Black feminist criticism's project is to engage Black women's literary work and push it into academia. Black feminist criticism's project also includes the task of making Black women academics and writers aware of the works of other Black women. (Griffin 484) This dual work of analyzing and passing down a legacy of Black women's writing to other Black women is reflected in the work of uncovering Black women writers, for example in the writings of Alice Walker and Mary Helen Washington.

The importance of *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* by Alice Walker was that it not only introduced a particular form of home grown feminist thought called womanism, but introduced it in the context of seeking out "our mother's gardens." "Our mother's gardens" is a metaphor for black women's creative, life affirming work. In

order to uncover for ourselves a legacy of survival, thriving, and self-love Walker suggests that we seek out this work. The familial way in which Walker discusses the practice of unearthing is both personal and political. The suppression of Black women's artistic production is intrinsically tied to the suppression of Black women's voices and the oppression of their bodies. (Walker, *In Search* 233) Walker states: "[…] we must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know." (237) To search for the work of Black women artists is to do right by them. As such, a critical eye on the work of Black women artists must also be sensitive to the ways in which that work is reflective of the lived experiences of Black women, their deepest desires and thus their inner lives.

Developing a critical lens and a familiar sensitivity is perhaps responsible for the ways in which Black women writers have spoken of each other in familial terms: grandmothers, mothers, daughters and sisters. The familial relationships imagined by these scholars who are moved to read Black women's writing for the articulation of Black women's humanity echo the very substance of Black women's life affirming work. Black women are called to Black women's writing as Black women are called to write—affirming each other in the process. Mary Helen Washington describes this circle of affirmation in terms of a distinctly Black women's literary tradition. In *Invented Lives* she states: "Women talk to other women in this tradition, and their friendships with other women—mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers—are vital to their growth and well being." (Washington xxi) This "talking to each other" occurs in the circle of Black women readers, scholars and writers, and within the literary work of Black women as well. As Washington observes in the work of Black women writers collected in her edited

volume *Invented Lives*, "A common scene recurring in at least five of the eight fiction writers in this collection is one in which women (usually two) gather together in a small room to share intimacies that can be trusted only to a kindred female spirit. That intimacy is a tool, allowing women writers to represent women more fully." (xxi) This circle repeats, unbroken, within the pages of the work of Black women writers, their own lives, and the interconnected bond in which Black feminist scholars read their work.

This familiar interconnection does not mean, however, that all Black women readers or scholars agree on meanings within Black women's creative work. That would lead to reductive and simplistic understandings of Black women's creative potential (essentialism). In fact, the fertile groundwork of Black feminist criticism lies in its contentions, disagreements and thus the diversity of discourse in Black women's creative and scholarly production. In Jacqueline Bobo's study on middle class Black women as cultural readers, she conducts focus groups composed of Black women and gives them the opportunity to interpret two films written by Black women: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. For Bobo's purposes, finding the commonalities in Black women's interpretations is important for identifying how Black women may be able to "form progressive and effective coalitions." (Bobo, *Black Women* 60) However, her study reveals that although Black women have shared visions due to commonalities in race and gender, their interpretations often diverge due to the diversity of their experiences across class, sexuality and age.

Scholars are allowed to disagree. Deborah McDowell's intervention on critical lenses took issue with Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" for its "reductive approach" to Black lesbian literature. Instead, she calls for rigorous academic

analysis over identity politics. Agreeing with Smith, but further pushing for Black feminist criticism in the academy, she states, "[…] a contextual approach to black women's literature exposes the conditions under which literature is produced, published, and reviewed." (McDowell 11) A rigorous analysis of Black women's writing that considers the contours of their lives would be available in the archives and in the text. She goes on to stress the importance of the text and Black women's language to unearth important motifs and frameworks that would articulate a black feminist aesthetic. (16) Later, McDowell returns to amend her push toward an academic feminist criticism by reemphasizing Smith's initial call towards a Black feminist movement in which Black women's literature would be instructive.

Instructive to this project is McDowell's deployment of archival research and interviews which consider the context and the lives of Black women artists. This is a direct rejection of literary analysis' (via Barthes and Foucault among others) behest that critics ignore the author's experience as instructive to reading their work. McDowell takes up the project of Black feminist writers and places their contestation, that Black women's lives are intricately interwoven in their art, and places it directly within academic discourse. According to McDowell, "Despite the power and appeal of Foucault […] it is not yet time to toll the death knell for the 'author' or for 'literary tradition,' although we must proceed with more complicated definitions of 'tradition' and how it functions […]." (23) Not only is it imperative that Black women writers' lives be considered parallel to their work, but the tradition in which Black women writers write must also be reconsidered as Black cultures operate non-linearly.

McDowell takes up Hortense Spillers' contention that literary traditions be re-considered. Hortense Spillers makes this clear in her insightful comparative analysis of Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*. For Spillers, a Black women's literary tradition cannot be considered linear. Spillers offers a mode of reading Black women writers that observes a cyclical tradition in which Black women engage. (Spillers, HJ 294) It is a cyclical tradition, in which Black women writers are most freely able to engage in discourse. Any other understanding of their discourse would be simplistic. She states, "[…] it is exactly the right not to accede to the simplifications and mystifications of a strictly historiographical timeline that now promises the greatest freedom of discourse to black people, to black women, as critics, teachers, writers, and thinkers." (295) The metaphoric circularity of discourse proposed by Spillers occurs again in Bernice Johnson Reagon's account of the spiritual song tradition carried on by Black women in which spiritual songs and freedom songs speak across and to each other. (qtd. in Brevard 36) This kind of circularity highlights how Black women artists, across genre, speak to each other across time and space.

Black women's unbroken circle of discourse occurs in private as well as public spaces. The literary scene that Washington describes above in which two Black women talk to each other is both intimate (within the world of the book) and public (in the pages of the book). Artistic expression operates in both of these spheres revealing and concealing inner worlds in public space. In her article, "Theorizing African American Women's Discourse," Olga Idriss Davis observes the public and private practices of Black women's discourses in blues and quilt traditions. She states that these traditions

"uncover the interplay between oppression and activism—the privateness and publicness of discourse—and celebrates an aesthetic community of resistance that in turn encourages and nurtures a political community of active and ongoing struggle for freedom and liberation." (Davis, OI 46) Black women speak to each other in ways that are both political and personal.

Black women's speaking with each other necessitates these kinds of border crossings between the public and private, the personal and the political, the creative and the scholarly. Black women speak with each other in discourse and this project through modes of call-and-response that affirm, disagree with, and elaborate on each other's work. In her study on Black women's caring and accountability, Marsha Houston notes that Black women's communication with each other across generations and within communities operates on a level with which truth can be found in many voices and held all at once. (Houston and Davis 92) To speak in a circle across time and space is an apt metaphor that includes the concept of nonlinear literary traditions, the fact of multiple truths in Black women's standpoint and the public/private mode in which Black women talk about their lives.

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Regarding ellipses: Entering into Tongues is like entering into something already begun. No so much as getting into a car and starting the engine, but having left a car running and returning to it for warmth. It was already there, motor humming, pistons firing. It is as if you were already speaking, and realized it. (Has that ever happened to you? You suddenly become aware of your own speaking?) Its like that. In that sense, there is no observable beginning and you begin to doubt if there is an end.

In the humanities we call this Discourse.

Fig. 2 Bettina Judd. *Detail of "Regarding Ellipses: Speaking in Tongues Project,"* 2011. Digital Image

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It is in honor of this circular tradition that I put Black women artists in conversation with each other in this project. Throughout, I pull quotes, snatches of knowing, that speak back to and in chorus with other Black women writers, scholars and artists. These thinkers speak to each other, talk to and about each other, and signify on each other's thoughts. In a circle, everyone's face can be seen and the voices of those in the circle converge at the center. It is in that center that the diverse, complicated, and sometimes, contradictory shared experiences and knowledge held by black women converge.

This project imagines a circle of knowledge. As artist-researcher (and daughter) who has been called to this project, I speak with these women through the familiar, conversing in the languages germane to our conversation. I am aware that in my speaking this conversation began even before this project started. The unbroken circle of Black feminist discourse necessitates that this project "practices what it preaches"—that is that I speak in the familiar and engage in our shared modes of knowledge production. It is for this reason that I include the creative work produced during the course of this research project that deeply informs the project as a whole, bringing me forward into the next thought.

The Artist Statement of Project - Methodologies and Methods

I research my mother's anger. What I really do is try to be a good daughter. While I do not purport to think exactly as all of them do, I do wish to attempt to

"complete [her and their] thoughts."[7] *My interest is in understanding who they are and the subtle tether between us that connects experience, knowledge, survival strategies and strategies for thriving.*

I could tell many stories about many mothers first with my family and spreading outward to all of the Black women who have in some way nurtured me. I wish to make it clear that I do not wish to limit who these women are to the role of nurturers of anyone or anything but their own lives. For even as my own mother has in many ways nurtured me as a mother, what I have found most valuable and what I explore in my work are the ways in which she has nurtured her own life in art.

The first instrument that my mother gave me was my voice. It was an instrument that could not be taken from me unless I no longer used or cared for it (something that she warns me about even now). She demonstrated its purpose and power by using it daily and for all occasions. When she was full of sorrow, worry, joy, or elation she sang. She would put on a record or play her black standing piano and sing. She would sing in the car, me tightly buckled in next to her. Her rich classically trained soprano would hit a note cleanly with no vibrato, yet something within me would shake. I would join her on such a note and something deeper within me would move. This sound and feeling would shift the air, alter the space, heavy feelings would lift and there would be joy. She would perform and something would move within others—she shifted the energy of others, all while changing within herself. She thought of her voice as something that is to be used in service to the divine and others, yet the grace of it allowed for it to most dynamically

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[7] In the last lines of her posthumously printed book *Young Gifted and Black*, Lorraine Hansberry writes: "If anything should happen—before 'tis done—may I trust that all commas and periods will be placed and someone will complete my thoughts—
This last should be the least difficult—since there are so many who think as I do—" See Hansberry, 265.

change her life. She learned the power of creativity as something deeply personal and imperative for "feeling good" by example. When I was ten years old and showing interest in poetry my mother set an unpublished manuscript of poetry written by her mother on the little white desk in my bedroom.

I am invested in how Black women have used art in order to create feminist thought. By focusing on the home-grown artistic practices through which Black feminist thought is created, I hope that my work highlights not only the contributions of Black women artists to feminist thought, but also the feminist practices within African American culture that place Black women squarely within a politic that is concerned with the status of women broadly and Black women specifically. Examining knowledge production beyond the academy or the gallery is important to a more holistic understanding of Black feminist thought. My research compels me to look at aspects of knowledge production that are so often avoided in the academy. Such knowledge production practices include spirituality, politics of emotion, and memory.

This kind of work requires me to work on levels of academic production that are both traditional and creative. My work oscillates between academic prose, creative writing and other media in order to demonstrate the overarching artistic/scholarly approach I have to knowledge and creative production. The use of media changes for the purpose of the project at hand. For the purposes of this project, an academic dissertation, I will primarily focus on academic prose while incorporating as much as possible my own creative work that is set out to explore this topic.

As an artist and academic, competing modes of meaning-making crowd my efforts in this project. The research project within the parameters of academia requires a statement of project, a research question, clear and definitive declarations of meaning making. Scholars reveal not only our methods of research practice but also the methodology that informs those methods. We review and unpack theories upon which the basis of our inquiry is defined. Everything is seemingly revealed by this structure.

In addition to the above, I am impelled by practices, methods, and methodologies of art practice. These practices have their own sets of methods and methodologies to consider, although the structure of artistic practice allows for some opacity. The rise of the importance of the artist statement in the art world, liner notes by the musician[8], prefaces, forwards, epigraphs by the poet, and astute interviews and lectures by all of the above, gives voice to artists who, otherwise, "have said all that needs to be said" in their work. The artist statement and project description are outlines of the methods, methodologies and theoretical frameworks of the creative trajectory of an artist's work—even over time. What makes it compelling as a document is that it is intended to be both autobiographical and technical.

The artist statement is a document for which the primary use in the art world is business-related. Artists train themselves to craft precise statements for grant opportunities, residencies and gallery spots. The statement is as imperative to an artist's marketing as the art itself. The artist statement is also an artist's whisper into the ear of

[8] Notably, liner notes are scarcer now that music is often purchased and downloaded over the Internet. The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences has noticed this trend and have attempted to launch a campaign called "Give Fans the Credit" that allows fans to see liner notes. See The Recording Academy "The Recording Academy Launches Campaign to 'Give Fans the Credit'."

her audience. Its informal uses of personal pronouns and erudite use of academic language performs the artist as both deeply introspective and well-read. From it we not only expect to learn about the art, but about the artist herself. By foregrounding the market based uses of the artist statement I do not mean to imply that artist statements are disingenuous. Many are earnest attempts to communicate to an audience through a different medium—prose—the intentions, processes, and situations from which the art has emerged. What I mean to point out is that these documents represent knowledge in markets similar to the academic market of project statements and proposals.

As young artists enter the competitive art world, they are faced with the reality of having to describe their work in prose. Artist and instructor Jackie Battenfield instructs artists to toe a narrow line between baring their souls and leaving a bit of information for their audience's imagination. She states, "What you reveal reflects a delicate balance between expressing your ideas and providing just enough information for viewers so they can start their own process of engagement." (Purvis and Battenfield Ch.2) Artists are instructed to give "[…]insightful information" about their process, discuss specifics about their artistic vision and share how they, as artists, relate to the media and subject matter. Women artists, artists of color, and disabled artists must also consider how their identities may hinder the flight of their work—pigeonholing them as artists who create art that is only intended for the marginalized group in which they are a part.

As I stated above, the statement of purpose is a phenomenon that can be linked to the nature of the art market, where statements are artists' opportunity to be cutting edge, to engage an audience, and to promote themselves. They may also mark the increasing importance of academia and the art critic to the art world as well. Battenfield quotes the

curator and director of the University of Wyoming's Art Museum as stating this fact: "You've got to be able to describe your work. You've got to be able to do all the work for the critic." (Ch. 2) Battenfield herself encourages artists to make documenting their process a part of the creative process. This in turn makes the artist into an interdisciplinarian—at once having to be proficient at her craft and also proficient in analyzing her own work.

Because of the increasing importance of the artist statement, I would like to propose that the artist statement is as significant a text as the art itself. If the artist chooses to craft an artist statement in prose, she is once again producing a work, a consumable product—a text. The artist statement is often the closest an audience may get to the artist's creative process, her inspirations, and her methods. The artist statement is a blending of forms "specific and poetic," as Battenfield describes. The artist statement, however, exemplifies the merging of disciplines that are central to this study. Artists must reach beyond their media of choice and dabble in a world that was once reserved for consumers of their work. They must become proficient at communicating meaning, viewing their work as outsiders, and describing what was once esoteric and indescribable—the creative process.

As an artist-scholar, the artist statement's contents are similar to the project description, the abstract, the biography (bio), and most of all the methodology. All together these elements of the academic enterprise are about the market in which scholars are situated. It is the work of the scholar to construct clear statements for an audience that is quick to boredom and in need of scintillating new work. Scholars must describe processes of information gathering, analyzing, and production by outlining careful

methodologies. Scholars also must navigate a continually uncertain terrain of reflexivity while engaging with their work. They must consider their relationship to their study, how that relationship might affect what they have produced and how readers may interpret their work because of that relationship. These aspects of the academic enterprise—the project description, the abstract, the biography and the methodological statement intend to translate larger texts: the book, the research project, and the article into small informative and concise paragraphs leading to interested readers, publishing, informed publics and of course, funding. These truths do not make the project statement, abstract, or bio any less important to the work itself. In fact, many scholars would argue that writing any one of these has forced them to look at their work differently or even clarify their project for themselves.

The artist statement and the project description therefore serve as apt tools for approaching the methodological specificities of this project. It is a space where I, as artist-researcher, am able to describe my research/creative process and simultaneously make that reflexivity a part of this whole project. As I turn pages in search of answers to specific research questions, the very act of turning folds itself into the research question.

Artists also respond to each other and their critics through their creative work and the artist statement. Artists make statements formally and informally via liner notes, prefaces, project statements, interviews and written critique. Black women artists are interdisciplinarians who work in their creative medium as well as prose. On the most literal level, Black women artists have had to be critics of their own work. Black women artists have had to stand in defense of their subject matter. They have also had to stand in for their sisters in order to honor each other's work. Novelists and poets Toni Cade

Bambara, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Pearl Cleage, Elizabeth Alexander and June Jordan are as well known for their academic prose and criticism as they are known for their fiction and poetry. This fact stands next to the importance of their creative work as knowledge production.

To describe my methods is also to contribute to a circle of knowledge in which creative processes are as informative to truth and experience as what is produced. The creative practices of Black women artists *are* their lived experiences, and as such, are included in my analyses of their work. By crossing boundaries of genre in this project, I attempt to enact a feminist method of research in which my processes of producing this text are visible. According to Susanne Gannon and Bronwynn Davies, in feminist research: "[w]riting itself is a method of inquiry rather than a transparent medium for re-presenting data." (Gannon and Davies 78) Founded in feminist conceptualizations of knowledge and knowledge production that privilege boundary crossings in genre and method, this project crosses boundaries between scholarly text, literary text, and image in order to produce a more whole "body" of knowledge. Therefore, I utilize methods in which art practice serves as a method of research.

Informed by Black feminist critical theories in the fields of literature, I include and highlight Black women's lived experiences in the context of discussing their work. As such, archival research, interviews and reviews of interviews conducted by other scholars and journalists inform the framings of discussing these artists' work. Also, cued by Black feminist criticism, I deploy close readings of these women's poetry, photography and music, which enhance and drive the modes of discourse and knowledge production I observe.

Art Practice as Research

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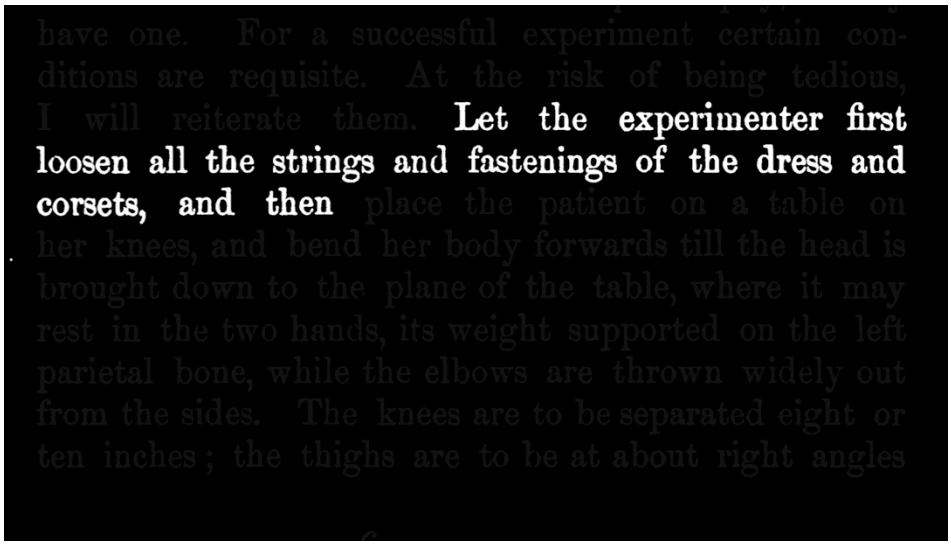

Fig. 3 Bettina Judd. "Run on Sentence #1," 2011. Digital Image.

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My methods of art practice as research are informed by autobiographical experiences of knowing in my art practice, affirmed by theories by women of color, as well as burgeoning scholarship that explores the inherent connections between ways of knowing and creative production. Such scholarship, coming largely from philosophies in education, including discourses in arts education, informs my understanding of how practices in art can be a part of methodological research processes.

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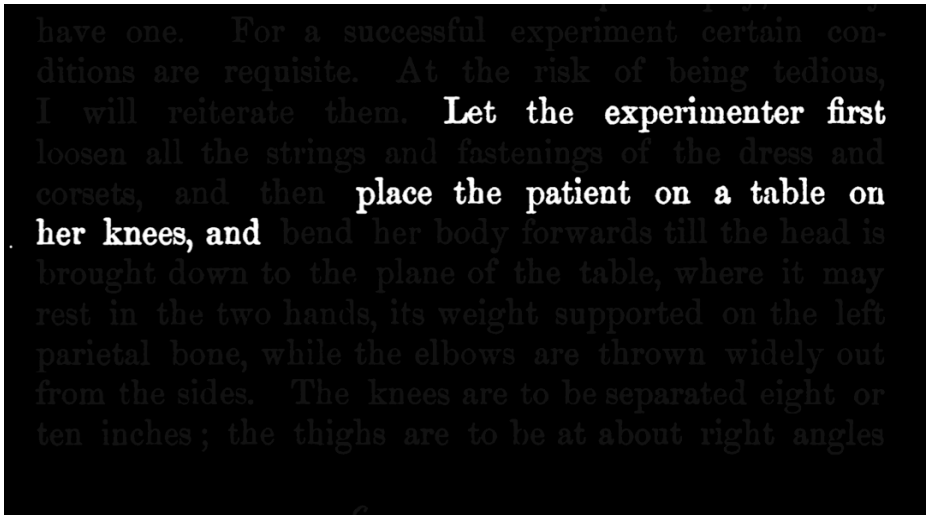

Fig. 4 Bettina Judd. "Run on Sentence #2," 2011. Digital Image.

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Understood in this body of knowledge is that art is, in fact, knowledge and that ways of knowing in the arts are connected to feelings and the emotions. Louis Arnaud Reid observed this in his essay "Feeling and Aesthetic Knowing," stating that, "Knowledge of art is a different kind of knowledge experience, different from everything else." This difference is a sense, a set of "embodied values" that interacted with objects on the outside as well as the inner life. (Reid 26) Further, feeling is imperative to understanding and interpreting art itself. Sculptor Victor Heyfron argues this in his essay "The Object Status of Aesthetic Knowing": "Feeling is a distinctive way of recognizing the significance of human existence, a kind of knowing with self, and we gain insight into this significance of how things are through engagement in art." (Heyfron 46) Feeling and art are ways of knowing that inform each other, the result experience of both being feelin. In order to know art one must feel, and in order to create art one must feel.

These processes are representative in the series of images that recur in my project *Run on Sentence?* (Fig. 3-6) in which I black out and highlight various passages from J.

Marion Sims' book on uterine surgery. By highlighting parts of his text, I draw attention to the sexual, racial, and class tensions that are prominent in his work. These tensions, perceivable in this work are through tone, space and punctuation in his writing—particularly the frantic experience of reading this run on sentence in which Sims attempts to explain to doctors, how to observe the female pelvis. His instructions read like a harlequin novel (See Fig. 3), while remaining cold and calculated. Eventually, Sims reduces the female body to a right triangle in order to de-flesh the fleshiness (sensuousness) of his work. (See Fig. 6)

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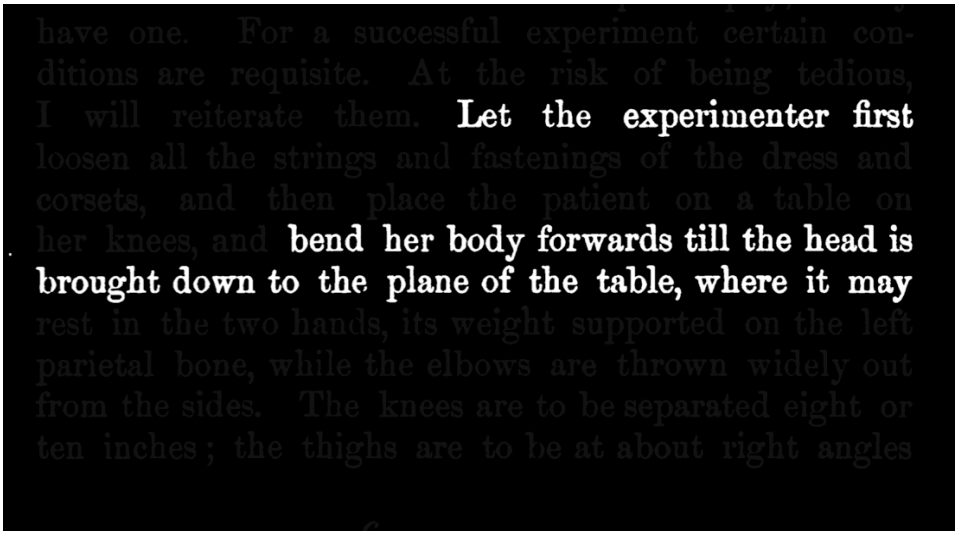

Fig. 5 Bettina Judd. *"Run on Sentence #3,"* 2011. Digital Image.

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This connection between the inner life and artistic production challenges notions of true knowledge as exclusively located in the empirical and scientific. In order to postulate that art practice itself can be research, then artists-researchers must also

consider feelin and the inner life as valuable information. It is for this reason that artistic practice, the processes through which artists engage the inner life and create, is both method and data. This kind of information is unfixed, its contours developed by experience and context. In his essay, "On the Difference Between Artistic Research and Artist Practice," composer Germán Toro-Perez states that, "We can describe art experience as sensuous experience, and the result of artistic activity as form perceivable by the senses if we understand form not as solid shape, but as the possibility of relationship." (Toro-Pérez 34) When we are considering the internal world of the senses to be valuable information, art practice is the research method.

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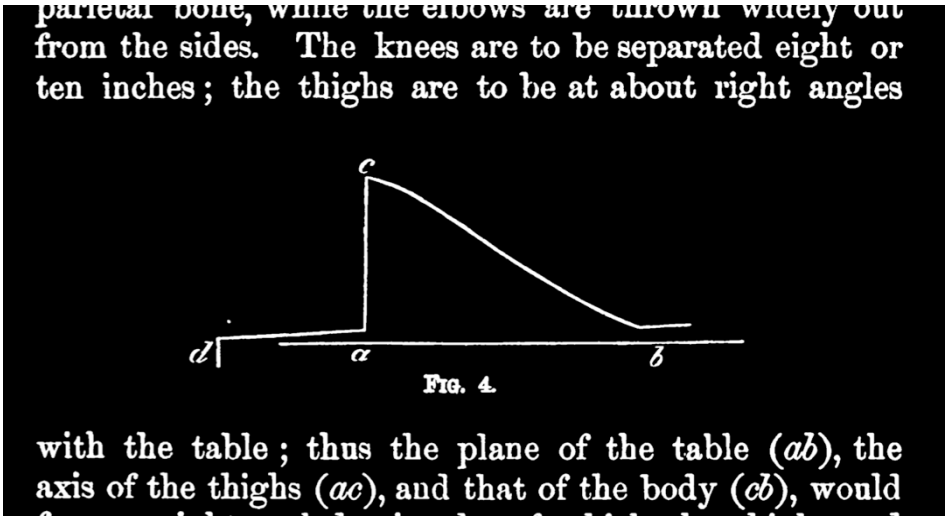
from the sides. The knees are to be separated eight or ten inches; the thighs are to be at about right angles

FIG. 4.

with the table; thus the plane of the table (*ab*), the axis of the thighs (*ac*), and that of the body (*cb*), would

Fig. 6 Bettina Judd. "Figure 4," 2011. Digital Image.

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Just as in scientific research, artistic research practices involve trial and error and ethics of rigor. Art practitioners are always experimenting with new materials, new concepts, and techniques as a part of the art practice in order to come to an end result.

According to Toro-Pérez, rigor in the arts is tangled in opening up new opportunities for experiences of art. (35) Good art, then, is judged by its ability to emotionally move its audience.

There are no new thoughts, only new ways of making them felt.
—Audre Lorde (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 39)

Just like other inquiries in the humanities, art practice is grounded in the understanding of knowledge and truth as relational. The knowledge production created by the artists discussed in this project is in conversation with this research project and, thus, with the creative practice in which I engage. As artist-researcher and Black woman in the academy, I am prone to code switching, speaking in my multiple tongues, multiple modes of discourse. As I write in the mode of academic prose, I am also thinking in the poetic and attempting to fully capture the visual information that informs this project. All of this informs the thought processes that occur in this project and are represented as best they can be in the form of this written dissertation. This code switching is not only in language, but also in discipline, making this a necessarily interdisciplinary project. This project attempts to make connections between art practice and black feminist knowledge production, newly felt.

According to Graeme Sullivan, art practice as research does just that. He states, "The aim of research in the visual arts, as in other similar forms of exploratory inquiry, is to provoke, challenge and illuminate rather than confirm and consolidate." (Sullivan 174) He goes on to state that art practice itself leaves the parameters of influence open, inviting what he calls a "transdisciplinary practice." (174) Concerned largely with the

visual, Sullivan argues that studio art practice is research practice and makes an argument for art practice as a way of putting in place the long contested debate around theory and praxis. Visual art practice is a form of knowledge production where transformation is the goal rather than fixed knowledge. Sullivan outlines a framework for research projects through four central modes: experiences, exercises, encounters, and enactments.

Sullivan describes experiences as the part of art practice in which critique and production happen at once. It is at the site of experience in art practice in which imagination meets practice. Experience starts with visualization—the process of making visual questions and ideas. Sullivan proposes multiple modes of visualization, including visualizing objects, data, texts, and ideas. (200) This experience involves trial and error, tinkering with material and theory, and rounding out finished artwork. Also included in experiences are the ways in which artwork may be exhibited or performed. In conversation with a diverse public, an artist's work may be challenged, put in conversation with other artists' work and shaped into new transformative work. Experience also involves exegesis and thesis, which means that artists discuss and frame their work within the context of scholarship. Sullivan notes this to be a process already developed and practiced within arts education institutions such as MFA programs, where students are expected to build art projects and be able to place them within an academic context via theses.

Sullivan also identifies arts research practices that engage in what he calls "interpretive discourse." (215) These art research practices dialogue with other information. This inherently involves having the artist open up private studio practices to a larger audience so that the speaking between art works and the world can readily

happen. In this phase, review and integration follow dialogue along with interpretation. This phase may result in narratives about the creative process in which synthesis is described and supported.

The art practice that takes place in this dissertation is executed and represented in relation to archival research, theory, close readings of artists' work, and interviews. I include visual art and poetry that I executed before I began *Feelin Feminism*. Including this work demonstrates the circular and ongoing nature of knowledge production and situates the project itself in the realm of experience. The artwork is in conversation with the Black feminist critical framework that operates throughout this project. It is also in conversation with the themes and concepts discussed in each chapter, including joy, the mystical, ecstasy, motherhood and sexuality. Further, the art and poetry in this project converse with bodies of knowledge that exist outside of this dissertation; as such that work has a secondary life. This fact highlights the scope and immense possibilities for what art practice as research is capable of accomplishing, and also reveals the relevance of the premise behind *Feelin Feminism* to further research and art projects.

> *Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use relationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by a movement away from set patterns and goals toward a more whole perspective […]* — Gloria Anzaldúa (Anzaldúa 101)

I would like to, for a moment, say a word about the structure of the texts and images in this project. As I stated above, this project deploys modes of code switching and cross-conversation in which image, academic prose, poetry, and lyric by me and

other women artists are represented as "speaking to each other." I am influenced by the hybrid writing style of women of color cross-genre writers Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde, in which border crossings occur at the site of language, critique, and poetry. I am also influenced by the performance writing mode deployed by playwright and director Sharon Bridgeforth, who, in an attempt to visually represent the improvisational jazz aesthetic that shapes the performance of her plays in her scripts, uses varied placement and font styles to represent different (and same) voices.[9]

Anzaldúa's visual description of the fluid movement of *la mestiza* in *Borderlands/La Frontera* is useful for attempting to formulate a visual mode of representing the fluid code-switching and border-crossing aspect of this project. In order to differentiate my words that go beyond the borders of academic prose from the words of other writers, including my subjects, I begin and end those passages I author with this symbol: §. Quotes from other artists and scholars will often be quoted in italics and centered on the page,

like so.

§

I may code switch into personal narrative voice in italics and standard justification like so.

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[9] I am grateful for this insight into the structure of Bridgeforth's "scriptwriting by experience." In the fall of 2012 at Hampshire College, I was able to participate in a performance reading of her play *Bloodpudding.* Bearing witness to her creative process as director allowed me to see how varied text and text shape on the page may represent multiple characters on the stage. Nothing, not even the number of characters presented in the text was fixed. The performance took the shape of the actors and singers who came to participate. Here, in my placement of text and invocation of a myriad of voices and modes of writing, I find that instructive.

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POEMS

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like this.

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Standard academic prose will be in non-italicized fonts and fully justified.

Close Reading

Because this project engages with different forms of creative production (poetry, photography, music) close readings of the artists' works draws on multiple fields of inquiry. Close reading involves the strategy of engaging with the works of artists through theory. Therefore, while the modes of engagement shift from artist to artist, the lens through which I engage each of their works intersects at the site of Black feminist criticism. In the process of "close reading," I am challenged with varied modes of engagement: poetic explication for the poetry of Lucille Clifton, visual analysis in the photography of Renee Cox, and musical analysis in Avery*Sunshine's vocal performance.

Explication, or line-by-line analysis, continues to be the standard method for reading and analyzing poetry. Although more prolific for fiction, Black feminist literary criticism informs how I read Clifton's poetry. I've already discussed the body of Black feminist literary criticism that frames my reading, but to restate, I am influenced by Deborah McDowell's method of viewing Black women's literary work. Both contextual research and close reading are central to this project. Influenced by the importance of

context, in the mode of Barbara Smith, I also find it important to identify the political implications of Black women's creative production. It is in this mode that I read Clifton's poetry in terms of the texts and its apparent meanings and in relation her life, identity and worldview. I do so through the practice of line-by-line explication and through archival research.

In order to negotiate the imagery of photographer Renee Cox on the nexus of shame and pride, I have to consider the ways in which her imagery functions in its social context, how it triggers critiques of "good" and "bad" images, and how Cox, herself, understands her work to function. Sylvia Wynter's "rethinking" of aesthetics is an instructive tool for viewing Cox's imagery beyond these particular binaries. Wynter proposes a new mode of viewing visual texts encompassed in four steps that she calls a "deciphering practice." (Wynter, "Rethinking Aesthetics" 266) These steps include: 1) deploying practices of understanding texts through their own "signifying practices," 2) investigating the cultural and contextual matter of the text, 3) analyzing the discourse between signifying practices of the text and its context; and 4) providing new ways of seeing, new languages for describing, "the social reality of which we are both agents and always already socio-culturally constituted subjects." (268) In other words, as a method of viewing and analyzing Cox's photographs, I attempt to interrogate them in terms of what the images do to negotiate a complex system of ideas around "good" and "bad" imagery. What these images do is all the more complicated by status quo understandings of Black women's bodies and Black motherhood that implement racial shame. Further, Wynter's postulation of the good/bad as having a biochemical (opiate) reaction is useful for my formulation of feelin in Cox's imagery. Rather than responding to the good

mother/bad mother trap and the affectual responses they induce, Cox injects (pun intended) an alternative mode of feelin in which both shame and ego-based pride are problematized in mother imagery.

I am influenced by Susan McClary's call for scholars to listen for aspects of gender in women's music while simultaneously challenging traditional music theory's androcentric perspectives in music theory. According to McClary, a feminist musicology approach would reconsider the ways in which traditional music analysis is gendered and examine the ways in which those gendered forms may be newly considered. For McClary, music exists in a social world and the ways that it is created and heard are social. She states that, "[…] one of the principal tasks of feminist music criticism would be to examine the semiotics of desire, arousal, and sexual pleasure that circulate in the public sphere through music." (McClary 9) Attuned to McClary's argument about gender, I am also engaged with Daphne Brooks' contention that studies of popular music are entwined with African American studies. Brooks cites W.E.B. DuBois as an originator of popular music studies. She also argues that DuBois' *Souls of Black Folk* is instructive for those who wish to study popular music because his project also interrogates identity. (Brooks 99) Like DuBois' *Souls* and Ralph Ellison's "Living with Music," those who analyze popular music must also consider music's relationship to identity and the inner life of humans. (101) These perspectives on analyzing music are most helpful in listening for the ways in which sexual desire, gender, and identity are made audile in Avery*Sunshine's vocal performance.

Interviews

Connecting Black women's experiences to Black women's art makes it necessary for me to consider the lived experience of the artist. While I do not do complete biographical work here, I do include the private lives of the artists discussed in order to frame, in more detail, their creative processes, spiritual practices, world views, and work. For living artists Renee Cox and Avery*Sunshine, I was able to conduct interviews to discuss these issues.

Interviews are a method of inquiry in which knowledge is produced, relational, and contextual. As discussed by Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkman, in the qualitative research interview "[…] knowledge is produced socially in the interaction of interviewer and interviewee." (Kvale and Brinkmann 82) Interviewing is also a mode of feminist research practice that creates moments of collaborative knowledge production. As Marjorie DeVault and Glenda Gross observe, feminist interview methods shift the mode of research in terms of a subject/researcher relationship into one in which the interview is "[…] an encounter between women with common interests, who would share knowledge." (DeVault and Gross 178) Interviewers must participate in active listening and deploy conversational styles of interviewing.

For our interviews, I came to the conversation with a set of questions that included previous knowledge about the artist and allowed for open responses to direct questions. I reviewed previous interviews, viewed or listened to their art and made note of recurring themes and concepts, and incorporated them into the interview questions. Using Kvale and Brinkman's outline of semi-structured interview methods, I produced short lists of questions that would structure the interviews and allow for the conversations

to be shaped by the synergetic relationship between the artists I interview and me. Interview questions were crafted specifically for each artist. (See Appendices 1 and 2)

According to DeVault and Gross, key to feminist interview methods are reflexive modes of analysis and engagement. (181) Reflexivity in the context of the interview holds the interviewer accountable for the ways in which power and privilege impact dynamics within the interview and in the final research project. Reflexivity attempts to account for these power differentials by taking into consideration differences between the interviewed and the interviewer, along the lines of race, class, ability and sexuality. Feminist researchers address these issues by "matching" researchers with those who are being researched along these lines of difference when possible, and accounting for difference rather than avoiding it during the interview process, as well as in analyzing the final results. (176, 189) As a Black woman artist-researcher who is interviewing Black women artists, I consider these matters of difference and privilege in the interview process. Being the "subject" of research alone allows for concerns around difference.

One aspect of difference that has come up in both interviews with Sunshine and Cox is that of age. Both of these artists are older than this researcher, and both commented on this issue during the interview. This matter of difference concerns me within the parameters of this project, as concerns about my age may have affected the extent to which these women felt comfortable sharing sensitive information or speaking on par with me. One artist specifically alluded to my eventually gaining a better perspective on what she was attempting to communicate with me, "As I get older." I agree with these sentiments, not only in the maternalistic mode in which they may be

interpreted, but because of the ways in which any researcher or artist worth her salt would revisit and find new ways of thinking about a project after its initial execution.

Archival Research

What I search for is my mother's anger. In Special Collections, between the pages of *The Negro A Beast*, I found something more compelling than a book. I found a feelin—a connective tissue of knowledge and blood—a residue of her place, footprint in shaping knowledge through anger. Anger, which I already knew, did not flood me when encountering the book but dusted over, as it was already a part of my life. I went to special collections not for the book but for that residue, for the dusty radioactivity surrounding it. Dust is a substance made of many things, perhaps, everything: skin, bone, and fragments of other pages.

Dust in the archive is an apt metaphor for the residue of things encountered with the researcher there. There are affective connections between things and the researcher who wishes to assemble narratives of the past. Carolyn Steedman's theory of dust and the archive precisely describes the fact of dust and its metaphorical place in the archive: Dust is proof that "*nothing goes away."* (Steedman 163) She continues: "This is what Dust is about; this is what Dust *is:* what it means and what it is. […] It is about circularity, the impossibility of things disappearing, or going away, or being gone. Nothing *can be* destroyed." (164) To further extend this metaphor and fact of dust—the circularity of dust is further complicated by the fact that it accumulates. Meaning that the dust of things is created by those who encounter the object beforehand and in the present.

Researchers, like this daughter acting as researcher, bring desires to the archives; meaning is made through the assemblage of documents stored by those who control, order and make the archive available. As Steedman notes, “The archive is made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also from the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and that just ended up there.” (68) The archives are a witness to the ongoing shape of dust, what is recorded, recordable, and what can or should be kept, and dust itself is what is left over, included and interpreted by researchers.

Upon encountering Lucille Clifton's archive at Emory University, I looked for clues to her creative process. I hoped to see drafts of poems I knew, poems that may have taken other forms, and diary entries about her creative process. I had learned about her spirituality and mysticism from interviews, but I was not clear on how what is known as her spirit writing would influence her creative process. I discuss how her spirituality influences her creative process in Chapter 3. My encounters with Lucille Clifton's archive have certainly revealed the ways in which things that “never go away” remain pertinent and diligent to this research. Clifton's archive is also a challenging resource, in which issues of authority, authenticity and agency abound.

I cannot talk about deploying archival methods in Clifton's papers without talking about spiritual subjectivity and issues of authority and authenticity in excavating materials, ideas and unpublished work in her archive. Clifton's archive includes not only drafts of poems, royalty documents and personal letters, but also reams of automatic writing, Ouija board transcripts, notes from ghosts, manuscripts that detail her and her children’s conversations with spirits and a vast book collection that largely consists of

books on astrology, reams of automatic writing. The drafts of poems I intended to encounter as evidence of her creative process were few, and worked in tandem with the list of items I described above as important information for understanding Clifton's creative process.

Questions of truth and authenticity abound when a researcher encounters a manuscript in which the writer claims to speak to people who died long before the manuscript was written. It is not only with trepidation that I encounter materials in the archive, but I also question what may be acceptable truths outside of it. Clifton's archive proves a valuable resource into a particular bit of knowledge about the depth of Clifton's spirituality. Her archive curiously provides less information about the mechanics of her draft process. Save for a few copies of a single poem titled "9 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (Clifton, *9 Ways*), what I already know about the rigor in Clifton's craft from interviews and conversations with her students is curiously absent in the archives. No doubt at the bottom of long ago tossed trash and recycling bins are the early drafts of many of Clifton's poems. What “9 Ways of Looking at a Black Girl,” or, in another revision, “Black Girl Looking at Black Bird” revealed is that there is a long and tedious draft process by which Clifton crafts her very compact poems.

Chapter Outline

The chapters that follow represent an order of feelin that make meaning with one another. They are ordered in terms of their movement towards re-membering mind, body and spirit in an order of feelin. According to Jacqui Alexander, mind, body and spirit are re-membered through spirit possession. (Alexander, MJ 320) It is in this process that the

mind/body/spirit is "knitted together," at the site of the body. The mind "[…] is propelled outside of itself in order to invite the return of the Spirit." The ego dies and the body "becomes a means of communication […]" where language emerges to reveal truths pertinent to sacred subjectivity. It is in this mode of communication through the body that spirit is able to "mount its descent." (320) Also, a means of knitting mind/body/and spirit, Alexander's descriptive process of spirit possession wonderfully puts into order a means by which feelin can be ordered.

Chapter 2, "Shameless Mama: Renee Cox's Evolving "Yo Mama" represents the death of the ego. It explores how Renee Cox navigates the image of the Black mother through her photography. Connecting both Renee Cox's experience as a black mother and artist, this chapter discusses how shame and pride are negotiated at the site of the black mother figure. Cox's ever-evolving art, along with her own worldview on the experience of shame, shaming, and even egocentrism, informs this project's discussion of shame and pride in the image of the Black mother.

Chapter 3, "Joy in the Mourning: Lucille Clifton's Theology of Joy," represents a "means of communication." It examines how Lucille Clifton wrote and spoke about joy in her poems, through spiritual practices. This chapter explores the ways in which spirituality was central to how Clifton understood joy, how joy was to be practiced and how joy is imperative for a full life. As such, joy is entwined in the creative process as a spiritual practice.

Chapter 4, "Going in: The Freedom of Sacred and Secular Ecstasy in Avery*Sunshine's Music," represents ecstatic spiritual mounting. In it, I discuss the inherent experience of divine sexual and sacred ecstasy in Sunshine's vocal performance.

The sacro-sexual experience of ecstasy is present in all of Sunshine's R&B music. Sunshine's personal ambivalence toward musical genre reflects this sacro-sexual experience, as she is invested in experiencing the ecstasy that music, regardless of genre, has to offer. It is through vocal performance that ecstasy in its myriad form is simultaneously performed and experienced.

Chapter 5, "Conclusion: Toward a Methodology of Anger," returns a discussion of the precarious politics of anger and pain as it relates to Black women's bodies which began the dissertation. Throughout the project, I contend that feelin is knowledge that is embodied, spiritual and intellectual and I explore the ways in which these artists negotiate feelin and try to communicate it through the creative. In the final chapter, I revisit the potential for anger as a methodology in producing and uncovering unarticulated forms of knowledge, and conclude by positing modes of transforming that anger into another form of energy that could have the power to heal.

Chapter 2

Shameless Mama: Renee Cox's Evolving Black Motherhood

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> **CONFRONTING MY MOTHER'S ANGER** is like confronting a ghost. It does not belong to my mother but to this person who existed long before me. I'm not allowed to know this person. To be called a thing like mother, good mother, good black mother is to slip into terrified skin. To negotiate your rituals. You don't have time to go to special collections anyway. There is a whole wide world to feed your baby girl and she ain't got but one mouth.

§

In this play of paradox, only the female stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject. —Hortense Spillers (Spillers, H 80)

I mentioned in the previous chapter that *feelin* is an experience that requires response. Such response can be affirmative, negative or ambivalent, but will always be resonant. The experience of feelin is, like resonance, "deep, full, and reverberating," and has "the ability to evoke or suggest images, memories, and emotions." ("resonance" OED) What happens when such memories, emotions and images conflict? In this chapter, I explore how feelin can operate as resonant ways of knowing that try to make sense of conflicting images of Black motherhood by examining how racial shame/shaming and racial pride are negotiated by artist Renee Cox through her images of Black mothers. Cox's photographs feature her semi-autobiographical alter ego named "Yo Mama."

Using a name that, in itself, has its origins in playing the dozens, Cox engages the way in which Black motherhood is maligned (as in a demeaning "yo mama" joke) while also representing explicit pride in her body, ownership of her image and the complexities of her motherhood. The emergence and reemergence of the Yo Mama character in over nearly 20 years of Cox's work reflects her own shifting and transcendent ways of knowing and experiencing her identity as mother and artist.

Image removed.

Fig.7 Renee Cox. *Yo Mama,* 1996. Cibachrome Print.

The black and white photograph is of a Black woman standing erect in the center of the frame against a black background. (Fig. 7) The image has a fine grain that allows

the viewer to experience the smooth contours of her muscular body. Her lean arms flex from holding a boy child with both hands. He looks into the camera playfully. His tongue is stuck out and his feet curled. His lighter skin is striking against her darker body. She is lit from the back and front, heightening the visibility of muscular contours in her thighs, and disallowing the shape of her body from being wholly consumed by the dark background. She stands in black high heels that nearly disappear in the image's darker hues. The image is punctuated by her gaze, which defiantly looks down at the viewer. Her looking is inescapable. It forces the viewer to consider that she or he is the one being watched, sized up. The original photograph is seven feet tall, larger than life and towering over viewers. It is titled *Yo Mama.*

The photo typifies the boldness of Renee Cox's *Yo Mama* series. With little embellishment and her first child as prop, *Yo Mama* sets the pace for a series of photographs in which Cox features her nude body and names it in terms of her motherhood. Five years after this image, Cox herself became known by the persona "Yo Mama" after the 2001 Brooklyn Museum controversy over her series of photographic panels depicting herself as Christ in the manner of da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Her work, titled *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, received backlash from Catholic and civic leadership. (Schwartz 3) In response, then-mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, called for a decency panel that would oversee the content of work shown at museums that received public funding. (Blood 5) *Yo Mama's Last Supper* and the controversy surrounding it is an example of how an image of a nude Black woman as divine mother has the power to disrupt and disturb the secular status quo. As Cox noted in an interview with a student at Spelman College, *Yo Mama's Last Supper* is an image of "an African-American woman

[…] at the head of the table," and that African-American woman is a mother. (qtd. in Springer par. 25) In *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, Cox refers to herself as "Yo Mama" and Yo Mama is also Christ (Yo God?). Cox frames herself as Black mother and artist with seemingly no shame about her motherhood, no shame about her body, and no shame in her work.

Taking up motherhood in this image and its precursor *Yo Mama*, is a response to the artist's lived experience as a Black woman balancing life as a mother and artist. In my interview with Cox, conducted in the spring of 2012, she recalled that *Yo Mama* "was about making a statement. It was also about female artists." (Cox *Personal Interview*) The size of it, its bold statement was a response to the detraction she encountered when she was in The Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. There, she was pregnant with her first son and was challenged as to whether or not she would continue to work as an artist. The experience revealed to her that in the Art establishment, "… if you're woman and you have a child, you're out of the game." (*personal interview)* To the contrary, Cox asserts that having children enhanced her work and career and shared that motherhood was something she thought of differently: "I feel my job as a mother is like spiritual advisor, guidance counselor, whatever you want to call it, maybe that falls under spiritual advisor, tour guide. But tour guide to the world." (*personal interview*) Her work as mother was not to set aside her life, but to incorporate her children into her life as artist.

Cox's particular brand of Black motherhood is created and constantly evolving, navigating through the tangled web of race, gender, class and representation. This evolution is documented in photography as a response to expectations of what makes a

good mother. These photographs are provocative because they broach fixed archetypes of motherhood while revealing the tensions of an ideal Black mother figure fashioned by racial shame and anxiety. As mother and guide, she is also traversing life in her own way and learning as well.

In my interview with her, Cox described a shift that happened in her consciousness "about two years ago" (The interview was conducted in the spring of 2012.). She said, "Before that I was as [egotistic] and as mad as the rest of the world, you know. Competitive. Complete nut job. But then one day I had my epiphany, enlightenment…" (*personal interview*) Cox says that it was at this time that she released concerns about the way she was perceived by the rest of the world. Her concern with perceptions about herself and her work were wrapped up in her ego—the sense of herself that is concerned about what she calls, "the little me." She credits New Thought author Eckart Tolle with the language for this shift that characterized the last few years, "I came into this introspective phase, which I'm still in, and that's how I came to appreciate and discover the whole of what Eckhart Tolle was talking about." (*personal interview*) Though Cox characterizes this shift as one that happened overnight, her progress towards this "introspective phase" can be observed in her photographs. This recent shift in her consciousness reflects Cox's ongoing processes of self-reflection and creativity. It is indicative of her own desires to transcend the racist and sexist script which would have had her confined as mother only and not the successful artist and mother that she is.

Cox's ongoing process is not linear and I do not wish to create a lineal narrative. What this chapter will do is document the many ways, points if you will, at which *Yo Mama* emerges as a moment of reconsidering Black motherhood. Much of Cox's

inspiration comes from her own life, creative process, critical responses to her work and her spiritual practice. For example, in a discussion about recent work that was still in progress at the time of our interview, Cox claims that she conceptualized the meanings of what she was producing *after* she began a series of abstract clay figures. However, it was while she produced these images that she began to think of her project as "Afro-futurist." It was during this time that Cox was made aware that her *Rajé* series garnered attention by scholars interested in Afrofuturism—a growing body of literature, art and scholarship that considers the future of the African diaspora. Her initial response to being identified with an emerging school of thought was relatively ambivalent "…I was like 'Oh, wow, yeah, okay.' And then I Wikipedia it [search for it on Wikipedia] and somehow my name's on there so I was like, really? I didn't know I was an Afro futurist." (*personal interview)* Her current work, which directly speaks to motherships (Yo Mama's Ship) and futurity, is influenced by responses to her earlier work as well as this new shift in consciousness.

As the Black mother figure is consistently an image of cultural anxiety and shame, so Cox's rendering and re-rendering of *Yo Mama* navigates Black mother's moorings. Each encounter with the Black mother image directly engages aspects of the images of Black motherhood that are also sites of racial and gender shame and anxiety: Black women's sexuality, embodiment, agency, and power. All of these aspects are codified in dominant representations of Black women, or what Patricia Hill Collins calls "controlling images." Cox offers her body as model for alternative versions of these images while also modeling self-envisioned Black motherhood.

In the next few pages, I discuss the well-traversed backdrop of Black motherhood that Cox negotiates in the context of the affective terrain of shame and anxiety. With these feelins in mind, I describe and analyze six photographs that reflect nearly twenty years of Cox's repeated visitations of *Yo Mama* and other Black mother figures in her work. First, I discuss one of the images from Cox's *Yo Mama* series titled *Yo Mama Goes to the Hamptons* (1993) as one of the first images that directly engage questions around her own motherhood and controlling images of the mammy. I then discuss her direct engagement with the mammy figure in *The Liberation of Lady J and UB* (1998). It is in this image that Cox not only attempts to liberate mammy by changing her body, but does so through the superhuman archetype, Rajé, who she invents and embodies. By embodying this superhuman archetype, Cox situates herself on the other end of the spectrum of racial shaming—racial pride. However, it is through this imagining of racial pride that Cox reveals cultural anxieties around Aunt Jemima and the pervasiveness of mammy as an image of Black motherhood.

After the *Rajé* series, Cox continued to reimagine Black motherhood in her *American Family* (2001) series. In the photograph *Olympia's Boyz*, Cox casts herself as a more regal and Afrocentric version of Manet's *Olympia* and positions her sons in the image as guards over her body. Cox's "Olympia" defies the false binary of mother and whore, and does so through Afrocentric symbols of queenhood—once again shifting shame and Black motherhood into prideful Black motherhood.

In the *Nanny Queen of the Maroons* (2004) series, Cox's work takes a more introspective turn. In this series Cox casts herself as Grandy Nanny, a Jamaican National hero known for freeing herself, and others, from slavery. Here, Cox explores the ways in

which Black motherhood is idealized within a Black community as a unifying and mysterious figure.

In her series *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* (2008), Cox takes on images of motherhood and wealth propagated by reality television shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. In this series Cox reflects on her own experiences as a mother living in the suburbs and the expectations of such women by situating artwork from her *Yo Mama* series in photographs of domesticity and wealth. In the photograph *Missy At Home*, Cox takes on an introspective character that does not embody the particular pride that typifies her previous photographs. While she continues to use her body as model, Cox's art begins to ask more questions than create concrete answers about images of Black motherhood and wealth. Each of these images reflects a moment of consideration, and even reconsideration, of Black motherhood, the Black mother's image in the public sphere, and the complexities of life as a Black woman artist who happens to be a mother.

I end this chapter with a short discussion of the work that Cox was developing at the time of our interview. Cox, who by this time has adopted a new spiritual and creative practice founded on meditation and creating through "no thought," begins to create work that is intentionally Afrofuturist. In doing so, she continues to look back on her earlier *Yo Mama* series. At the point that this work is created, her sons are much older and motherhood has taken on a different shape, one in which yet another transcendence of her role as mother emerges.

Shaming Yo Mama and Getting Her Body Back

> *I have had kids tell me that my hair was so nappy it looked like a thousand Africans giving the Black Power salute, but never has anyone said to my face that my whole family—especially my mama—was "a tangle of pathology."*

— Robin D.G. Kelley from *Yo Mama's Dysfunktional!* (Kelley 2)

Images of Black motherhood are maligned by what Patricia Hill Collins names "controlling images." These images have characteristics that "justify U.S. Black women's oppression" by manipulating ideas about Black womanhood. (Collins, *Black Feminist* 69) According to Collins, "[…] challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought." (*personal interview*) Controlling images, outlined as the matriarch, the jezebel, the mammy, and their derivatives, specifically take aim at Black motherhood.

Just as Black feminists and activists have challenged these images, Black women artists have also worked to reclaim them. For example mammy, as her infamous avatar Aunt Jemima, has been a visual symbol of disgust, which many Black artists, including Cox, have attempted to revision and liberate. (Harris, MD 107; Farrington 132)

Michelle Wallace describes African American's current attitudes toward the stereotypes of the Mammy as particularly "hostile." (Wallace 280) She notes that the particular attention given to the mammy stereotype may reveal some deeply held beliefs in the culture toward black motherhood in general. Considering the well-documented history of the mammy and matriarch, it is clear that concern for what makes a good black mother is a consistent theme in conversations about the uplift of the Black community as a whole. Furthermore, the national discourse and public policy that view black motherhood as a perpetual problem have created a culture of shaming of black women—especially Black mothers. According to Wallace, "Cultural shame over black women as mothers is a cultural construction older than we realize." (285) That cultural shame is

particularly placed on the image and embodiment of the mammy, a figure typified by her lack of sexuality, reveals something about the sexual implications of racial shame.

Black motherhood in the form of mammy and matriarch also reveals a sordid and conflicting continuum of shame around black women's sexuality. Mammy is often described as unforgivably a-sexual, while the matriarch via the welfare queen is too sexually inclined—bound to having many children and often out of wedlock. This provides a perplexingly gendered conundrum of acceptable Black motherhood. Cloaked in excess on each end--excessively sexual and excessively fat (read a-sexual)--Black mother's sexual too-much-ness (on either end of the spectrum) is in tandem with unacceptable Black womanhood.

The sexual shaming of Black women that entraps the image of Black motherhood on each end is a form of social control. Melissa Harris-Perry says, "Black women in their role as mothers and potential mothers are subjugated to surveillance, judgment, and physical invasion. It is not hard to imagine how these experiences produce lasting shame." (Harris-Perry 115) The experience of shame is intrinsically linked with self-esteem and self-evaluation.

If, in the heterosexual construction of reproduction, motherhood is tied with sexual acts, then the public shaming of black mothers acts as a form of policing Black women's reproduction and sexuality. As Silvan Tompkins observes, the "innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy." (qtd. by Sedgwick 135) Shame would seem to be an instrument that would reduce the sexual libidos of Black women. Dubiously, shame "operates only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both," meaning that the social shaming of Black motherhood

is intended to perpetually inhibit Black women's full and joyful experiences. (Sedgwick, Frank and Alexander 135) According to Sarah Ahmed, "Shame can be described as an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body." She continues, "Certainly, when I feel shame, I have done something that I feel is bad." (Ahmed 103) To sexually shame Black women on either end of a spectrum of excess is to trouble sexuality, motherhood and the quality of black women's lives.

"Ain't no shame in my game."
—A Black Folk Saying

Despite shame and shaming of Black women's sexuality and motherhood, Black women manage to continue being mothers. Despite what seems like a cultural campaign to end Black motherhood, Black motherhood persists. Based upon this fact I propose that while there is clear cultural shame around Black motherhood at the site of the mammy and matriarch, there is also a rejection of that shame—a decision to *feel* motherhood. This happens simultaneously as shame is always already entangled with the identity Black and woman and mother, (*I am shame*.) and identity itself is shaped in opposition and relationship with the culture around it. In "The Fact of Blackness," Frantz Fanon articulates the inescapable marking of Black identity and the racialized meanings and histories that come with it. The marking of Black identity is articulated by the same processes and acts of shame and shaming. In "The Fact of Blackness" Blackness becomes accusation as in "'Dirty nigger!' or simply, 'Look, a Negro!'" (Fanon 109) This shaming is shaped by racial myth and stereotype. Blackness is not just a fact but also an epithet. Black identifies and accuses. Shame is the result and the experience of Blackness. Fanon

writes, “Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea. When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle.” (116) At once when Fanon is identified: Look at the Nigger! The gaze also overwhelms him and the weight of that gaze enacts Blackness and its shame. Perhaps most poignant in this moment is the fact that Fanon is identified as such by a white child, who also exclaims, “I’m frightened!” For Fanon, the experience of being looked at becomes unbearable. “Where shall I hide?” Fanon asks. Shame is enacted here in its protoform of looking, being identified and looking away.

Looking down or looking away is the bodily reaction to the experience of disconnection between one individual and another. The shamed individual seeks recognition in the eyes of the other, and when that recognition is denied, shame occurs. Subsequently, the shamed one shrinks away from the object by which it was rejected; this physical response is another form of communication. As such, it shapes the identity of the shamed in that moment. According to Sedgwick, “Shame floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication.” (Sedgwick 36) In a moment one thinks of herself as connected to another; in the next, she is made aware that they are not so connected. Shame, then, is an affect of being at one moment disconnected from another and then re-connected, as a perpetual other. It makes and unmakes identity.

According to Sarah Ahmed, shame is characterized as an impulse to cover oneself. (Ahmed 105) The shamed looks away, separating herself from the event or object that has shamed her and inverting toward an “individual” response to that event or

object, yet she simultaneously identifies with that event or object in "uncontrollable relationality." (Sedgwick 37) Sight, or witnessing, is imperative to shame and is also discussed in terms of the affective motion to put one's "eyes down, head averted." This is a gesture made in vain to cover one's exposed self, after having witnessed something that cannot be unseen and to which one is now undeniably linked. Fanon is undeniably linked to his own accused body, more damning in the face of whiteness:

> And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. (Fanon 110)

Fanon's third-person consciousness invokes the double consciousness or "two souls," articulated by DuBois. This double consciousness is predicated on looking and being looked at. It is this certain way that marks Blackness and invokes shame. DuBois opens his book, *Souls of Black Folk,* and his description of this double consciousness with the question: "How does it feel to be a problem?" (DuBois 2) In identifying his own early understandings of his difference, his being "a problem," DuBois answers the above question through the protoform of shame once again: looking, rejection, and looking away. DuBois narrates a childhood moment where he was to give a card to a white girl, and she refused. It was then that he realized he was different from his white classmates. DuBois describes that moment as feeling "shut out from their world"—different somehow but same in "heart and life and longing." (DuBois 2) Shaming becomes precursor to longing for belonging.

§

Sims invents the speculum.
I invent the wincing.

The if you must of it
The looking away[10]

§

Shame requires a shamer. It requires an individual to actively disengage with the process of identificatory communication. As DuBois' account suggests, in the innocence of childhood, profound self-knowledge is made. However, in the U.S., shaming of Black bodies in particular is an important enterprise for reinforcing a racist and sexist power structure. Trudier Harris uncovers this process in *Exorcising Blackness* and discusses how the lynching ritual was practiced to "exorcise" the Black (beast) from a community. (Harris, T xiii) According to Harris, imperative to the lynching ritual was the act of taunting. And, ultimately, castration would serve as a form of sadistic torture and dehumanize victims as well. (23) The lynching ritual, which involves acts of shaming directly on the Black body, is but one horrific way in which Blackness in the U.S. is associated with acts of shaming. Such acts have been ritualized in U.S. culture and practiced as status quo.

Shame is an internalized act in which the shamed sees herself as the source of a problem, or as Melissa Harris-Perry describes, "When we feel ashamed, we assume the room is straight and that the self is off-kilter. Shame urges us to internalize the crooked room." (Harris-Perry 105) In a culture where anti-black racism and sexism is pervasive,

[10] The weight of looking here demonstrated in these lines of poetry. Betsey Harris, the woman on which J. Marion Sims tests his first prototype of his speculum, also invents the subtle experiences of the pelvic exam—the experience of being looked at most intimately in the medical environment, and being compelled to look away.

Black women are particularly prone to shame. As Harris-Perry notes, “As a group [African American women] possess a number of stigmatized identities and life circumstances: they are more likely to be poor, to be unmarried, to parent children alone, to be overweight, to be physically ill, and to be undereducated and under employed.” (106) It is possible, however, that some Black women may not endure some of these conditions, the threat of these conditions or the shame associated with them.

To look back would seem to be a mode of confronting shame. Perhaps this is why witness and the gift of sight are recurring themes in Black women’s art. Through Black women’s art we are made to witness Black women’s experiences as the artists mediate them. However, a Black woman witnessing shame in another Black woman ignites yet another layer of shame as a mirror image. This is the condition of double consciousness. But, if we are to focus on the power of Black women looking inward, we must face the ways in which shame navigates within the Black interior.

Cox’s photography is well known for its use of the gaze. In *Yo Mama*, Cox returns the viewer’s gaze. She witnesses both the nudity of her body and the viewer’s interaction with her body. Cox witnesses to herself and others. From her series *American Family* it is clear that Cox relishes in her sexual body and her position as mother. Cox’s sight directly confronts the issue of shame and shaming by witnessing back to her viewers. While Cox believes that so many black women are leaving their bodies on the auction block—that is to mean that their bodies are constantly signifying and reifying the history of slavery, Cox sees herself as witness to that. She says, "even if I was a slave and I was on the auction block, I'd be looking people right in their damn eyes." She goes on, "And I might be standing completely naked but I would have that same sort of fuckin

gaze to say to them, 'Yeah, you need to check yourself, and I'm not becoming a victim of your insanity.'" (Cox *Personal Interview*)

Cox's imagery also reveals the uncertain and tenuous state of being on that auction block. The hypothetical scenario above speaks to the power of the gaze under the unrelenting violence of physical oppression. It highlights a survival technique for the psyche by maintaining self-hood through such violence. However, this is not an immediate cure to the physical violence itself. What this means is that the power of the gaze is punctuated by the violence it witnesses. The gaze is highly aware of the sickness of its viewers, and exists in that world as well. We can ask no more of a body but to bear witness to itself.

We are given insight into a self that exists in the horrors of slavery, violence, forced medical experimentation, objectification. This is all. We are given information that there is a selfhood, but we are not given the contours of that selfhood. Even if we, seasoned viewers, can accept—have no other choice than to accept – the complex humanity of the subjectivity of Renee Cox through her arresting gaze, we are forced to back up. We are forced to step away from the image and ponder: In what have I engaged? How am I implicated in this? My own psyche? History versus my own conscious? A yo mama joke? Political commentary? All of that.

The images in the *Yo Mama* series rely on this returned gaze. However, Cox's later work allows for her to look away, to enter into her own inner-consciousness and make commentary on the meanings of the world around her. Cox transforms shame and anxiety about Black motherhood and Black women's bodies into a transcendent will and

purpose that reflect both a transient identity and a steady, centered, inner life that humanizes her within her black body.

On Shame

§

ON SHAME

What will I do now / with my hands?"
- Carl Phillips "As from a Quiver of Arrows"[11]

Hold them
one tightly to the other.
Love a callus.
Kiss, and finally open
to a sun, a sky, a God
that knew you before
you were naked.

This is where you will begin,

after a fruit called forbidden,
after behest and seduction,
after a mouth full of fleshy knowing,
we begin at the evening breeze

where dilated pupils
gather unbearable perfection
(opening they say) to abandon
as if eyes could ever
grasp such a thing.

Perhaps, let
hands that once knew
sublime thumbs
pressing clay metacarpals,
flexors and tendons into form
witness to that familiar Whole
of red gush and ether.

[11] See Phillips 40.

What new sensations,
longings, covenants?

I don't know what
happens to the serpent.

Where does blame go
when it had no utterance,
no shame on which to land?

§

As shame emerges as a central way in which Black mothers are devalued, a feelin Black motherhood would act to change the air in which Black motherhood exists. Feelin Black motherhood would mean experiencing and viewing motherhood without shame.

> *Fuck surviving, I want to thrive in this lifetime. You know, I don't want to be hanging on by a string. No. I would like to thrive; I want my work out there. Those who can appreciate and can have that dialogue that discourse with it, fantastic. For the others that cannot, maybe one day they will. I can't help them. —Renee Cox* (Cox *Personal Interview*)

Renee Cox adopts many Black motherhood ideals. However, her art exposes the limitations of proscribed definitions of a good mother. For example, her liberation of Aunt Jemima, or Lady J, adopts attitudes about the liberation of Aunt Jemima from her elderly, fat body. The image itself is confrontational and intentionally campy. While we can imagine that once liberated Aunt Jemima becomes a supermodel, what does that mean for the rest of us—in our own bodies? Apropos the ideal Black mother, Cox uplifts her family in American Family. But what is an American family? What is an ideal Black family? Cox's happens to be interracial and cross-national. She is Jamaican born, American raised and was married to a white man from France. As a Black mother ought, Cox elevates her sons as the baby Christ in *Yo Mamadonna* and lauds them as African

warriors in *Olympia's Boyz*, but viewers will notice the striking visual difference of their skin which highlights that her uplifted sons are also of mixed race. Finally, Cox never denies her own body or sexual agency when she presents herself as mother. Even as Madonna, Cox proudly displays her own nude body, as Eleanor Heartney observes, "[…] intentionally confounding the official denial of the Virgin's and hence motherhood's sexual side." (Heartney 12) *Fuck surviving;* to thrive in this lifetime means to take up the cross of one's own life.

> *Its good news when you reject things as they are. When you lay down the world as it is. And you take on the responsibility of shaping your own way. That's good news*.
> —Bernice Johnson Reagon with Sweet Honey in the Rock singing "Good News" (Rock "Good News")

For Cox, an image-maker, taking up the cross of her own life involves taking control of her own image: "For me it's all about: I own it." (Cox *Personal Interview*) Taking control over the image and confronting viewers with her own gaze is how Cox makes meaning in her work. As Collins notes, "The insistence on Black women's self-definitions reframes the entire dialogue from one of protesting the technical accuracy of an image—namely, reframing the Black matriarchy thesis—to one stressing the power dynamics underlying the very process of definition itself." (Collins, *Black Feminist* 114) Cox's visual imagery is shameless, dare I say, prideful. Pride, however, is an emotion that operates on the same plane as shame. Shame's near enemy, pride, negotiates the same sets of logic as pride—logic that is based on a shared understanding of good images and deeds and bad images and deeds. For example, when scholars and activists investigating queer politics question the politics of pride and shame in activism, they discuss the ways in which gay pride adopted assimilationist practices that actually

continued to shame non-assimilationist queers. Gay liberal projects picked up the same politics of respectability that formerly shamed and ostracized queers. As Deborah Gould observes, the articulations of gay pride were ostensibly about gay respectability, and "a politics of respectability is almost always deeply ambivalent; concerned above all with social acceptance." (89) As an ambivalent emotion, pride asks a question just as much as it appears to make a statement. By adopting the practices of the culture that shames, one asks for acceptance on that culture's terms.

Sylvia Wynter's discussion of *désêtre,* Fanon's term for the "unbearable wrongness of blackness," articulates this close relationship between shame and pride in reading images of Black peoples. For Wynter the politics of representation itself poses a problem because Blackness is already imposed by *désêtre.* (Wynter, "On How We" 118) Efforts to understand Blackness on "good" terms fail to dismantle the Western logic by which Blackness is always already maligned. When applying such dichotomous judgments on images, as is the practice of aesthetics, the fallacies of such critique become clear. If aesthetics is, as Wynter observes, the "imperative enactment of each governing code of subject/abject […]," then the wielding of aesthetics reproduces such dichotomous codes. (Wynter, "Rethinking Aesthetics" 258) Pride and shame, then, act as two sides of one ideological coin. In the context of this discussion of Black motherhood, the coin will always come up "Black mother deviant."

The arc I trace follows how Cox negotiates these visual codes that always come up "Black mother deviant." By examining the cultural context of her work and the ideological and historical meanings that interact with her work a more complex set of readings can be gleaned. Cox is clearly critical of, and very much a part of, the culture in

which shaming Black motherhood and idealizing operate on the same plane. Cox's discussion of her wrestling with the ego in relationship to her creative process reflects a wrestling with the ideological constraints that dictate the double-sided coin as truth.

Mother of Pride – Mid 1990s

§
Seeing my face in her
want, I felt wanted
§

Yo Mama Goes to the Hamptons (Fig. 10) features Cox wearing a printed wrap garment. It partially covers one breast, leaving the other swollen breast bare. It holds her crying lighter-skinned child and covers the rest of her body to her ankles. The print of the fabric appears to be polka dot in some places, flowers in others. She is in the center of the frame, gazing at us through sun-squinted eyes. Her expression is serious and unsmiling. Her thick dreadlocks frame her face, stopping near her chin. The photo appears to be taken outdoors, and bright light reflects on her right side. The backdrop is unkempt foliage: bushes and trees, branches.

The setting is described as the Hamptons, but we are not faced with images of large mansions or beach homes—symbols of the wealth that the Hamptons, a series of villages and towns in New York, are known for. We do see trees, shrubs, grass and this brown skinned, bare breasted woman carrying her child. Cox's body in this context, wrapped in this fashion, seems to reference the idealized Afrocentric contexts she often plays with in her images. Cox tells her story of motherhood in the setting of the

Hamptons. Bare-breasted and in Afrocentric attire, Yo Mama schmoozes with the wealthy.

Image removed.

Fig. 10. Renee Cox. *Yo Mama Goes to the Hamptons*, 1994. Black and white photograph

The image could be glossed over in the company of other images in the Yo Mama series where Cox has allowed her "Yo Mama" persona to travel. This "Yo Mama" who summers in the Hamptons, however, not only takes up residence in new space but references her own presence across time and addresses the meanings of her Black mother self as mother in an otherwise white, wealthy space. The image appears to be a direct reference to Betye Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*.

The Liberation of Aunt Jemima is a three-dimensional piece; a black-skinned corpulent Aunt Jemima figure stands inside of a red cabinet in front of a repetitious background made up of her trademarked image. This smiling figure wears a flower-

patterned dress with a polka dot handkerchief and checkered scarf around her head. In one hand she holds a broom, in the other a rifle. A relief in her skirt (formally a notepad) reveals an image of another mammy, smiling against the backdrop of trees, bushes, and a picket fence—the ultimate symbol of idealized Old South domesticity. One hand is on her hip while a crying light-skinned child is under her other arm. The original image is derived from a trading card. (Morgan 103) While some critics have identified the child underneath mammy's arm as white, as was intended in the original postcard, Michael D. Harris argues that Saar intended for the child to be read as mulatto. She made this decision in order to be a "testimony about how black women were 'sexually abused or misused' in the household." (Harris, MD 117) Saar punctuates this found image with a black fist, feminized by red paint on the thumbnail. It covers the linen the original advertisement displayed and appears to serve as the mammy's skirt.

The pattern in the fabric of Cox's wrap in *To Mama Goes to the Hamptons* echoes the fabric in the gun-toting Aunt Jemima of Betye Saar's 1972 cabinet. Her own mixed-

Fig. 11 Betye Saar. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima,* 1972. Mixed media.

race child's crying disposition echoes the crying mixed-race child in Saar's image. The connecting thread through all of this is a disruption of the landscape predicated on the American dream of comfort via wealth and domesticity that the Hamptons and picket fences symbolize and that the mammy's servitude secures. The militant fist in Saar's image is implied in Cox's expression, afro-centric clothing, and hair. That the crying child is Cox's own adds a distinct layer of self-reflectivity and awareness. Although the

child is hers, she does not appear to immediately tend to it as mothers are expected to do; this ambivalence is reflected in other images in the series. Some may decide that this ambivalence is evidence of poor motherly etiquette, but while Saar's mammy may be ambivalent toward her child, based on the sexual abuse she alludes to, Cox's mixed race children were born by choice.

The power in this image is the same power that many of Cox's images exude. Cox's gaze, her center position in the image, and her choice of props (including her child) have appeared in other photographs, each equally, if not more, arresting. The photo's reference to Saar's earlier attempt to liberate mammy highlights a thoughtful response to issues of motherhood, domesticity, and belonging that are invoked in the image of a brown-skinned Cox holding a light-skinned child in an affluent, white neighborhood. She does not embrace readings of her body as servant in this context but as mother to her own child living her complex life. This photograph serves as a bookmark for Cox's later exploration of navigating bourgeoisie motherhood in *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* (2008) and the image of the subservient mammy figure *The Liberation of Lady J and UB* (1998). She fits into neither category of mammy nor housewife but exists as a mother of her own imagination. Her bare and swollen left breast and the hint of her right breast simultaneously signify the agency she retains to nurse her own children and to own her sexuality. In this photo, she is both: mother and sexual being, a theme that continues in her work. Cox will continue to reference this mammy mother connection in her own attempt to liberate Aunt Jemima.

Image removed.

Fig. 8 Renee Cox, *The Liberation of Lady J and UB,* 1998. Cibachrome Print.

In her *Rajé* series, Cox creates a mythical heroine who goes about righting racial wrongs, from picking up taxicabs that zip past Black men in New York City with her bare hands to liberating black caricatures from food packages. In *The Liberation of Lady J and UB* (Fig. 8) Rajé pulls Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben from their boxes. She stands center in her trademark leotard in the colors of the Rastafarian and Black Liberation flags. She wears black thigh-high, spiked leather boots, large geometric earrings, and smoky makeup and is crowned with dreadlocks that gather at the top of her head. Rajé is a sexual symbol, as any comic book inspired super-heroine would be. Liberated Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben stand on each side of Rajé, all three with arms interlocked. Faded replications of Lady J and UB emanate behind them to indicate movement. They have left the confines of their boxes and have been given super-hero names. In transforming Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben into superheroes Lady J and UB, the physicality of the

caricatures changes dramatically. The elderly Uncle Ben and heavy-set Aunt Jemima become young models. The muscular and shirtless Rodney Charles is UB and leather bikini-clad supermodel Roshumba is Lady J.

§

WHILE SHE IS AT IT
For Dolce and Gabbana

Aunt Jemima is in style.
–Nina Simone at a live performance of "Four Women"

…and while she is at it
on all fours and cleaning your
kitchen, while she is swaying
large hips and hanging breasts
let her dangle from your ears
drip from your children's mouths

while she is at it
hands tied above her head
screaming your fear,
your rage, take her rag
fashion it just so. Wear it to parties,
breakfast at tiffany's

while she is at it
multimillionaring your grandfather
looking out, forever tied to your
cupboard wrap her girth
around every black woman you see
tear off her blouse and
suck

§

Cox's decision to change the physicality of Aunt Jemima from a corpulent, elderly mammy to a young svelte supermodel demonstrates how the liberation of Aunt Jemima is contingent upon the transformation of her abject body. The physical changes that executives at Quaker Oats have enacted on Aunt Jemima since her first appearance in

1893—for example, trading in her notorious handkerchief for a short curled hairstyle—is not change enough for Cox. In the corpulent and smiling physicality of Aunt Jemima, roots of historical stereotyped representation run too deep. That the artist transforms and, as the title states, "liberates" Aunt Jemima from these embodied restraints illustrates how she is engaged in this larger discourse on representation and embodiment. Cox liberates Aunt Jemima from her smile, her old age and her fatness.

Fatness is a particular form of embodiment in which Black women have been racially shamed. As Andrea Elizabeth Shaw notes in her book, *The Embodiment of Disobedience*, "The West has required the ideological erasure of both blackness and fatness as a means of gaining aesthetic acceptability […]." (Shaw 2) Cox makes no efforts to challenge this association of blackness, fatness and shame; rather, she chooses to liberate Aunt Jemima from fatness and age wholly. Recasting her in this way does not liberate Aunt Jemima's body but shifts her into another acceptable body, one in which she can embody pride as well as her always present black fat and elderly shame.

Attempts to liberate mammy, to sniff out any of her possible contemporary iterations and recast them are deeply connected to concerns about the matriarch and welfare queen as symbols of Black motherhood. Michelle Wallace notes, "[…] there is a great deal of self-destructive masochistic hostility for the myth of Mammy in the black community as a stereotype, hostility which quite commonly overflows to embrace most contemporary black women, black mothers, and perhaps teenage mothers in particular." (Wallace 280) Cox's *Rajé* series, in conversation with the *Yo Mama* series, reveals this hostility toward stereotypical images of the black mother. It also serves as a bookmark in

a consistently shifting perspective on black motherhood as it is experienced and represented in Cox's art which features her own body.

Cox does not challenge the West's mandate that fatness must be erased in order to be considered modern. Instead, the artist identifies with this mandate in her effort to return to mammy her sexuality and self-efficacy—a sexuality, as several scholars have complained, which is rendered invisible because of her fatness. (Collins, *Black Feminist* 84; Alexander, "Coming Out" 222) Common renderings of mammy as fat are indicative of westernized standards of beauty from which Black women have been denied. Mammy's fatness is asexual, as much as white women's purported slenderness indicates their sexual availability.

If, as Lorraine O'Grady states, "The female body […] like a coin, […] has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, non-white or, prototypically, black," then within the construct of the mammy and her white mistress, she is fat and asexual while the other is slender and sexual. (O'Grady 174; Morgan 99) Cox's decision to cut mammy down in size and reverse time are the methods by which she attempts to give mammy back her sexual agency. As Andrea Liss' description of the *Yo Mama* series observes: "Cox's remarkable portraits bring into full evidence the denials of slavery brought to bear on the black female body—denials that disallowed women their legitimate motherhood, rightful property, and self-owned sexuality." (Liss 284) Though not embodying Aunt Jemima herself, Cox's alter ego ushers in an Aunt Jemima whose body more closely approximates her own. Physically, Lady J is a version of the self-contained Rajé. Her smoky makeup, short natural haircut, thigh high leather boots and finger claws are shared with her super-heroine sister. However, Lady J dares to show

even more skin than Rajé. If Aunt Jemima doesn't own her body, the Black woman artist who renders her and takes the form of the super hero who rescues her remakes it. This is perhaps most telling about the anxiety and "hostility" against the image of mammy: this is a fight over who gets her body.

Removing Lady J's fatness, however, does little to actually liberate her. What remains is the elderly and fat image of Aunt Jemima that is perpetually unable to be liberated. In a war of good images and bad images, we are still left with the structure of an aesthetic that was never kind to Black women anyway. As Sylvia Wynter observes, aesthetics and counter aesthetics govern and produce the tastes of the same culture. (Wynter, "Rethinking Aesthetics" 269) In other words, pre-established aesthetics and aesthetics that seek to counter pre-established aesthetics, in this case, produce the same moral judgments. The aesthetic of a thin ideal that has functioned to render fat bodies as abject and asexual persists in this paradigm.

§

FULL BODIED WOMAN
For Us after KoKo Taylor

a Full Bodied Woman is a low growl greeting sun
all cocoa butter and hair kink, the soft part of cracklin
She who resounds *Oh yeahhhhh* as in: *It is good*
from this we know man's image is in She who covers
all the ground She walks. Moves a boulder with a smile
sweet as pound cake, heart of watermelon.

a Full Bodied Woman's got matrilineage in her hips
lovers remember mothers and aunties without shame
when She enfolds between heavy breasts
hot with sin and a familiar that assures *everything's*
'gone be all right as in: *we walk by faith, not by sight*
from this we know she can feed multitudes.

> a Full Bodied Woman can gives life in edible chunks.
> those who know partake. those who don't
> from this we know She will return
> for who could reign over a woman who
> sings *I'm a Woman* without apology? *As* in:
> *I am that I am.*

§

Call me over-churched but the old bible verse "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but principalities," comes to mind here. (Eph. 6.12) What Renee Cox negotiates through her photographic images is not as simple as representation; it is about the principled manner under which Black women's bodies, particularly those of the black mother, are considered up for grabs. Cox engages a debate about representation by addressing the issue of Aunt Jemima, but the greater trajectory of her work marks a more introspective concern: How does the black female body (namely her own) signify through these complicated channels of meaning? How does a fully self-possessed and confident Black woman maintain that awareness while traversing the multiple terrains that would describe her on terms not her own? Motherhood, a topic where much social anxiety and shame is heaped upon Black women, bumps against the will and worldview of such a woman. Cox faces the shame expected of her, challenges the anxieties around Black women's bodies that pervade in responses to her work, and visually documents a journey through which feelings of anxiety and shame transform into *feelin* which liberates. Cox negotiates the politics of shame and anxiety and frees her self-image into a transcendent will and purpose.

Sex, Power and the Sacred Mother

To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves. - Lorraine O'Grady "Olympia's Maid" (O'Grady 176)

Olympia's Boyz (Fig. 12) from the American Family series is both comment and homage to Manet's *Olympia*. A nude Cox reclines on a chaise covered with what appears to be mud cloth. On her neck and arm is beaded jewelry appearing to be from South Africa. She allows her dreadlocks to cover only one breast, and her hand covers her genitals. She also wears low open back heels, much like Manet's painting. The colors are brown and black on her brown skin. Her heels are gold. Her beaded jewelry pops in yellow, turquoise, black and white. Cox does not have the Black maid Olympia has behind her. In Laura's[12] stead, Cox has her two sons standing guard behind her. They are shirtless with colorful fabric wrapped around their waists and heads. Unsmilingly, they hold spears. Their light skin marking their own mixed heritage is comment on and context to this highly Afrocentric image that is also styled after a European "master."

[12] Laura is the name of the model for the maid in the Manet painting. (O'Grady 175) (175)

"Boyz" in this context alludes to the ghetto-centric use of the term in the 1990s. The term was used for the New Jack Swing R&B group Boyz II Men and the John Singleton film *Boyz in the Hood*. Boyz marks, in particular, U.S. Black urban male youth. Despite the fact that Cox raised her sons in the suburbs of New York, in name she cloaks them with the ghetto-centric Black maleness of the American imagination. While such Blackness is imagined through the gun-laden violence of gangster films, Olympia's Boyz are warriors of another kind. Instead of handguns, they hold spears, presumably in protection of their mother. Unlike Laura, whose place they take in the image, they too have a gaze of their own. Like their mother, Olympia's Boyz look back toward viewers.

Image removed.

Fig. 12 Renee Cox. *Olympia's Boyz,* 2001. Archival digital c-print mounted on aluminum.

Not only are they witness to being viewed, they are witness to others viewing their mother.

Suddenly, Olympia, with guards of her own flesh rather than a maid who is Other, is more queen than prostitute. Her nakedness is a regal garment of its own, sexual, self-possessed and unashamed. She is all of those things, not only in the presence of her sons but guarded by her boyz. By positioning her dark-skinned body in the place of Olympia, Cox comments on Manet's interpretation of this reclining nude, who was accompanied by a black maid. Cox serves up sexuality, motherhood (particularly Black mothers with sons), as well as reclamation. It is as if she decides to place the dark-skinned maid from the original painting in her rightful place as waited-on queen. In Manet's painting this maid is, as Lorraine O'Grady puts it, "Jezebel and Mammy, prostitute and female eunuch […] When we're through with her inexhaustibly comforting breast, we can use her ceaselessly open cunt." (175) In Cox's image, Olympia's maid takes to the bed, no longer a "peripheral Negro" but the subject of the image, who holds her own gaze, her own children, and her own sexuality intact.

Olympia is an appropriate link between the concepts behind *Grand Salon* and the rest of the *American Family* series. Manet's *Olympia* received volatile backlash at its initial exhibition, because Olympia's gaze met the viewer's. Cox not only meets the viewer with her gaze from her naked body, but she meets the viewer's gaze in the presence of her children. She is the sexualized and empowered Olympia, mother; her children are warriors, also unafraid to look. She risks identifying with the limiting tropes of the over-sexualized Black woman, yet her ownership of all these things at once forces viewers to engage with more complicated possibilities, all under the careful watch of

Cox's gaze. Shelly Eversley notes of the image, "Unreality seems reconciled with the real, and oppositions such as Madonna/whore and Black/White no longer seem fixed or exclusive." (Eversley 73) That Cox crosses these boundaries on multiple planes with such ease signifies uneasy ruptures not only in a status quo of womanhood but in the modes of silence and censure in African American anxieties around Black motherhood.

By risking the traps of oversimplification, Cox also tricks them. According to Eversley, "O*lympia's Boyz* makes vivid the simultaneous and volatile combinations of race, gender, sexuality and history to inaugurate another kind of knowledge, one that is willing to practice the theory of the most democratic ideals." (126) This democracy of ideals is Cox's demonstration of a sense of entitlement over her own body. Eversley continues "[…] the entitlement that looms large in scale dominates the viewing space so that all viewers must look at the big picture […] one Jamaican-born, American-raised, black female artist who sees herself, and by extension, her American Family, made in God's image." (74) Cox certainly sees the wholly human sexual being, the Sacred Feminine Divine, and the God within herself, although she is quite democratic about it:

> Meaning of God: Being. What is Being? You, me, everybody else on this freaking planet is a Being. Right? So, this God resides in here. [She points to her chest.] I had one priest, because I grew up Catholic […] that said, "You don't have to go to church because your church is here. [Points to her chest] " – Renee Cox (Cox *Personal Interview*) (Cox *Personal Interview*)

§

I Am Grateful For A Mother With Secrets

I remember choosing

from the cosmos
Seeing my face in her
want, I felt wanted
I don't know if I was, but
I know the meaning of secrets:

Two women, one baby
readied to be sliced in half

The story is about what
makes a mother bad
what makes her good

for her life she would
swallow truth whole

§

Outside of the view of Black motherhood as perpetually troubled, there is another perspective where Black motherhood is revered. The perversion of U.S. racism has troubled the image of Black motherhood by controlling and disseminating images of the mammy, the matriarch, and the jezebel, but underneath that is the desire to be enveloped by a Black mother figure. As much as the mammy is maligned and rejected, she is also overwhelmingly embraced by those invested in nostalgia for a romanticized Deep South. More deeply, the longing for the Black mother to return home to her Black children both rallies against this mammy image and pulls on the same strings of the selfless, Strong Black Woman archetype.

Sheri Parks makes connections between the Strong Black Woman trope and the archetype of the Sacred Dark Feminine. She researches the relentless presence of the Black Mother, perverted as Mammy in American culture, and finds her roots in the archetype of the Sacred Dark Feminine. Enmeshed in stereotype and images in popular

culture, "Black women automatically inherit the ancient myths of the Sacred Dark Feminine." (Parks 33) While that inheritance is marred by the legacy of slavery and racism in the U.S., Parks sees the importance for women of color, especially Black women, of owning the power of the Sacred Dark Feminine for themselves, rather than having the perversions of the Sacred Dark Feminine define them: "The mythology permeates the secular culture, and black women have to wrestle with a mythology that arrived before them and will linger long after." (200) The archetype of the Sacred Dark Feminine is so pervasive that Black women will feel and have felt the effects and expectations of it already. This inheritance has its costs, but, according to Parks, it has its own possibilities. She states, "Fierce energy, deep compassion, and often a connection to a holy spirit is a very powerful combination. Black women need to face the image and decide if and how to make use of it." (202) Cox does make use of the Sacred Dark Feminine—quite literally.

While her takes on the Madonna, and even Jesus are attractive objects from which to draw these conclusions, Cox's meditation on the folkloric and historical figure of Grandy Nanny reveals Black desires for the presence of the Sacred Dark Feminine that will save Black folks from their condition.

Black Mother as Sacred - Queen Nanny of the Maroons/River Queen

§

The story is about what
makes a mother bad
what makes her good

§

The [Strong Black Woman] role is overwhelming—it calls for incredible levels of emotional, spiritual, and intellectual energy, combined with a selflessness that is truly superhuman and wildly unrealistic. And nobody asked them if they wanted the job. —
Sheri Parks (xv)

Despite the black and white tones of the photograph, we can see that the landscape is lush. (Fig. 9) There are flora-covered mountains, palm trees and bushes. More rocks jut out of a calmly moving river, and ripples appear to encircle every object they encounter. There is movement in the water, and one can sense that the river is flowing away from us. In the center of the photograph, a woman sits on a rock in the middle of the river. She wears a long light colored dress with a darker apron; a long, dark colored headscarf wraps around her head and rests on her left shoulder. She sits with her knees apart, wrists resting on each. Her gaze toward us is unsmiling and suspicious. The dark of her eyes peers out to us from one side. We are interrupting something or we are not where we are supposed to be, or we are a threat.

In a series of striking black and white and color photographs, Cox transforms herself into Grandy Nanny—a folk hero in Jamaica known for her revolt against slavery. In the Jamaican imagination, Nanny embodies liberation, strength and the epitome Black womanhood. As a Black woman who's willing and able to stand up against slaveholders, rumored to have supernatural powers and an exceptional connection to the Divine, Nanny is the quintessential strong black woman. Her story borders on epic mythology. According to Kenneth Bilby and Filomena Chioma Steady, "Stories detail Nanny's confrontations with bakra [whites], once again emphasizing her supernatural cunning. It is said that Nanny kept a magic cauldron along the approach to the Maroon village. […] No sooner would the unfortunate victim glance down than he would be pulled into the

seething mess to disappear forever." (Bilby, KaFCS 459) Interestingly enough, Nanny's corpulent body is a large part of the super-human element of her mythology. Bilby and Steady go on to state:

> Another story, perhaps the most commonly told of all, relates how Nanny, upon meeting a large *bakra* force, stopped down and tauntingly presented her rump toward their guns; as they fired on her, she proceeded to shock them by catching between her buttocks a full round of lead shot, rendering them inactive. (459)

Image removed.

Fig. 9 Renee Cox. *River Queen,* 2004. Black and white photograph.

With stories full of such magic and physical bombast, Nanny's role as a (super) powerful Black woman attracts Cox, who ultimately dedicates a series to her.

Cox's identification with super-powerful womanhood is a constant theme in her work. She does not shy away from the implications of being considered a powerful Black woman. In direct opposition to the Black feminist statement by the Combahee River Collective, "We reject pedestals, queenhood… etc." (Collective 267), Cox embraces the opportunity to be put on a pedestal saying, "as far as I'm concerned you can put me on a pedestal… I don't have a problem with that." (Cox *Personal Interview*) However, in line with the Collective, it is doubtful that she would ever "walk ten paces behind." (Collective 267) Cox's sense of womanhood is not merely human, but super-human.

Cox's take on Nanny also represents a shift in her art in which she looks to history and folklore for emblems of this super-human Black woman figure. Cox notes this difference in the series in an interview with a student at Spelman College: "I was very pleased with that work in the sense that I felt that it sort of transcended my image. […] I felt with Queen Nanny I was able to transgress and sort of embrace that character, that persona of Queen Nanny." (College, *Interview With*) In the *Nanny* series, Cox, without a sense of satire, takes on a historical figure who already embodies the qualities Cox projects in her previous work.

Grandy Nanny's legacy in Jamaica has even had effects on contemporary politics. According to Anita Waters, in the 1970s the Jamaican government invoked Nanny. "For example, an advertisement about women's rights under the PNP government proclaims, 'in the name of Nanny and all our brave foremothers who began the struggle for our freedom, let us not turn back now…'" (Waters 69) Nanny, a historical hero endowed with supernatural powers, is also considered a matriarch to the people. She has been named among other things, the "Mother of Us All." (Gottlieb 77) Cox alludes to this naming in a

photo of the same name. In other photos she is pictured as mother, schoolteacher or even church lady, expanding the series from the mythology of Nanny, "mother of us all" into, perhaps, "Mothers are all Nanny."

In an interview at Spelman College, Renee Cox noted that while she was in Jamaica doing research and photographing this series, the presence of Nanny was palpable. Describing the experience as "kooky," she said, "I even have some photographs of me where it doesn't even look like me […] at Nanny Falls. […] It's kind of eerie because you look at this photograph and you're like, 'Whoa something's being channeled here.'" (Spelman College *Interview With*) Nanny's supernatural presence alters Cox's photographs, rendering her unrecognizable. An omnipotent presence, Nanny is not only in the landscape of her adopted home but in Renee Cox the artist as well. Taking up Nanny as a spiritual presence, the rest of the series presents Cox as Nanny in the present as forms of Black motherhood. In the photograph, *Mother of Us All*, Cox sits on a porch with children, presumably mother to them. Another photograph, "Nanny Churchlady," evokes a time other than that of the historical Nanny. The title of the photograph names the churchlady Nanny as if Nanny is no longer a singular person but a title that evokes the qualities of Grandy Nanny. As the photos continue, Cox begins to look more like herself, yet, as she notes, the presence of Nanny is clear. To be a Black woman on that island is to inherit Nanny. She is indeed "The Mother of Us All," an omnipotent matriarchal spirit.

Michelle Cliff also finds deep connections to the story of Nanny in her essay on Black women artists. She describes her first encounter with the story of Grandy Nanny and its impact on her writing: "Immediately she came alive in my mind. I could see her

clearly […] an old Black woman wearing a necklace fashioned from the teeth of white men. More important, perhaps, was that once I re-membered Nanny, the other female characters in my book began to emerge, and I could see how we were all her daughters, and were connected to her." (Cliff 10) Cliff's connection was imbued with ritual and cultural remembrance. Her description evokes a clear desire and reverence for this idealized Black mother, so much so that the vision of her expands into the memory of the matriarchs in Cliff's family. She continues,

> My cumulative consciousness was triggered. I thought of customs we practiced, as though automatically; beliefs we held, knowing only that they had been passed down; the enormous respect I had been taught as a Jamaican child for certain old women—those considered empowered, that is, those close to God. (10)

Nanny, matriarchs and her own grandmother become visions of the divine as a Black woman.

Returning to the photograph "River Queen," the sense of this divinity comes into place. We are looking at Renee Cox, but it is also not Cox. Nanny, with her suspecting gaze, sits on a rock in a river. There is something ancient in the weight of her presence. Despite Cox's small frame there is a weighty presence—a strength—in her pose. She sits in her domain, the river. There is a reason she is called the "River Queen." This story is imbued with the resistance that Nanny embodies.

In his book on the Maroons in Jamaica, Kenneth Bilby recounts the story a man by the name of Charles Bernard told of Nanny: "White man say, 'you fe work.' Grandy Nanny say, 'me not working!' And she tek the river, follow river! She follow river." (Bilby, KM 106) Bilby notes the significance of rivers to enslaved maroons "as escape

routes as well as food and water […] maroons who found themselves being tracked […] waded and swam up rivers to mask their scent from the hounds." (136) In the U.S. allusions to rivers in songs and tales also represent routes to freedom. The river in this story about Nanny is the road to freedom. By taking it and following it, the river is hers, and her river becomes her way. The photograph *River Queen* inscribes Nanny's guardianship over the river. Nanny is not on a boat traveling but steady on a rock looking at us, the viewers, with suspicion. We are in her domain. Cox embodies Nanny embodying Cox with that arresting gaze. The position of Nanny on the rocks and the rocks that sit behind her allude that Nanny is at a fork in the river on her path to freedom. The river, perhaps the gaze, is urging us to choose.

Goddesses, and particularly African-derived goddesses, such as the Ifa/Yoruba orisha Oshun and Oya often have guardianship over rivers or if not rivers, then other bodies of water. Yemaya has domain over the oceans and seas. As Parks notes:

> The Dark Goddesses have long been associated with rivers; the Strong Black Woman and the Sacred Dark Feminine are like rivers on parallel paths, flowing along beside each other but, at least in the United States, rarely joining together. But whether or not a black woman identifies closely with the Dark Feminine, the two figures are quite similar. (Parks 201)

Whether similar or eerily indistinguishable, it is clear which path Cox has chosen. Cox identifies with an archetype of Black womanhood that is endowed with divine power and holds power within her community. As Collins observes, "The resiliency of women-centered family networks and their willingness to take responsibility for Black children illustrates how African-influenced understandings of family have been continually

reworked to help African-Americans as a collectivity cope with and resist oppression." (Collins, *Black Feminist* 183) In all of her representations of Nanny, Cox points to Black women's practices of assuming the responsibility of caring for the entire community. This real-life practice among Black women reveals that self-defined ideals of motherhood within the Black community are constantly fulfilled.

As herself, Renee Cox is a mother in suburban America. Her encounters with ideals of motherhood are awash with images and ideals of a western, "traditional" nuclear household. In that context, Black motherhood is either unheard of or invisible. However, Cox takes on those spaces directly, and in her earlier *Yo Mama* series documents the encounter of her kind of motherhood in the idyllic, wealthy and predominantly white Hamptons suburb.

The Problem with Imaging Black Women's Bodies / Imaging Black Mothers

> *I think some of the issues that are going on now that you still see that are quite prevalent is that some black women are still carrying this burden of slavery at the auction block and so on and so forth. So as soon as they see the black body, the black female body, they think it's being auctioned or it's being objectified.*
> - *Renee Cox* (Cox *Personal Interview*)

> *You don't know what they're [your kids are] thinking. They're not asking you questions, you don't exchange, how does that make you a good mother? This is an exterior look—it's a look that you're going for. I'm not interested in a look; I'm interested in the essence. - Renee Cox* (Cox *Personal Interview*)

There is a congruency between some Black women's reception of Cox's work and some women's concerns over perceptions of themselves as mothers. The first statement was in response to a question about how Black women engage her work that features her

nude body. The second statement is directed toward mothers she met after her move to the suburbs of New York. Both of these statements signal an oppositional worldview in which Cox does not identify with the role that she is expected to take as Black woman and mother. I use the term disidentification as José Esteban Muñoz takes it up in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. There, Muñoz is concerned with how queers of color deal with dominant ideology yet choose neither to assimilate with it nor "strictly oppose" it. (Muñoz ii) In it, Muñoz sees resistance in the performance of simultaneously rejecting and not strictly opposing. For Cox, opposing dominant ideologies about her Black body takes the form of seeing the Black female body as always "being auctioned off," always "being objectified." (Cox *Personal Interview*) In our interview she referenced a reaction that a Black woman had to her photograph *Liberty in the Bronx* that featured a nude Cox holding broken chains in the fashion of the Statue of Liberty. She discussed this reaction in more detail during an interview with Lisa Fairington at Spelman College in 2009:

> The New School actually purchased this photograph—thank God. They had it in a conference room. And there was an African-American woman who was there for a conference and had a single-handed, one-woman revolt. She couldn't stay in the room because it made her feel like she was at the slave auction block. (College, *Cox and Fairington*)

This visceral reaction recalls what Darlene Clark Hine has named the "culture of dissemblance" around Black women's bodies. According to Hine, this culture of dissemblance, the extra care for the presentation of bodies and silence around sexuality for Black women at the turn of the 20th century, was a form of resistance against the prevalence of abuse and rape. (Hine 912) As many feminist writers have acknowledged

this culture of dissemblance has carried into the late 20th and 21st centuries in the form of disturbing silence that actually did little to protect Black women from stereotypes. And according to Evelyn Hammonds it actually limited the language by which Black women could shape and define their own sexual desire. (Hammonds 132)

To bring it back to the image, the woman who decided to "revolt" against Cox's photograph was, in defense of her own womanhood, attempting to censor the work of a Black woman artist. It was her preference that she be away from the image and that she not have to face the loud nakedness of Cox as Liberty that would shame her as she would be shamed on the auction block. The politics of silence and culture of dissemblance did nothing to help Cox or this woman. That Cox continues to produce these images, despite reactions from Black women in conference rooms or even the mayor of New York, speaks volumes about the vision Cox holds for herself in a world in which silence around her body is preferred.

B.E. Myers describes Cox's work as representing "transient consciousness." According to Myers, "Cox's multiple representations and re-situations […] envision a Black woman—Yo Mama—operating despite circumstances which are supposed to ensnare her in an overdetermined identity." (Meyers 33) By situating Yo Mama differently and returning the gaze in each of these situations, Cox forces her audience to engage with her own vision. Cox's nude body is not offered freely; it comes with the cost of implication. In her "multiple representations and re-situations" Cox forces her audience to travel with her and consider new possibilities of meaning. These new possibilities resist overdetermination. However, Cox engages with the histories that threaten to obliterate her position as subject. She identifies as Black, woman, and mother.

Her images do away with stereotypical and disempowering tropes of Black womanhood, such as the mammy figure, Aunt Jemima in *The Liberation of Lady J and UB*, while taking up on her own terms a form of Black motherhood.

Cox does not see her body in terms of its objectification but is nonetheless aware of her body's relationship to that history and the power of her gaze in witnessing to history. As Meyers notes, "... even though the more modern Cox photographs with the knowledge that she controls the conditions under which the picture is taken she also operates with the understanding that she has very little control over what or how the image she produces finally, means." (30) This lack of control, however, is freed through Cox's own ability to use her gaze within the photograph to witness to the viewers' take on its meaning. Cox maintains subjectivity that is always shifting, and it is her viewer who is shaken.

The racist histories of science, medicine, slavery and gender oppression influence viewers' ability to see Cox's body. Cox, in these images created by her own vision and staring back into the lens to testify to that vision, challenges the viewer's vision, because while that history is and was reliant on a form of reason that reduced the black and female body to an object, Cox's gaze demands subjectivity. The Black woman in the conference room at the New School could have a point. Cox's work is referencing the auction block, but she is in fact not there. One can imagine Cox speaking from that pedestal in Liberty in the South Bronx, "I'm not on the auction block, why are you?"

Cox rejects limited perceptions of herself as a Black mother. When I asked about the persistence of images of Black motherhood and how she imagined she was perceived as a Black mother in her work, she quipped, "Girl, I can't get into people's imaginations.

People are mad. You know 99% of the people in the world are mad." She continued, "I have no interest, nor do I have any kind of time to be trying to figure out what these other people are thinking, or how they're thinking." (Cox *Personal Interview*) She predicated her choice to "get off of the auction block" on matters of her body as a matter of mental health, "I were to listen to that, I would be clouding my mind with negative thinking. For what? To raise my blood pressure? What, for me to lose my hair? Hell no. Let them do it. I'm not going there." She continued on the matter of mental health and survival: "[I]t's not even about surviving, it's about thriving. Fuck surviving, I want to thrive in this lifetime. You know, I don't want to be there hanging on by string. No. I would like to thrive; I want my work out there." (Cox *Personal Interview*)

Cox's re-imagined motherhood is one in which Renee Cox as a person and artist continues to live, thrive, and be in conversation with the world. Her acceptance of her body as free and full of agency is a matter of taking her body back from the imagination of history and reclaiming it through the gaze. Recall how she chooses to imagine herself on that auction block. "[E]ven if I was a slave and I was on the auction block," she said, "I'd be looking people right in their damn eyes." As *Yo Mama* demonstrates, this looking back is exactly what her work accomplishes. This attitude extends to Cox's imagined motherhood, which rejects controlling notions of Black motherhood and embraces notions of what she thinks a mother should be: "I feel my job as a mother is like spiritual advisor, guidance counselor, whatever you want to call it, maybe that falls under spiritual advisor, tour guide. But tour guide to the world." (Cox *Personal Interview*)

Without Ego there is No Shame - Transcendent Purpose and the Mothership Connection

...three conscious breaths and being the witness of my thoughts, those two things allow me to go into the creative space. To be able to look at something see an image, maybe get an idea and then I go do it. - Renee Cox (*personal interview*)

An artist who has often been referred to as egotistical, perhaps there is justifiable reason for such a critique. Renee Cox has the audacity to see herself, her family, and thus her position as mother as no less than divine. In an interview with a student at Spelman College, Cox acknowledged these accusations. (College, *Interview With*) Although the accusations of egotism are due to what Eversley notes as a sense of entitlement otherwise never due to Black women, Cox acknowledges that her work is about a kind of pride. According to her, "They're all about pride… I think the way that I am in my images… I feel self-assured. I'm good within my skin, so, I'm not asking for permission from anybody or anything. Nor do I feel like any kind of victim." (Cox *Personal Interview*) However, Cox also acknowledges egotism on her part. She says that in the past she was "as [egotistic] and as mad as the rest of the world, you know. Competitive. Complete nut job." (Cox *Personal* Interview) Cox is not describing the ego of Freud but the ego as New Thought authors such as Eckhart Tolle describe it. Under New Thought the ego is the image of the self that gives the self-identity. The mind is considered separate from ones "true essence" and therefore the ego-self is created through mind. Eckhart Tolle defines the ego as "a false self, created by the unconscious identification with the mind." (Tolle 18) It is this ego, Cox argues, that kept her in a "mad" and unhealthy state. It is this ego, according to Cox, that does not serve her in the creative process. She says that, "[…] the real creativity comes from no thought. You know there's no plan. It comes out of the sort of spaciousness of your mind." (Cox *Personal Interview*) For Cox, the creative process is

based in the *experience* of creating. The art process itself is an experience and thought comes after her work is complete.

Experience happens before consciousness in the production of Black feminist thought. Articulating a distinctly Black feminist standpoint Patricia Hill Collins' states, "For individual women, the particular experiences that accrue to living as a Black woman in the United States can stimulate a distinctive consciousness concerning our own experiences and society overall." (Collins, *Black Feminist* 23) Experience is understood to be the basis of thought, not the other way around. She continues, "Many African-American women grasp this connection between what one does and how one thinks." (24) Tapping into the body is the method. Cherrie Moraga declared that feminists of color write a "theory of the flesh" in which experience and embodiment are the wellspring of radical thought. (Moraga and Anzaldúa 23) Helene Cixous implored women to write from the body as reclamation of their bodies, sexuality and agency. (Cixous 876) Audre Lorde urged women to pay attention to feeling first, discounting Descartes as Tolle, later, does: "The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am," She says, "The Black mother within each of us - the poet - whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free." (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 38) She continues, "Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human […] There are only new ways of making them felt." (39) In the tradition of feminist writing, this writer proposes feelin as Black feminist knowledge production.

In her book *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women* Akasha Hull interviews Black women artists across genre about their creative process. In the

book, Hull speaks with Black women writers and visual artists, and contemplates the connections between spirituality and creative production, the spirit world and the natural world, and the point of contact the human body and consciousness. Many of the artists she interviewed discussed their creativity in divine or spiritual terms. To be truly creative, artists discussed "being open" to spiritual or ancestral influence, and at the very least disallowing personal will or ego to impede the creative process. (Hull 127) For visual artist Michelle Gibbs, contact with the material and letting go of the ego is essential in the creative process. Using meditation practices and the materials she chose, the production of art works were dependent on her not fully imposing her will on those materials in her meditative state. She says, "[…] it's a very collaborative process between me and the material. If you let the material be your only guide, […] it will be too much. It will not have a coherent form." She continues, "First it comes to you and then have to go to it […]." (131) Describing the process as collaborative rather than a process of channeling is an important distinction Hull makes in discussing the creative process of these artists. The artists she talks with "refused to be viewed simply as channels and mediums, and they insisted on acknowledging the parts they consciously played in their own creative processes." (133) The talents, skills, and knowledge that these artists have developed are a part of the creative process; however spiritual practices of "detachment and discipline" aim at creativity while the ego takes a back seat.

Feelin is the source of creativity and incredible strength for women. Distilling sensations into creative production are the processes by which feelin is shared and made tangible. As Lorde states: "[…] each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman's place of

power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep." (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 36) She continues, "Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought." (37) "For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action." (37) That Cox's creative process takes up experience (her own motherhood and "no thought") confirms what Audre Lorde has already told us about the importance of feeling[13] and creativity in women's lives.

Discreet Charm of the Bougies

While her earlier work focused on her lived experience as creative inspiration, Cox's latest work presents as meditation. This meditation is not without her wry sense of humor. Cox describes *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* as "Black Desperate Housewives meets The Valley of the Dolls." (Plett 8) Named after the French Surrealist film *Le Charme Discret de la Bourgeoisie* (*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*), *The Discrete Charm of the Bougies* uses the Black English version of the word "bourgeoisie" to comment on the peculiarities of the image of Black bourgeois life in the style of television shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta,* and *Basketball Wives.*

The original film depicts a motley crew of French aristocrats who invite each other over for dinner parties (but we never seem to eat). They comment on the lack of civilized manners of others, drink heavily, smuggle drugs and commit murder. The narrative arc of the film is unstable, as viewers are unable to tell what scenes are part of

[13] "Feeling" here is Lorde's term.

the film's overarching narrative and what scenes are fantasy. The bourgeois men wake up at the climax of each scene and begin the next. Cox adopts the surrealism of the film for her photographic series while also dramatizing the internal angst of her characters.

Unlike most of her work, *The Discrete Charm of the Bougies* is entirely in color, and in some instances, color is enhanced to highlight uncanny experiences. While on exhibit at the Galerie Nordine Zidoun in Paris, one of the images was displayed using lenticular technology, which makes an image appear to have more depth. The series is complex, as the photographs are as much about the settings and props as they are about the character within the frame. Unlike her former photography that often featured central images against dark backgrounds, the backgrounds in these photographs are in full focus, with a lot of detail to take in. The settings signify on the lived circumstances and inner life of the character portrayed.

Image removed.

Fig. 13 Renee Cox. *Missy At Home*, 2008. Color photograph.

Take as an example, *Missy At Home*. (Fig. 13) In this domestic scene we are invited into the home of "Missy," a sassy recurring character in the series. In what seems to be a game room, she leans against a mahogany-colored stacked bar holding a thistle-shaped whiskey glass in one hand that, in context with other images in the series, is probably filled with Appleton Jamaican rum. In her other hand is a pool stick placed suggestively between her thighs. Her hair is black, long, and straight with bangs that slightly wisp to one side. Although she is "at home" as the title suggests, she stands here in strappy stiletto heels and a mesh duster that allows us to see black lacy underwear and a bra underneath. The mesh duster gapes a bit around her belly to show bare skin.

Missy does not look back into the lens of the camera. Her gaze is off toward the pool table ahead of her, but her lids are heavy, suggesting deeper thought. Behind the bar is a window with even more liquor stacked in the windowsill. The dark glass of the

window reflects the other wall on which hangs Cox most infamous work, *Yo Mama's Last Supper.* Here we are able to see the center panel with Cox as Christ and the two panels that flank it to the right. This is not the only representation of previous works by Cox. She invokes another piece from the *Yo Mama* series with the bench from the similarly titled *Yo Mama at Home* sitting beneath *Yo Mama's Last Supper* and beyond the pool table. Next to the bench is a red and yellow painting, with what appears to be a photograph in the center. It leans against the light brown wall on a hardwood floor. The game on the pool table has already started, and although we do not know who she is playing with or who is winning, all that is within view is the cue ball and three striped balls in red, orange and blue. The perfectly cued red stripe ball is the only one in focus.

Missy, clearly related to Yo Mama*,* is dressed for someone's attention, and we, the viewers, are welcome to look. It is not that Missy is particularly inviting, her pursed lips seem to give off an attitude of *I don't give a damn.* What is welcoming is that she appears posed to be looked at—and suggestively so. In her inner sanctum we are given much more information about her life, mainly that even here it continues to be a performance for someone else's eyes. Unlike *Yo Mama at Home*, Missy seems aware and posed for our gaze. By contrast, Yo Mama not only returns that gaze in classic Cox fashion, but she sits naked, pregnant, arms spanning the back of the bench on which she sits with her legs comfortably apart. We are definitely in *her house* and need to get used to her rules. Missy on the other hand appears posed for someone else's pleasure and acquiesces to the possibility of someone's gaze without challenge. Her place in the room, against a bar in a corner, does not have the same commanding power of the original *Yo Mama at Home.* Missy seems to be allowing other folks in her space. It is as if a guard has been let down

and another veil put up. Missy's suggestive attire is not Yo Mama's nudity. It conceals her body yet reveals her sexuality, whereas Yo Mama's nudity confronts and dares with naked truth.

Missy has good art on her walls. She can afford it. She also made it. What is in the background is the same body before us yet presented as the timeless nude Christ who happens to be a Black woman. It is the photograph that caused so much controversy. It is an image that declares that the image of God (or at least God's son) is a Black mother. It is also an image that, by now, reflects the costs and backlash of such a declaration. It remains holy in Missy's inner sanctum, full of booze, sex and domestic ennui. If, after *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, all Missy can do is come home to this kind of domestic life, exactly what has she created? The angst evident in this image, as well as the series, makes it clear that a bourgeois lifestyle is a hollow pursuit. Her experience in the suburbs made it clear that in order to live this lifestyle, self-abandon and isolation are mandatory. Cox explained the inspiration for the series in an interview: "I was living in suburbia, I'm living in Chappaqua, and I'm around these women who are on Valium and pain killers and drink cocktails. They're privileged but they're alienated and they're isolated. They're alone." (Plett 8) So what does the inner life of Missy look like? What could it look like drowned in self-medicated anesthesia? This particular housewife doesn't fit so neatly in the American middle-class ideal. Each image, punctuated by Renee Cox's previous work, demonstrates the creative self, repressed within the paradigm of suburbia, the tensions of a self-actualized woman in a setting that demands subservience.

In this series Cox imagines an inner-self that is suffocated by the concept of ideal motherhood. Cox considered how stringently the women she encountered in Chappaqua,

New York, identified as "good mothers." However, the criterion of successful motherhood rested on their successfully providing all of the domestic niceties normatively expected of mothers. To place this within the framework of Cox's description of the ego, the motherhood ideal is an ego-driven attachment in which these women have shaped their identities. The promise of failure in living up to these identities shaped outside of real lived experiences and deeply rooted desires guarantees shame.

Furthermore, this ego-driven attachment to the mother ideal is counter to and built to destroy what Cox sees as her true essence. Cox witnesses in her suburban town and records in her art the self-destructive behaviors that are symptomatic of suppressing the self in order to satisfy the ego—what she considers to be ego-driven madness. When I asked her what she did during this period of transformation, she said:

> Take three conscious breaths, three conscious breaths. That's all you need to do. You don't have to go to the Himalayas for 15 years and learn somebody's technique. It's not about technique; its three conscious breaths. I guarantee, you do it right now, get on the train and do it and you'll see. You won't think about anything. Inhale for six, exhale for six, do it three times, and I say "What were you thinking about?" and you'll tell me nothing. That's the space that you want to be in as much as possible… –Renee Cox (Cox *Personal Interview*)

Her spiritual practice has become her creative process. In the space of "no thought," Cox is able to tap into what she calls her true essence, a place where her identity is not shaped by archetypes, images or counter images. Without the ego-driven attachment to the "good mother" ideal constructed by others, Cox is able to mother without shame as opposed to being someone else's "good mother." To look at the previous sentence is also to view the "doing" (to mother) and "being" of feelin. By experience, Cox is be-ing a good mother.

Afrofuturism and the Mothership Connection

> *How has it changed my work? Well, it's for you to figure out. I don't know. […] I can show you the change. I can show you the shift from before. I can say to you…look at the Housewives series. The Housewives series was, I would say, coming into it… but not there. And then the new work, I would say yeah, it's there.* – Renee Cox (*personal interview*)

During my studio interview with Cox I was able to view some of her works in progress. Cox had just returned from a trip to Mexico with numerous abstracted clay figures she had been working on. The golden figures had rounded "heads" and curvy, abstracted limbs. The bulk of them gathered near what looked like a clay sculpture of a boat. This boat, according to Cox at the time of our interview, will be called "The Mothership Connection." The figures represent a group of alien beings that will "recolonize," bringing "a conscious message with them." (Cox, *Personal Interview*) As one may note from her Rajé series, the theme of otherworldly beings carrying a conscious message with them is not new to Cox's work. Some scholars have identified Rajé as "Afrofuturist." This new work seems to consciously take that possibility to a new dimension through new creative processes and media. If Afrofuturism may be defined as a school of thought "concerned with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional," what new interventions is Cox making for Black motherhood? (Eshun 293) What exactly is the message of the beings coming on the Mothership Connection? How are they shaped by a mode of consciousness that foregrounds feeling before thought? How does "mother" fit on the ship? Where is it going now?

I haven't seen the completed work that will be *The Mothership Connection*. While this new work promises to represent a new chapter in Cox's career, I propose that viewers of Renee Cox's work have all been witness to the work in progress, the journey of the ship "The Mothership Connection." Traveling through terrains of feelin about motherhood, this too is a journey where figures created from feelin emerge as the most authentic part of the self. We have been jolted out of our complacency, jarred with our own expectations and forced to encounter the uncomfortable proximities of a woman being her whole self and a mother without shame. I am excited about the next leg of her journey.

Chapter 3

Joy in the Mourning: Lucille Clifton's Theology of Joy

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Joy!

In the few times I've met Lucille Clifton, I've approached with a book for her to sign. I usually tried to solicit a longer message as a signature—something other than her standard "Joy!" she wrote in everyone's books. I'd recount my first experience with her poetry, how she has influenced my writing and so on. But every time, in the small and curvy handwriting that reminds me of my own mother's, she would write "Joy!" On one occasion when I chatted Clifton up for a longer signature I told her how "homage to my hips," and all of her poems about the body were so important to me because I'd lost an ovary. She interrupted my sob story: "But always joy—right?" My consistent dissatisfaction with this signature amplified the importance of her writing it.

I was dissatisfied with "Joy!" because I wanted her to convey some brilliance to this young aspiring poet. I was also dissatisfied because at my core I was afraid of what it meant to experience true "Joy!" True joy comes with a load of responsibility—to my community, to my family, to my God. But Ms. Lucille's steady and unwavering signature, "Joy!," was the brilliant message. It continues to be the answer to any of the questions I would ask her even now after her death: Ms. Lucille, how do I become a better poet? Ms. Lucille, how do I survive the way you have? Ms. Lucille, how can I love myself the way you do in "homage to my hips"? Joy exclamation point, joy exclamation point, joy exclamation point—to all of the above.

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The answer is joy. I cannot complete the poem—I cannot begin the poem—without having experienced some sense of joy. It is an inner-being, personal feeling that emerges from the deepest sense of oneself. Clifton's feelin of joy is a concept rooted in the experience of being a Black woman. Joy, for Clifton, is a total experience wherein the miracle of existence in the face of destruction is acknowledged and the enduring light of survival triumphs. Joy is discussed here as feelin which is a conscious choice and practice. Lucille Clifton's theology of joy outlines such practice and decision in theological terms.

What Clifton conveyed with her insistence on "joy!" was as simple as "you are alive" and as complex as the answer to "why are you alive?" Joy is in the miracle of life made evident in the poem. Joy is also in the completion of the poem; not the poem for the poem's sake, but what the poem signifies—the evidence of existence. This is why Clifton's poems, although packed with the difficult, the sad, the angry, all point to her notorious iteration of joy exclamation point. She is alive. You are alive. In the face of destruction we exist.

The passage that begins this chapter is an excerpt from my remembrances of Clifton, given at a community gathering in her honor at the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore, Maryland, in June of 2010. When the master of ceremonies, poet Reginald Harris, welcomed guests and introduced the poets, he began with his own reflection on Clifton's "joy!" It was fortuitous (but not coincidental) that my own reflection, my biggest lesson from Ms. Clifton, was this particular concept. Her insistence on joy is exemplified in a 1999 interview with her colleague, Michael Glaser:

> **Lucille:** […] It is not a completely intellectual choice. To choose life, that's reason enough to know that the whole of life is more than an intellectual life.
>
> I don't believe that one should always try to take the easy road. And when you do, you should know you're doing it. But suppose once in a while we choose joy. That could almost be enough, you know?
>
> **Michael:** And you can't choose joy unless you acknowledge the darkness?
> **Lucille:** Absolutely.
> **Michael:** But to acknowledge the darkness and not choose joy is-
> **Lucille:** Is sin.
> **Michael:** Wow! "To acknowledge the darkness and not choose joy is sin."
> **Lucille:** It's sin against the spirit. Against the self. It's sin against what made us.
> (Clifton, "With Michael Glaser" 325)

This conversation highlights what I will call Lucille Clifton's Theology of Joy. Although not a very religious person,[14] spirituality was an aspect of Clifton's life that informed her poetry and her worldview. Clifton considered writing an integral part of her spiritual practice, and poetry was a means of distilling her experiences as a spiritual person into form. In her final interview with Chard deNoird, Clifton calls herself a carpenter, the same trade for which Jesus of Nazareth is known. For her, the craft of poetry-making is like carpentry, "[…] I do carpentry that is needed for what's going on, in the carpenter's rule, not the poet's rule." (Clifton, "Last Interview" 5)

Despite her insistence, Clifton's work is not often associated with joy. Her complex, dense and concise poetic style often tells difficult stories—*terrible stories* in fact. She takes up subjects such as abuse and incest, cancer, death, slavery and generally the difficult aspects of human experience. But to develop a theory of joy through Clifton's work is not an effort in irony. In this chapter I will demonstrate how Clifton's theology of joy is evident and imperative to a more complete understanding of her poetry.

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[14] In numerous interviews Clifton discusses that she is a very spiritual person, but not religious as she does not attend any church. See Bingham 12, deNiord 6 and Rowell 67.

I do not intend to make generalizations about all of her work; not all of her poems are joyful or about joy. However, joy appears as a constant and important aspect in Clifton's comprehension of the human condition. Existence is always maintained in the face of destruction and darkness, joy is the enduring light of survival. To discuss joy as feelin, as I do here, is to acknowledge the importance of the experience of joy in Black women's lives. Clifton's understanding of joy as the complexity of human existence situates the feelin of joy as an experience through which Black women can claim the totality of human experience for themselves.

The dimensions of joy, outlined here by Clifton's theology of joy, are: 1) the complexity of human experience. 2) acknowledgment of the difficult. 3) conscious, habitual and deliberate choice. With such a dense definition, it is clear that joy operates as something deeper than the Oxford English Dictionary's description of "a feeling of great pleasure and happiness." ("joy" def. 1) This standard definition is static, whereas Clifton's theology of joy is dynamic. Joy is and does.

Joy as Feelin

> *I never learned to cut feelings off. I never learned that you were supposed to contain your feelings if you were an educated person, a sophisticated person. I did learn that I had to see things wholly and I learned to feel wholly as well, especially the complexities of what it means to be human and the complexities of what it means to be me.*
> – Lucille Clifton in an interview with Bill Moyers (Moyers 84)

Clifton insisted on a holistic approach to telling the story. She never at one time was Black and Black only. Never at one time woman, and woman only. Never at one

time poet or mother only. She is and was all of these things; her work was about "the whole of life." (Clifton, "With Michael Glaser" 325) Theory has a tendency to limit this aspect of humanity. In following its obsessions, theory truncates truths.

§

THE RESEARCHER CONTEMPLATES VENUS

> When I talk about my work I am asked to speak of Sarah Baartman.
>
> I hold Sarah's hand and ask her: Where would you like for me to put you? She laughs, or maybe she sighs. Researchers only ask leading questions. Questions that lean toward the body sometimes trip over the dead.

§

Clifton highlights the importance of feelin as knowledge through her poetry. She continually used the language of "wholeness" when in conversation about her work and the human condition. When she discusses writing about "the whole of life" with Michael Glaser, Clifton is talking about the complexity of human existence. When she talks about writing "the whole of what I am," with Charles Rowell, she is speaking about the complexity of human existence as an important factor in her work. (Lucille 61) And when she refers to herself as a "grown woman" and her poems as "grown woman poems," she is referring to her sexuality and experience as a Black woman. (*Lucille Clifton With Quincy Troupe*; Clifton, "Between Starshine and Clay: An Interview With Lucille Clifton By Remica Bingham") The wholeness of human experience extends to the complexity of human thought and the production of knowledge about whole experiences. In the Rowell interview, Clifton speaks of the wholeness of knowledge as inclusive of

feeling. She states: "The whole truth is that we're not all just our head and what we think. Logic is very useful; so is feeling." (61) The "both/and" of logic and experience converge as feelin.

The trouble with academic discourse is that it speaks so much so as to foreclose—while the sparse yet deep language of poetry attempts to, as poet Rita Dove has said, communicate a greater "inner truth"[15]—a more whole truth. In its hubris, scholarship can foreclose the many other truths of humanity, of a population, of a poem. This is how we like our scholarship. In it we can control the chaos of the world, ordering it with diagrams, outlines, and the concluding chapter so that we are at once comforted in the feeling of knowing. Yet, what is it that we "feel" that we know? And on the subject of joy, can one know it without feeling it?

Knowing is illusive—shifting—dependent on the current discourse. In order for it to be at all contained and unequivocally one's own, knowing must be placed in the body. As in: I'm feeling that. Feelin has its own signs, its own metaphors; it is in itself a tool for interpretation. It may also be interpreted. In the African American tradition of signifying, this theory means one thing when it means it. Joy means joy when it means it. Joy also means life when it means it. Joy means the complexity of life when it means it because joy is a thing that is felt more than it can be understood.

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[15] In a conversation about her book *Thomas and Beulah*, Dove discusses the factual differences between her poems and the biographical history of her grandparents—beginning with her grandmother's name. She says the following: "There were lesser challenges--a challenge, for instance, to decide how much was going to be strictly autobiographical and at what point to begin to invent, and I began to invent very early. And once that barrier was over, it was fine. I mean invent in a sense that, for instance, my grandmother's name was not Beulah, it was Georgianna. That was a decision I made--an aesthetic decision, actually--because Georgianna, though it's a wonderful name, was first of all too male based for me, and second of all didn't have the Biblical connotations that I wanted for the book. Also, it's a long name, and a very difficult name to fit on a line. So once I broke through that, I didn't have to be absolutely faithful according to biographical truth. I could go after an inner truth. That freed me."(Cavalieri 11; Cavalieri)

Feelin is not foreclosed knowledge. It does not matter whether or not you agree with the conclusion of the story or one perceived meaning of the song. The point is that you feel how it moves along, the motivation, the tools, and the experience that leads to the conclusion. I do not intend to foreclose the meanings of Clifton's poetry. I do not "interpret" her poetry for readers. (Other writers do this just fine.) What I want to pinpoint is the evidence of this theory in action. You may not get with Clifton's conclusions about what joy means, but can you follow the journey of that knowledge? Can you acknowledge it? Imagine it? Imagine the experience of it? Experience it? Yes to any of these things means that you are feelin me.

Because feelin is not foreclosed knowledge, it has room for those who feel it and those who don't. This is why feelin as knowledge endures. As a theory in the flesh, it is rooted in a physical reality and mutable. Open for revisions, it thrives in the both/and. For Clifton, poetry operates in the both/and of intellectual engagement and intuition. In an interview with Rowell Clifton, she says, "Poetry, it seems to me—what I tell my students—comes from both intellect and intuition. One doesn't separate oneself out. It's not either/or; it's both/and again." (61) The power of feelin as a form of knowledge is in its ability to operate in the both/and. The feelin of joy operates in such a place. It operates in the darkness as well as the light.

In Clifton's work, joy is political because it operates in the everyday survival of her life as a Black woman. By engaging in feelin joy, Clifton claims full humanity for herself in the face of the "somethings" that try to kill her every day. (Clifton, *Celebrate* 13) In writing about joy, Clifton documents the experience of claiming this full humanity by facing life and writing it down. She often quoted Gwendolyn Brooks who, Clifton

recalls, said, "[…] leaving my house is a political act." (Clifton, *Rowell Interview* 67) During a reading for the Lannan video series she said, "When people talk about political around me, generally they are talking about my life." (*Lucille Clifton With Quincy Troupe*) The political act of choosing to live her whole life in all of its difficulty, all of its complexity, is at the core of her theology of joy. This chapter explores Clifton's understanding of joy as a practice—a holistic experience that is reached for and, in its reclamation of full and complex humanity for her Black woman life, is also resistant to forces that would deny her such humanity.

Since Clifton's death, the body of critical engagement with her work is steadily growing. However, in her lifetime a few critics have continually engaged her and her work. Audrey R. McCluskey, Joyce Johnson and Hillary Holladay are prime examples. Her work has been characterized by its woman-centered themes; in fact Holladay's interest in her work began with an interest in women's menstrual poems. Most apparent are critical engagements with Clifton's biblical and spiritual themes. Akasha Hull has talked with her extensively about spiritual themes in her poetry. Joyce Johnson's much earlier engagement with her work dealt with the theme of celebration in her poetry—an engagement which has reverberated even after Clifton's death. It is clear that Clifton's poetry tells us something about the spiritual dimensions of Black women's lives. Here, I examine the ways in which these spiritual engagements point to a central theology of joy which is also a site of Black feminist knowledge production.

Poems Selected

The poems I've selected from Clifton's oeuvre are those that address Clifton's theology of joy. As the interview with Michael Glaser reveals, Clifton describes joy in

three central ways. The first is that joy is the miracle of life. Joy as the miracle of life is a celebration of the complexity of human existence. Clifton's poetry explores such complexity through the practice of telling stories, as well as maintaining an awareness of oneself and one's history. Human complexity is further described through humanity's connection to the divine, and the divine's ambivalence toward good and evil. Through Clifton's motifs of the fox, and biblical figures such as Adam, Eve, and David, the complexity of human existence is predicated on the capacity of humans to do both good and evil, to experience suffering and delight, to be hunter and hunted, artist and warrior.

The second aspect of her theology of joy is that one must acknowledge darkness. For it is in acknowledging darkness that one is aware of and maintains awareness of the complexity of human existence. In order to explore darkness, Clifton looks to the prince of darkness, Lucifer, who, as the serpent in the garden, calls on God to discuss the fall of humankind. It is in her series "Brothers" that Clifton takes on the theological field of theodicy, which asks why God allows evil to exist in the world.

The third aspect of Clifton's theology of joy is that joy must be chosen. This aspect highlights joy as a practice—a conscious effort in a human's life. For Clifton, joy must be self-generated, consciously chosen, and practiced in resistance to the forces that would otherwise steal one's joy. These are the forces that would negate the complexity of humanity or send one into perpetual darkness. In choosing the practice of joy, Clifton points to choosing an enlightened path which requires one to stay aware, whole, and wholly resistant to the forces that negate one's humanity.

These three central aspects of Clifton's theology branch out and touch the far reaches of human existence. Clifton's own spirituality—a non-practicing Baptist who

took up metaphysical beliefs, married a yogi, and wrote in the voice of her mother's ghost—inform her theology. This theology spreads across religious belief yet is grounded in her experience as a Black woman, her existential and inquisitive mind, and her joyful spirit.

Making Black Women's Experiences Effable: Glossolalia, Mysticism, and "Good Preaching"

There is something complex about Black women's experiences. These complex somethings are rooted in Black women's capability to create structures in which their survival and thriving is possible. In a reading of Kasi Lemmons's *Eve's Bayou* titled "Oedipus Rex at Eve's Bayou or the Little Black Girl who Left Sigmund Freud in the Swamp," D. Soyini Madison's philosophic avatar/character Noir describes how Black women disrupt psychoanalytic constructions of gender through Black women's mystical efficacy. Through the mystical world of voodoo, Black conjure women are able to describe their desires and effect change. "She 'sees things'," says Madison, "This is her inheritance from a long line of New Orleans black conjure women." (Madison 323) To be a black conjure woman in the U.S. is heavily laden with a rich and complicated history of slavery, racial mixing, erasure, and memory. According to Madison, "[…] under voodoo, death and threat were under control and order of a transcendent will and purpose. The greatest power was having the magic to intervene […]" (326) A conjure woman could make such an intervention. Her ability to transcend lay sight is inherent to her ability to see within herself.

Mae Henderson's concept of "speaking in tongues" signifies on the mystical power necessary to make the unspeakable spoken. In her analysis of Black women's writings

Henderson uses the trope of speaking in tongues or glossolalia as the mode through which Black women write to and through multiple discourses. This speaking to multiple discourses involves the same second sight taken up by conjure women. As Henderson notes, "What distinguishes black women's writing […] is the privileging (rather than repressing) of the 'other in ourselves.'" (Henderson 350) Henderson notes that glossolalia has two connotations: the one which is "the particular, private, closed, and privileged communication between the congregant and the divinity," as well as "the ability to speak in diverse known languages." (352) The speaking within and outside of oneself allows the Black woman writer not only to know and describe the contours of her experience, but to speak to others as well. Glossolalia is the language of the unknown; it is also a language that is known. By its inherent divine and mystical source, glossolalia is the language of the inner-self.

§

```
..Isho bi calla bo desha
nashu no meo paru ni so nasha ki toma
eru eru di so fie fello mantos ne po mayanu leosha
si
kesho si ni payo bala niko na para beso la ti no fa
ko

ayo ma ni ayo ma ni ma lo shi na to fa mako na
mako ta sa lo peu peu
pee lo masha tu mako na sa ti mako
na sa ti lo fino sha

fino sha mo
fino sha si to komun pala...
```

```
Inspiration bi bo calla Desha
nashu no paru Vimeo is so thrust
ERU ERU so di po ne fie fello mantos mayanu
leosha not tomorrow is not it nonsense
approach and I'm a beso para ti no ko fa
Ayo is Ayo ma ma ma is any interest and to
Mark and your fa lo ta sa peu peu
then just pee your lo sa ti Mako
and sa ti lo fino when
sha mo fino
fino when not to komun pala

(Swahili - detected)
```

Fig. 14 Bettina Judd. *Speaking in Tongues Experiment* "Ishobi" #2, 2012. Digital Image.[16]

§

[16] The above image is from a project titled the Speaking in Tongues Experiment. In this experiment I attempt to translate tongues in Google translate. Translations are then transformed into poems.

Lucille Clifton's writing is speaking in tongues. I am speaking not only to Henderson's keen analysis of Black women's polyglossal writing but to Lucille Clifton specifically as a writer who worked in the mystical. I am speaking of the reams of spirit writing done by Clifton and available in her archives. These spirit writings, particularly her automatic writing, reflect a similar experience of the mystical practice of speaking in tongues on paper. Starting with pen and paper, Clifton would wait (tarry) for things to start. Many of these writings were illegible to me, but flipping through pages of these writings, one can find familiar words and concepts. This writing, by my observation, did not often translate directly into poems, but the experience of it, the mystical content of the spirit writings, is clearly legible in her poetry.

Writing as Creative Process and Spiritual Practice

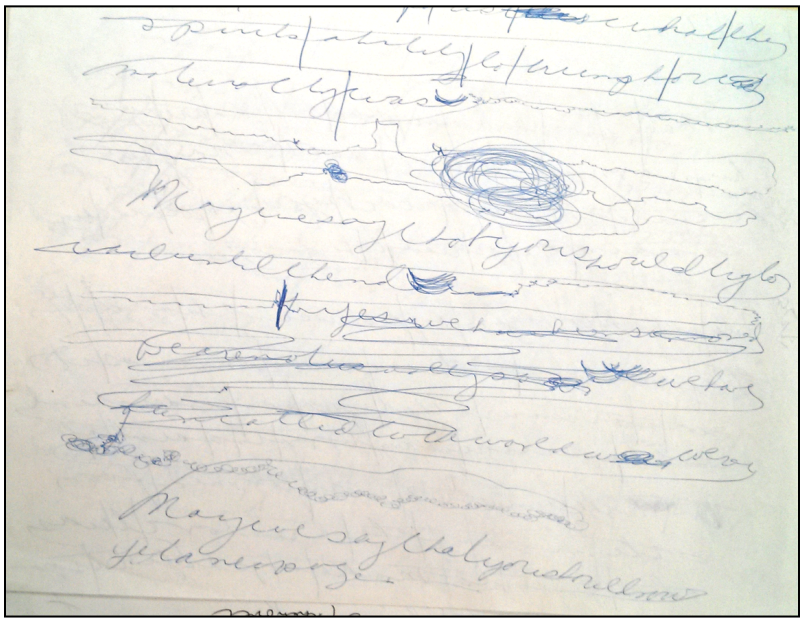

Fig. 15 *Automatic writing from Clifton's Archive. "Automatic Writing, 1977" [2 of 2]* Box 30 Folder 1. Manuscript Archive and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Entering into Clifton's archive and perusing her automatic writings was initially frustrating. What I realized, after flipping through so many pages, squinting my eyes in the dim light of the archive, is that deciphering Clifton's automatic writing is an exercise in visual as well as textual analysis. The shape of her automatic writing changes and provides information about the experience of it. Some writings appear more round than others. Some appear to be a series of loops.

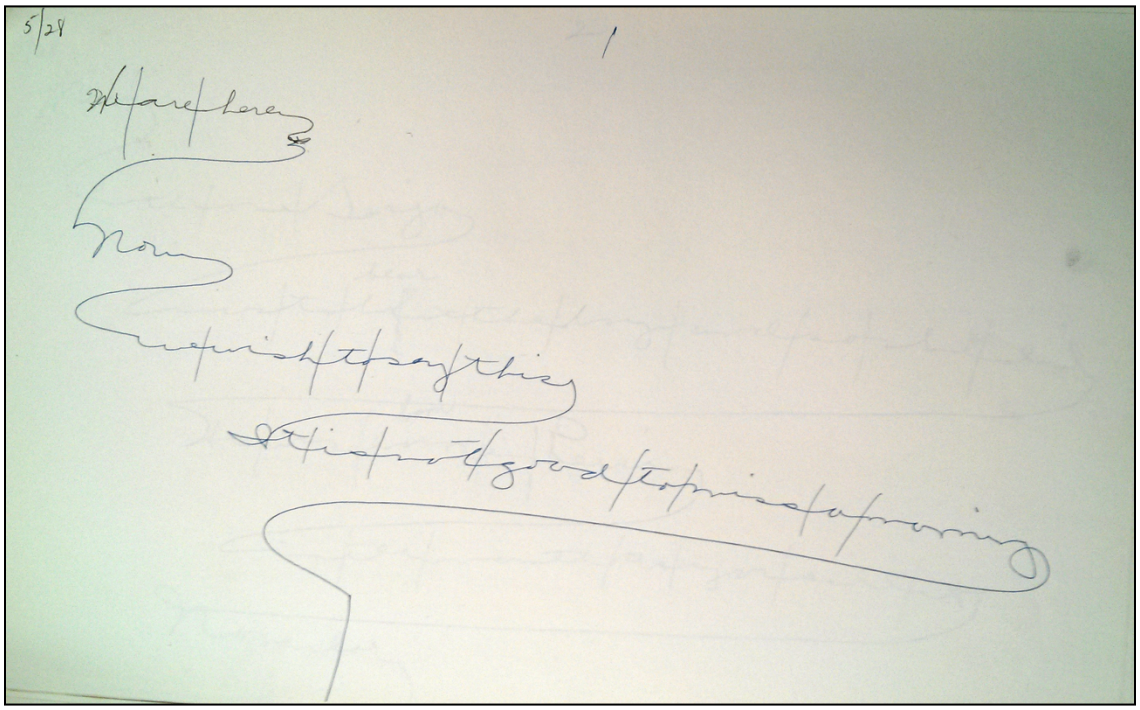

Fig. 16 *Automatic writing from Clifton's Archive. "The Message from the Ones III Persia,"* May 20, 1977 to June 3, 1977. Dated May 28. Box 30 Folder 5. Manuscript Archive and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

WE ARE HERE…
NOW…
…WE WISH TO SAY THIS
…IT IS NOT GOOD TO MISS A MORNING…

Other writing looks familiar and clear. One can observe evidence that Clifton, or someone else, attempted to decipher the writing after the trance-like state in which it was

written by placing dashes between more legible words. Some spirit writing appears as mountains or rivers, other spirit writing presents as sketches of faces.

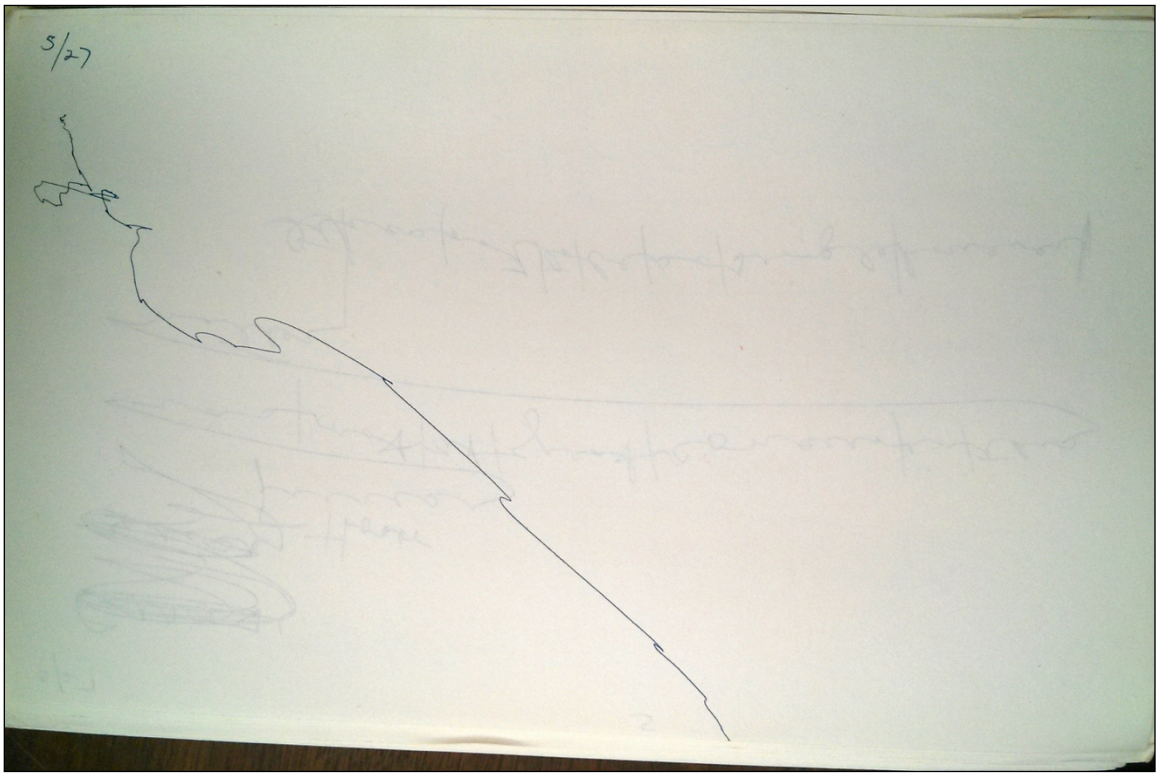

Fig. 17 *Automatic writing from Clifton's archive dated May 27, 1977 "The Message from the Ones III Persia,"* Box 30 Folder 5. Manuscript Archive and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Found in the archive, automatic writing is what is left over, the residue, of a spiritual experience. The experience of reading it is physical. One is forced to move in the direction of Clifton's hand, following its orders across the page.

The importance of Clifton's spirit writing is that it is a prolific spiritual practice, an experience that profoundly affected her creative practice. To analyze Clifton's spirit writing is to do more than read. It is to know the processes by which spirit writing occurs. Spirit writing is the result of mechanical functions that take place through muscle, pen

and paper. All of these physical things are galvanized into movement by spirit. One tarries for words by putting themselves in the way of flow. Therefore, to interpret the differences between mechanical and divined manifestations would be difficult if not impossible. Some writings in the archive appear as repeated failed attempts to connect with the other side. There are pages and pages of illegible loops. This may be my untrained reading. This does not mean that I am not attuned and compelled here by the power of the meaning of the writing itself, nor that I am unwilling to attempt to take these writings as serious materials. To the contrary I argue that the fact of Lucille Clifton's spirit writing is her attunement to the complexities of human life and what Jacqueline Alexander would call a spiritual subjectivity.

The only other instance where I have knowingly encountered automatic writing is from visual artist David Hammonds. His automatic writing can be found in the beginning in *Diaspora, Memory, Place*. The book documents artists Hammonds, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, and Pamela Z's creative collaborative efforts across the African diaspora. Hammonds' spirit writing is the only art in the volume that is left relatively unengaged, but it curiously begins the entire text. (Hammons, Campos-Pons and Z 1-24) It is as if it is to be considered text—text that attempts to describe the crossing of borders necessary to negotiate diaspora. There are also more crossings: an artist, Hammonds becomes a writer and diviner.

Automatic writing represents the crossing of borders between the natural world and the spirit world. A crossing in which Clifton openly engages. Clifton, attuned to the metaphysical and the diasporic, crafted her own subjectivity through spiritual knowing. She was a Dahomey woman who saw ghosts and spoke to the dead. She was the daughter

of Thelma. Thelma continued to talk to her after her death as her everlasting spirit, Greta. Clifton talks about this relationship with Thelma/Greta with Akasha Hull in her book *Soul Talk.* Clifton and her children channeled spirits quite often in the 1960s and 70s on a Ouija board. The first encounter she had was with Thelma/Greta who introduced herself as her mother. (Hull 55) Leftovers of these encounters abound in Clifton's archive. Raw transcripts of Ouija board conversations detail, letter by letter, the words eked out of what was meant to be a toy.

Clifton began spirit writing by what she called, "listening/hearing." According to Hull, "[…] the idea came to her that she should try writing. When she did, she received automatic messages faster." (58) Clifton learned that she was a "natural channel," and she continued to practice automatic writing. This continued practice offered more spiritual gifts. In the archive, in an automatic message dated April 16, the spirits, also known as The Ones, tell her, "Good morning, We wish to say this to you before… we begin…Lucille you are now the one who…will begin to see…we…hope that you will use these powers…wisely..." In the corner, is an even more legible note asking, "why me" possibly made after the initial divining to indicate where she consciously asked a question of The Ones. The message continues: "…you have shown yourself to be…one who…understands their use…now we begin…" (figs. 18-19)

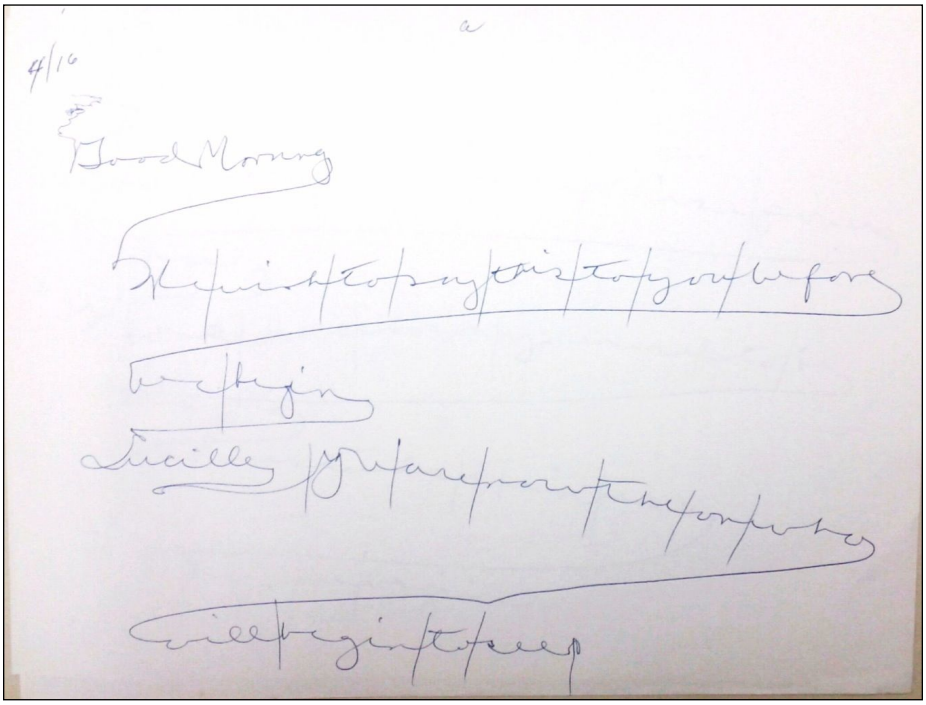

Fig. 18 “Good Morning 1” *“Automatic Writing” 1977. [1 of 2]* Box 29 folder 20. Manuscript Archive and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

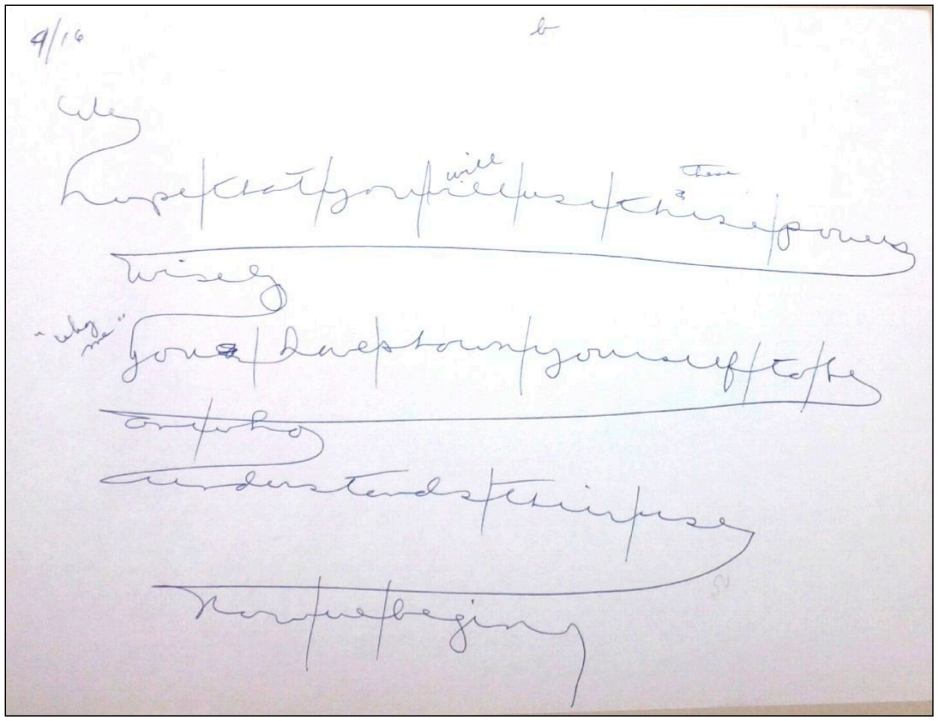

Fig. 19 “Good Morning 2” *“Automatic Writing” 1977. [1 of 2]* Box 29 folder 20. Manuscript Archive and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Clifton's writing speaks to a deeply engaged sacred subjectivity. It is telling that her channeling method of choice was writing. As a poet, she continued to be engaged with the spirit. Volumes of poetry give us clues to this robust spiritual practice. "The Message from the Ones III" folders found in her archive, are, no doubt linked to her series of the same name found in the 2004 collection *Mercy*. The collection *Next* features poems in the voices of those she spoke with in her spirit writing. In "the message of thelma sayles," one can witness her mother's voice urging her to write through her spiritual gifts. The poem reads, "turn the blood that clots on your tongue/ into poems. poems." (12-13) It is from this constant practice of spiritual channeling through the writing process that Clifton's theology of joy has authority. Speaking with those who were once dead and those who were never living in the natural world explains how, for Clifton, joy and darkness coexist.

Clifton literally divined writing, and in divining it made the unspeakable spoken. According to Madison, Black conjure women, in their ability to see and name things that are otherwise ineffable *are* jouissance, "[…] known and named." (323) Clifton defines joy! all her own. Let me reiterate: Clifton's joy lives as much in proximity to darkness as it does to sublime light. Clifton's joy! has its feelin roots in the both/and U.S. Black Women's experience. The experience Madison notes that is fraught with the complexity of Black experience, "[…] blackness, the American South, rape, and the alchemy of the African Diaspora." (Madison 324) Joy! is also mourning. Let me take it back to church:

§

THE MOURNING BENCH

wait for a breakthrough in stillness.
feel any stray air seeping through drafty windows
any stick fan fluttering, stopping, fluttering again
stomach's hunger groaning
wish that it be spirit

hear the smallest things above
preacher's cadenced prayer
loud whispers invoking Christ
above tambourine and gospel growl
above the soft splashing of
this poem wading in the other side
of the creek, remembering a memory
never had

this poem, dressed in white, mourns for the lost poet
who cannot, even now impart the workings of the
bottomless hush hinting havoc
the voice whispering for death
the impenetrable skin of her ghost

this is a bench for mourning skin
for perishing willfully, letting blood
preparing both hands for acquisition

prepare this bench in the heart
eat with closed fists
repeat broken covenants
hear shouts muffled under tongue
containment, amenorrhea
prepare sacrament
drink of me
mourn the dead

or do not

inhale what is:
whiskey on a deacon's breath

humid summer air
cowardice, resistance
godly intention

exhale deep as if digging a well:
first nothing
then breaking earth
sputtering water
overwhelming flood

think consecration, covenant, last days
think nothing
be exaltation, ether, exhaustion
climax in a sacred place

be saved.

§

The mourning bench is a place and a practice. Home to both Baptist and Pentecostal churches, the mourning bench is a site of profound and necessary change. It is the cliff at which one decides joy or darkness. It was first explained to me by my mother, and then by my grandmother and grandfather. It separated the saved from the unsaved, members of the Body of Christ from those outside of the fold. In order to become a member of the Church, one would have to sit on a literal bench where they would tarry for the Spirit to come over them. Elders, deacons, mothers, and other members of the church would fervently pray and sing songs in order to invite Spirit into the mourner.

The idea is that one mourns her sins. She lays down the darkness to choose eternal life with Christ. Mourning is the practice into salvation, into light, into joy! The mourning bench, when set in the mouths of some, sounds oddly enough like moanin' (as

in groaning) which sounds a lot like mornin' (as in the beginning of a new day), and this is not a coincidence. The multiplicity of meaning for the mournin'/moanin'/mornin' bench reveals the experience of the place and practice. At the bench one will mourn her sins, moan, and wake into the dawn of a new morning.

When I was told about this practice, it frightened me. The idea of being forced to have this intimate, life changing experience in the presence and at the behest of the community around me, and for that experience to be taken as a measure of my goodness and membership, shook me to my core. "What if the spirit didn't decide to take over me?" I thought. What then? Was I considered less saved? My mother had an answer for me. She disclosed that when she sat on the bench for the first time, she didn't have the ecstatic experience expected of her. The church thought that since she was just a little girl, she wasn't ready. She later joined a church in a city up North that didn't have this practice. The sigh of disappointment in her voice when she told me this made it clear that this mystical practice--even though it is no longer performed in that old church in Warrenton, North Carolina (where my people are from)--is still highly regarded, even if considered too "old timey" for the new sophisticated church crowd. It was a rite of passage, and in that sense I was envious that I'd never experienced it.

Like many rites of passage, rituals that mark transition into a new stage in one's life, the practice is a metaphor for a new and necessary skill that must be learned. Clifton's joy! encapsulates that skill in three letters and a punctuation mark. Joy! is the complicated both/and of mourning and morning where, when faced with the option of staying in darkness, one continually and consciously chooses sublime light. This ritual is joy itself.

Feelin and Poetic language

It is through poetry and the sparse diction employed by Clifton that she is able to speak from her location as a Black woman to multiple audiences. Clifton had no post-baccalaureate degree, yet spoke directly to the halls of academia; she had a long-standing appointment at William and Mary College. She spoke to larger publics as poet laureate of Maryland, though born in Buffalo, New York. As a Black woman, she spoke to men, women, people of color, and whites alike. As Davies notes of Black women's identity broadly: "Black female subjectivity asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates and so re-claims as it re-asserts" (37). Clifton herself asserted that it is because she had to define her own identity as a Black woman that she has been able to feel connected to mixed audiences: "[…] [O]ne of the blessings of being born an African American woman on this continent is that I learned early not to buy other people's definitions, and primarily about who I was. That refusal led me to wonder about *every* definition, so I was then able to try to define the world for myself." She goes on:

> People are beginning to understand that especially in poetry feeling transcends boundaries of race, culture, class, economics. They are also beginning to understand that intellect does *not* do that. On the other hand, the way we feel, the way we fear, the way we love, the way we hope--these are the same kinds of things for all of us. So poetry that is both intellectual and intuitive seems to me to be poetry that will get past any of the artificial boundaries which separate us. (Moyers 84)

Speaking through the complexities of our own lives, the things others may fail to hear, decipher, or care to know about, is characteristic of Black women writers. As Carole Boyce Davies states: "It is this tension between articulation and aphasia, between

the limitations of spoken language and the possibility of expression, between space for certain forms of talk, and lack of space for Black women's speech, the location between the public and the private that some Black women writers address" (153). Davies uses the phrase, "It's not everything you can talk, but…" to describe unspeakable spoken things that characterize the subject matter and actuality of Black women's speech and writing. It is a phrase that characterizes the unspeakability of Black women's experiences, the unhearability, as well as the resistance to having no speech and going unheard. Clifton's practice of poetic writing is also a part of this resistance. Her theology of joy has within it a practice of resistance. In fact, the very act of her writing is demonstrative of such resistance; Clifton wrote against claims that considered her to be anything less than a complex human. This writing, understood as speech, crosses borders and boundaries, and it does so through Clifton's Black woman self. To speak is to have particular form of agency, and to speak as a Black woman is to assert such agency through speech that is always in danger of unintelligibility.

Through poetry Clifton is able to describe joy for her and for others. In an interview with poet Susan Somers-Willet, Clifton says of feeling in her poetry:

> Feeling matters to me a lot in poems because feeling is a thing that transcends culture, transcends race, transcends nationality, geography, theory. My understanding of the atom and the understanding of somebody in Timbuktu of the atom are very different. Our fears of the atom are close together. I think writers, good writers, understand this but we get nervous because everybody is an intellectual. (Somers-Willet 10)

Her poetry, with its focused, sparse, yet complex language, is written in that gift of tongues that speaks across difference. According to Henderson, the gift of tongues, the gift of prophecy, and the gift of interpretation are all linked. She says, "While

distinguishing between these three gifts, the Scriptures frequently conflate or conjoin them. If to speak in tongues is to utter mysteries in the and through the Spirit, to prophesy is to speak to others in a (diversity of) languages which the congregation can understand." (Henderson 354) It is my contention that Clifton's work contains all of these gifts, and I echo Henderson in her claim that black women writers are "[…] the modern day apostles, empowered by experience to speak as poets and prophets in many tongues" (354). Clifton has also situated herself within an African American tradition of spiritual orators and preachers. In an interview with Quincy Troupe she said, "If I had antecedents it might have been good preaching." (*Lucille Clifton With Quincy Troupe*) As is the practice of good Baptist preaching, Clifton's theology of joy emerges in three main points. In the following pages I will expand on each aspect of joy. I will then go on to discuss her poetry in light of this framing.

Joy is the Miracle of a Complex Life

The impulse to acknowledge and embrace oneself as a whole human subject is a continuous theme of Black feminist thought and consciousness. This desire to be considered on terms of full humanity was expressed early on by nineteenth century orator Maria Miller Stewart who pushed for Black women to be seen and to see themselves beyond the domestic roles to which the oppressive slave system relegated them. She asked, "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?" (Stewart 29) Stewart understood that for Black women's full potential to become realized not only did those around them have to lift the foot of oppression from their necks, but also Black women themselves had to

acknowledge their full potential and capabilities. In another speech, Stewart said, "O, ye daughters of Africa, awake! Awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties" (Stewart 27). Stewart recognized that in order to thrive, Black women needed to step into the fullness of their humanity—not with the permission of the world, but in spite of the world's doubts.

Over a century later, the Combahee River Collective echoed the importance of embracing and demanding recognition of Black women's full humanity. Thwarting masculinity as the Black power movement's impetus to institute patriarchy as a rule for Black liberation, they declared, "We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough" (Collective 267). By rejecting the flattened status to which Black men would have relegated Black women, even with the seemingly liberating position of idealized womanhood and queenhood no less, Black women opted for full humanity. This position would have allowed them the opportunity to speak from their own conditions and experiences—not the conditions and experiences handed to them or expected of them.

Some days I am, some days I'm not. Human! - Jill Scott[17]

Black women's ability to define themselves on their own terms, as humans, as women, as mothers, and especially as artists is a defining feature of Black feminist thought. To be considered human and complex is to resist flattened, controlling images,

[17] On her live album Experience: Jill Scott 826+, Scott talks to the audience about people's assumptions that she is "a positive person" because she has a natural hair style. She responds with. "Come on! Some days I am, some days I'm not. Human!"

and popular assumptions that attempt to define Black women as a group. As Patricia Hill Collins notes: "For U.S. Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women's survival." (Collins, *Black Feminist* 100) To express, understand, and live one's life fully is to also accept the complexity of human existence. As Clifton states in an unpublished interview with two college students at Duke University in 1990: "Poetry is the story of inner life and what it means to be human. If I am telling the story of humans, I am a part of that story. I don't think of myself as a subculture. It is an art about being human." (Clifton, *Lucille Clifton With Emily Gates and Beth Carloss* 1)

Lucille Clifton's poetry echoes the necessity of stepping into and embracing a full and complex humanity in spite of the world's doubts. The easy road would be to take life as the world has given it to Black women. Clifton's statement "suppose once in a while we choose joy," is a challenge to reject the limitations of a life that would normally be afforded to Black women— "to choose life" as opposed to an unchallenged existence. Perhaps this is why Clifton's poetry, which is so full of complexity, is also so celebratory. As Joyce Johnson noted of Clifton's poetry in 1983, "Lucille Clifton celebrates life. Not just her life, or even our life, but all of life. She celebrates its realities, its mysteries, and perhaps, most of all its continuity." (Johnson 75) Life, in complete awareness of itself, is joy. Joy is chosen; it is not a given as it is not the most easy thing to choose. Choosing joy, however, is not a singular event. Because life is complex we are, at every moment, faced with the option to choose the easy or to choose joy. Perhaps this is why Clifton wrote it as a meditation—a ritual. Joy in every book she signed. Joy presents itself as an

option at least as often as the easy presents itself as an option. Sustaining joy is a practice for life and vice versa. Suppose "once in a while we choose joy," acknowledges joy as a practice, and life as a complex series of moments that offer opportunities to choose or not choose joy. Therefore, in order to be sustained, one's impulse must be to choose joy. The impulse to choose joy then becomes a self-sustained impulse to live.

Complex Personhood and the Terrible Stories

[…] by "terrible" I'm meaning more than just "bad." I'm meaning the complexity and enormity of our lives.
– Lucille Clifton on *The Terrible Stories* with Troupe

"If without stories we live not, stories live not without us."
– Phyllis Trible in *Texts of Terror* (Trible 1)

The miracle of life exists in the complexity of it. *The Terrible Stories* is a collection of poems that honor the difficult. They address this problem of choosing that which is not easy—choosing life— and thus choosing joy. In his interview with Clifton, Quincy Troupe described the collection as her darkest, while also a "book of celebration." It is Clifton's understanding of the relationship between joy and darkness as the complexity of human existence that makes this duality possible. Clifton's poetry shares these complexities; it tells the terrible stories of human existence—often by telling the story of her existence. It is fitting then, that the first of the poems in *The Terrible Stories* is titled "telling our stories."

> child, i tell you now it was not
> the animal blood i was hiding from,
> it was the poet in her, the poet and
> the terrible stories she could tell.
> (Clifton, *Telling Our Stories* 11-14)

Coming before the section "a dream of foxes," "telling our stories" explains the imperative of the poet choosing to tell the "terrible stories" of her life. In this poem we are left anticipating, perhaps to parallel the fox as desire, the decision of the human poet to listen to the poet fox. Yet quickly, at the turn of the page, where the first section's title, "a dream of foxes," gleams back at us, all of the reader's anticipations are fulfilled. The speaker did choose to tell the stories, to give into her desires, to choose the complexities of life and thus, joy.

Upon encountering the fox, the speaker fears the stories that reveal the complexity of the fox life: they hunt, but they too are hunted. Seeing this life of a fox as both being feared and being afraid acknowledges the complexity of the fox life, but that does not absolve us from fear. Indeed, the human poet speaks of the fear of the "terrible" stories the fox could tell.

The fox that is both hunter and hunted lurks just outside the human poet's door, asking for nothing, yet in wait of something. This tension of asking for nothing in particular but waiting for something is desire embodied in the poet-fox. Yet the poet-human resists; she traps herself inside her home so that she may not encounter the fox but is aware that in not greeting the poet fox, she is missing something. The poet-human can only imagine what the fox thinks of her—what the poet-fox tells her fox-kind when she has gone away from the door. What the poet-human imagines is the fear in her own reflection, "the trembling snout, the ignorant eyes." (12-13)

The human poet's rejection of the fox that embodies desire is a fear of that desire. It reveals the rejection of what desire could tell her about herself. Desire could tell the "terrible stories," the complex and difficult stories that make up a life. The human

speaker, in the face of the poet-fox, must make a decision—the imperative decision to choose that which is not easy: "telling our stories." The poems that follow give into the fox—allowing terrible stories to be told and complexities to be revealed, beginning with memories of the terrible past.

Complex Personhood And The Capacity For Good And Evil

> So as long as we don't see in ourselves the possibility of great good as well as great evil, as long as we think that bad stuff is done by some people who are sort of isolated and wear bad stuff T-shirts or something, we can't fight against it.
> – Lucille Clifton in an interview with Charles Rowell

The practice of joy and the complexity of life is wonderfully connected in "the book of David"—the last section of *The Terrible Stories.* This series of persona poems in the voice of David of Jerusalem explores the complexity of the artist/warrior/prophet who wrote the book of Psalms. David embodies the complexity of life and the capacity for the human to do both good and evil (and be quite proficient in both). The final poem in the collection, "what manner of man," reflects the complexity of the whole human, and centralizes the human's capacity for joy and David's particular expression of his joy as an artist. In this poem, David asks the profound and universal question: "who am i?" If there is any answer at all, it is a complex one:

> if i am not singing to myself
> to whom then? each sound, each word
> is a way of wondering that first
> brushed against me in the hills
> when I was an unshorn shepherd boy.
> each star that watched my watching then
> was a mouth that would not speak.

> what is a man? what am i? (1-8)

The question "what am i?" is also the question "what is God?" in the first lines of "what manner of man." David asks, "if i am not singing to myself/ to whom then?" (1-2) David singing is the question of his own existence, and also, the question of God's existence. An answer would not only confirm who David is but also confirm who God is. The fact that, for Clifton, David does this questioning through "singing" is significant in that it is particular to David as an artist who connects to God through the language of joy.

David asks the profound question "what is a man? what am i?" through the ecstatic expressions of song and dance rather than through solemn supplication. (8) He continues: "even when I am dancing now i am dancing/ myself onto the tongue of heaven/ hoping to move into some sure/ answer from the Lord." (9-12) David's joyful prayers are questions about the complexities of his life. David asks about the capacity for him to love himself in the complexity of his life:

> how can this david love himself,
> be loved (i am singing and spinning now)
> if he stands in the tents of history
> bloody skull in one hand, harp in the other? (13-16)

David's queries exist in the moment of his joy and the affirmation of his life. David affirms his choosing joy through his "singing and spinning" and also entreats God for an answer to the questions "what is a man? what am i?" David asks how he can love himself and be loved because of the very complexity of his life and the way that history will recount it, "bloody skull in one hand, harp in the other." David does not apologize for this complexity. (16) He does not reflect solely on his acts as a warrior or solely his work as

an artist. Instead, he is more invested in the answer of why he has become both. His ecstatic singing and dancing of these questions reflect the answer: David is complex. Life is complex. Joy is the complexity of life.

death and destruction in the complex world

In her theology of joy, Clifton makes clear the consequences of acknowledging darkness and refusing to choose joy. So far, we have discussed this matter of choosing joy on an individual level. Choosing joy, choosing the difficult in our own lives, requires us to sustain a love within ourselves that makes choosing joy a practice. We must be able to acknowledge the dark in our lives, be able to discern what appears to be easy and instead, choose life in all of its complexity—joy.

In "in the meantime," Clifton expands this concept beyond the individual human to humanity as a whole. In this poem she sheds light on more global concepts of light and darkness. The poem relates dichotomous relationships even in its title; the word "meantime" refers to a concurrent time and also "mean" as in "not nice" times. She begins the poem with Jesus, "the lord of loaves and fishes," looking at the devastation of genocide, war, and poverty. He "frowns as the children of haiti somalia bosnia rwanda everywhere/ float onto the boats of their bellies/ and die." The imagery of human bodies floating onto their bloated bellies ushers us into this "meantime:" "in the meantime/ someone who is not hungry sits to dine." (5-6) The "lord of loaves and fishes" is a reference to one of the miracles Jesus performed, in which he fed the multitude on one boy's lunch of five loaves of bread and two fish. In the biblical sense, this reading represents the choice a young boy made to share his lunch with Jesus and the multitude; it

also represents the good in distributing wealth—forgoing one's personal satisfaction for the sake of humanity. There is a dichotomous relationship being made here between the starving "them" of "haiti somalia bosnia rwanda everyhere" and the well-fed "we" that "could have been/ a balm/ a light" in the next stanza. (9-11) The speaker, musing on what humanity "could" have been, highlights again the impact of choice in our lives.

The next meantime is a "mean time." The problem of the dichotomy between a "them" and "we" is alluded to in the moment of the atom bomb exploding: "in the mean time/ that split apart with the atom/ all roads began to lead/ to these tables/ these hungry children" (14-19). Time itself is mean and splits apart, along with the atom that split in order to create the blast. In this moment mean time becomes connected to the "meantime" of abundance in one place, "these tables," and the lack of "these hungry children" in another place but in the same time (17-18). The dichotomy of "we" and "them," the "rich" and the "poor," becomes the atomic blast itself—the splitting apart of humanity. This separation is "Death the destroyer of worlds," (21) a line she attributes to the Mahabharata, quoted by Robert Oppenheimer at the moment of the first atomic explosion. Clifton implicates herself in the destruction of worlds in this final line. It is neither Oppenheimer nor the U.S. government alone who is responsible. In seeing the interconnectedness of suffering by describing the places often described as "over there" and the "third world" as "every*here*" (italics mine) Clifton also takes up the interconnectedness of destruction invoked by the line from the Mahabharata.

Clifton's joy extends beyond the individual and embraces the complexity of all humanity. This splitting apart of humanity described in "in the meantime" is also the splitting apart of the human. This splitting between those who sit to dine when they are

not hungry and those who die of starvation equals a splitting of the "whole" of humanity. In this sense, to choose death appears to be easier. Choosing war is easier than choosing peace and accepting the difference and complexity of humanity. This poem proposes that we choose joy on a global scale. It demonstrates, through the devastation of war, genocide, and poverty, the wages of the sin that acknowledges darkness and still chooses the easy road. "In the meantime" forces us to look at the darkness much more clearly and still presents the opportunities to choose joy or something else. By acknowledging darkness, one is able to see more clearly the wonderful difficulty of joy, the miracle of life. "In the meantime" Clifton considers the consequences of choosing darkness. The roads that lead us to the tables of the well fed and the unfed also lead us to the abrupt end of the very telling of this story. The visual imagery of the moment of the first atomic blast interrupts the roads, the tables, the fishes and loaves and leaves only destruction. Apocalypse is massive change through incredible difficulty.

This perspective on the wages of the sin of injustice is shared by June Jordan, who considers joy to be a human right in the same moment she considers "rational justice" to be a human right:

> To be honest, I expect apocalypse […] But life itself compels optimism. It does not seem reasonable that the majority of the peoples of the world should, finally, lose joy, and rational justice, as a global experiment to be pursued and fiercely protected. It seems unreasonable that more than 400 million people, right now, struggle against hunger and starvation, even while there is arable earth aplenty to feed and nourish every one of us.
> - June Jordan in the introduction to *Some of Us Did Not Die* (4)

Jordan "expect[s] apocalypse" because a few have made decisions that perpetuate systems which exclude the poor and otherwise disenfranchised from the tree of life. The

etymological root of the word "expect" is from the Latin *ex* (out), *spectare* (to look for). Jordan's *expecting* of apocalypse is not only facing it, but also *looking for it.* It is "life itself," for Jordan, which "compels an optimism." Jordan presents to us the conscious choices between life and "something else." She seeks out the dark ending as well as the miracle of life and finds that indeed "some of us did not die." Central to Jordan's speech at Barnard is the miracle of life and survival in the wake of destruction. Delivered after 9/11, "Some of Us Did Not Die" highlights the reality that although there was and is death and destruction, those of us who remember are the survivors.

"In the meantime" is a poem that grapples with theodicy, the problem of evil in a world with an all-benevolent God. While Clifton discusses the capacity for human good, she demonstrates the devastating capacity for human evil. Such aspects of humanity are possible simultaneously, and the choice for one or the other is always present. We can be "a balm/ a light," or we can be "Death the destroyer of worlds." These possibilities exist for humanity in the form of a crossroads where we can acknowledge this dark part of us and choose that easy road, or we can choose joy.

Acknowledging Darkness

It is important to be able to wade through the darkness in Clifton's poetry, to acknowledge its dimensions and depth. Readers must be willing to see the darkness *as well as* the joy in Clifton's poetry. In Clifton's view, darkness is a part of the complexity of humanity; where humans exist darkness must exist. Nowhere is this more evident than in Clifton's recurring motif of the "Lucifer in Lucille." In the following pages, I will explore this aspect of darkness, so often acknowledged in Clifton's poetry. This aspect of

her work is frequently recognized by critics, to the point of flattening it as exclusively mournful even in its celebrations. While others have discussed the mourning and sadness in Clifton's poetry as a central aspect of her work, what I would like to uncover are the ways in which she utilizes mourning as a practice of joy. I argue that it is not sadness or mourning that defines Clifton's work, but her philosophy of the complicatedness of human existence and the overwhelming optimism that makes life possible—joy.

The Lucifer in Lucille

In the "brothers" series found in *The Book of Light*, Clifton speaks of the "Lucifer in Lucille," the darkness that exists in humanity. In an interview with Hillary Holladay she states that, "I know there's Lucifer in Lucille, because I know me […] And there is the possibility of Lucille in Lucifer. It's too easy to see Lucifer as all bad. Suppose he was merely being human […]"(qtd. in Holladay) By connecting to this darkness, Clifton not only demonstrates that aspect of her theology of joy but also makes an explicit connection to an African-American understanding of darkness and the devil. As Holladay notes, the devil in Clifton's poetry is an iteration of the Yoruba deity Legba who emerges as the devil and trickster Bruh Rabbit in African American folklore (129). Clifton's conceptual framework of the devil is not one of pure evil but of pure complexity. The devil is a trickster and a shape shifter who adapts to his circumstances, often in disregard for moralistic boundaries. Legba, the guardian of the crossroads, is the embodiment of the human capacity for both good and evil—both good and evil being at the will of human circumstances, their "fever" of humanity. Lucifer is a figure that, as Holladay points out, "speaks for human suffering rather than for evil" (138).

The series of poems "brothers" is a conversation between Lucifer and God, yet only the voice of Lucifer is heard. Lucifer functions as a stand-in for the poet, whose name takes its etymological root from the same source as Lucifer's name. Both Lucifer and Lucille come from the Latin root for "light." This etymological connection is the focus of *The Book of Light*, where the series "brothers" appears. Holladay observes this connection between Lucifer in Lucille and states, "Clifton makes it clear that this is not only an African American version of the archetypal tale: it is her own version, and Lucifer, the so-called Prince of Darkness is an ironically fitting conduit for a darker skinned poet whose name means light" (132). In the series, Lucifer emerges as a complex figure who embodies light, Lucille, and humanity as a whole.

Clifton begins with the poem "invitation" in which an "aged" Lucifer requests the presence of God in the Garden of Eden. It is in the garden, "creations bed," that the biblical scene of the beginning of the world is set. Lucifer invites God to "come coil" in this place, a time described as "long after" the days of Adam and Eve and his form as serpent. Lucifer has grown nostalgic for the time when humans, freshly made, roamed the garden. This poem functions as an invocation and invitation.

Lyrically, the poem also functions as a preface to the rest of the series. In "invitation" readers are also invited into a private (and rather sacred) conversation between Lucifer and God, where they discuss the beginning of the world and the fall of humans—getting an inside perspective on the two beings "who watched it happen and wondered/ what it meant" (15-16). The very idea of such an inside story is telling of the way in which Clifton wishes to render the devil and his supposed opposite—God. Here they are kin. More than that, they are on speaking terms where Lucifer can ask God to

share in an intimate moment of "coiling" with him in the garden that began it all. The Prince of Darkness himself invites God and, in turn, the readers into this intimate moment—one which promises a truth rarely approached: What does Lucifer have to say about mankind? What could Lucifer possibly say to God? Lucifer's name promises its full meaning—to shed light on all of these things.

The second poem in the "brothers" series, "how great Thou art," comes after God responds, we presume, in the affirmative to Lucifer's invitation. Beginning with exaltation "how great Thou art," the poem invokes the traditional Baptist hymn of the same name that marvels at God and God's creations. While invoking this kind of adoration and exaltations, the poems also asks: *Who art Thou?* In the poem, the implied question answers itself: "listen, You are beyond/ even Your own understanding" (1-2). The essence of God is in the very question of God's existence.

Like David, Lucifer answers the question of his own existence through the answer of God's existence. If Lucifer is capable of existing so is God—and visa versa. The wonder of God is God, and therefore the wonder that humans and Lucifer have of God is also God. Lucifer goes on to explain why Adam and Eve were tempted to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil: "the odd ambition. The desire/ to reach beyond the stars/ is You" (12-14). In creating the earth, Lucifer proposes, God's work was questioning the meaning of God's self. In committing the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve's sin was also in wanting to know the essence of God. As Hillary Holladay notes, "the poem implies that the human ambition and desire to know and understand 'God' are also a part of God" (135). In this poem, Lucifer is quite ambivalent toward the idea that Adam and Eve sinned by eating the fruit

of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This ambivalence is not a matter of pure evil but a more complicated matter of pure human ambition to be like God. Or, as the serpent observes in the biblical scripture, "for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (NRSV, Genesis 3.5). Knowledge itself is biblically described as possessing both good and evil. Knowledge is also described as being the prerogative of God.

In the biblical story, Lucifer convinces Adam and Eve that they would be more like God if they know the difference between good and evil. In the biblical rendering echoed here in "how great Thou art," Lucifer sheds light on the complicated, the "both/and," matters of life. To acknowledge that there is both good and evil is also to ponder the question that God—"the perfect/ imperfection" ponders. To acknowledge that there is both good and evil is to face the complexity of life—to move beyond the naïve innocence of paradise and to choose, instead, the difficulty and toil in the fields. The original sin, then, is the ongoing burden of human existence. Humans burdened with the knowledge of good and evil must face both in order to choose joy. Joy, a given in the Garden of Eden, is the essence of humanity's original state; after the fall it must be earned.

Theodicy and Facing Darkness

> *Lucifer was doing what he was supposed to do, too, you know?*
> – Clifton in Conversation with Holladay (188)

Theodicy in theology explores the problem of evil. Assuming that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent, it would seem that evil and human suffering

would not exist. Theodicy is a field within theology which explores this dilemma and, historically, has attempted to justify the will of God in allowing human suffering. This thread of Western theology that focuses on Christian belief has a long history, with theologians citing Epicurus as having formulated the first questions about the existence of God and the persistence of evil. (Surin 225)

Black and Womanist theologies don't dwell on the question of why God allows evil, but they approach the subject of evil with a view of God as having a vested interest in the oppressed and, with them, seeking justice. As James Cone, the architect of Black Liberation Theology, states, "The pain of the oppressed is God's pain, for God takes their suffering as God's own, thereby freeing them from its ultimate control of their lives" (Cone 161). The idea that God suffers with humanity is also embodied in the suffering of Christ who, as Kelly Brown Douglass notes in her book *The Black Christ*, is strongly identified with the suffering of Black people and Black women particularly. (97)

In *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* Delores Williams also does not directly address why Black women may suffer. She utilizes the biblical figure of Hagar, the slave woman who is sent out into the wilderness, as a figure with which Black women identify. A woman owned by Sarai and Abraham and thereby without agency, Hagar is impregnated by her master and sent into the wilderness with her new son Ishmael. The corollaries between the story of African-American women in the United States who descended from slaves is clear, however within this corollary is the promise of prosperity and longevity given to Hagar through her son (21).

According to Williams, the Divine exists with Hagar through her time in the wilderness, and it is the wilderness itself that promises Hagar control over her destiny.

Hagar, now a runaway slave, is alone in the desert without food or shelter. She has been a slave all of her life; though now she is free, Hagar suffers and is on the brink of death. This experience, however, has within it a divine promise that favors Hagar and her offspring. Williams states, "This experience holds in solution a woman's self-initiated liberation event, woman's alienation and isolation, economic deprivation, pregnancy and a radical encounter with God, which empowers the female slave of African descent to hope and to act" (26). Suffering is an experience and time in which God is considered to be most present.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." –The Book of Matthew[18]

It is notable, then, that in her theology of joy, Clifton addresses the problem of evil by foregrounding joy. This does not mean that Clifton does not see, acknowledge, or experience suffering. On the contrary, her poetry addresses human suffering in its many forms—including her multiple bouts with cancer. Clifton foregrounds joy by complicating the meaning of suffering as a part of vibrant human experience.

In this sense, there is a corollary between Clifton's view of God and evil and the view of God in Black liberation theology and womanist theology. These theologies share the belief that God suffers with the oppressed. In his book *Theology of the Pain of God* Kitamori connects western theology to Japan on the basis of this question of pain,

[18] The concept that suffering and the presence of God are intertwined is exemplified in the Beatitudes given by Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount. An oft-observed set of beliefs within Christianity, the Beatitudes described the blessings promised to those who suffer. For example, the "poor in spirit" will inherit "the kingdom of heaven," those who are "meek" will "inherit the earth" and those who are "persecuted for righteousness sake" will have "the Kingdom of Heaven." (NRSV, Matthew 5)

suffering, and the existence of God. In the chapter titled "Pain as the Essence of God" Kitamori states, "The Bible reveals that the pain of God belongs to his *eternal being*" (45, italics his). Referring to God's description of Godself as the Alpha and Omega "the first and the last, *who died* and came to life," Kitamori highlights the aspect of God that exists in an expansive eternity that includes suffering (45, italics his). The expansiveness of God marks the importance of the dilemma of theodicy within Clifton's worldview: That an *omnipresent* God is present during suffering, allows suffering, and also suffers.

In the poem "in my own defense" from "the brothers" series, Clifton describes the condition of humanity after the fall. Lucifer, identifying with the condition of humans, asks God, "what could i choose/ but to slide along behind them,/ they whose only sin/ was being their father's children?" (1-4). Now, awake and punished, Adam and Eve face the world ahead of them "as they stood with their backs/ to the garden,/ a new and terrible luster/ burning in their eyes" (5-9). Clifton's use of the term "luster" is a reference to the poem that begins *The Book of Light*. "LIGHT" is a list poem that names versions of or synonyms for the word light. The list alludes to Lucifer as well as Lucille, whose names share the Latin root word "lux," which means light. In "LIGHT," the word "luster" comes after "lightning bolt" and before "luciferous." The word's placement in the poem creates its own associative meanings. The lightning bolt could stand in for God's wrath after the fall. The god of the Hebrews has often been associated with the Greek sky god, Zeus, known for his lightning bolts. For that matter, the Yoruba deity Shango, who also rules the sky, hurls lightning bolts toward earth. Another kind of light that plays a role in this story is "luciferous," which shares its root with the name of Lucifer, the prince of

darkness, who "brings light." This luster is also knowledge and, perhaps, acknowledgement. Light is the business of both God and the Lucifer.

As fallen humans, and now with knowledge of good and evil, gods themselves, Adam and Eve are now in the business of discernment—recognizing good from evil. They must do the difficult work of living and survival—now that they understand their imperfections and now that they have been punished. Lucifer admonishes the ever-powerful God for punishing these two "whose only sin/ was being their father's children" and allowing their sin to take place: "only You could have called/ their ineffable names," he says (9-10). Lucifer, the prince of darkness, asks God why God allows sin to exist. The question is indeed Lucifer's "own defense." Lucifer did what he did because God made it possible. God also made the condition in which Adam and Eve would be far away and unable to hear God's calling them in the Garden: "only in their fever/ could they have failed to hear" (11-12). Darkness, difficulty, and complexity are God's creations. Human life in its complexity is the "fever" that would take humans away from God; it is also created by God. The reasoning here leads one to understand that in none of this are humans truly apart from God.

The question of God's existence appears further along in the series, picking up in the poem "'the silence of God is God,'" a quote taken from Carolyn Forché's "The Angel of History." The silence of God is devastating, but it is also the manifestation of God's presence—indeed the confirmation of God's presence. In the absence of God's voice humans do what they will. As Holladay notes, "God's silence calls human speech into being" (Holladay 138). Human freewill, often associated with the evil Lucifer promises, is caused by God's silence. Lucifer asks God for the answer to all of this on behalf of

himself and humankind "tell me, tell us why/ You neither raised Your hand/ nor turned away, tell us why/ You watched the excommunication of/ that world and You said nothing" (7-11). God's silence, then, is responsible, at least partially, for the fall of humankind. But God's silence is also what makes God because faith is what maintains God as God. To ask God to explain Gods-self is to blasphemously propose God's lack of existence. As Lucifer says in the final poem, "……is God," "to ask You to explain/ is to deny You" (8-9). However, in describing God, Lucifer provides a strange image, "so./ having no need to speak/ You sent Your tongue/ splintered into angels" (1-4). Lucifer, an angel who is also a liar said to have a split tongue, associates this split tongue with God. This blasphemous allusion of Lucifer in God is the shocking conclusion to what Lucifer wished to speak of all along—that the all-encompassing God is a God that allows for good and evil. "All You, all You" is also all Lucifer (*how great thou art* 14).

"As for myself" is a description of the Lucifer by himself. The poem begins, "less snake than angel/ less angel than man," (1-2) pointing to the complexity of Lucifer's character. Lucifer, characterized as the devil, is often associated with the serpent in the biblical story of Adam and Eve. In the earlier poems in the series, Clifton writes from the perspective that Lucifer is the serpent in the story, but her description here offers an opportunity to complicate that interpretation. Lucifer, first and foremost for Clifton, must be considered in terms of his original form: an angel. More specifically, Lucifer was one of the most powerful and beautiful angels according to legend—very different from the characterizations of him as devil and Satan in other accounts. In fact, Clifton has noted that the Lucifer she writes about is explicitly *not* Satan (Glaser 323). In the voice of Lucifer, Clifton clarifies misunderstandings about the Prince of Darkness by highlighting

his status as archangel and connecting this divine aspect of Lucifer to humanity. Lucifer not only allies himself with humanity but with womankind. Eve, who according to the legend is to blame for the fall of man, is misunderstood like Lucifer. Blamed because she was seduced by the devil and in turn seduced Adam, Lucifer and Eve share a common bond of disgrace in the creation myth. Lucifer and Eve also have in common gifts of spiritual perception, as Eve would be the first to *feel* the movement of new life within her through pregnancy, "i too am blessed with/ the one gift you cherish;/ to feel the living move in me/ and to be unafraid" (13-16). Here, the woman-identified voice of Lucille Clifton beams through the voice of Lucifer as a creator.

Clifton's Lucifer not only identifies with womanhood but also observes a particular strength in it. This series of poems fits into a larger body of work by Clifton who is a poet concerned with the conditions of women and who identifies so strongly with other women. At the last reading she participated in at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, Clifton was asked how she felt about being considered an elder among poets. She commented that it detracts from the fact that she is also a woman, and the fact that she is a woman is very important to her. In a 2006 interview with Remica Bingham, Clifton commented that the first and most important thing for womanist poetry is that the poet be a woman. (Bingham 11) Clifton's ability to include woman-positive language in these series of poems only further stresses the fact that she considered the whole of herself to be important to her creative work. The woman within Lucifer highlights the aspect of complex humanity that repeats as a theme in Clifton's work and interviews.

The Lucifer/woman connection is also made in the earlier collection titled *quilting*. In the section "tree of life" Lucifer, Adam, and Eve are able to speak. The voice of Eve is much more discerning than that of her male counterpart Adam. In the poem "eve thinking," which follows the poem "adam thinking," Eve waits for Adam to become enlightened with language and decides "tonight as he sleeps/ i will whisper into his mouth/ our names" (11-13). Eve's apparent wisdom and self-knowledge is celebrated in the poem "eve's version," in which she retells the story of the fall from her perspective. Describing Lucifer as a "smooth talker," Eve does not appear to blame the devil but refers to Lucifer as one who convinced her to take of the forbidden fruit as she would hunger for her own "lush self" (1,8). Eve's persona is both darkness and self-awareness. In "the story thus far" Eve is figured as the leader of the exodus from Eden: "so they went out/ clay and morning star/ following the bright back/ of the woman" (1-4). Both Lucifer and Adam follow Eve into the world outside of Eden; Eve stands in not only for her woman-self but for desire as well. Desire wrapped up in the body of a woman who leads the Prince of Darkness and Humankind into the world manifests a powerful image in which Eve, fully self-aware, ushers the world in by facing it head on. Eve steps out of Eden "into the unborn world," and upon her stepping into it "chaos fell away/ before her like a cloud/ and everywhere seemed light" (10-13). In this moment it is Eve who brings light like her counterpart, Lucifer, the morning star. Eve's connection to the Prince of Darkness in this way is yet another example of the light within darkness. As Eve's dark connection with the devil is associated with the fall of man, Eve is also the mother of a new world, one that "seemed glorious/ seemed very eden" (13-14). Without the sin that

Eve and, in turn, womankind is blamed for, there would be no world as we know it. Eve's alliance with Lucifer helps to create what is the world and is, ultimately, God's will.

Returning to the "brothers" series Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, has proven that he is in fact the Prince of ambivalence—of both/and. Lucifer, who exists in the both/and—who thrives in complexity, goes on to characterize human existence as joyous, even in its travails. Lucifer connects the bliss of Eden to the bliss of complex human existence in the fifth poem in the series "the road led from delight." This road out of paradise leads to another kind of paradise, one of contradictions and "the sharp/ edge of seasons" (1-2)—a life full of the difficult and the very possible, winters into spring. The road out of paradise leads to the simple joys that are possible from hard toil, the "puff of bread baking" (3). This road also leads into the land of grotesque humanity and ecstasy, "the warm/ vale of sheet and sweat after love" (3-4). Lucifer's ambivalence allows room for the joy in darkness. Each of his examples of sweet joy requires suffering and darkness: the winter into spring, the toil in the fields and kitchen for baking bread, the human musk and stink for love making. All of these things are dependent on one another; all are necessary for the joyous complexity of human life. Yet, as Lucifer discusses, so much attention is paid to the harshness of this life away from paradise. He entreats God, "forbid me not/ my meditation on the outer world" while also facing darkness (9-10). As Holladay notes, "Lucifer nevertheless insists that suffering is not the whole story, and he asks, a bit truculently, for a chance to celebrate the sensuous joys of food and rest, lovemaking and life-making […]" (135). The "world" in this sense is that of the physical realm. Rebuking that world and meditating on God is central to Judeo/Christian worship. In the Christian tradition, meditating on the world is associated with the devil. Take for

instance this passage from the infamous temptation of Christ found in the book of Matthew:

> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' (NRSV, Matthew 4.8-10)

The temptation is in Christ's wanting dominion over earth rather than serving God in the heavens. From Lucifer's point of view, in these poems, the world is its own bit of heaven with complications one must face—regardless. My use of the word "regardless" is intended to be as facetious as it sounds. Lucifer is flippant about the darkness, pain, and punishment. He acknowledges it but places it in the ancillary, "the bruising of his heel, my head,/ *and so forth*" (12-13). Once again Lucifer reveals the ambivalence and, in his ambivalence, chooses joy.

Despite sin and destruction, despite the damnation of the "world" and "worldly" things, Lucifer is a proponent of the goodness within the darkness—the light within himself. In the seventh poem in the series, "still there is mercy, there is grace," Lucifer meditates on the very mercy and grace that allows him to exist. He says, "how otherwise/ could i have come to this/ marble spinning in space/ propelled by the great/ thumb of the universe?" (1-5) Lucifer's meditation is also an answer to the great question in theodicy, "Why does an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God allow so much evil?" Lucifer's very existence as the Prince of Darkness is also evidence of God's mercy. Lucifer is allowed to exist even though he is a fallen angel who sinned against God. Even in his evil acts, the hand of God allows it and everything in the universe becomes the will of God: "how otherwise/ could the two roads/ of this tongue/ converge into a single/ certitude?" (6-10)

Furthermore, that Lucifer may still call God brother, approach God, worship God, and belong to God is evidence of mercy and grace:

> how otherwise
> could i, a sleek old
> traveler,
> curl one day safe and still
> beside You
> at Your feet, perhaps,
> but, amen, Yours" (6-17)

Darkness embodied in Lucifer is also within the will of God—the will of that "which made us."

"These were humans—caught up in a divine plan, but human. That seems to be the miracle."

— Clifton in Conversation with Holladay (188)

The motif of Lucifer in Clifton's poems is a practice in her facing darkness through poetry. As Chard deNiord pointed out in Clifton's final interview before her death, her poems that address biblical figures and spiritual motifs also function as a kind of spiritual meditation or devotion (deNoird 6). While it has been widely observed that Clifton writes about the darkness in her poetry, it is also true that she doesn't exploit the harshness of life but finds the humanity in it. When asked about the horrible events in her poetry, she said that her work is also about "Feeling them deeply, and writing about them" (deNoird 6). Clifton's meditations on darkness do not come from a purely cerebral place, but a whole place where the fullness of humanity can be expressed. Darkness

necessitates joy, and joy needs darkness in order to reflect the complexity of human experience. Clifton highlights this relationship by meditating on the fall of man and the full expression of humanity in that lesson. The original sin was a sin of pleasure; the subsequent punishment also bears its own pleasures. All of these things are within the will of God. Lucifer teaches us these lessons despite the religious characterization he has of pure evil. For Clifton, evil is not that pure and neither is good.

Choosing Joy

Resistance is the secret of joy!
– Alice Walker

It is not enough to choose joy once. Life, in is complexity always creates new moments where new choices must be made. To choose joy "once in a while," means to sustain it—to continue to choose joy and the miracle of life. The second poem in the "from the cadaver" section of *The Terrible Stories*, the poem "lumpectomy eve" describes longing, this time within the body, via the breast that is ill with cancer. Clifton writes, "all night i dream of lips/ that nursed and nursed/ and the lonely nipple" (1-3). The breast, here, becomes its own agent—capable of loneliness as the speaker remembers its uses. This breast once nursed—fed others. That feeding turns into a desire to feed that leaves the breast lonely and without the will to survive: "lost in loss and the need/ to feed that turns at last/ on itself that will kill/ […]/ its body for its hunger's sake" (4-7). The function of the breast as one that feeds is likened to the tumor that feeds. The hunger of the breast outweighs the survival of the body in the struggle of things that want to feed and be fed.

The breast chooses to succumb to the darkness of death and the only way to sway the breast from this decision is love. One breast comforts the other, urging it to remember love, and love becomes the drive to choose life and thus joy: "love calls you to this knife/ for love for love" (10-11). For love, the breast must choose life. It must choose the difficulty of loneliness over death.

...one thing I've learned in this life is that I'm probably going to have to comfort myself.
– Lucille Clifton, in an interview with Michael Glaser (320)

The one breast encourages the other to go to the surgical knife in a sacrifice for life. These two breasts belong to a singular self and, in their comforting, signify the self as the source for joy-affirming love. Through love, the self is able to make joy a practice—a constant choice in the face of an easier choice—loneliness.

She must be her own model as well as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model, which is to say, herself.
– *Alice Walker* In Search of Our Mother's Gardens (8)

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model…
- Lucille Clifton, *Book of Light* (won't you celebrate with me 1-3)

In order for joy to become a practice, a "once in a while" choice, the exercise of it must be self-generated. Joy must be self-sustaining. Perhaps this is why Clifton chose the singular word whenever she was asked for her signature. A self-sustained practice of choosing joy, particularly in a body that is under constant threat, is also a practice of resistance. This aspect of joy as resistance and self-sustaining life force is re-iterated in

Clifton's often quoted and often praised poem "won't you celebrate with me." It exalts, despite having to face the everyday "something's" that would try to kill her," forging through life "one hand holding tight my other hand." (10-11) Celebration is the cause and practice through which resistance is manifested. Resistance is compulsory—everyday—as in: "Every time I walk out of my house, it is a political decision" (qtd. by Clifton in Rowell 67, Bingham 11).

§

Pathology

noun. 1. Sorrows, sufferings 2. the branch of knowledge that deals with the emotions. 3. the study of disease
– Oxford English Dictionary

Or an easy diagnosis. The way a term announces its sickness: third world, ghetto, housing project. We understand the course of the virus, the smell of its bacteria, the color of its pox. Among these symptoms are shadows of the point of contact—contract: work camp, shanty town, the rez. These things subsume pathology so that we no longer see suffering but existence.

Or:

Q. Grandmother, how are you?
A. Fair to middlin'.

§

A Politics of Non-Complaint

The time you spend complaining
is wasted, there's no doubt.
No one wants to listen to problems
he knows you're doing nothing about.

— Laura P. Grissom from "Stop Complaining" (Grissom 9-12)

The theme of non-complaint has within it the theme of resistance. While critiqued by many as a part of the syndrome in which Black women self-inflict pain and suffer alone needlessly, the politics of non-complaint are really embedded with a kind of resistance wherein struggle is as compulsory as joy. What I refer to as non-complaint should not be confused with exacting analyses of the devastating effects of "embodied strength" via the strong-black-woman trope which Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, Joan Morgan and others have rightly and extensively critiqued for its part in further erasing the experiences of Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 104). Nor should it be confused with complacency or non-critique. Here, non-complaint is choosing joy in the face of darkness. As in the poem, the circumstances of life are described succinctly and are not ignored. Life isn't on the up and up nor is life terrible. Life is "fair to middling." Within a certain kind of awareness, the present moment is balanced. Clifton's discussions of the practice of joy wherein darkness and social forces (the "somethings") are acknowledged rely on such awareness. To complain is to dwell on that darkness.

But always joy—right?
–Lucille Clifton to me.

The themes of survival and joy echo in other Black feminist writings. Alice Walker's book *Possessing the Secret of Joy* defines joy in terms of survival in the face of destruction. While in therapy, the central character Tashi continues to uncover the many layers of what seems like madness to her. After recovering the traumatic memories of being circumcised, Tashi comes into recognition of her full and complex self. In the

story, this recognition takes place while the newly established government in her home country pursues Tashi for murder—she has killed the elder who circumcised her and her sister who died of complications from the surgery. Before Tashi goes to the firing squad to face her own annihilation, secured by her plea of guilty in a murder trial, Olivia, her childhood friend, holds a sign that says "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!" (281) Tashi fully embraces her truth and complex humanity and resists a culture and government that would rather she be someone quite different. Even in the face of death, Tashi chooses the complexity of her own life. Resistance as the secret of joy is also resistance against social forces that seek to control, dehumanize, and flatten the complexity of human existence—the *somethings* that seek to destroy Black women on a daily basis.

Grown Woman-ness

§

SHAPED LIKE THE EARTH

I gotta get used to
my hand that always
looks like a fist
let go of the hope
of thin wrists and
a delicate nape
accept
the privilege of being a woman shaped
like the earth
flat footed and mean
looking as if I ain't smiling
accept that grown men and women will
confuse me for

a mother and a child
get used to the sway of my own hips
how it shifts my whole body
a march pelvis first
a woman shaped like the earth still
has to turn over
that night and day
might caress her every curve.

§

How easy it would be to assume a life that is handed to you. But as Patricia Hill Collins has discussed at length in her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Black women have consistently resisted the "somethings" that seek to confine us via controlling images of Black womanhood, social structures, and class and gender based hierarchies. Being a Black woman and choosing joy resists these structures. Clifton's poetic defiance not only tells of survival and resistance but also, in its content, resists the life that would be handed to her. By insisting that she, a Black woman, is a complex human being, Clifton pushes readers to consider her complex humanity through the themes in her poetry. She takes up non-complaint by choosing the joyful aspects of human existence in spite of the somethings that would exclude her from such complex, whole, and joyful aspects of human experience. Clifton takes up the joyful, even if her readers refuse to acknowledge it; her spiritual poetry that simultaneously takes up sex and sensuality is evidence of this resistance.

I do a lot of bible poems, and I find sensuality in them all the time. I am a grown-up, sensual woman, even at this age and size. People would think you wouldn't be. I'm open to the whole of human experience.
– Clifton in an interview with Remica Bingham (11)

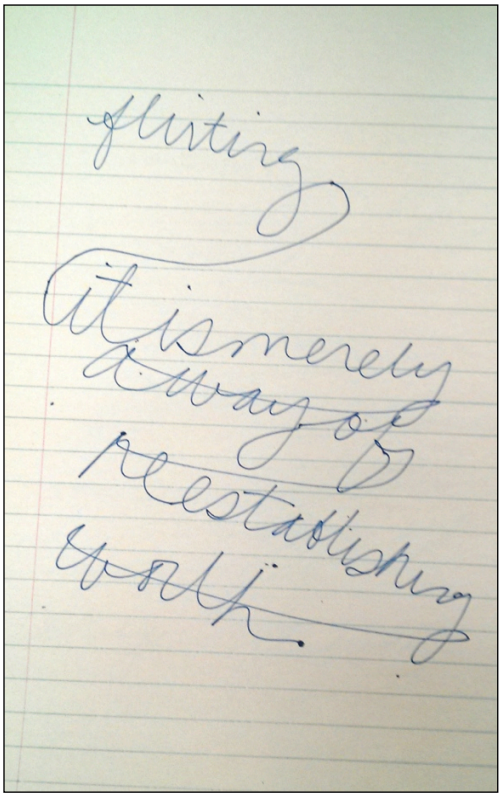

Fig. 20 Clifton, Lucille. "Flirting is merely a way…" *"Automatic Writing" 1977. [1 of 2]* Box 29 folder 20.

In a 2006 interview with Remica Bingham, Clifton discussed her desire to write and publish more poetry about sexuality. She has elsewhere commented on the role of sensuality and desire in her work, and the need to give voice to women of a certain size and age on the matters of desire and sexuality. In that interview with Bingham, Clifton stated that her poems that deal with spirituality are at once connected to sensuality. This connection is made clear in her "In the Garden" series, where she describes Adam and Eve's first sin, eating the forbidden fruit, as metaphor for sexual intercourse. Such sensuality is present in the David poems and the Lucifer poems as well. One series of poems that deals with spirituality, but not in the biblical sense, is the "Ten Oxhearding Poems." The automatic writing above transcribes a message that appears to state, "Flirting is merely a way of reestablishing worth." (Fig. 19) The context of the message

is less clear, but what it does indicate is that communication with The One's included discussions of romance and sexuality. When Clifton takes up spirituality outside of the context of biblical reference, it is clear that she understood spirituality to be more universal than her Baptist roots. While at home in referencing the Bible, Clifton clearly makes a home for herself on many spiritual paths. This section will explore how Clifton expands her discussion of the sensual in spirituality, using a series of Buddhist meditation paintings.

In her 2008 book *Voices* Clifton reprints a series titled "Ten Oxhearding Poems," which was previously published by a smaller press. This series, described by many to be her most abstract and least decipherable work, seems to be the most sensuous of her poetry. Prompted by only the titles of a series of images created by a "12th century Chinese Zen master" as a meditation aid, Clifton writes poems that become mediations of her own. This meditation engages the meaning of life, the will to live, and sexual desire.

In the introduction to the series, Clifton begins with hands--instruments of pleasure and, particularly, self-pleasure. Hands do the bidding of their master: "they are still/if I asked them to rise. they will rise" (2-4). If the voice asks them to self-pleasure, they will self-pleasure: "if i ask them to turn/ they will turn in an arc/ of perfect understanding" (5-7). No one knows better how to pleasure one than oneself. The speaker goes on to place the hands in the center of what may be understood as carnal desire: "they have allowed me only such/ privilege as owed to flesh" (8-9). Through sexual touch, the hands are at the mercy of this desire, previously referred to in the "terrible stories" via the symbol of the fox. In the Ten Oxhearding Poems, the fox without its "f" (for fuck perhaps?) becomes the ox—enlarged, slow moving, and even more demanding.

Fox, now ox, signifies the unrelenting growth of sexual desire created by the distance between the fox poems and the ox poems. Desire unfulfilled becomes intensified—desire in need of "herding" as in controlling. Hands that would control such an ox "in perfect understanding" are also controlled by the ox that signifies desire, "they know. they belong to the ox" (43).

When reading these poems within the context of sexual desire they become as clear as the rest of Clifton's poetry and, perhaps, even more vivid. The animal symbolism may seem to obfuscate, but it actually illuminates sexuality. Animals often represent carnal passion, and Clifton herself has commented that the fox in "The Terrible Stories" signifies sexual desire. This series has also been called particularly opaque in comparison to the rest of her work, but these poems are clearly about desire, both the appetite for sex and the longing to live. Once the reader engages the poems from this perspective, the series' full meaning is revealed.

I look at these poems because they exemplify the full meaning of joy as the complexity of life. As meditation, these poems illuminate Clifton's understanding of joy as a practice, a constant and persistent choice. Joy as practice is exemplified in this series of poems used in Zen Buddhist meditation practice. I also choose these poems for their sensuality. For Clifton, sensuality emerges in her work as one of the pleasurable aspects of a complex human existence. While she has mentioned that many have assumed that she has no sensuality to her work or in her life, Clifton has insisted that she is a sensual being, a grown-up woman who is "open to the whole of human experience." (Bingham 11)

This series is not so much complex in its language, but complex because in order to interpret it one must give in to the complex personhood of the one who wrote them. Lucille Clifton has discussed sexuality as a part of the complexity of human experience (Bingham 11), but she wrote very clear poems. That aspect of her writing does not change when she discusses sexuality. Complexity, once again, must be chosen in order to grasp the full meaning of Clifton's work. The easy route to these poems is that they are too complex for comprehension. Such an assumption is the manifestation of another flattened and oversimplified reading of the author: that this older, round, Black woman has no sexual desire of her own or that while contemplating the meaning of life, and the presence of God, she could not speak of sexuality as well. Despite the literary discourse around reading poems beyond their author, it is clear no such reading is afforded Clifton. Readers who focused on the typically and historically a-sexualized body that created this work have missed the full meaning of these poems. Clifton, however, knows better and chooses joy. The darkness Clifton acknowledges regarding sexuality in the "in the garden" series, where sin and sexuality are also seen as joyous aspects of humanity, comes into the fullness of joy and complex humanity in “Ten Oxhearding Poems.”

Clifton describes sexual desire in terms of a primal and animalistic urge. Perhaps it is sizeism, ageism and critics’ stereotyping of Clifton as wise/mother that actually make it difficult to read these poems as sexual. The perceived difficulty has more to do with Clifton's personhood being so often confined to a-sexual elder and never read as complex, sensual woman. “Ten Oxhearding Poems” are about the full-grown womaness of Lucille Clifton, whose desire is as big and unrelenting as an ox.

The poem "1st picture/ readying for the ox" literally comes as vivid as the picture it intends to describe. The titles, which begin with Arabic numerals, direct us to the process by which Clifton wrote these poems. She did not see the series of paintings, only read the titles of the images. As she imagines the visuals, so we are directed to "picture" readying for the ox. By directing the reader toward an internal process of "picturing" with her, Clifton takes up the practice of co-meditation. The readers are on an internal journey with her. This internal and meditative practice mirrors a distinctly feminine form of sexual desire. (Literally, women's sexual organs are on the inside.) Yet the most powerful sexual organ, the brain, is activated in the process of visualization.

Clifton chooses to meditate on sexuality rather than be distracted by it. Grown into an ox, desire "summons" the hands into self-pleasure in the poems. Clifton moves into sensual language when describing the hands and their actions: "the fingers come together/caressing each other's tips/ in a need beyond desire." (4-6) Desire moves out of silence "until the silence has been released." (7) The hands, even if belonging to one person, must come into partnership with each other. The sexual act is about the coming together of parts. The recurring theme of hands in this series is very much related to the theme of hands in her opus. Hands recur in part because, as Holladay and Lupton note, Clifton was born with twelve fingers. These twelve fingers, symbols of her magic as well as her lineage (her mother, grandmother and even some of her children were born with twelve fingers as well), signify the power she wields within her hands in the physical realm, as well as her powers as a Dahomey woman and a seer, blessed with the gift of sight and tongues. The magical fingers also signify loss, because they were cut off from her hands at such an early age. In these poems the magical fingers reunite, "come

together [...] in a need beyond desire" that exceeds earthly wants into a realm of spiritual knowing. (4-6)

Her use of the word "come" also signifies double meaning as the euphemism for orgasm. Heightened then, by the rare and intense moment of partners climaxing "together", hands that, in another poem, "hold tight the other hand" in an act of self-sustaining survival, come together in the sensual act of "caressing each other's tips." Her use of the word "tips" heightens the tension of the sexual act. Tips of the fingers are the most sensitive parts of the hands. This may also be an allusion to the most sensitive part of genitalia--the tip of the penis, or even the sensitive tip of the clitoris. Desire is called desire by name. What she discusses here is something beyond desire and also desires itself. Such desire moves into climactic release, and the silence around her sexuality is "released" into orgasmic bliss. The joy of sexual desire, is literally "what made us."

> *I do believe that karma is real. I do believe the Universe will change. If one does not change oneself, one will be changed [laughter]. That's the hard part! The law of the universe is balance. If one does not balance oneself, the universe will balance one. I know that's so.*
>
> - Lucille Clifton in an interview with Betty Parry

Clifton's spiritual pluralism is evidenced in her intrigue with the Ten Oxhearding Pictures. While her experience as a Black woman informs her reading of the names of the pictures in translating them into meditative poems, such a standpoint expands her view as opposed to limiting it. As Qianna Whitted notes: "Clifton parts with names in her 'ten oxherding pictures.' She leaves behind the labels that fix reality in place and wanders with indecision until she stumbles upon an unfamiliar state "where/no thing is defined" (par. 7 Whitted).

In the "Ten Oxhearding Pictures" Clifton demonstrates her ability to speak in yet another tongue, this one in response to Zen Buddhist paintings. By leaving behind fixed labels, she does not abandon her identity, but her identity shifts according to her necessary travels. However, Clifton is very much used to this shifting, especially when it comes to the spiritual. In her series "The Message from the Ones," Clifton takes a brave leap by publishing in her 2002 collection, *Mercy,* poems that came to her through spirits.

Clifton describes her ghostly encounters with her mother's spirit Thelma (in the spirit world known as Greta) in her collection *Two Headed Woman* and in her final interview with Chard deNoird:

> We had a Ouija board, and we started, the girls ... my two oldest girls, Sidney and Fredrica, and I, and Rica would take down this Ouija board and that just happened. I remember that quite well. It was raining and we were in Buffalo and we wanted to go to the movies and it was too rainy to go to the movies, and so, Sidney - we always had a lot of games and a lot of game playing in the family - got out the things for games, and Rica said something like, 'Look at this, it's a Ouija board, let's look at it.' And then, Sid and I started touching it and all of a sudden it jumps. My kids and I thought anything could happen with me, and Sid said, 'Stop Ma. Stop it. Don't do this.' And I said, 'I'm not doing anything.' (10)

The same story, nearly verbatim, is available in her archives in Clifton's versions of a manuscript titled "Curiosities."[19] Multiple versions of this text, as well as another manuscript titled "Visits,"[20] describe her and her children's encounters with her mother's spirit. The manuscript outlines techniques for engaging with the spirit world, as well as reflections on those engagements; to my knowledge, it has not been published.

In this final interview with deNoird, Clifton also discusses the processes of her automatic writing. "It was writing with her hand," she said describing the experience,

[19] Box 29 Folder 2 Lucille Clifton Papers, Manuscript and Rare Book Library, Emory University
[20] Box 29 Folder 6 Lucille Clifton Papers, Manuscript and Rare Book Library, Emory University

"and then Sid started writing. So you had to go back through it and see what the words were" (10). The volumes of automatic writing and Ouija board transcriptions are tremendous. Emory's collection of Lucille Clifton's papers also includes her library, which are largely books on astrology and spirituality. While readers often associated Clifton's poetry with religion specifically, her spiritual views were obviously wide-reaching.

Clifton's theology of joy, then, is an informed standpoint that encompasses a wide range of spiritual knowledge based in experience. Clifton's spiritual practices did not involve the restrictions of the Baptist Christian church in which she was raised. Her experience with spirituality came through feelin much in the way that her poetry is a process of feeling. In an interview with an undergraduate psychology student at UC Santa Cruz, Clifton describes her creative process through feelin:

> It seems to me that any artist works so intuitively and the intuitiveness is very hard to express verbally and so it would be very hard for anybody to talk very accurately about why they do what they do. Do you know? I would think that to say, 'I had a feel for it" is as close as you could come. After a certain length of time you trust those feelings. (Hartog 3)

Writing from feeling and expressing through poetry, Clifton carves out her theology of joy through holistic and embodied experience. Her insistence on having "a feel for it," her meditations on the spirit, and her informed worldview demonstrate feelin as holistic knowledge production.

Celebrate With Me

> **won't you celebrate with me**
>
> won't you celebrate with me
> what i have shaped into

a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

"Won't you celebrate with me" is one of Clifton's most cited, read, and celebrated poems. After her death on February 13, 2010, those who mourned her recalled it in her memory, including poet Toi Derricotte in the Spring 2010 issue of *Callaloo*. It is a poem of celebration as much as it is a poem about death because it is a poem about the complexity of life. "Won't you celebrate with me" encapsulates the theology of joy that I have discussed in this chapter: The "what" that the speaker has shaped into "a kind of life" is to be celebrated. Such celebration highlights what she has made of her life. Having "no model," and having "made it up," the speaker conveys the self-sustained nature of choosing this life and choosing to celebrate it. Somewhere between the earth and the cosmos, "starshine and clay," the speaker holds herself, "my one hand holding tight/my other hand" (10-11). Finally the poem acknowledges the possibility for death: "everyday/something has tried to kill me" (12-13). Speaking once again to the "everyday" forces that seek to destroy women of color, Clifton continues to choose celebration, to choose joy. In choosing that joy those somethings have "failed."

I wondered during that community celebration the summer after her death, if it were truly appropriate to read the poem. Had the poem now lost its meaning, because she

had died? I wondered if the everyday somethings finally found their way to her and won this time. By engaging with her work, in particular Clifton's theology of joy, this question has been answered for me. Joy does not promise physical immortality. In acknowledging death, joy accepts its existence in favor of choosing life. In "won't you celebrate with me," Clifton chooses joy. Her making that choice is the failure of those heinous somethings. Death is a part of the complexity of human life; its inevitability does not foreclose the possibility for joy.

The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life. –Book of Romans
(NRSV, Romans 6.23)

The death Clifton experienced that winter evening in 2010 was the end of this life. When Clifton spoke of sin as the acknowledgement of darkness and *not* choosing joy, she was speaking of another kind of death—a death of the spirit, of freedom that would enable the somethings some kind of victory. Within this understanding, joy is a revolutionary act and everyday practice. To celebrate with the speaker of "won't you celebrate with me" is to take up this revolutionary act, not only for the speaker but also for "you" who celebrates with her. "Won't you celebrate with me" is a call to arms as joy itself is resistance. Joy as a revolutionary act is an everyday form of Black women's resistance, championed by Clifton.

The experience of joy is the affirmation of the complexity of Black women's lives. Our joy exists in and through struggle and promises survival. To engage with joy, to choose the complexity of life, is to resist the somethings that threaten the lives of Black women. In line with other conventions of Black feminist engagement it is an

everyday form of resistance rooted in experience that goes beyond the physical, mental, or spiritual. Joy engages all of these things as it engages the "whole of life." Joy is felt in the body, and it reverberates there through the affirmation of its value. Joy is felt in the mind and reverberates there through the conscious decision to choose joy. As Clifton demonstrated, joy is experienced in the spirit and reverberates through a connection to the divine and through sexual desire. This holistic experience of joy operates as foundational knowledge for Black women's understandings of the possibilities of liberation. To experience joy is to understand what is possible while acknowledging what is. It is to experience what is possible holistically and to also stay grounded in reality.

Clifton's theology of joy demonstrates how feelin is knowledge. Joy is more than a fleeting experience. It is the way in which one knows something else is possible. Clifton spoke on many occasions of poetry's power to reveal "the whole of life." Her use of poetry to transmit and layout a blueprint for joy as a liberatory experience situates her as part poetic revolutionary and part spiritual conjure woman. Clifton's poetry is short and to the point for a reason. As she has said about her brevity in writing her poems "when I am finished, I stop."[21] There is much work to be done, but there is always room for joy.

[21] She stated this at her last reading at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, 2009.

Chapter 4
Sacred and Secular Ecstasy in Avery*Sunshine's Vocal Performance

In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea. – Audre Lorde
(Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 56)

[S]inging is running this sound through your body. You cannot sing a song, and not change your condition. – Bernice Johnson Reagon
(Reagon)

§

BEHOLDING

Car and dashboard
windshield wipers
and rain beat
a sky unfolding
by first soprano
demand and daughter
lifting against the glass, spinto
a resonance bound to break—
I'm sure it cracked just a
little bit the walls between
one and the other

this first day of
voice, rung through a timbre
of something bigger
preparing some kingdom

Now, when she sings in that register
she hears, out of her own chest
her mother beating against glass
bound to break, surely cracking
a wall.

§

A sound resonates through the head, lower tones vibrating in the chest. The highest point lifts the scalp from the skull. Belly distended with air, mouth gaping, and feet firmly planted and apart. Sing it through your face, as if you are pushing it off of your head.[22] *Adjustments are made; the whole body had become an instrument. The torso a reservoir of wind, limbs alternative control devices. The head is the horn, the speaker, the amplifier and output. There are cracks, then at the trill a note breaks and something else, a tear. Silence.*

It is the job of the vocalist to emote, not to get emotional.

I gather myself but the song has gone beyond me. It is not sadness but an overwhelming vibration of feelin, and I cannot identify those feelins yet. The song is about Immaculate Conception, or a Mississippi chain gang, or something else I don't know because it is in a language I haven't learned. But a sound has broken through my body and it carried me, or I have carried it, to a place where it spun and resounded. I wondered if I could replicate this for someone else.

§

I first encountered anointed sound in my mother's car. It was legendary in every church we'd attended; the prize of all qualities one could have is the ability to *move* people deeply through song. It was always described in the supernatural, as if one had to be born with it or endowed with it by the Holy Spirit. Exclusively used *for the uplift of His kingdom.* There was no amount of work or practice that she could do to have this quality bestowed upon her. Anointing was a holy thing, but that resounding ecstasy happened not in a church, but in a car, the studio, my bedroom floor while listening to Jill

[22] In this narrative, the voices of multiple vocal instructors are not italicized.

Scott, or Sarah Vaughan, the living room where I mimicked each warm note Toni Braxton sang. The quality that I experienced didn't feel relegated to Sunday (or Friday night rehearsal), but the language for it was there.

In the workings of the first instrument, the voice and my body stretch and open into a response. I was told by musician Avery*Sunshine, also known as Denise White, that ecstatic experience in song is not only essential but, "The older you get, the more you're going to want to get it." (White *Personal Interview*) She explained that this experience was not only essential to one's ability to sing but to one's core as a woman. As something that already exists in my core, it is independent of others. Sunshine goes on to say:

> The person you love may not have that same [urge]. But it's like, 'I have this thing in me, what's that?' […] There is a spiritual realm where this thing happens as well and, ideally, to me, it would behoove us to… explore that early on. But nobody talks about that. Your mom ain't going to sit down and talk to you about spiritual ecstasy let alone, shoot, physical ecstasy; ain't nobody talking about that. (*Personal Interview*)

Here, Audre Lorde's essay on the erotic rings most true. What Sunshine echoes, and I can testify to, is an experience that lies on a "deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling." (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 53) This experience, accessed by both singing and listening to song, is felt in the body and stirs the soul; it exists in the realm of the erotic. Ignited by Black roots music in the U.S., which transcended the boundaries between sexual and erotic, secular and sacred, listeners and practitioners of R&B, Soul, Gospel, Jazz and the Blues experience the out-of-body and erotic and do not differentiate between the two. As James Cone notes of secular blues, in his book *Spirituals and the Blues*: "They tell us that there is no

wholeness without sex, no authentic love without the feel and touch of the physical body. The blues affirm the authenticity of sex as the bodily expression of black soul." (Cone 118).

While it is widely understood that both secular and sacred Black music are co-influenced by styling and emotional themes, but the *simultaneous* spiritual and sexual experience of Black women's vocal performances within these genres is seldom discussed. That is to say, there is an acknowledgement of and an investment in the narrative of Black music having permeable barriers between its secular and sacred genres, but the ecstatic experiences that both genres convey and perform are often unacknowledged. To explore the sacred and secular (spiritual and sexual) experience of Black music is to examine it through the lens of Lorde's erotic, which centers "this thing within" women that is ignored, suppressed, and demonized—yet a source of tremendous power.

**Poof* Sunshine!*

Avery*Sunshine's self-titled debut album demonstrates a clear decision to freely traverse the worlds of sacred and secular Black music. My first encounter with the singer was a backyard party for queer Black women in Washington, DC, where she was the featured performer. She entertained us with the featured tracks on her album, but the most memorable part of her performance was her rendition of the gospel tune, "Safe in His Arms." At this backyard party which occurs annually during Black Gay Pride in Washington, DC, Avery*Sunshine, who also works as a choir director for two churches in Atlanta, led the audience—separating us into soprano, alto, and tenor voices. We

harmonized the chorus that would back her up through the song. At a party that wasn't quite intended to be church, she brought church with her. During our interview she described her need for spiritual and communal singing at her concerts "[there is] the clear connection between me on the stage with a crowd and me at the church, in the pulpit with the congregation […] I do have a need for that communal [singing] I do and that's very, very—it's very African. Those are our roots." (White *Personal Interview*) Sunshine's communal gospel extends into her debut studio album as well.

Sunshine's album reflects the influence and importance of gospel, soul, and R&B in her music. It is an overwhelmingly "feel good" album with mostly mid-tempo, up-beat rhythms, like the introductory track, "All in My Head," and playful lyrics, as in her most popular single, "Ugly Part of Me." The track "Blessing Me" is a willful blurring of the sacred and secular; it is an R&B slow groove arrangement of a well-known gospel tune. Self-proclaimed as "Chu'ched" (Sunshine, *Meet & Greet*) Avery*Sunshine also addresses sensuality and desire. The song "Just Not Tonight" describes forbidden desire, while "Like This" describes a romantic relationship in a guitar-forward, lounge-inspired track. Her first hit, "Stalk You," which is about obsessed sexual desire, is a house[23] tune.

Sunshine's process is deeply spiritual and synergetic. She works with her partner, Dana, who plays guitar and co-writes many of her songs. She credits him for pushing her to do her own project. Dana is also embedded in the story of Sunshine's name, a moniker that is, perhaps, the most explicit embodiment of scared experience and sexual desire. When one of Denise White's singles was picked up and it was clear that her music career as a solo artist was beginning, Dana prompted her to name herself. (Nodap; DeBreaux)

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[23] House is an up-tempo dance music genre known for heavy bass and soulful lead singing.

"Avery" is inspired by the sassy and sexually empowered blues woman, Shug Avery, from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple,* and Sunshine is taken from the character of the same name in the film *Harlem Nights.* (Sunshine, *Meet & Greet*; DeBreaux; Nodap) In *Harlem Nights,* Sugar Ray (Richard Pryor) asks for a girl who could "turn out" a man. Verna (Della Reese), the resident madam offers, "I have got a girl whose pussy is so good, if you threw it up in the air it would turn into sunshine." (Murphy, *Harlem Nights*) Sunshine (Lela Rochon) is a high priced, exclusive prostitute employed by Verna who manages to seduce a mobster to the point of distraction—an essential element to the scheme cooked up by the protagonists of the film. This mobster promptly decides to leave his wife and children and endangers his life to stay with Sunshine—and thus her radiant pussy. Rochon portrays this character as a soft-spoken, seemingly innocent and impeccably dressed seductress who drips with playful sexuality. Avery*Sunshine observes, "…well, she was a hooker [or] whatever but it wasn't dirty to me and there was something about her that I admired." (White *Personal Interview*).

White admires Shug Avery from *The Color Purple* for being a "…bossy, testosterone-filled woman." It was this "testosterone" that Sunshine identified with in Shug's character. "…I've always been told that I have more masculine energy by my ex-husband… I do have more masculine energy and I embrace it and I think… that masculine energy… is nothing but confidence in saying what we [women] want." (*Personal Interview*) Confident and self-assured, Shug Avery takes orders from no man and teaches the protagonist, Celie, about her own sexuality as an overarching lesson in self-love.

After singing a blues dedicated to Celie, Shug playfully coaxes her into embracing her own body. In the film, Shug dresses Celie in a red fringe gown and instructs her to "shake her shimmy." (Spielberg et al., *The Color Purple*) At the end of this scene, Shug kisses Celie in an act of both friendly and sexual attention. Celie emerges from this moment more in touch with her own sexuality and more willing to see herself as desirable.

Shug also teaches Celie her greatest spiritual lesson: "That God is more of an *it*" that is also, "Just trying to be loved." (Spielberg et al., *The Color Purple*) Shug connects God to nature and the core of humanity. In the line that ties in the title of the book, Shug says, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field and don't notice it." (Spielberg et al., *The Color Purple*) In a climactic scene in her story line, Shug barges into her father's church, interrupts Sunday services, and boldly sings, "God is Trying to Tell You Something," Shug punctuates her performance of "God is Trying to Tell You Something" by telling her father, "See Daddy, sinners have soul too." Her ability to sing religious music, and sing it with deep emotion, was proof that Shug was also spiritually connected—even if she was well known to engage in matters of the flesh. Although it usually the prerogative of the church to convert sinners, it is Shug who converted her father into a more encompassing spirituality.

It is through music that Shug enacts teaching moments, beginning with her blues for Ms. Celie and culminating in her spirited performance in her father's church. She directs Celie to see God in herself, thus emerging in the book and the film as a beacon of spiritual and sexual knowledge. Sunshine's appreciation for the film (She does primarily reference the film version.) and particularly her identification with Shug Avery's

character reveals how Black women receive the film version of the novel well despite the fact that the film changes some of the more radical aspects of the story. For example, the novel did not have a story line in which Shug Avery reconciles with her preacher father—in fact her father is wholly absent from the novel. That Sunshine reads Shug Avery terms of her ability to embody strength and sensuality speaks to Jacqueline Bobo's assertion that Black women's reception of the film takes on an oppositional gaze. (Bobo, *Black Feminist* 92) In her study in audience reception of the film, Bobo asserts that Black women generally respond well to the film *The Color Purple* because they were about to "extract meaningful elements" of the film. (93) Sunshine reads Shug Avery as sexually empowered and androgynous despite the narrative of her father in the film which could, arguably, be read as an attempt to reinsert patriarchal power and the desire for male approval in one of the more self-sufficient and empowered female characters. Sunshine reads Shug Avery as especially empowered. Shug Avery is a master teacher of the connectivity of all things, the presence of the Divine in all things, and the oneness of spirituality and sexuality in life and music. Such a character is a fitting frame for Avery*Sunshine's persona and art.

Thus far in this project I have explored feelin practices through the release of shame in the ego via the image and the experience of joy through poetry. Here, I explore the current of ecstatic experience felt in the body through music. Feelin in song is a current that testifies as divine vibration conducted through the body. It has the ability to vibrate through the body (quite literally through the chest, vocal chords, and head) and transmit to listeners through what Teresa Brenen calls "the transmission of affect," or the

biological and social means by which "the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another." (Brennan 3) Although Brenen is not specifically discussing music, she explores these neurological and social transmissions; the quality of these transmissions is not discussed—perhaps because such characteristics are subjective and, therefore, less quantifiable. What makes a note or a measure of notes sensual, a melisma indicative of the presence of the Holy Ghost, or a chord euphoric is unfixed. Whom a song moves, and how, is a matter of taste. Vocal singing experiences reveal the same shifting and subjective experiences as those of sexual and spiritual ecstasy.

This chapter explores feelin through song. Not just the listening to music, or lyrical interpretation, but the experience of, as Bernice Johnson Reagon has said, "running sound through your body." (Reagon) What I explore here are the implications of the ecstatic experience of running sound through the body. What does it mean that Black women have been important purveyors and participants of this practice, and what are the uses of this practice as a tool for thriving? In the music world where the lines between sacred and secular are seemingly rigid, how do Black women artists who often break these barriers conceptualize the quality of this sound and its meaning spiritually and sexually?

I argue that Black women's vocal performances can be an expression of spiritual and sexual ecstasy. Vocal performance is imperative to this exploration of spiritual and sexual ecstasy because it takes place on an emotional terrain and is expressed through the bodies of Black women. Vocal performances of secular and sacred music are places in which Africanist ideologies of the sacred and secular intersect. Discussing how black

women experience and articulate this experience of sacred and sexual ecstasy through vocal performance will highlight dimensions of Black women's sexuality and spirituality that are rarely discussed. It will demonstrate how Black women express and experience sexuality and spirituality simultaneously. Finally, considering the simultaneity of black women's spiritual and sexual ecstatic expression through the body demonstrates how feelin ecstasy emerges as an experienced-based mode of Black feminist thought. It renders Black women whole in terms of their sexuality and their spirituality in sacred and secular spaces.

First, I will briefly describe how ecstasy is understood within parts of U.S. Black culture. Ecstasy is an experience that allows one understand oneself as a spiritual and human being—a sacred subject. This culturally specific concept of ecstasy takes on ambivalent forms that destabilize the dichotomy of sacred and secular. Avery*Sunshine's engagement with ecstasy embraces this ambivalence in order to fully express the complexity of the sacred and sexual ecstatic experience. In order to contextualize Avery*Sunshine's genre-ambivalent music and sacred-secular musical philosophy, I will discuss how Black women vocalists have been purveyors of ecstatic expression through song in both secular and sacred domains. Then, I will engage in close analysis of three themes that emerge lyrically and sonically in Sunshine's self-titled album and demonstrate the simultaneity of sacred and sexual expression.

In interviews with other media sources and with me, Sunshine consistently connects the experience of musical performance to sensuality and the divine. Using an analysis of her music and these sources, I will explore the ways in which Sunshine conceptualizes these sexual and sacred connections in her music. First, I will explore her

use of ambiguous and ambivalent lyrics to connect worldly experience to experiences with the divine. In the song "Today," Sunshine makes these lyrical connections by using the individually centered style of the blues to access her right to complain while simultaneously acknowledging the divine. Building on the ambivalence in her lyrics, I look at the song "I Need You Now," in which Sunshine pleads to a "you" that, upon first listening, seems to be God but could very well be a lover or a dear friend. In this song Sunshine repeatedly and deliberately uses the vocal skill of growling to invoke and connect to the deeply embodied experience of the presence of God and her lover.

Finally, I will round out this discussion of ecstasy by approaching song as freedom. Sunshine described singing as liberating, and she demonstrates that freedom vocally and through genre-ambivalent music. Looking at her sensual, jazz-infused interpretation of the gospel song "The Most," I will analyze how Sunshine's love song to a lover and her children ultimately transforms into a love song for music itself.

Feelin the Spirit: Blue Notes, Sangin and Ecstasy in the flesh

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Most preachers tune up in the key of A.

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The term "tune up," in this context, refers to the practice, in African American Christian Churches, of singing or chanting part of a sermon for climactic effect. I had a girlfriend with an interest in theology who gave me this little bit of Black church trivia. I don't know if it is true, but, for me, it was part of a search for the note or series of notes

that were most sacred, most exalting—most likely to make one catch the spirit. I wanted to figure out how I got these complex and overwhelming feelins from notes, melisma, and intervals I heard and sang despite the lyrics.

Initially, I was taken by the concept of notes and their spiritual qualities when in my freshman year in college I learned about *diabolus in musica* or the flat fifth. It is the most dissonant interval in European music and named for the devil because of its darker qualities. That it has been so heavily used to denote the gothic, the demonic or dark in many genres of music seemed to solidify this concept for me. Further, the idea of the flat fifth resonated with me because it is a familiar interval in black music. The flat fifth is essential to the blues scale. (Evans 85) This would seem to be musicological proof that perhaps it is the devil's music, as church folks and legends have always said. But if blues music is the work of the devil, many Christians are implicated in blending the sacred with the profane as they utilized the intoxicating qualities of this music in worship. In an interview, when asked about her assertion that music brings listeners back to the spirit, Avery*Sunshine references a biblical verse:

> Music was so important music was such a force that it almost was in competition it was revered […] I wish I could pull up the scripture now and talk about Lucifer himself being the instrument. His body being the drum his lips being a horn for God to have an angel that is music is the personification of music like it was something versed out of spirituality. (Sunshine, *A Conversation* par. 20 sic.)

The devil, once again, emerges as a complicated force—a minister of "both/and." As the previous chapter discussed, Clifton's meditation on Lucifer presents him as the darkness within God's will. Lucifer is the prince of light as well as the prince of darkness. This duality of the devil is presented in his Yoruba relative, Eshu Legba who, at the

crossroads, embodies the complexities of life. Through him, both/and become symbolic dissonance within the core of experience. It is Legba, a largely endowed, cross dressing, sexually charged, guardian of passage to the afterlife, who, when crossed with the Christian devil, becomes the minister of music on earth. Both/and—sacred/secular—angel/devil. If music is in fact the devil's work, it is within the divine will of God.

Blues Notes and Ecstasy

The devil's note persists in the blues because the blues and the musical traditions from which it comes do not exist on the Western scale. Blue notes are the variety of notes between Western notes. (Evans 86) They are the most accessible through the voice because Western instruments often have to be ingeniously altered to achieve them. According to Evans, "Blue notes are quite clearly an extension of African musical practices and sometimes additionally an attempt to come to terms with Western instruments [that are] not designed to enable the player to achieve them easily." (87) These notes, played "between" the Western standard division of notes, are often invoked on instruments by playing adjacent notes—one note and the next note—this *and* that. This duality of notes and the way they must be achieved on Western instruments symbolically achieve the both/and sonically.

My search for the quality of a note, a series of notes, turned into this research project. I went looking for the note, and I found myself in the places where I first practiced singing, Baptist and Pentecostal churches. In the church, the term used to describe the ability of a singer to evoke emotion and spiritual ecstasy through music was "the anointing." The anointing is a biblical notion, and the gift of song through the

anointing is a concept that describes one's connection to the Divine as much as one's ability to carry a tune. It is defined as a skill that could not be taught on an earthly plane. (Bibles I John 2.27) Unable to be learned or taught, the anointing is a gift from the Divine that uses the flesh as a vessel. (II Cor. 4.7) In a worldview that perceives the flesh as permanently disabled through sin, anointing is divine ability. (Acts 10.38) It is empowerment from the Divine to rule or even to pass on a message. (I Samuel 10.1; Luke 4.16) Despite the definition of anointing as adept singing skill appearing nowhere in the Bible, the use of the word as a barometer of divinely inspired singing persists.

The anointing describes authority, and for the singer it is an authority to invoke the Holy Spirit. In the church setting, the anointing is a subjective quality that speaks not only to a person's ability to sing, but to the person's ability to move the congregation into an enlivened state of spiritual ecstasy. Because of its subjective aspects, the anointing is a terrifying quality to negotiate in the church. In the church, anointing is the quality in which one's connection to the Divine is perceived. A barometer of a person's salvation in Christ, the anointing is also a confirmation of "good singing." All of these measures, however, are subjective. (Even if they are not related as such in The Church.) As Sunshine notes, "[…] I absolutely believe in anointing and I think everybody is anointed to do whatever that thing is. I do believe that but it may not touch everybody the same way." (White *Personal Interview*) I bring the anointing up as a subjective barometer of musical and spiritual quality. It is this very quality of subjectivity that most closely acts as a measure of ecstatic experience in vocal performance.

I found it difficult to find a term for this measure, and I am not the only one. In her dissertation on pedagogical strategies for gospel vocal training, Trineice Murlene

Robinson-Martin defines the qualitative difference between singing and sangin' across the lines of technical and emotive skills:

> When a singer is regarded as being able to 'sing,' he or she typically has a nice timbral quality to their voice, can sing in tune, and demonstrates technical and harmonic skills with the use of 'runs,' 'vocal ornamentations' or the soulful elements. However, the singer […] typically lacks the ability to display a personal connection to the music in a way he or she would by 'sangin'.' […] 'Sangin'' is not about technique; it is having the ability to relate to the audience in such a way that the audience feels as if the singer is telling their story. (Robinson-Martin 18)

Yet, even this passage does not adequately describe the experience of this particular quality in a voice. Although sangin' describes the emotional quality of being able "to relate to the audience," "the anointed" voice is described in biblical terms that invite divine presence. Whether or not most churches would agree on the theological implications of this is not the point here. In fact, some would say the term is overused because it limits the way in which we listen to vocal artists. Avery*Sunshine does. In our interview I asked about the concept of "anointing" in voices, and she replied that the term is, "Overused and abused […]." (White *Personal Interview*) The concept itself is subjective. Yet, something *is* experienced, even if on the individual level of the audience or the performer.

Adding another term to describe this quality seems superfluous, but this lexicon of terms—anointing, sangin, blowin, witnessing, testifying, or putting it down is rooted in a culture that understands vocal singing to have powerful, enigmatic qualities that move people. These powerful qualities are so valued because they can "change ones condition," as Bernice Johnson Reagon notes. (Reagon) To sing is to enact this change, and an

individual's ability to transmit that change, having the anointing or sangin', is valued in Black culture. Ecstatic experience is imperative to changing one's condition.

Whereas ecstasy is considered an excessive and inarticulate experience had within women, in parts of U.S. Black culture ecstatic experience through song is essential for survival. Singer and historian Bernice Johnson Reagon describes the experience of congregational singing, "[...] singing is running this sound through your body. You cannot sing a song, and not change your condition." (Reagon) Singing itself and the ecstatic experience induced by singing are imperative to an erotic experience wherein one "become[s] less willing to accept powerlessness." (Lorde 58) Reagon continues:

> […] I am talking about a culture that thinks it is important to exercise this part of your being. The part of your being that is tampered with when you run this sound through your body is a part of you that our culture thinks should be developed and cultivated that you should be familiar with, that you should be able to get to as often as possible. And that if it's not developed you are underdeveloped as a human being. (Reagon)

Black women like Reagon are central actors in this culture. Reagon was teaching songs to a group of community members in Virginia Beach when she said this. Describing the sensations in her own body at the time she said, "I'm a little flustered up here. My temperature— I'm a little flushed, and I open my mouth and I do one of these songs and my whole something is different and I can just *feel* it." (Reagon) The erotic experience she describes refers to Black religious music—spirituals. Her description, however, draws erotic parallels to the experience of singing. Valuing these erotic sensations, even in sacred contexts, reveals a distinctly dual mode of understanding the

erotic in Black culture. This experience exists on a sacred plane and occurs in the sacred place that is the church.

The power to change one's condition has been traced as a particularly important aspect of art and culture diasporically. In his book *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, Robert Farris Thompson calls this power to change *àshe.* According to Thompson, àshe holds, "the power-to-make-things-happen." (Thompson 5) Thompson goes on to say that: "A thing or a work of art that has àshe transcends ordinary questions about its makeup and confinements: *it is divine force incarnate.*" (7 *italics mine*) Àshe is the experience of the divine on earth. Yet, it is also a force that exists within an aesthetic. Àshe is a force that is experienced through its representation. He goes on to say: "As we become noble, fully realizing the spark of *creative goodness God endowed us with* […] we find the confidence to cope with all kinds of situations. This is àshe. This is character. This is mystic coolness." (16 italics mine) The concept of anointing in U.S. Black religious expression echoes the qualities of àshe in which "creative goodness" is "endowed" by God. Through àshe, style meets and *represents* the divine and the divine's power to change.

Ecstatic experience is the impetus for changing one's condition, and it is the practice that makes change possible. Ecstatic expression through song exists on a spectrum where secular life and sacred afterlife are part of a single continuum of human experience. It is for this reason that Black women's vocal expression exists between the spaces of secular and sacred musical genres, between sexual and spiritual ecstatic experiences.

Black Womanist Thought and the Blues Body

Ecstasy, the divine erotic experience, happens in the body. Black women musicians of religious or secular music must, regardless of genre, negotiate issues of embodiment and sexuality that are projected onto their bodies. Blues women are most often associated with their brazen sexuality, and this characteristic of their musical content and performance has been considered the most liberating aspect of their legacy. Hazel Carby led the discussion on Black women's sexuality in the blues in her influential article "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime." In it, she argues that blues women embody Black women's sexual politics outside of a middle class framework. (Carby, Hazel V. 12) The blues itself is a mode of cultural production in which the experiences of Black life, particularly Black life in the rural South, were communicated and the circumstances critiqued. According to Carby, "The women blues singers had no respect for sexual taboos, for breaking through the boundaries of respectability and convention." (21) Kelly Brown Douglas, inspired by blues women's unabashed embrace of their own sexuality, describes something called a "blues body" that is inherently connected to sensuous experience. The blues is a form of music in touch with the sexual. "To be sure, sexual themes are prevalent within blues, specially those sung by women. Blues women sing, seemingly without shame or restraint, about their sexual needs, desires, and preferences." (Douglas 50) Black women whose bodies have often been subject to scrutiny and Western projections are embodied symbols of sexual desire in blues, yet they shape the dimensions of their own sexual desire. Douglas goes on, "Blues is in touch with the feelings of blues bodies. Blues does not begin with ideas in the head, but with the experiences of the body. Blues does not intellectualize those experiences; rather, it

passionately expresses them. Blues listens to the call of the body and responds by conveying what the body is communicating, making visible that which is invisible." (51) Blues women become high priestesses, experts of sensuous experience in their own bodies.

The blues body is a body on the edges of society—a body in touch with sensuality and ecstatic expression. It yearns for sensuous experience, and sensuous experience can occur in the church or in the juke joint. As described in blues woman Bessie Smith's "Preachin' the Blues," Sister Green, a character in her song, is as uplifted by the power of the blues as she would be by the Holy Spirit. Douglas notes, "Resonating to the message of the blues, she cannot help but jump up and shout/shimmy. […] Through the blues, she is put back in touch with her body." (53) Put back in touch with her body, Smith's Sister Green breaks barriers expressed in the church, where piety and silence around sexuality are preferred.

In the context of music, the shout and the shimmy become indiscernible expressions of ecstasy in the flesh. Blues singer Ida Goodson reiterates this experience in the documentary *Wild Women Don't Have the Blues.* She says, "…when I play the blues I feel something going on and next thing I know I'm feeling good … then you go and play church songs and then that feeling come back… The devil got his work and God got his work." (Dall, *Wild Women don't Have the Blues*) Goodson's statement both highlights and rejects the Christian division between sexual and divine sensuous experience. Her acknowledgement, certainly, gives room to the saints in the church who continue to view the blues as the devil's music because of its sexually explicit content.

Yet, she also rejects the notion that because of this association with the devil she, too, must reject the experience. Both the devil's work and God's work are deemed valuable.

Blues women are willing to work on the edge of sexual and spiritual devotion that are inherently tied to the edges of respectable black womanhood because these edges constitute Black women's complex lives. In her study on blues women, Angela Davis notes how blues women have been imperative to a cultural legacy from which popular music continues to reap benefits, but as icons and musicians whose brazen lyrics put sexuality forward, they were "a rich terrain for examining a historical feminist consciousness" through their "aesthetic representations of the politics of gender and sexuality." (Davis, *Blues Legacies* xiii) Davis' work highlights the feminist implications of blues women's music, specifically through their lyrics. Black women blues musicians, despite their marginalized status, developed a musical genre in which their own sexual desires were expressed during a period when many black women chose to be silent about their sexualities. The fact that these women connected the two experiences through song and deed highlights a rejection of the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular in content and experience. That they expressed these connections through their own experiences and the experiences of other Black women sheds light on the fact that ecstasy is a valuable aspect of Black women's lived experiences.

Between the histories of slavery and abuses against Black women's bodies, including rape, much has contributed to a legacy of silence around sexuality. (Hine 912; Hammonds 132) Compounded with the ongoing devaluation of Black women's bodies, Black women in the church are also burdened with issues of respectable Christian womanhood. As Katie Canon notes, the Christian church "restricted their sexual agency,

by binding them with all kinds of biblical cords and ecclesiastical strings" in order to counter stereotypes. (Cannon) Specifically, Black women have been taught that, biblically, their specifically female bodies are marred with carnal sin. The limits within which their bodies remain respectable are very small. According to Nancy Lynne Westfield, "Women have been taught in the sanctuary to silence, tone down, disregard, even hate their bodies as bodies. […] when body is spiritualized as while praying or singing or testifying, or shouting or dancing the holy dance, then the body is seen as 'good.' But, if the body is the body, carnal, flesh then it is to be silenced and hidden." (Westfield 46) Blues women, especially those who do their work inside and outside the walls of the church, challenge these limiting notions by freely expressing the ecstatic experience within their bodies through music and the particularly vulnerable performance of singing.

§

BLUES IS A BLACK CONDITION

Over-determined skin and life
bones of blueswomen

Bones of blueswomen living
blue lives in blue America
on blue streets hollering
in blue fields
make you feel some kinda…

The Researcher reaches
points a blue finger
at a blue blood
says: Blue blue blood
finger blue, a point

out of the blue

Out of the Blue

See what I'm sayin'?

Blues is a black condition.

Over-determined skin and life
& bones

of Blues women living blue
lives in Blue America
on Blue streets, hollering
in blue fields

some kinda…

Researcher churches
raises a blue hand
To a blues woman
says, Save me Blues!
hand raised in a blue, blue way.

§

The legacy of the blues and its influences on R&B, Jazz and Soul reiterate connections between sacred and secular life. In her album compilation "Church: Songs of Soul and Inspiration," Maya Angelou expressly makes these connections by curating an album featuring women musicians whose work is most well known in the secular world, such as Patti Labelle, Stephanie Williams and Chaka Khan, and having them record Soul and R&B next to gospel tunes. In the short documentary for the project, Angelou describes the importance of secular meeting sacred under the uniting banner of "church" by defining the function of art. She says, "Art is given to us to help us stand up […] that's what the music is supposed to do." (Lesser) Echoing Reagon, for whom the function of Black music is to "change your condition," Angelou's project extends this sentiment

towards contemporary Black music from spirituals to gospel and blues to soul and R&B. Her decision to focus on Black women singers in order to share this message highlights that Black women musicians are integral to connecting these sacred and secular worlds.

In her foreword to the CD project, Angelou expands the notion of church into every aspect of secular life—including her body. "It slides the skin over my muscles and allows my lungs to inspirit and fill so that hallelujah like rain comes from my mouth. Hallelujah falls like rain from my lips." Angelou's poetic and erotic description of church refers to the word "church" as it is used in Black vernaculars, both noun and adjective, both place of worship and state of being. Her sensuous language heightens this state of being into the erotic. Church happens *within* her, and this happening within her body is far more valuable and expansive than a building for religious worship. In the U.S. Black experience dating before enslavement, the church is an internal, otherwise invisible experience, "[…] invisible because this church was resident—not in the liturgies of edifices dominated by whites—but in the slaves themselves […] the slaves carried their worship within them." (Reed, T) For Angelou, church "is where I don't have to go because it is always with me […] When I think about church and remember that church and I are one, I am reminded that everything in God's world is sacred." (Angelou) Angelou punctuates her forward by singing, in a contralto, the spiritual "Every time I feel the spirit"; each time driving the point that "feelin the spirit" is the experience and erotic state of being that is "church." (Angelou) Church, however, can happen anywhere—even in the secular realm or as church folks would have it, "the world."

Black Women Singing Ecstatic experience

To me God is not in religion that's us we do that. I don't know what my music is. I don't know what to call it. God is weaved throughout the whole album in all of the music. — *Avery*Sunshine* (Sunshine, *A Conversation* par. 10)

[…] I would like to interview a lot of church officials and churchgoers and ask them: when they decided to get married and have children and they shared those "magic nights," was it to "The Greatest Hits of Mahalia Jackson?" — *Kim Burrell* (Lilly par. 39) (qtd. in)

§

ON WRITING VOCALESE Make love to a brass horn. List each nuance of the vamp. Cry when he hits that sharp note. Become dissatisfied with frivolous sound. Ritual until E becomes the first note of your daily prayer. Begin to hear words for drawn breath. In time signatures, sketches of pain. Melisma when words can't find rhyme. A note becomes a hard black line.

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Avery*Sunshine is a persona that embodies the master teacher, sexual self-assuredness of Shug Avery and the sweet sexiness of Sunshine. These two personas would certainly be unexpected of a choir director and mother, but when I asked her if there was a difference between Denise White, her given name, and Avery*Sunshine she said, "…Avery*Sunshine is Denise and Denise is Avery*Sunshine. The only difference is Denise is going to say a few curse words." (White *Personal Interview*) Avery*Sunshine has public relations management whereas Denise, "keeps it real." Denise White allows for Avery*Sunshine to emerge as a warm choir director, the coy Sunshine, and commanding Shug Avery. She takes up sexuality and spirituality in her music and her musical mission. She understands the complexities of human life and sees the Divine as present in religious and sexual contexts. In an online interview she said:

> I think that we put God in a box, that is such an overused term but it's fitting. We put God in a box when we say, "I'm only going to do this, and I'm only going to be…" No, I'm a person. I am a sexy Black woman. I want to talk about being sensuous, I want to talk about not feelin good, and I want to talk about God being present while all of that is going on in my life. God is never outside of that, ever. Ever. Even when we so-called sin, God is there. God is there, and I feel like I'm supposed to say that. (Sunshine, *Meet & Greet*)

Musically, these connections are clear. Listeners notice this enough to ask in interviews why she didn't pursue gospel. In one interview Sunshine responded that it would be "like pulling teeth" for her to be a gospel artist. "Because I'm not just gospel music, I'm soul. … God is present [in] every song I sing." (*Meet and Greet*) For White, Gospel was a genre that would limit her ability to express herself as a whole person. She goes on, "There are times I just want to talk about [how] 'I don't feel good today.' […] I need to be able to do that. I can't really do that if I say I'm just a gospel singer […] they don't want to hear that. They want you to say [starts singing] 'In Jesus…' I don't want to talk about Jesus right now! I want to talk about what happened today. I ain't feelin[24] good and I want to talk about that." (*Meet and Greet*) However, White does continue to sing in church, lead the choir and, as I mention above, record and perform gospel music as Avery*Sunshine.

By straddling the fence, she does risk rejection. The line between sacred and secular is thin and treacherous, as artists such as Whitney Houston, Aretha Franklin, Sister Rosetta Tharpe and others who crossed over into secular music received pushback from the religious community. This pushback dates to the emergence of the blues from

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[24] In the interview, Sunshine's speech pattern reflects the use of the term feelin. Here, I incorporate it into my discussion of feelin to illustrate her connection between emotional experience and musical expression.

the legacy of the "seculars" of enslaved people in the U.S. South. Cone observes, "The 'secular' songs of slavery were 'non-religious,' occasionally anti-religious, and were often called 'devil songs' by religious folk." (Cone 98) By calling the blues secular spirituals, Cone asserts that they share a common thread of existential crisis with sacred music but with fleshy urgency: "They are secular in the sense that they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of black soul, including the sexual manifestations. They are spirituals because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience." (100) Philosophical and theological connection aside, blues music itself is implicated by religious music and vice versa.

Alan Young's chapter on Black women gospel artists documents the thin line and constant pushback from "church folk" when gospel artists attempt to cross over to the blues. He observes that while Sister Rosetta Tharpe was a well-respected gospel singer by 1953, when she recorded a blues she was rejected: "[…] when a star figure 'crosses over,'" he said, "church members tend to forget Christ's teachings on forgiveness. The result was that Tharpe's church base disappeared […] she never regained her standing in gospel music circles." (Young 108) Another artist, Willa Mae Ford Smith, was often accused of having too much of a blues sound by church folk, likening her to blues woman Bessie Smith. (109) Despite this, the influence of secular music on gospel music remains, and it is a cyclical influence.

As Hazel Carby observes, "It is widely understood that the influence of spirituals and gospel music can be felt across a spectrum of black American musical forms, but it is also clear that popular forms of secular music have influenced gospel music." (Carby, Hazel V 182) If church folks heard Bessie Smith in Willa Mae Ford Smith it is because

she was there. Mahalia Jackson, one of the most recognized gospel singers, was most influenced by Bessie Smith and other blues singers. According to Horace C. Boyer, "she listened for hours to the recordings of popular blues singers Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey and attempted to capture their nuances and volume." (Boyer 85) Jackson blended the vocal styles of blues singers to create the signature sound that epitomizes vocal worship in the gospel genre. Specifically, Boyer notes the "deep and dark" resonances of the blues singers blended with that of "sanctified singers" in the church shaped Jackson's singing. (Boyer 85) Right down to *vocal styling,* the evocation of praise and worship is implicated by a genre, which according to Angela Davis, "challenged the most powerful African-American institution, the Christian church." (Davis, *Blues Legacies* 121)

Perhaps it is this legacy of contestation that fuels the rejection of blues singers by religious (church) folk. But perhaps this too is a reflection of the cycle of influence between the genres—reflecting a deeper ambivalence toward sexuality and spirituality held by African-Americans. As Cone notes, "most blacks only verbalized the distinction between the 'sacred' and 'profane' and found themselves unable to follow white Christianity's rejection of the body." (Cone 117) This *difficult ambivalence* between secular and sacred music genres often holds musicians hostage to either genre, as Denise White laments. It is difficult because embracing sexuality and other non-religious themes in secular music goes against Christian doctrine, but there is an ambivalence based in a cultural recognition of the connection between the sacred and profane.

Choosing between the sacred and secular in terms of musical genre has been elevated to choosing between "two Gods." In her review of a documentary on Cissy

Houston, Hazel Carby notes the difficulty that performers of sacred and secular music have in choosing one genre over the other. She says that these difficult choices "can result in living with a permanent sense of dual and conflicting loyalties. Whitney Houston was aware that the demands of 'serving two Gods,' as she described it, 'plagued' her mother because 'the church people never want to let you go." (Carby, Hazel V 182)

> *But they took" secular" and made it a vulgar term. They limited it to what they've known it to be. […] It's unfortunate that the people of the church thought I was turning my back on God… just because the word secular was mentioned in my bio, by my team, on the 'Backstage with Kim Burrell' website. — Kim Burrell* (qtd. in Lilly par. 53)

These conflicting choices can be consistently observed in music artists. One Black woman musician who epitomizes this struggle is Kim Burrell. Although Burrell is affiliated with The Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.), the largest African-American Pentecostal denomination that does not ordain women as pastors, she remains a pastor of her own church in Houston. She also serves as a Vice President of the International Music Department, as well as President of the International Youth Choir for the Church of God in Christ. When rumors swirled about Burrell releasing a secular album, the president of the International Music Department of the C.O.G.I.C., Judith McAllister, issued a statement in an attempt to assure the church that, in fact, her upcoming album was not secular and that Burrell was still conducting her life within C.O.G.I.C. "holiness" standards. Although Burrell distances herself from the term "secular" to describe her album, songs on the album deal with secular themes of romantic love and relationships. She has a timid remake of Earth, Wind, and Fire's "Love's Holiday" which begins, "Would you mind if I touched, if reached out to hold you tight," consciously changing

the lyrics that mention kissing. (Burrell, White and Scarborough; White and Scarborough)

Every caution Burrell took to make a seemingly "clean" album that featured secular songs did not fool the religious crowd. Numerous religious blogs criticized her efforts, but none of this criticism foiled Burrell. In an interview at one of these blog sites, Burrell defends her decision to sing songs that may be considered secular. She said, "I have a range of lyrics because we need to learn to speak about love without having to preface it with a scripture. […] [I]f you have this God in your heart, you can have a conversation without mentioning Jesus and God and the Trinity and all that, and people will know that there's love in you." (Lilly par. 38) Burrell's belief in the Divine presence outside of the structure of religion is reflected in her vocal performance, which many reviewers describe as jazz-inspired. While Burrell denies the claims that she deliberately attempts to sing in secular forms, she proves that her musical inspiration comes from her authority to interpret song, any song, as scripture. At the very publicized funeral of Whitney Houston, where she was scheduled to sing Houston's semi-gospel song "I Believe in You and Me,"[25] Pastor Burrell went off program to sing "A Change is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke. Burrell consistently tries to define herself outside of genre yet remains connected to the religious community. She is a musical mentor to countless secular musicians, including Houston, and remains an influence for others such as Avery*Sunshine. (Sunshine, *A Conversation* par. 24) This influence is evident in musical

[25] "The lyrics of "I Believe in You in Me" are religiously ambiguous. Ambiguous in the sense that they are about a love relationship, however, the song's refrain alludes to the hymn "Amazing Grace" by adopting the lyrics, "I was lost, now I'm free." It is also one of the few secular songs on Houston's only gospel album—the soundtrack to *The Preacher's Wife.* (Linzer and Wolfert)

style as well as philosophies on the connection between the sacred and the secular worlds.

> *"[…] there's something about the vibration of music that brings you back to the spirit." — Avery*Sunshine* (Harris par. 18)

The connection between religious and secular music is clearly reflected, on both sides, in singers' vocal expressions across these musical genres. Considering vocal expression in Black women's music forces us to consider not only the mechanics and history of secular and sacred musical influence in their repertoires, but it also forces us to think about how Black women *experience* vocal expression in their bodies along the lines of the sacred and secular. By looking at Black women's experiences within via vocal performance we are also able to tap into a dimension of internal ecstatic experience.

Gospel singers often describe singing as a divine experience. On the video for her first solo release, Karen Clark Sheard described a holy spirit descending on her and her sisters at the beginning of their careers. (*Finally. Live!*) Gospel singer Rita Wilson described being "in the spirit" as an out-of-body experience: "Sometimes it is embarrassing. But I can't control it. When the Spirit begins to come into my body and dwell in me, I can't stop, I can't control it." (Young 120) In an interview with *Rolling Stone,* Whitney Houston described her desire to sing was because she, too, wanted to move people as her mother did: "When I used to watch my mother sing, which was usually in church, that feeling, that soul, that thing – it's like electricity rolling through you. If you have ever been in a Baptist church or a Pentecostal church, when the Holy Spirit starts to roll and people start to really feel what they're doing, it's… it's incredible.

That's what I wanted." (Houston par. 10) Houston's religious influence inspired the approach to her secular career.

As much as these artists are asked about the methods behind production, the concepts surrounding their art, and how they consider the connections between sacred and secular genres, it is often assumed that their experiences of singing the genres would differ because of the lyrical content. As former blues woman Annie Pavageau relates, "It does seem to me, though, that you're bound to feel different when you sing for Jesus than when you sing the blues, because *then*… you are inspired by the Holy Spirit." (qtd. in Davis, *Blues Legacies* 125, italics in original) While gospel singers are expected to experience divine presence in their sacred music performances, they are not expected to have similar experiences while singing secular music. Yet, secular artists describe the experience of singing in similar terms; themes of losing control, being out of the body, and being vulnerable are repeated in their descriptions of musical vocal expression. In an interview with Kick Magazine, Avery*Sunshine said, "there's something about the vibration of music that brings you back to the spirit." (White *Personal Interview*; Sunshine, *A Conversation*) With me she described the experience as "euphoric" and expanded on that concept: "…the spirit…" is "…that indescribable nudge, that thing that is very present that you might not be able to touch but you know it's there." This nudge is the change agent within that "…either keeps you from doing something or encourages you to do something and it definitely is more felt than seen—and I mean internally felt." (White *Personal Interview*) Feelin the activating nudge of the spirit in music, Sunshine not only enacts her own philosophy of the secular and sacred as one but of music as an essential and dynamic force in human expression.

Lyrics, The Right to Complain and Transcendent Runs

Singers acknowledge their own pain, speak about it openly, and transform themselves through the expression of it. This invites and forces a public to acknowledge that pain and witness that transformation. In a culture where Black women's suffering is often ignored or rendered an inherent and noble condition, music serves as a space where Black women's experiences are center and intimately engaged in the public sphere. As Rebecca Wanzo notes, Black women are "[…] frequently illegible as sympathetic objects for media and political concern […]." (Wanzo 2) Suffering and the sentiments attached to recognizing suffering in others is not a political currency Black women are able to negotiate. While I do not argue, in this chapter, that Black women's vocal expression is effective at gaining the "affective agency" Wanzo explores in *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised*, I do explore how Black women's vocal music is a space where they are able to express pain and transform that pain through ecstatic expression.

Black women musicians describe and express pain on an emotive plane through music in spite of cultural and religious logics that often ignore it. Taking up the blues, a music centered on Black experience, is one way Black women have named and expressed their experiences with pain. Although Black religious music allows some room for Black women to express their pain, Christian belief often glorifies Black women's pain as part of God's plan. Within the Black church, Black women's suffering becomes akin to Christ's suffering, reinforcing Black women's suffering as the condition that redeems them and makes them holy. This attitude toward Black women's suffering supports the

idea of "The Black Christ" that "shares with the Book of Job a theodicy of redemptive suffering, or the idea that suffering of the righteous can have a beneficial effect." (Whitted 48) As symbols of long-suffering, Black women would thus be compelled to take up the cross.

Religiously justified ignorance of Black women's pain specifically compounds how Black women endure what Debra Walker King describes as *blackpain.* It is the normalization of Black bodies in pain which "[…] function as rhetorical devices, as instruments of socialization, and as sociopolitical strategy" so that violence against Black bodies not only becomes normalized, but inherent and therefore negligible. (King 16) Blues women and their settings differ in that the notion that they are meant to suffer as a part of a divine plan is ignored and in some cases challenged. In the Blues and other secular music, Black women are allowed to demand an acknowledgement of their experiences. Avery*Sunshine, however, simultaneously acknowledges God, her own suffering, and the ways pain is religiously ignored and in her song, "Today."

While Gospel songs typically focus on faith or God's divine will, in "Today," Sunshine holds onto her right to vocalize her struggles and she reveals an indignation about wanting "her way." Songs like, Rev. Paul Jones' "I Won't Complain," and Walter Hawkins' "Be Grateful" reflect the belief that God's will is perfect and that any complaint about evil in the world is proof of lack of belief in God's good will. Unlike these gospel songs that explain God's will despite suffering, Sunshine's song is not an effort to convince her audience to trust in God. She doesn't question God's presence in her life during her suffering, but she also does not accept suffering as a fixed condition of her life. The tension in the song is of a spiritual and religious woman who ignores God,

as James Cones describes the secularism of the blues, by embracing her sorrows. Sunshine simultaneously ignores and acknowledges God through her lyrics and demonstrates spiritual transformation through music.

Sunshine mentions this song often when she is asked about her choice to sing between secular and sacred music. Reflecting on the limits in the gospel music genre she says, "I don't want to talk about Jesus right now! I want to talk about what happened today." (Sunshine, *Meet & Greet*) Sunshine risks blasphemy by choosing not to be in a constant state of thankfulness for God's grace. Instead, she chooses to acknowledge the difficult. The song's narrative arc also acknowledges a dissonant belief that she can control the experience of her suffering through the vocal transformation from the phrase "I'm trying to stay positive," her reverberating vocalizations, her declaration that "everything is gonna be alright," and, finally, her mother's advice about prayer through good and bad times.

The persona in "Today" describes dissatisfaction with her circumstances and difficulty in attempting to go about her day as if it is not difficult. The refrain is: "Today, oh today/ nothing seems to be going my way/ trying to keep my sanity is getting the best of me today." (White, *Today*) Though Sunshine considers this song to be outside the scope of gospel aesthetics, the song does recognize the Divine. Not only do the lyrics recognize the Divine, they hint at the speaker's acknowledgement of the Christian belief that one should not complain because of God's omnipotence. She holds this knowledge while also holding the truth of her own feelin and circumstances: "Yes, I know the One/ who said I'd be safe from all harm/ Just sometimes what I see/ I let it get the best of me

like today." (*Today*) Just as she holds the concept of God and God's omnipotence, she reserves the right to ignore a theology that denies to her a right to her own pain.

The song begins with Sunshine singing this refrain solo with keyboard accompaniment and the light rhythm of the hi-hat. Sunshine gives us the basic melody of the chorus with little embellishment. In this first round, her airy solo allows the vowels to be accentuated with a slight rasp. The subtle reverb heard in the second phrase of the chorus, along with the addition of guitar riffs, foreshadows the background singers who join her in three-part harmony for a second round of the chorus. This experience is shared. The full band, including guitar and bass, enter the sound space.

The second version of the chorus only slightly deviates from the original, giving us our first melisma on the deified verb in the lyric: "Yes, I know the one, who *said* I'd be safe from all harm." The melisma, here, is a vocal affirmation of the belief in divine action. She goes into the first verse with a less melodic use of the chords from the chorus. In fact, there is a range of no more than five notes in her delivery of the verse. The effect is a melodic speech, and the lyrics are indeed testimony. A looped, speaking Sunshine testifies "Yeah…" in solemn agreement between the lines of her testimony. The verses continue in this way: "(Yeah) My baby's dad is acting like a nut. (Yeah) My car is smoking, it keeps acting up. (Yeah)." The melody slightly shifts as she ends the phrase and the lyrics reflect inward. The notes become lower, and she uses more chest notes, "I feel like I'm about to lose my head." (*Today*)

As Sunshine addresses an audience, the notes get higher: "My strength is getting weak y'all." The semi-spoken notes return as she enters the next verse: "My boss is acting like he's smoking crack (Yeah) / wants me to work two shifts back to back."

(*Today*) The tone of the lead and background voices become stronger, but the elongated vowels and nasal tones create an audible pout that emphasizes the measure of complaint. When the background singers sing, "Yes, I know the One…" Sunshine reiterates a church-based consciousness, ad-libbing "I should know better." (*Today*) She concludes the final verse with the resolve: "I'm trying to stay positive today." This final line leads the vocalist into a series of reverberating "Ohs" while the background singers repeat the chorus. The Sunshine departs from the central melody of the song to venture into this series of improvised, wordless riffs. The reverberating sound rounds out and ends as the background singers conclude the final refrain. A melodic, rounded and resolved Sunshine sings "Everything's gonna be alright."

Sunshine's narration, the vocal and lyrical transformation from complaint to conviction—"Everything's gonna be alright"—is punctuated by the distant voice of her mother on the phone. "Most folks pray when things are out of hand…" her mother says in the first round of the refrain. She goes on, "We need prayer. Prayer is our armor." Sunshine grunts in recognition or agreement, and the two say loving goodbyes. The end of the song frames its meaning, and "Today" winds down to reveal that perhaps it all was a lament to her mother. Listeners realize they were included in an intimate conversation between Sunshine and her mother where the singer felt free to express her discontent. Sunshine articulates the contours of her pain and finally expresses a transitional experience through that pain vocally. The song acts as a testimony and her mother's voice as a discerning moral force that literally punctuates the song by stressing the importance of prayer and trust in divine will.

The refrain, in gospel music, is the space in a song that directs us to the moral lesson. When suffering is expressed in gospel music, the refrain is the place where the listener is reminded of divine will and religious obligation. In gospel songs that do address painful experience, such as Walker Hawkins, "Thank You" and "Be Grateful" or Vicky Winans's "King Jesus," the verses describe suffering, and refrains are the reminder—the succor of the song. While "Today" does have this kind of moral lesson, it is not the focus. The title of the song, "Today," also reflects Sunshine's ambivalence toward using the song's themes as a moral tool. "Today" simply marks the present human situation, not insisting that she should be grateful or lean on Jesus or even wallow in her blues. The refrain, however, takes up a blues aesthetic as it focuses on the human experience. One could posit that Sunshine both acknowledges and deliberately does "ignore God", as Cone suggests of the blues, because despite her knowing about this divine will she insists on describing her struggle on the earthly plane: "Yes I know the One…Just sometimes what I see/ I let it get the best of me like today." (*Today*) Sunshine hints that a part of her struggle is in keeping up such appearances. She frames the song in the secular human world, while depicting the inner struggle of a woman who understands these religious concepts. The lyrics articulate the human condition of grappling with the present— "today's" experiences—while coming to terms with a religious and spiritual philosophy. The song's lyrics exist between gospel and R&B because of the way that they treat suffering and the role of the divine.

Musically, the song demonstrates transformation. The specific timbre Sunshine uses through most of this song produces a whine that audibly signifies complaint. This quality is reflected even in the tones of her background singers. After the second verse,

the refrain takes on a new shape. Sunshine's adlib holds a G note that rounds out the timbre of the backup singers into a fully throated sound. By the end of the final refrain this eighteen-bar adlib simmers down and the resolve, "everything's gonna be alright," closes out Sunshine's vocal arrangement.

The divine is present and absent in "Today." Divine experience, expressed through vocal arrangement, appears as a presence that is exercised within Sunshine's body and exorcised through vocal expression. Sunshine takes us to church in the tradition of her blues foremothers who, "[…] confront[s] the blues, acknowledge[s] the blues, count[s] the blues, name[s] the blues through song [as] the aesthetic means of expelling the blues from one's life." (Davis, *Blues Legacies* 135) Music becomes a form of prayer, an altar to lay things down and change one's condition through the vibration of sound.

Singing God in the Body

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My greatest teacher in singing gospel music was the minister of music at Solid Rock Bible Church in Lancaster, California. Sister Hackett was a slight woman from Chicago who played the piano with such finesse that the congregation would get worked up by a mere four bars of her elaborate intros. As both the minister of music and first lady (pastor's wife), she was also an example of respectable black womanhood. I could go on about her delicate mannerisms matched with her strong will and dynamic personality, especially when it came to speaking about Christ. I could write a book on

her hats and their matching outfits, clutches and heels. But this is about the best lesson she ever taught me: how to growl.

The song was Vickie Winans's "King Jesus." I felt out of place, and slightly favored. Her daughters were selected to sing back up for this high-energy song, and they were the prize singers in the choir. The lyrics, anchored by the stock phrase "I've been 'buked/ scorned/talked about sure as you're born," made the song sound older than it actually was. As we practiced, my timbre wasn't right. Sister Hackett told me to dig deep, presuming I had somewhere to dig at sixteen. "Haven't you been lied on?" she exclaimed. On the spot, I dug up a story from the recesses of my childhood, a third-grade incident when the popular girl blamed me for a nasty note she wrote about our classmates. Sister Hackett, wanting me to get in touch with those feelins of betrayal, made me repeat the girl's name. Thinking about it as an adult, the whole incident seems funny, and even at sixteen I could appreciate the humor of recounting the troubles of a small child. But just that little bit of emotion put some strength in my voice at the very first phrase, "I've been lied on/ cheated..." a strength that didn't seem right coming out of my body. Such a sound seemed relegated to older women who'd actually been through something.

Not only did I seem to lose my childlike soprano, but the chest note had gristle. When I got to the phrase "talked about sure as you're born," I had a grown-woman growl that excited me. Our rehearsal of this song went on longer than we needed to learn it. The feelin needed practice. It would be my first time on the praise team. My newfound growl would be a part of the practice of ushering in the Presence.

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The Growl

I include a discussion of the growl here not to presume that its use is always indicative of transcendence, but to discuss the way it and other vocal tools may be used to express and invoke divine presence. It is essentially a vocal trick. The power in its use is the element of surprise and placement on particular lyrics within a song. Like all vocal tricks used in blues, gospel, soul, and R&B, such as melisma and runs, the growl can be overused and rendered hollow of meaning. When I asked Sunshine about the quality of an "anointed" voice and the use of these skills, she rejected the notion that vocal tricks alone have the power to move. "For a minute," she said, "I thought that the only anointed voices were the ones that could do runs, do all kinds of stuff, the vocal melisma with their voices… I thought that was anointing until you listen." She goes on, "There are people who… you know the whole song is nothing but a run. It's been executed wonderfully but I didn't feel anything." (White *Personal Interview*) Despite this, Sunshine and other notable singers use the growl, blasts of vibrato, melisma, and runs to express emotional connection and emphasize the meaning of a lyric or draw the audience's attention to a note.

Classical voice instructors find the trick of "growling" a rather elusive skill to teach. It happens in the throat and resonates through chest notes. It creates an explosive vibration less subtle than the typical vibrato. Its use signals that divine presence has taken over the singer's voice and sent it into the supernatural. The growl itself has roots in the field holler, and its persistent use on single whole notes reflects that relationship. Blues singer Koko Taylor's execution of the growl in the opening sequence of "I'm A Woman"

typifies this use. Taylor's "Oh yeah," is an invocation of a supernatural feminine presence. The shock of hearing the growl is in the fact that it is so deeply vibratory that it literally shakes the body while carrying a single precise note. Many classical teachers avoid it for fear of damaging vocal chords. To be able to use the growl without such damage is considered a gift.

Amiri Baraka wrote on the structure of these vocal articulations that connect soul desires to sound in his book *Blues People.* Baraka notes the influence of the field holler on the sound and intent of blues music, noting that "[t]he shouts and hollers were strident laments, more than anything." (Baraka 60) Shouts and hollers were also markers of individual style. (61) Furthermore, the sound/feelin produced in the shout became the structure by which the blues was created, "as was characteristic of the hollers and shouts, the single line could be repeated again and again and again, either because the singer specially liked it, or because he could not think of another line. The repeated phrase also carries into instrumental jazz as the riff." (62) Yet the riff continues as a vocal sound/feelin by which repetition of notes and words touch on emotional quality as well as musical style.

Karen Clark Sheard, a gospel singer renown for her use of vocal tricks and honing, along with her sisters the "Clark sound," uses the growl specifically to punctuate her iteration of the voice of God in her gospel version of Jill Scott's "He Loves Me (Lyzel in E Flat)." Sheard's version, "You Loved Me," features her particular vocal ability to create the audio illusion of an echo. By repeating a melodic phrase and diminishing its volume she relates to her audience the sound of "The Still Voice" of God. She sings, "You're not alone, you're not alone, not alone/ I'll hold your hand, I'll hold

your hand/ I'll hold your hand/ I'll help you/ I'll help you/ I'll help you…" and so on. (Clark-Sheard, Sheard and Scott) She ends God's melodic monologue with a series of short runs and punctuates this divine voice with a growl, also managing to echo that growl. Karen Clark Sheard's musical talent was honed in the Black Pentecostal church (the Church of God in Christ specifically) where expressive showmanship and musical expressions of the Holy Spirit are one with God's presence. Sheard takes up anointed authority in her vocal impersonation of God's voice and iterates it through her own full-bodied vocal sound. It is telling that Sheard uses a song most known for its sexual connotations. Scott's original tune is quite explicitly centered on sexual intercourse. The title "You Love Me" is the first line of the song: "You love me/ especially different every time/ you keep me on my feet/ happily excited by your touch…" (Scott and Williams) Though Sheard quite expressly states in the song that Jesus is "who [she's] talking about," her use of Scott's sultry tune points not only to the musical connections between secular and sacred Black music but also to a theme within gospel music that features Jesus as an intimate partner. (Clark-Sheard, Sheard and Scott)

Ecstasy is Meeting God in the Body

Sunshine skillfully uses a blast of vibrato—a soprano version of the growl—as the central feature of the song "I Need You Now." The song begins with a drum buildup and the refrain, "I need you now/ More than I needed you then/ It's been a while/ But I still need my friend," which is sung with background in harmony. When the refrain ends, drums return to build the momentum and lead us to a blast of the word "I've" in a vibrato-filled C note. The textures of the various vibratos build on the momentum of the

song. The first verse continues, “I’ve really been going through/ Beat down caught in a rut.” The “I” in “I’ve” receives the full-throated vibrato. This signals the personal focus of the song. “I Need You Now” is a song about internal struggle directed toward an ambiguous “you.” The tone of the song, along with the use of a quartet style background, gives the “feel” of a gospel tune in which the “you” is God.

The second verse continues in this ambiguous vein. Opening with another blast of full-throated vibrato, the beginning of the song enhances the effect of the growl by using repetition and building, once again, on the anticipation of the drums at the end of the previous refrain. “I’ve tried I’ve tried I’ve tried I’ve tried” it begins, the blast releasing into a decrescendo that relates the sense of defeat—as if the phrase continues, “I’ve tried, but I failed.” The repetition of words and notes turn the lyrical line into a riff. As the verse continues, Sunshine makes a lyrical allusion to failed attempts to solve deeply spiritual problems in “the world” or in sin. She sings, that she’s tried, “Hanging out with the crowd/ when no one could hear my voice/ I guess the music was just too loud.” Cut off from needs otherwise unmet, the lyricist’s attempt to be understood “in the world” only enhances the sense of isolation in the song and the continued need for this “you.” The song’s use of this conceit pivots toward gospel styling, yet there continues to be an ambiguity about the “you.” Sunshine’s lyrics often use ambiguity in order to tread this line between gospel and R&B.

Along with the growl, Sunshine features backup singers who vocalize in the style of the classical gospel quartet. This style encourages every voice in the quartet to have a distinct timbre, ad-lib, and sustain notes longer than other members or to respond to the

soloist in melodic speech. In this style, voices singing in unison seem extremely distinct. This becomes most clear in the bridge.

In Black music, the bridge transforms and gives new meaning to the song. This is also true in "I Need You Now." The ambiguity of the "you" in the song is not solved but further confounded. Using a stock conceit common to soul music, Sunshine goes through a list of people she has consulted about her dilemma and the various advice they give her only to disregard a well-meaning, doctor, pastor, and finally mother who entreat her to move on. Sunshine sings, "My doctor said there's nothing wrong/ It's all in my head/ My pastor said it's time to move on/ You know that's the same thing my mama said/ But I ain't listening to nobody else/ Because I know what I need/ and all I need is you." (White, *I Need You Now*)

One of the most famous uses of this conceit is Aretha Franklin in the bridge of Don Covay's composition "Chain of Fools" in which Franklin sings, "My father says leave you alone/ my mother says come on home/ my doctor says take it easy/ but your loving is just too strong." (Covey) It is also reflected in the spiritual "Jordan River" in which a similar list of family members and friends are unable to "cross the river" with the singer. The drastic decision to cross over is on the speaker alone. By translating this concept in which drastic decisions, drastic enough to allude to death, must come from personal conviction or will, Franklin spoke to the power of lovin in influencing a woman's decision—even to her detriment. Rejecting well-intended advice signals a stronger will beyond logic; in Aretha's case, the will was lovin, and possibly in Sunshine's case too. Sunshine's ambiguous "you" does not allow us to know exactly why

she needs this other person or thing, but the need is expressed to be so great it defies logic.

In the bridge, longing turns into illogical erotic desire. Sunshine's bridge alludes to another bridge in Black music where erotic desire is expressed. Sunshine not only signifies on Franklin's conceit lyrically but musically as well. The background vocals during the bridge shift into a doo-wop style similar to Franklin's background vocals on the bridge to "Chain of Fools." This drastic vocal shift mirrors the transitional aspect of the bridge itself. While the bridge further complicates meaning, it does tells us that the "you" in her song may not be God considering Sunshine's pastor is one of the detractors.

In fact, the vamp verifies that the "you" may be a lover. In a sweet tone that is otherwise absent in the rest of the song, Sunshine sings along with background singers in equally sweet harmony: "I need you to come back. See about me." The various points of the song have created a narrative arc where erotic desire is as serious as divine presence and as desirable as sexual ecstasy.

Altering sound to represent and invoke divine presence is common practice in Black music. Returning to Thompsons's discussion of the power of àshe in Ífa, a Yoruba spiritual system, possession of the spirit is affective and embodied. As Thompson states, "To become possessed by the spirit […] is to 'make the god,' to capture numinous flowing force within one's body." (9) This kind of possession is an embodied experience, which is also witnessed through style and represents àshe—the power to change one's condition. Sunshine alters sound, both vocally and instrumentally, to allude to the desire for God's presence in her desire for sexual attention. Desire itself remains connected to the divine and the body through this sonic force produced within the body. That the

difference between her lover and God remain ambiguous throughout the song reflects the ambiguities between sexual and spiritual desire. Singing is the mode by which both sexual and spiritual ecstasy can be experienced, as Sunshine notes, "[singing] releases something very much like sex." (White *Personal Interview*) In this frame, the divine is sexual partner and singing, or running sound through one's body, is intercourse.

Singing to Change Your Condition

> *You can't be a good singer and not be vulnerable and I think being vulnerable allows you to be free. Something about it allows you to be stress free and at peace. That's that Nirvana. Do you know what I mean? For me anyway, it's orgasmic.*
> – Avery*Sunshine (*Personal Interview*)

Opening the body's channels into song and allowing the voice to reverberate on the ears of others is an intimate act. I've discussed the extent to which that act mirrors intercourse and divine exhalation. The deepest places within the human spirit can be reached through song. This deep touch meets Black women at a core that otherwise would be denied by the church or overdetermined by the state. Singing is a tool, a key that Black women have for unlocking their own desires and engaging in this intimate touch.

Opening this channel to the core of a woman's essence is a vulnerable state to engage. "Once you start to put sound out on that level you're out," says Bernice Reagon, "There's no hiding place, you're exposed, everybody in the room has heard what you sound like you know what you sound like and you can't go back in." (Reagon) The

vulnerabilities shared in the act of singing, activated through the activism of the Civil Rights movement, have permeated Black culture.

T.V. Reed began his book *The Art of Protest* with the story of student activists in 1960s Tennessee. In doing so he acknowledged that singing was fundamental and imperative to changing one's condition. During a police raid at the Highlander Folk School, a girl began to sing "We Shall Overcome," and she sings the lyric, "We are not afraid." The act of singing the song while, in fact, being afraid was a mechanism through which the girl "[sings] away a bit of her fear," and "asserts the […] right to freedom and justice." (Reed, TV 1) While songs were a unifying force, they were also an affective force for activists whose livelihood, if not their lives, were in constant peril. In the Civil Rights movement, singing was practiced in order to change one's emotional condition. Bernice Johnson Reagon related a similar story in her interview with Bill Moyers where police raided a church, and someone would raise a song. (Reagon) While the present physical circumstances of the group may not change—they may even go to jail—the air would not belong to the policemen who threatened them. They literally took it back through song.

The songs themselves had messages, but most importantly they united the activists that sang them, shifting the energy from fear to bravery. The energetic importance of the songs is why the songs are simply tools used "To get to the singing." (Reagon) Lyrically they reified the political stance the activists took, carrying a message of freedom to those who sang and heard them. It is ironic that this most vulnerable act was so essential for the Civil Rights movement; that vulnerability had a certain strength and protection.

Black women have changed the landscape of popular music by drawing from a musical tradition that incorporates the importance of changing one's condition. Popular artists such as Beyoncé, Janelle Monaé and Jennifer Hudson inherit this aspect of song and performance in their work by using the power of voice, song and music to articulate sexual desire, spiritual desire, and desire for fundamental change in the conditions of their (inner) lives. This vibrational change is not relegated to one domain of transcendent experience; here, feelin emerges as that fundamental vibrational change that operates on these various planes. Regardless of the song, the feelin needs practice.

Listening to and singing along with these women, even if no audience is present, has been crucial to my spiritual healing. Margo Perkins testifies to the healing power of Black women's voices in her essay "The Church of Aretha." She identifies Aretha Franklin's voice as an imperative touchtone of healing for her while she is in the hostile environment of the academy. "When I journey to the church of Aretha," she says, "I experience again a sense of peace, wholeness, and connection to those life-affirming aspects of my culture and my community." (Perkins 128) I also think of sister-friends and my own mother who speak to the anointed voices of Layla Hathaway, Gladys Knight or Roberta Flack as consolations of healing in troubled times.

Thinking of my own mother, I have to return to that car. She was always singing then. I wasn't always sure she was practicing. My mother was my first lesson in song resounding against a windshield, my little voice and hers meeting in a divine place. Hers classical and mine something else, muddied with a history of sound meant to pierce the heart of God—make God come down and dwell in us. God *in* us.

§

NO TEARS IN THE END
After my Mother, after Roberta Flack

the piano would unfold to
reveal a woman. the top
layer to many dreams a
familiar guitar lick
a lyric.

this is how the ritual begins
or maybe, this is somewhere
in the middle. one, then
two, then many
Softly

all at once permeable, the first
unfolding: a woman. a piano. yet
another woman. sorrow, a
hand turning.
Strumming

reprehensible tears. meaning full,
meaningless tears. a crooked line
of women. a salty muddy
path. a chorus leaning
Singing

this is how the ritual begins.
or maybe, this is somewhere
in the middle. one, then
two, then many
Softly

who finds us here but questions?
hope it be ourselves. an answer, a
woman, a familiar guitar licks.
a lyric. notes resolving:
Killing

this is how the ritual begins.
or maybe, this is somewhere
in the middle. one, then
two, then many
softly.

§

Chapter 5
Conclusion: Toward a Methodology of Anger

What I research is my mother's anger. What I have explored in this dissertation are the ways that feelin shapes Black women's experience and knowledge production. This exploration of shame, joy and ecstasy brings me back to thinking through how anger shapes ways of knowing, how anger can move. Anger has its meanings in the social world. As with Cox and shame, these meanings are pervasive. The angry Black woman meets me before I have had a chance to get properly riled up. Getting in my feelins—knowing and speaking from my core—challenges these meanings that would otherwise attempt to explain me to myself. Understanding the feelin of anger as a way of knowing frees me from its more damaging effects. It gives me the information needed to *practice* it, interrogate the object of my anger for what needs to be moved, shifted. It opens me to more possibilities of experience. It propels a new project, which puts me in the flow of another. This last chapter is about feelin as a methodological practice, about anger as knowledge. It is about my project *Patient.* a collection of poems that began with an outburst and the question *why am I angry?*

I know that I tread on some seriously dangerous ground by talking about angry Black women. To talk about angry Black women is to uphold, to take seriously, those damaging stereotypes and possibly cement them into some demonstrable reality. In a culture that sees emotion as antithetical to rational, valuable thought, talking about Black

women in terms of their anger has become a form of pathology. As such, there have been continuous attacks against Black women and their ability to reason.

Scientific inquiry has already found that Black women are no more and no less angry than any other group, yet the fear and negative perception of Black women's anger persists. According to psychologist J. Celeste Walley-Jean, the persistence of the stereotype routinely correlates with the subordination of Black women's expression. (Walley-Jean 71) In her empirical study of Black women across various age groups, anger was viewed as a powerful and positive force as well as a dangerous emotion in need of constant regulation and control. (75) The fear of being viewed as an angry Black woman regulated these women's actions even when righteous anger was warranted. Walley-Jean states that contrary to popular belief, and possibly in response to being viewed as angry, "African American women […] are actually *less* likely to experience angry feelings even when faced with situations in which they are criticized, disrespected, or evaluated negatively." (82) These kinds of affect-less reactions are intended to protect them from the harm of stereotypical labeling, however Walley-Jean suggests that the effects of suppressing anger are dire. In terms of individual mental health, problems such as depression and low self-esteem are the effects of unexpressed anger.

As a form of social control, the demonization of angry Black women may actually contribute to Black women's continued subordinate status. Black women's anger has also been found to be reactions to every day forms of racism and disrespect. (75) That the suppression of Black women's anger directly correlates to negative health and social circumstances tells us something about the importance of Black women's anger to their own survival.

When Robert Staples wanted to delegitimize the words of Michelle Wallace and Ntozake Shange, he did so by naming them "Angry Black Feminists." (Staples 25) He suggested that Black women's anger was inappropriately directed and Black men's anger more important by ascribing violence enacted by black men on black women as mere instances of "acting out" as part of a continuous, "[…] curious rage festering inside black men because, like it or not, they have not been allowed to fulfill the roles […] society ascribes to them." Furthermore he casts Black women's anger as primitive and vampiric, describing Shange and her audience of Black women as having "a collective appetite for black male blood." (26) In doing so, Staples set up a dichotomy in which Black women's rage is somehow less attuned, more irrational, and actually more damaging than Black men's anger. Lorde responded in defense of black women with, "Is [black male] rage any more legitimate than the rage of black women? And why are black women supposed to absorb that male rage in silence? Why isn't that male rage turned upon their oppressors?" She continues, "Black men's feelings of nobodiness and their fear of vulnerability must indeed be talked about, but not by black women any more, at the expense of our own 'curious rage.'" (Lorde, "American Disease" 17) By drawing attention to Staples's attack on Black women's righteous rage, Lorde demanded a serious, collective look at Black women's anger as knowledge.

The importance of anger in understanding the lives of Black women must have stayed on Lorde's mind because she continued her thoughts on the subject in her keynote address for the National Women's Studies Association in 1981. The conference theme was "Women Respond to Racism." Lorde stated, "My response to racism is anger." For Lorde, "women responding to racism" means to take anger as a serious matter of

knowing. She goes on: "Women responding to racism means women responding to anger, the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and coopting." (Lorde, "Uses of Anger" 7) Anger was a signpost that such misnamings, betrayals and stereotyping needed to be dealt with, and swiftly.

Addressing anger is imperative to understanding the contours of racism and disempowerment, and any refusals to deal with anger via guilt or deflection is in collusion with such powers. She goes on: "We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor to seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty; we must be quite serious about the choice of this topic and the angers entwined within it, because, rest assured, our opponents are quite serious about their hatred of us and of what we are trying to do here." (8) According to Lorde, the power of anger is so great and its truth so imperative to the survival of women as a whole that the very existence of anger in the lives of women has been under attack.

Lorde's discussion of anger was intended to address how anger felt by women of color is often misnamed, misconstrued, and disregarded. She draws attention to the use of anger by proposing a new definition for women interested in justice. Anger was not illogical or irrational, but the soundest reaction to injustice in the face of betrayal. Anger was not a singular, empty emotion but a way of knowing "loaded with information and energy." (8) The energy housed within anger can create progress and change.

What does it mean that our cultural understanding of Black women as "angry" is also a practice of disregard? It means we are deliberately about the business of ignorance. When it comes to Black women, we are more compelled to ignore than struggle through

particular forms of knowledge *because* they are complex, loaded, difficult and often hard to hear. Anger is a circular energetic force, an appropriate response to injustice fueled by repetitive forces of injustice. In particular, it is reenergized by the willful disregard and distortion of a legitimate response to injustice—anger itself. Anger's energetic force is a demand to shift these affective paradigms or, as Lorde described, "Anger is the grief of distortions between peers and its object is change." (8) Anger is anger's response to its own abjection; it is not only anger but also pain, hurt and sadness. To disregard, distort, and further pathologize Black women's anger does not squelch it.

Black women's anger has divine origins. As Sheri Parks observes, righteous anger is a characteristic of the archetype of the Dark Feminine Divine. Black women are associated with anger as inheritors of the Dark Feminine. Parks describes the Dark Feminine's anger as "[…] usually compassionate, protective, and retributive […]."(Parks 110) However, in a racist society, the stereotype of angry black women has worked to delegitimize and disregard Black women. For example, Parks goes on to describe the conservative media campaign against Michelle Obama during her husband's bid for the presidency in 2008 that used exactly this tactic of painting Obama as pathologically angry. After a comment in which Obama described herself as being "proud of her country" for the first time, backlash ensued. The backlash may have been the actual irrational response. Parks observes, "Conservatives discounted the look on her face and the joy in her voice and took her statement as suggesting that she had never been proud of her country." (112) Obama's "irrational" anger is her racial and gendered inheritance. Parks recounts that according to conservatives who mounted this backlash, "[…] Michelle was angry, the typical black woman was angry, and it was the organizing force

of their personalities, the central core of their beings." (112) Distorting Black women's anger through stereotype flattens the truly complex emotional experiences of Black women. It is a tactic to diffuse what would otherwise be an incredibly powerful force.

As physics would have it, energy shifts into another energy. Unexpressed anger turns into self-destructive dis-ease. To further disregard and refuse to face Black women's righteous anger is to fuel it. For Black women to ignore that righteous anger is to participate in their own self-destruction. To pathologize Black women's anger is to say to them that they are the cause of their own suffering. It is to say, as Marilyn Yarbrough and Crystal Bennett point out, that what Black women say is untrustworthy and our thoughts are delusional. (Yarbrough and Bennett 631) It is a stereotype that maintains racist and sexist disregard of Black women's humanity.

It is no less dangerous to talk about angry Black women than what I've done here, which is to talk about Black women *getting all up in their feelins* and to propose it as righteous knowledge. To "get all up in one's feelins" is a term used to describe when someone has become emotionally hurt or angry. It is a signpost to trouble—something has gone awry. And indeed, before this project began, something did go very wrong:

§

IN 2006 I HAD AN ORDEAL WITH MEDICINE.

> I must have been found guilty of something. I don't *feel* innocent here lurking with ghosts. See it happens like that. I start at a thought that is quite benign and end up peccant, debased.
>
> I had an ordeal with medicine and was found innocent or guilty. It feels the same because I live in a haunted house. A house can be a dynasty, a bloodline, a body.

> There was punishment. Like the way the body is murdered by its own weight when lynched. To weigh, ponder.
>
> In 2006 I had an ordeal with medicine. While, I heal I learn why the ghosts came to me. The research question is: why am I patient?

§

In my first year of graduate school, I had an ordeal with medicine. This ordeal led me through courses of experience that manifested as spiritual, bodily and intellectual knowledge about race, medicine, memory and trauma. I had an ovarian torsion, a relatively benign circumstance if not for the immense pain involved. I visited three hospitals before being accurately diagnosed and having my ovary removed. I spent a week in acute pain, subjected to diagnoses as condescending as menstrual cramps, bladder infection, and, more seriously, an appendicitis or an ectopic pregnancy (despite my professed sexual history devoid of contact with men). After fifteen hours at Johns Hopkins Hospital I was diagnosed with an ovarian torsion and scheduled for immediate surgery to remove the dead organ. Johns Hopkins is the nearest hospital to my grandparent's home in East Baltimore, where my uncle took me to be in their care. (This becomes more important later.) I was finally diagnosed with the torsion after numerous tests, questions about my sexual history, pelvic exams, more questions about my sexual history and, finally, an ultrasound of my pelvis.

When the doctor informed me that I would be subject to yet another pelvic exam, the third exam that day, I had a break from the patience required of a patient. Noting the young trainees behind the doctor who announced the new exam, I said through a fog of morphine and oxycodone, "Fine, do whatever you have to. Gynecology was built on the backs of Black women anyway." There was silence. The trainees nervously giggled, and

the seasoned doctor asked if I was unsatisfied with the treatment I'd been given throughout the day. My grandmother intervened. She said that the day had been exhausting, that I'd been in a lot of pain and there had been no solutions to my problem as of yet. Thank God for her wisdom, because I was no longer able to parse words with people who would, in a few hours, cut me open on an operating table. After this outburst, for the first time at the hospital, I had a Black nurse administer my pelvic exam:

§

> **YOU BE LUCY, I'LL BE BETSEY**
> *February 17, 2006*
>
> The nurse with the natural compliments me on my locs. We begin in that nappy-hair banter of, *when did you start yours?* All of this happening between my thighs. Between speculum and cotton swab, *I just had to stop running to the salon.* Between the manual test in the vagina, *You're going to feel a pinch,* and the manual test in the anus, *It's so much easier to manage this way.* Nothing said of my outburst. *Yours look so healthy.* Nothing of why she tends to me. *Almost done.* Just two black women and a speculum, each asking the other *When did you get free?*

§

What I've tried to come to terms with is how three enslaved women from Alabama came to me on that hospital bed. I was angry. Anger propelled me into another way of knowing, one in which spirits, frightening coincidences, and racist legacies haunt me, choose me, feel through me. Another way I might describe what happened to me that evening was that I "got all up in my feelins." I took some personal things politically, and some political things personally. An army of black women who knew too well the shenanigans of the medico-industrial complex crowded my bed.

§

INITIATION
Late Evening February 16, 2006

They ask for another pelvic exam. I've had three today. I tell them about three women in Alabama.

Hospital curtain. Showman speculum. Surgeon auditorium. There is an opening here, a thrusting, a climax, a little death. Who will rise from that, and how? Why not stay dead and forget? Why do I choose to remember? You, in bed with me Anarcha. You, brushing my head Joice. Why do you mourn me and sing, as if I'm the one who has died?

§

Intellectually, I went to an article by Terry Kapsalis that connected the legacies of the "father" of gynecology in the U.S., J. Marion Sims, to the "father" of U.S. Popular Culture, P.T. Barnum. Their connection: both of these men began their careers via the exploitation of the bodies of enslaved Black women. Joice Heth for P.T. Barnum and Anarcha Westcott, Lucy Zimmerman, and Betsey Harris for J. Marion Sims. I tried to make sense of what happened to me, in light of this history of exploitation, experimentation, and gynecological discovery, by painting watercolors. A few revelations came, but then there was silence.

The silence ended when I was accepted into a workshop for Black poets known as Cave Canem. At the week-long retreat in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, I carried with me Benjamin Reiss' *The Showman and the Slave*. The text attempts to piece together a somewhat more honest portrait of Joice Heth, the woman P.T. Barnum publicly displayed as the 161 year-old nursemaid to General George Washington. My final day there, I heard a clear voice announce: "And for my last trick, I will release the ghost!"

§

JOICE HETH PRESENTS: HERSELF!
February 19, 1836

AND FOR MY LAST TRICK
I WILL RELEASE THE GHOST
Hover over my corpse
and escape.

You will open her. DISCOVER
ancient black. OBSERVE
this DISAPPEARING ACT

Read her femur like rings
on a tree. *Count slow*
(with Mississippis)
to 81 years

Pelvis tells you she had
children. WONDER
if she nursed them

NOTICE a
smirk of
knowing

Eyes sunk dim.
WATCH
you

diminish
to life
size.

§

I'd never been one for persona poems. In fact, this is the first persona poem I'd ever penned. It was so clear and frighteningly sardonic that it felt unlike me, but it *was* me as well. It was angry, but lucid and useful.

According to Reiss, Greensburg was one of the last stops that Barnum and Heth made before her death on February 19, 1836. She would later be dissected on February

25, 1836. (February 25, 147 years later, would be this author's day of birth.). After Heth's death, P.T. Barnum would refute that she was human at all. (10) In the poems that followed, Heth's voice played with this ambiguity. She insisted that she was a human; I insisted that she was a human; but what became central to the poems in her voice were the ways that her story is consistently obfuscated by Barnum and the spectacle of her enslaved body.

From this poem on, I began to write in the voices of all the women I felt would let me. When I couldn't, I wrote in the voice of my researcher/patient self-searching for meaning and understanding about my outburst and those body/spirit/memories I was experiencing.

§

JOICE HETH PRESENTS: THE SHOWMAN AS DENTIST*

When he starts on the incisor I think of the
time my first child was conceived,
white shirt against my face
oil on the back of my tongue.

It fills my mouth, I choke.
He pushes my head to spit.
His shoe soiled.
His fist loosens the next tooth.
I swallow it.

He must work for each of these.
Work as hard as they have to stay here.
Work as hard as I did to be beaten
before the boneless child passed as feces.

My face against his shirt
muddied with my blood
my spit.

Semen of ten shipmen

smell of broken virgins
oil on the back of my tongue.

Teeth collect in my lap
some broken and sharp on gums

If I bit down it would be my own blood shed
my mouth stayed soft
Soft, so I would not die

Showman whispers.
Satisfied,
My black beauty.

---

* In his memoir P.T. Barnum refers to Heth as his "black beauty."

~*~

BETSEY INVENTS THE SPECULUM
Montgomery, Alabama - Fall 1845

Introducing the bent handle of the spoon I saw everything, as no man had ever seen before.
– J. Marion Sims in *The Story of My Life*

I have bent in other ways
to open the body make space

More pliable than pewter,
my skin may be less giving

Great discoveries are made
on cushioned lessons and hard falls

Sims invents the speculum.
I invent the wincing.

The *if you must* of it
The looking away

The here of discovery.

§

When Rebecca Skloot published a book about Henrietta Lacks, things got worse.

Henrietta Lacks is more than a ghost. She is the very structure of things, literally, present in my skin—our skin. She is, through medical science, HeLa—ever growing cells that facilitate new discoveries in science including lifesaving vaccines. In 1951 these cells obliterated her body. Lacks was treated for a severe form of cervical cancer at Johns Hopkins. Johns Hopkins was her care provider of choice, no doubt because she lived in Dundalk, where Johns Hopkins would be the nearest hospital. East Baltimore was increasingly a haven for aspiring middleclass Black folks who, like my family, migrated from the tobacco fields of Virginia and North Carolina in the mid-20th century. Lacks and her husband were among these migrating Black families.

Henrietta Lacks is more than a ghost. Her story and the story of her family create an ocean of unspeakable anger. Anger because it is a truth Black folks in the U.S. already know *even when we don't know exactly.* We know stories like the Tuskegee syphilis experiments. We know the horrors behind terms like "Mississippi appendectomy." We know stories like those documented in Marilyn Nelson's *Fortune's Bones*—the bones of enslaved people, indigenous people, who were subjects of medical science against their will. We know Sarah Baartman. Henrietta Lacks is more than a ghost. Her story is more than a ghost story because she exists in our skin.

Henrietta Lacks' cells were harvested at this teaching hospital that also owns my dead ovary. Despite my own requests to retrieve it, to see it, I was told that it no longer existed. It was now, a smear of cells on a plate. However, when I ordered my medical files later:

§

The specimen was received fresh labeled with the patient's name, Judd, Bettina, and is designated "left ovary." The specimen consists of an enlarged and hemorrhagic ovary, weighing 160 grams and measuring 9 x 6 x 3 cm. The surface of the ovary is smooth with areas of hemorrhage and hyperemia. The ovary is received with several cut surfaces. Serial sectioning reveals mainly multiple areas of confluent hemorrhage. There are intervening areas of fibrous white stroma. Representative sections are submitted. Approximately 50% of the specimen is submitted.

Fig. 21 Bettina Judd, "The Specimen" in *How Much Does it Hurt?* 2011. Digitally altered photocopy.

§

Lacks was in everything as she literally *is* everything. She is ever growing in laboratories all over the world. Ever growing as a constant reminder of the easy annihilation and simultaneous proliferation of Black bodies. The idea of her body in pain, her cells rapidly reproducing, causing such pain, is incomprehensible, vast. The legacy she is part of as listed above is also vast, an ocean of suffering—unknown and unknowable suffering. This ocean is what I've come to know as a place of origin for U.S. Black folks:

§

OF AIR AND SEA
for Henrietta Lacks

where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
where is your tribal memory? sirs,
in that gray vault. the sea.
– Derek Walcott

I have almost died four times

first in the womb
suffocating on the Idea

twice nearly drowned

once at Mount Sinai
lungs failing
chest compressing
extending

you were the science
so that I would not

you on that last bed
you in tubes growing
all around

had I known
I would have wept
would not have thought
of death
of myself

had not an autopsy
a fistula
your cells

what lives would be uncradled?
what discoveries never proclaimed?
what bodies left between here
and oblivion?

all encompassing blue
vast open coffin
of air and sea

~

I am thankful for medicine
the way it cradles
kills

death isn’t careless

breathing even
if difficult is air

air not salt water
not yet

~

I don't want to be responsible
for the retelling

I want the truth of you
to disappear

there is no returning
to mother’s dreamless sleep

no heritage cruise
only forward

through the backward
gaze of memory

when there may be
some chance
of forgetting
mind veers off
to the waves

~

you are memory

you are everything

§

I was searching for meaning. I had anger wide and deep as that ocean. I had haunts and voices, questions and points of entry into a research project, yet all of it felt like a problem. I was a problem. This research practice and its disembodied methods were a problem for the work I was actually doing. Meeting these women meant meeting a part of myself that was not innocent in the practice of erasure. As a researcher I could do them little justice, as research had done them no justice. As a daughter researching my mother's anger, I had different if uncomfortable investments. My subjectivity as researcher had to shift, accommodate the spiritual and affective plane on which these women's stories reverberated:

§

HAUNTED BY THE LIVING, I TALK TO THE DEAD

They scrutinize my inadequate notes. Notes that could never contain the grave trampling of narrative. The "what has happened here"* of your life. The premium cable telling of it.

At first I thought I feared your eye, Mrs. Lacks. But now I realize it is the gaze of your loved ones. On me, now, as if somehow I should make monument to you. Instead, ~~it is as if~~ I am figuring my life through your death.

The living wake, stare at me. Sleep is disappearance. The safety of *there are no survivors.*

---

*Elsa Barkley Brown " 'What Has Happened Here': The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics."

§

What I was writing in poetry was not verifiable data, but it was knowledge and truth in the most intimate of ways. Things were not neat; they were layered, complicated and hard. It wasn't mere legacy I was sorting through, I was entangled in pathology and the work I do which threatens to pathologize. If I went through the accepted routes of academic research, I could see these women only through the lenses of their oppressors. As I attempted to sort out all of this, the ability to render visually came back to me and so did a larger understanding of what it meant to know. The poems became a manuscript I titled *Patient.* It is a separate project that weaved in and out of academic research on feelin that developed into this project. Through art, my understanding of knowing and telling shifted and came alive. I was certain about the fact of art as knowledge because I was able to see and understand through concurrent projects in which inquiry and mind/body/spirit experience collided. Everything seemed to gather and launch from one thing: anger.

It was anger that allowed me to hear and see. It was anger that put me in the place of inquiry, anger that tied me to the academic endeavor and specifically, the University of Maryland system, through literal ties of blood, flesh, and spirit. It was anger that made itself known despite morphine drips, oxycodone, patient forms, applications, and academic milestones. Between my own ordeal and the ordeals of Black women that haunted me there was a large network of sensation and knowing, and anger was its cue.

Anger is the signal that there is more to know—that there is something to unpack; and that unpacking is deliberately difficult. When my mother ritualized anger by visiting the library to look at an awful book, she was also active in a movement to open the

academy to Black students. In the early 1970s, she was one of a small number of Black students at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She was part of an even smaller contingent of students united to add Africana Studies to the University curriculum. These students, and she, were literally clamoring: *There is more to know.*

Getting in my feelins is just the beginning of a drastic internal shift. In order to use anger as a methodology, I have to be willing to travel through it, and in my travels, pick up appropriate tools for its unpacking. This is research as trial and error. Sitting in this circle of knowledge builds *new ways of making thoughts felt.*

§

HOW TO MEASURE PAIN II: MAGGOT BRAIN

I knew I had to rise above it all
or drown in my own shit.
– Funkadelic "Maggot Brain"

How do you daughter measure pain?
How do you suture a cracked skull flickering
South?

One moment you are flying over North Carolina
next you are eating red dirt
screaming at someone's feet
dangling

Its 1999
a chain snaps
a head rolls
it starts to rain

in your pelvis
they examine you,
you whimper

knees buckle

feet in stirrups
a gloved hand no
a bent spoon

Stirring brimley stew
pot

How do you, daughter, forget
dying in 1830-something?

Your hand in your dress trying to find the child
whose infant head is beneath a heel
It's 1917 and the smell
of gasoline is a lot like

gasoline
you fill your tank
drive home
stop in
an intersection
you cannot move
they honk
stand
in Piccadilly
square
fondle
prod

your breasts
in the mouth of a child
he is not yours

his face imprinted on the jar of food
turning in your hand
quick now, in your pocket.

Write this down
don't forget
you are a good daughter.
you remember your
mothers' names

You cry and you don't know why
in the library looking up *The Negro: A Beast*

pages open beneath hands
from 1970 to 2006

how do you daughter
measure pain?

by the length and width
of your black woman self

echo of a scream
muffled
under cupped hands
in wild eyes
graceful nods
smiles

you have found yourself
in each broken body
each elation
your mother's scar
hers and hers
and you

§

What I have researched here are ways to know more by wading the depths of experience as knowledge. Body, mind, and spirit knowledge are in constant dialogue with the social. The very fact of research compels us to what Alexis Shotwell calls "implicit understanding," that there is more to know and that knowing is in feelin. (Shotwell x) There is something here that needs to be seen.

§

Fig. 22 Bettina Judd. *"How Much Does it Hurt on a Scale of One to Ten?"* #1 *(in progress)* 2011-2013. Paper, gauche, paste, pastel, digitally altered photocopy.

§

There is more here. The depth and breadth of Black women's experiences are immense and the knowledge held therein imperative to our full freedoms. This project has been an attempt to extract some drops of knowledge that exist through a spiritual, fleshy, and intellectual way of knowing. There is even more—oceans—an overwhelming everything by which we can understand ourselves more fully, articulate our experiences more clearly. If we are dancing, singing, crafting poems or speaking in tongues, in full expression of even the thoughts "not yet fully formed," there is even more to know.

§

RESOLVE

Last bit of blood from this rock
Another heart will grow here
beating & swelling

(The researcher enters with gloved hands, a speculum.)

last evening of defeat,
body flayed for someone else's art.

(Spread legs, she inserts the instrument. There is a snap.)

last evening of unrelenting
lightening sparking from ears

(Now a swab.)

there is no light she done
run off with fear.

(Just a sample.)

Where she gone? Where she gone?
Where she? *Gone.*

§

Appendix 1

Renee Cox Interview Questions

1. I've been a follower of your work since the nineties when the whole debacle with Guiliani went down. It was one of the few times my parents and I talked about art in that way--art that isn't bought in a mall kiosk--as a family. So thank you for that. It was also one of the first times I've ever seen a black woman nude as the subject of an art piece that wasn't itself about objectification of said woman. I don't think I'm the only one. What is the experience of being nude in front of your own lens like? Does the feeling of that shift when the photo is on display in a museum or gallery space? How?

2. American Family, *Yo Mama
   One of the things I am interested in is the way in which pride for Black women--particularly as it relates to the body also has a flip side of shame about it. That pride must come in the face of being shamed. Your work often represents the body in very positive ways and you've gotten some flack for it. Do you think there is something about your work that is both about the pride and that shame? Do you think that your audience has a hard time grappling with pride and shame when viewing your body in your work?

3. Yo Mama *Queen Nanny *Raje
   You've said before, that early in your career you wanted to "create your own history and create your own imagery." You've touched on the image of the black mother in a lot of your work. Is there something about the history of Black motherhood that you are also touching on?

4. The Stargazers exhibit put you in conversation with Elizabeth Catlett. What was that experience like? Do you see yourself in conversation with any other Black women artists?

5. Discreet Charm of the Bougies
   I really enjoy this series; there is something different about what it seems to be doing visually and emotionally. Whereas a lot of your work challenges viewers through direct gazes, these images feature a woman who looks away--it seems as though we are being asked to consider the inner world of this Black woman. Why this shift? Why now?

6. What are some of the inner-experiences, feelings if you will, that you would like us to consider when looking at this woman? Are some of these feelings from your own experience?

Appendix 2

Avery*Sunshine Interview Questions

1. How would you describe the feeling you get from singing?

2. In an interview with Kickmag you said that "there's something about the vibration of music that brings you back to the spirit." Could you expand on that? What does it mean to come "back to the spirit?"

3. You've talked about your most recent album being divinely inspired. How does spirituality function in your creative process? Do you have a ritual?

4. What does it mean to have "the anointing" musically? When did you know you had it?

5. You've said before that you want to talk about being a sexy black woman. Does singing make you feel sexy? How?

6. You say in previous interviews that that your name is inspired by the fictional characters Sunshine of Harlem Nights and Shug Avery of the Color Purple. What is it about these characters that inspired you to take up their names?

7. Is Avery*Sunshine any different from Denise White? Do you ever take one persona off to put another on?

8. I've seen you list your biggest influences. Could you tell me of the influences you list which most influences your vocal style? Why?

9. How did your years at Spelman College in Glee Club influence your music? Do you think your degree in philosophy has influenced your music at all?

10. You're still a minister of music while your music career is taking flight does singing in church feel the same way it does in nightclubs and other venues where you perform as Avery*Sunshine?

Appendix 3

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October 24, 2013

Bettina Judd
11W Minden Place
South Hadley, MA 01075

Dear Ms Judd:

Thank you for your request for permission to reprint the Lucille Clifton poetry from *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton* in your forthcoming doctoral dissertation "Feelin Feminism: Black Women's Art as Feminist Thought" for the University of Maryland, College Park.

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Appendix 4

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
DEPARTMENT OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

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October 7, 2013

Dear Copyright Holder,

My name is Bettina Judd and I am completing my PhD in Women's Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. In my dissertation *Feelin Feminism: Black Women's Art as Feminist Thought,* I discuss Ms. Saar's ***The Liberation of Aunt Jemima.*** I am writing for permission to reprint a photograph of this image in my dissertation. I am using the photograph from the Brooklyn Museum's website at:
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