

Erotic Defiance:
A Womanist Ethic of Moral and Political Agency

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Irving and Dorothy Bryant,
two extraordinary human beings who taught me self-love
so I would always be free.

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Introduction

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.

—Audre Lorde¹

Katie Cannon maintains in *Black Womanist Ethics* that at the epicenter of construction of black women's virtue ethics is the necessity to defy white supremacist categorizations of blackness as evil. These ethical schemas aim toward the quality of moral good that allows black people to maintain a fierce love for themselves and a tenacity about life that no person or institution can overwhelm.² As such, I posit erotic defiance as a qualitative distinction in the moral agency³ of black women that dismantles and debunks the overdetermination of black female identity by disclosing the sacred dynamism of the erotic capacities of their bodies. Defined as the willful embodiment of a revolutionary and unapologetic love of, and pleasure in, the bodies and being of the oppressed, erotic defiance is womanist virtue in action, a practice of freedom and an ethic of resistance that contests the authority of hegemony to define and delimit the existence of the marginalized. I argue that through acts of care, creativity and solidarity with the vulnerable, black women use their bodies to collaborate with the Spirit as vessels, conjurers and prophets,

¹ Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing, 1984), 54.

² Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1988).

³ Moral agency is the capacity of an individual to make judgments and choices that best suit his or her good, or the good of the community.

revealing the intrinsic connection of the erotic with the divine. Through black women's corporeal influence in the world, I maintain, erotic defiance is both a moral and political posture in that it disrupts the social order by inspiring new epistemologies that transform the aesthetic and religious significance of their bodies, informs and animates an ethic of responsibility and accomplishes the in-breaking of God in the material world.

Historical Theological Context:

Erotophobia and the Discursive Devaluation of Black Women

Erotophobia is a term used to convey a fear of physical pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, cultivated by Western Christianity's anti-erotic culture, which misnames the erotic as evil and divorces it from the divine.⁴ Its foundations lie in Platonic and Stoic philosophies of Greco-Roman culture that influence Christianity's predilection for negative assumptions and suspicions of the body. Chief among them are a hierarchy between the material and immaterial, antagonistic accounts of the relationship between the body and the soul, the privileging of reason and self-control, and the conflation of the passions, specifically sexual pleasure, with embodiment. The defining features of the most prominent schools of thought during the emergence and development of Early Christianity were philosophies that fostered a culture of antagonism that perceived the body as a burden and a threat. Furthermore, these beliefs maintained that it was virtuous to escape from one's own flesh.⁵

⁴ John Ince, *The Politics of Lust* (Vancouver: Pivotal, 2003), 7.

⁵ Plato, a student of the great philosopher Socrates and one of the most significant philosophical contributors to the development of Christian perspectives on the body espoused a belief in absolute values, which he articulates as the Forms. The theory of the forms suggests that concepts like beauty and justice have real existence, do not change, and are eternal. It proffers the existence of two realms: the superior transcendent, unchanging and immaterial realm of the Forms that can only be apprehended through reason, and the ordinary material, constantly subject to change, realm of the senses. Moreover, in his theory of recollection,

Feminist theologian Carter Heyward argues, “Rather than embracing sexuality as a dimension of sacred passion, Augustine targeted it as its opposite: the source of sin, setting in theological motion a violent antagonism, which Christians (and others) have suffered to this day.”⁶ The dominance of Augustinian thought on Christian doctrine has instituted shame and the fear of losing control as defining marks of the Christian psyche. Heightened by the dualist antagonism that influences these theologies, many Christians equate the embrace of one’s sexuality with a submission to evil, death and the severing of one’s relationship with God.⁷ Fear of being infected with irrational passions, losing control and losing one’s life as a result, produce in Western Christian subjects a preoccupation with sexual purity, promoting a fear of desire, existential rupture through disassociation with one’s own body and a suspicion of the bodies of others.⁸

Plato distinguishes the soul from the body and privileges it with special knowledge. Contending that the soul and the body are of different realms, he suggests that the soul, prior to its union with the body, belonged to the superior realm of the Forms, giving it knowledge of them. However, Plato purports the knowledge of the soul is dulled by the body, which belongs to the inferior realm of the sensible, and can only be recovered by turning away from the body’s distracting passions. Plato’s hierarchical and oppositional worlds establish an antagonism between the material and the immaterial, the body and the soul, in which the soul becomes the vehicle of salvation and the body is subordinated to the inferior realm of the sensible and denigrated as an impediment to true knowledge. Traditionally understood as Platonic dualism, foundational to this schema is the notion that the senses operate in opposition to reason/intellect, interfering with the acquisition of true knowledge. Plato avers, “For when a man enjoys great pleasure, or conversely when he suffers from pain, he is incapable of seeing or hearing anything correctly but hurries to grab one thing and avoid another. Being in a state of frenzy his reasoning power is at this time at its lowest.” Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, translated by T. K. Johansen (London: Penguin, 2008), 84. For more on the influence of Platonic thought on Christianity, see William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 56.

⁶ Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 90.

⁷ Christians experience an existential dissonance about their love and enjoyment of sin and their desire to please God. To desire anything above or contrary to God is to choose death in Augustine’s theology of disjunctive desire. It is humanity’s preoccupation with the paradox of their sin nature (the experience of desiring to choose the good, but being persuaded by evil nonetheless) that necessitates the subordination and denigration of physical/sexual pleasure. Its perceived incompatibility with God informs Western culture’s ambivalence regarding sex, our bodies and our relationships with the bodies of others. For more, see Kelly Brown Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies / Christian Souls* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005), 50–52.

⁸ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 25–30.

Western discourse regarding black women has historically been driven by assumptions about their bodies and the sexual correlatives assigned to them. Depicting black women's sexuality in exceedingly malicious ways, it characterizes them as animalistic, irresponsible, perverse and beguiling—infecting those who came in close proximity to them with disordered passions.⁹ The discursive construction of black women illustrates the way white Christian anxiety about the body is exploited to demonize black people, especially women. Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas writes, “White culture has intended for Black people to see themselves as an affront to the image of God.”¹⁰ The socially constructed scandal of blackness is a mechanism of white supremacist ideology inscribed in black flesh and the psyche of society which functions to validate white domination.¹¹ This campaign of acculturation fosters self-hatred in the black community by promoting the fallacy of black inferiority and declares black bodies obscene. Cornel West echoes Douglas's sentiments when he states, “White supremacist ideology is based first and foremost on the degradation of Black bodies in order to control them.”¹² This ideology begins with disdain for black bodies and morphs into white anxiety about black sexuality.¹³ The demonization of black bodies, according to Douglas, is an extension of the general denigration of sexuality and the body in the West. The separation between the spirit and the body exalts reason as the highest ability of mankind and degrades the body as the center of all emotional and sexual distractions and as an obstacle to humanity's pursuit of God.¹⁴ The subsequent alienation of these desires to remain

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 85.

¹¹ Ibid., 33.

¹² Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 2003), 516.

¹³ Ibid., 515.

¹⁴ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 25.

within the boundaries of acceptable civilized behavior motivates the projection of sexual desires, and all other passions that distract, onto “the other.” The other, in this case black people, bear the lascivious inclinations of whites. Black people are ultimately despised, as they represent the personification of libidinous vulgarity, and serve to corroborate the myth of white purity and virtue—the premise of white authority.¹⁵

Accordingly, the denigration of black sexuality becomes one of the primary ways to legitimize, in the minds of the dominant culture, their control and abuse of black women. Such formulations sanction black women’s subordination and neglect, animate social antagonisms, including physical and sexual violence, and dispossess black women of their own bodies, giving rise to feelings of impotence and rejection, compromising healthy identity construction and limiting black women’s capacity for moral agency.¹

Doubly degraded by their raced and gendered bodies, many black women experience their bodies and their sexualities as moral dilemmas, impediments to being seen as beautiful, respectable, or morally or spiritually legitimate. In our contemporary moment, black women continue to be hypersexualized and fetishized through their depiction in the media as inherently sexually irrational, irresponsible or manipulative seductresses through images like the welfare queen and her many children by different fathers. These images represent new-millennium manifestations of the historical stereotype Sapphire (sass-mouthed trouble makers), presenting black women as not only ugly, unfeminine and sexually perverse, but also uncivilized nuisances who need to be controlled.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., 33.

¹⁶ For more on the Sapphire, see Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame and Stereotypes and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 88.

Black institutions like the black church have offered little respite for the existential conundrum black women wrestle with every day of how to be perceived as moral agents in spite of the injurious designations of their bodies. As a product of Western Christian culture, the theology that undergirds the black church's ethic of sexual and bodily purity embraces the same Christian thought that associates desire and the body with evil and immorality. Bearing little resemblance to the spiritualities of West Africa, which declare all things in creation holy, most black churches maintain an anemic concept of the erotic, confined to the genitals and sexual acts, and acceptable only in the confines of marriage between a man and a woman.¹⁷ In this schema, bodies are tolerated, but only in the sanitized ascetic masculine tradition of service of God, leaving narrow spaces of policed existence for black bodies in general, especially black female bodies, and no room at all for the "corrupting influences" of black erotic expression.

Alternative Approaches to the Erotic

Constructing a womanist/feminist ethic of the erotic, this dissertation draws upon the feminist theory of Audre Lorde and womanist and feminist theologians and ethicists, including womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher, womanist moral theologian M. Shawn Copeland, ethicist Keri Day and feminist theologian Carter Heyward, among others, who have reimaged the erotic from a womanist/feminist perspective, in order to contest its demonization in Christian theology. It argues that black women's embrace and deployment of the erotic as a strategy of resistance and liberation is a defining and

¹⁷ Melva Costen states, "For African societies, humans live in a religious universe, so that natural phenomena, objects and all of life are associated with acts of God. Life is thus viewed holistically rather than in separate compartments as created by a secular-sacred dichotomy." Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993); and *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, edited by Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 1–10.

effective aspect of their moral and political agency. Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" serves as my principle source for a theory of the erotic. Lorde theorizes the erotic as a source of power and information generated through a depth of feeling that provides the energy for change.¹⁸ Inspiring those who participate in it to fuller living, responsibility and excellence, the erotic, she writes, "is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves."¹⁹ For Lorde, the erotic functions as a bridge that connects us to the truth of our being and passionate living that transforms the numbness of our existence to an impulse to pursue justice as change agents.²⁰

Heyward, Baker-Fletcher, Copeland and Day build on Lorde's assertion describing the erotic as a unifying force that upends the exploitative powers of empire, specifically capitalism, neoliberalism, racism, sexism and classism by empowering the oppressed and cultivating relationships of interdependence and mutuality. Mutuality, which Heyward describes as the chief aim of the erotic, entails "sharing power in such a way that each participant in the relationship is called more fully into becoming who she is—a whole person."²¹ Baker-Fletcher describes the erotic as a unifying principle that connects body and the spirit and the divine and humanity through the act of love.²² Copeland theologizes the erotic through a view of Christology that rejects normative sexual repression and affirms eros as life-giving and enhancing encounter. Emphasizing the cohering power of

¹⁸ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 58.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 56, 58.

²¹ Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, 191.

²² Karen Baker-Fletcher, "The Erotic in Contemporary Black Literature," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, edited by Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 202.

the erotic, as well, she contends the erotic—as embodied spirituality acts—is the force that drew people to Jesus and the kingdom of God. Necessary for deep emotional, psychic, and intellectual engagement, she maintains the erotic contributes to generous, generative and full living, such that it empowers and affirms life.²³ Taking aim at neoliberalism, Day perceives eros as a religious and/or spiritual good that enables the transformation of self and society away from the alienating proclivities of neoliberal culture.²⁴ As an intervention to the desensitizing effect of neoliberalism, Day argues, the erotic must be recovered by society to foster connection and belonging.²⁵

This dissertation builds on these theo-ethical definitions of the erotic, by exploring the erotic’s implications on black women’s moral agency, specifically its utility in healing the psychological and political effects of racism and sexism and the transformation of the social imagination. My investigation discloses the erotic as a divine resource integral and effective in disrupting black women’s erasure and demonization, restoring their humanity from the violence of objectification and dispossession, and empowering them to discard racist patriarchy’s strategies of power. Moreover, I contend the lessons learned from a womanist investigation of erotic defiance can be used to inform strategies for all humanity in the pursuit of justice and reconciliation in the material world.

The Erotic, the Body and Moral Agency

Through the sensual—those physical, emotional and psychic expressions of what is deepest and richest within each of us—Lorde locates the erotic and its agential

²³ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 64–65.

²⁴ Keri Day, *Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

capacities.²⁶ I argue the erotic evokes in a subject a love, pride and confidence in the wisdom of the body, the body itself, as the arbiter of this knowledge, and the truth of oneself, which an individual discovers through sensory/bodily pleasure. In effect, I maintain the erotic functions as a form of personal testimony and witnesses the good news of the body. Such physical revelation, I contend, disrupts the status quo by refuting the authority of fabricated ideologies.²⁷ As such, the body's experience of pleasure becomes a resource for resistance to faulty portrayals of black identity, which undergird racist ideologies. Once conscientiazised by the erotic, I argue black women develop the capacity to harness their bodies' erotic capacities in the service of moral and political agency, deploying it in the service of their liberation through healing touch, creativity that celebrates the body and the erotic, and activism and advocacy on behalf of the community.

My theorization of the erotic's role in black women's moral agency is based on phenomenologists Maurice Merleau-Ponty's, Howard Harrod's and Robert Sokolowski's phenomenological theories of the of the body's role in experience and perception. These theories contest the notion that moral agency is a disembodied phenomenon, underscoring

²⁶ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 54, 56.

²⁷ Institutional power generates the kind of knowledge it needs to be sustained. French philosopher Michel Foucault calls this "the will to knowledge." To produce this knowledge, power enlists various kinds of intelligence like science and theology to disseminate the ideas it seeks to construct. The Age of Enlightenment was characterized by the pursuit of knowledge and the freedom to do so unencumbered by religious limitations. During this time, science became increasingly revered, while religion lost its authoritative advantage. Christian philosophers looking for a way to maintain Christianity's influence in an increasingly skeptical world collaborated with the ideologies and sciences of the day in the denigration of black bodies. Christianity theologically legitimated the subordination of black people through the construction of a morality grounded in the perceived inferiority of their rational capacity and their physical appearances. Accordingly, only those whose bodies were similar to the Greco-Roman aesthetic ideal and those who submitted to Western notions of appropriateness and rationality were deemed valid human subjects. For more, see Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 3:101. For more on the discursive denigration of black people, see Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), ch. 2, "A Genealogy of Modern Racism," and Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do With It?*, 113–27.

the sensory and interpretive mechanisms of the body and its function in moral agency.²⁸ Traditionally theorized as a function of the mind in the thought of Aristotle, Augustine, and Kant, the rational aspects of moral agency have historically maintained centrality, while the body has been perceived as an obstacle to overcome. Phenomenologists on the other hand emphasize the body's contribution to moral agency, prior to action, articulating its contributions to the constitution of consciousness/subjectivity and the construction of meaning, as agents apprehend the world. Unfortunately, issues of race and gender go unexamined in their work. The work of womanist practical theologians Phillis Sheppard and Stephanie Crumpton, however, underscore the relationship of what phenomenologists call embodied sociality—the social dimension of the subject informed by one's embodiment—to the intersubjective construction of negative racial and gender value meanings and their impact on black women's self-concept. In her book *Self, Culture and Others*, Sheppard offers nuance to the phenomena of experience, noting, "It is always embedded in a cultural and historical relational milieu."²⁹ For Sheppard, the social world is "a world where gender, class and body are inextricably linked internally, and in the social negotiations in which we engage daily." Consequently, the unique circumstances of black female embodiment, i.e., the disparagement of their physiques and sexuality, and the social antagonisms, neglect and confinement it foments, have tremendously negative implications on black women's identity construction and dramatically limit their opportunities for moral agency.

²⁸ For more, see Linda Holler, *Erotic Morality* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 8–10, and Robert Sokolowski, *Moral Action: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 48–54.

²⁹ Phillis Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others in Womanist Practical Theology* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

Discursive Constructions of the Black Body as Symbol

Anthropologist Mary Douglas maintains the body's symbolic function in human culture serves as a code or image for social reality.³⁰ In other words, bodies, in general, function as symbols that convey messages and meaning that communicate the reality of a particular social order. Accordingly, the significance of the body is dictated by social powers.

Douglas writes, "The scope of the body as a medium of expression is limited by controls exerted from the social system."³¹ Black bodies, as a result, has been perceived by black and womanist scholars like Kelly Brown Douglas, Shawn Copeland and Anthony Pinn as a site of contestation in which warring racial ideologies compete to claim their symbolic and material powers. Pinn avers that control over one's body is a privilege often intentionally usurped from black people. He writes, "For blacks, social control and bodily control (or liberation) are oppositional and adversely related. The loss of control over black bodies (on a variety of levels) was a necessary component of the social system, and structures were put in place to guarantee this loss of control."³² Control over the image and sweat equity of black bodies is fundamental to America's economic livelihood, as well as the stability of the ideology of white supremacy, upon which it is built.

Accordingly, black people have been used as the means of production and a perpetually consuming class, while never ascending on any significant communal level to the power or status of the bourgeoisie. Part of the inability of black people to thrive economically or politically in America is connected to the symbolic significance of their bodies.

Black bodies have been used in the service of white ideology as an emblem of uncontrollable sexual desire, intellectual and ontological inferiority, immorality, danger

³⁰ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 74.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Anthony Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 144.

and therefore the necessity for white domination.³³ The product of racist constructions, these images are made possible through discursive power—the capacity of discourse to regulate the epistemologies, or ways of knowing, of the masses. French philosopher Michel Foucault explains discursive power, theorizing that power, in addition to the placement and control of bodies and the management of human being by subjects whereby individuals act on their own bodies, is facilitated through the construction of knowledge regarding the body.³⁴ The construction of knowledge, he argues, is guided by discursive powers, facilitated by “the will to knowledge.” Foucault describes the will to knowledge as strategies in which certain forms of knowledge are intentionally deployed through public discourse—the way things are talked about for the purposes of establishing a behavioral standard.³⁵ He argues, “Discourse transmits and produces power, it reinforces it.”³⁶ For Foucault, discourse creates and deploys power through the shaping of a community’s morality, by determining proper conduct and categorizing people for inclusion and exclusion, based upon their adherence to these behavior regulations.

In the case of black bodies, discourse has fashioned them as symbols of excessive desire, irrationality, inferiority, criminality, sexual danger and suspicion. These constructions are erected to provide an oppositional identity to whiteness, which create a false binary that designates whiteness as primary, central, normal and valid, while blackness is designated as subordinate, aberrant, inferior and illegitimate.

Black philosopher of religion Cornel West’s chapter entitled “A Genealogy of Modern Racism,” in his book *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary*

³³ For more, see Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 31–62, and Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do with It?*, 109–49.

³⁴ For more, see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 17–35.

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 1:100.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

Christianity, discusses his theory of the normative gaze and provides additional insight into the role of discourse in the denigration of black bodies. West argues that the normative gaze—the orientation of Western perception—privileges white phenotypical features over black ones based on the elevation of classical aesthetics as ideal. This ideal, he argues, governs formulations, categories and understandings including beauty, cultural standards of moderation and control and harmony.³⁷ West elaborates on Foucault’s theory of the will to knowledge through a racial lens, arguing that discursive powers have the capacity to produce, prohibit, develop, delimit forms of rationality, setting the parameters for the intelligibility, availability and legitimacy of certain ideas.³⁸ Consequently the beauty, validity and worth of black embodiment and cultural production become inconceivable in a system guided by this perspective.

Womanist ethicist, Emilie Townes also tackles the power of discourse on black bodies as she treats highly influential racial stereotypes formed in what she calls “the fantastic hegemonic imagination” in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. She argues that in Foucault’s understanding of discourse, imagination is often dangerously confused for history. In light of the imagination’s susceptibility to hegemony—the ideology deployed by dominant groups to persuade the marginalized to docility—Townes argues stereotypes are embraced as truths.³⁹ She writes, “The imagination was subordinated to the accepted moral landscape and its rules and sociopolitical and cultural realities.”⁴⁰ In this way, Townes joins the chorus of scholars who maintain that the realities of black communities are regulated by hegemonic discourse, which casts black people as

³⁷ West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 54.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁹ Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 20.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

caricatures of racist ideology.

Black and womanist theologians and ethicists have also reflected on how the black body, as carefully constructed symbol, is deployed by the dominant culture. Anthony Pinn emphasizes the importance of stylization in the significance of symbol and the black body. He writes, “The black body isn’t an image of society in the strict sense; rather the dehumanization of the black body promoted by the social system, is meant to maintain the system and reflect its wishes and fears.”⁴¹ Arguing that the historic treatment of black flesh as symbolically significant, he suggests that it is not just what is said about the black body, but the violence visited upon the black body that functions as a marker of white domination and the scandal of blackness. Lynched black bodies, or in its more contemporary iteration, black bodies brutalized by police, serve to terrorize black people and keep them ever mindful of the violent measures that will be taken in the maintenance of white supremacy and the containment of black existence. Conversely, for those who subscribe to the ideology of white supremacy, particularly those threatened by black prosperity, the murdered black body as symbol represents the sovereignty of white power.

The material circumstances of black flesh are a direct result of their social construction. In her book *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, M. Shawn Copeland emphasizes the link between black bodies as symbol and the historical status of black people. She argues, “The body mediates our engagement with others, with the world and with the Other.”⁴² This mediation is facilitated by the symbolic meanings of bodies. She writes, “The social body’s assignment of meaning and significance to race and/or gender and/or sexuality of physical bodies influences, perhaps even determines, the

⁴¹ Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 146.

⁴² Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 8.

trajectories of concrete lives.”⁴³ In other words our interpersonal engagements are calibrated by our cultural perceptions of different types of bodies. Moreover, the predetermined perceptions of those bodies have institutional and structural ramifications, dictating how particular bodies will be treated, educated, and cared for, as well as the opportunities that will be provided for them. In *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion*, Anthony Pinn asserts:

The social body and physical body act on each other, the former attempting to define the possibilities of meaning and movement for the latter. They exchange meanings through a dialectic process of pressures and restrictions. In short, the social system seeks to determine the ways in which the physical body is perceived and used.⁴⁴

Consequently, discursive power translates to material power, in that it constrains the movement of particular bodies, regulating where they can be and how they are required to act. These limits impact the very identity of black people and coerces them into performances of docility that reify the designation assigned by discursive power in the first place.⁴⁵

Erotic Defiance: A Womanist Ethic of Moral and Political Agency

This project is a womanist investigation of erotic defiance as an ethic of political agency. Womanism is an intellectual revolution in which black women challenge “normative” white patriarchal epistemologies that marginalize and subjugate them and establish new epistemological, theological and ethical methods and approaches based on their own

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 143.

⁴⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 11–25.

experiences, in pursuit of their own actualization.⁴⁶ Centering the real lives of black women, womanist research methodologies privilege sources considered unorthodox. These include black women's fiction, visual arts, fashion, music, religious rituals and everyday practices of survival to provide a clearer vision of black women's moral universes. Womanist methodological approaches in conjunction with my phenomenological approach to the body have motivated me to read black women's bodies, present as texts, shifting my attention to practices, or the ethics of the body, as a kind of discourse. These methodologies also disclose how the signifying language of ethics operative in cultural productions like religious rituals, music, music videos and musicians' social media presence serve as both spiritual and secular testimony revealing their didactic and prescriptive functions in the black communities.

I posit erotic defiance is a form of moral and political agency in which the erotic, that is, love manifested in and through the flesh, informs and makes possible a form of moral participation in which the marginalized and the privileged alike assert their rebellion against the assumed values and meanings of black and female corporeality as well as the convoluted concept of the erotic operative in the fantastic hegemonic imagination. Through an embodied ethic of resistance and freedom that harnesses the erotic—the demonized aspect of their being that renders the marginalized immoral and dangerous in the social imagination—as a resource for moral good, agents surmount the coercive powers of empire through the dynamic, relational and signifying capacity of their flesh to disrupt the power of hegemony over their bodies and beings. In so doing, agents deploy defiance through erotic modes of the haptic—rituals of care, protest and creativity

⁴⁶ For more, see Stacey Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006), xiii, 2–12.

and performances of veneration, self-possession and authorization as virtues in a praxis of contestation comprised of multiple postures of black women's embodied agency through which black people and women declare their radical subjectivity and self love.

Erotic defiance's intended telos is transformation in the material lives of black women through the disruption of black and female subjects psychic confinement to the blackness and femaleness that white patriarchy created and their performance of said liberation through acts of rebellion that assert a love of and pleasure in the body and being of the oppressed, despite their deleterious characterization by the discursive powers of hegemony. Offering an embodied praxis of self definition that enables black women to assert possession of their own bodies and therefore resist and stand in rebellion of black and female social regulation, commodification and degradation erotic defiance aims to thwart and prevent the myriad of consequences the choreography of oppression visits upon black women lives.

Relying on both the symbolic and material aspects of the body to contest demoralizing discursive formations of blackness and combat the psychic and material obstacles these misrepresentations create in the real lives of black people. Through bodily practices of touch, creativity, and protest, erotic defiance asserts an individual's power for self-definition, self-authorization and its capacity as a material agent of change in the moral universe. Jettisoning the need for validation from the dominant culture, I argue postures of erotic defiance embrace and even revere that which is regarded as inferior, dangerous and depraved as a way of asserting the beauty and goodness of black womanhood and asserting their authority over their bodies and being. As such, erotic

defiance is a deep engagement in and celebration of the subordinated and demonized experiences, perspectives and cultural meanings of black people.

In so doing, through the language of ethics—what black women do, particularly with their bodies—erotic defiance operates as an ethic of moral and political agency rejecting and refuting black women’s status as objects of profit and pleasure for white people and men and asserting their own authority.⁴⁷ Comparable to James Cone’s articulation of liberation, erotic defiance is “the mind and body in motion—responding to the passion and the rhythm of divine revelation and affirming that no chain shall hold my humanity down.”⁴⁸ Through these strategies, black woman assert their humanity and ethical subjectivity, restore a positive relationship with their bodies, and cultivate a healthy concept of self. Additionally, these practices resignify black women’s bodies and their erotic capacities as something to be honored, celebrated and engaged, disrupting the racial hierarchies of hegemony, which dictate the oppressive circumstances of black women and black people in general.

As a posture of liberation, erotic defiance is antithetical to the confinement of black and female subjectivity in a white supremacist and male-dominated world, freeing black and female body-subjects for life on their own terms and the construction of a new identity free of the desecrating powers of racism and sexism. Operating in more than just symbolic power, the material aspects of erotic defiance—erotically defiant black flesh in celebration of itself and in pursuit of its own interests—offers more than a counterargument to the idea of black inferiority and the notion that black bodies exist for the profit and pleasure of whiteness. In the midst of a tyrannical system of oppression, it

⁴⁷ Bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 11.

⁴⁸ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 140.

offers an experience that can be participated in, even the in-breaking of a new reality for black women.

At its heart this project engages in discourse analysis. It considers the discursive treatment of the erotic in womanist theo-ethical thought, feminist theory, black religious thought and radical theologians like Mark I. Wallace, while approaching bodily practices as texts through my own methodological construction—womanist haptic analysis. While discursive modes are typically represented as words that are spoken and written, in his translation of Foucault, cultural theorist Stuart Hall emphasizes the elasticity of the concept of language. He asserts, “Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But . . . since all social practices entail meaning and meanings shape and influence what we do—our conduct—all practices have a discursive aspect.”⁴⁹

Consequently, I posit the haptic as a mode of discourse, which, as Hortense Spillers argues, articulates a grammar of black bodies.⁵⁰ My account of the haptic—the perceptive and relational power of the body—offers a synthesis of a variety of sources:

phenomenology’s concept of the sociality of the body; the literary criticism of Hortense Spillers; womanist moral theologian M. Shawn Copeland’s fleeting engagement of the haptic as a linguistic device to account for the objectifying handling of black bodies as property and its role in the disintegration of their personhood; religious scholar Mark I. Wallace’s treatment of haptology; the theology of touch; and film theorist Michelle Ann Stephen’s sustained reflection on the haptic’s multiplicity of physical, psychological and social registers.

⁴⁹ Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation*, 2nd ed., edited by Stuart Hall et al. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 44.

⁵⁰ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 69.

My use of the haptic as a discourse aims to identify the relational capacity of bodies to underscore the often-discounted power of oppressed people through the body's haptic faculties. A womanist haptic analysis therefore privileges the discursive role of the body and its practices, centering the role of the body's sociality—what the body does, what has happened to the body, and how these contribute to identity, value meetings and cultural procedures in the constitution of meaning. While the aforementioned scholars informed my preliminary understanding of the role of touch in agency, my account of the haptic also includes the ways relationality between subjects engender alternative experiences that contribute to the construction of meaning in the individual and social imagination. This includes the sociality of the material body as well as the symbolic role of bodies.

My concept of the haptic is a premoral category—neither good or bad—that articulates the power of the flesh to signify or create meaning through actions and practices and how the general sociality of the body allows for said actions and sociality to be registered ethically through the erotic and the pornographic. Drawing on the womanist and feminist theologians and theorists who have come before me, I classify erotic modalities as the moral use of haptic, signaled by their ability to affirm life, transform and empower. The pornographic, on the other hand, is classified as the immoral use of the haptic—the exploitative—or as Lorde has articulated, the use of sensations without feelings.⁵¹ An ethical paradigm of the haptic, I argue, is vital to the understanding of the body's signifying power.

Deploying the haptic as a method for tracking the socioreligious value of demonized bodies, I use bodies as texts, analyzing the world's treatment of black women's

⁵¹ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 59.

bodies and the religious and social significance it produces. I also use the haptic to track black women's use of the relational power of their own bodies in asserting and manifesting their liberation from confinement foisted upon them by hegemony's deleterious classifications. The traditional discursive analysis of the erotic and the haptic analysis of bodies in motion, I argue, leads us to a fuller understanding of how the erotic can and should be wielded in the psychological and material liberation of black people, with a special emphasis on black women.

Overview of Chapters

The opening chapter of the dissertation, "The Significance of Black Bodies, the Power of Black Flesh," describes the constraining and disintegrating impact of racial oppression on black subjectivity through the haptic.⁵² Using the scholarship of secular humanist Anthony Pinn and literary theorists Hortense Spillers and Michelle Stephens, the chapter offers an account of black female corporeality as a way of framing the importance of underscoring the relational capacity of black flesh (one of the primary components of their humanity and their power), by examining black women's navigation of the reflexive relationship between the discursive/signified body and the sensory/relational flesh as one of the primary manifestations of black moral agency.

The remaining chapters explore profiles of erotic defiance to gain more insight on the utility of the erotic disrupting the power of racist and sexist hegemony on black

⁵² Haptic comes from the Greek *haptos*, which means "touch." The haptic is our bodily connectedness to the world and others. It includes bodily encounter, the impact and influence of our bodies on the world. This includes human practices, the activity of the body and the engagement of the flesh by others. For more, see Mark L. Wallace, "Early Christian Contempt for the Flesh and the Woman Who Loved Too Much in the Gospel of Luke," in *Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity*, edited by Margaret D. Kamitsuka (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 33–50; and Michele Ann Stephens, *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis and the Black Male Performer* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

women's existential freedom. Chapter 2, "Erotic Care of the Soul and the Reflexive Impact of Eros," more deeply explores the physical implications of black bodies' erotic deployment of the haptic. Rooted in Christian and folk practices of healing and transformation, erotic care of the soul showcases the body's capacity to facilitate change as a medium of erotic power in religious and secular spaces. Framing black women's practices of erotic care as a form of erotic defiance, in the tradition of the ministry of Jesus, it expands upon theologian Mark I. Wallace's concept of haptology (theology of touch), arguing for erotic care of the soul as a collaboration between spirit and flesh that erotically imparts new meaning to black flesh and usurps empire's claims on black bodies. Investigating black women's practices of erotic care of the soul, defined as intentional, haptic, intracommunal demonstrations of a countercultural love of the bodies of black women that minister to what womanist ethicist Emilie Townes calls the "*isness*" of black female being,⁵³ it represents the highest aspiration, the holy, pristine version of all the power of the erotic and serves as the first movement in black women's liberation from the strictures of the white gaze—the recognition that they are more than what the world tells them they are.

The third chapter, "Beyond Pleasure: Solidarity as a Practice of Communal Eroticism," represents the agent's moral and political deployment of erotic defiance through acts of active protest against injustice. In an age when the brutalization and killing of black people, both men and women, and the neglect of black communities, i.e., the

⁵³ Townes describes "*isness*" as the intersection of the spiritual and physical components of their being, which results in a deeply embodied spirituality that honors the wholeness and continuity of the human experience and seeks transformation in the concrete realities of black people. A spirituality that involves both body and soul, it unifies the sacrality of what is reserved for the divine with the everyday experiences of humanity. For more, see Emilie Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 11.

heinous quality of the water in Flint, Michigan, or the government's negligence where health care is concerned, commands national attention, the chapter represents the necessary engagement of traditional political efforts toward justice. Considering instances of erotic defiance beyond the black community, particularly among those with power to lose in society, it investigates the role of the erotic in solidarity. Focusing on the protest ritual of "dying in" as a communal demonstration of erotic defiance that depicts the sacramental and material implications of the body, I draw on Kelly Brown Douglas's and womanist ethicist Marcia Riggs's sacramental approach to the body and engage in a womanist reading of embodied protest, which I argue discloses a womanist ethic of kenosis as a foundational element of the erotic's power in cultivating the emotional and corporeal mutuality necessary for authentic solidarity.

Chapter 4, "The Erotic Conjure of Hip Hop and R&B Provocateurs: Where Is the Love?" offers a profile of erotic defiance through the stylization of erotically defiant "hip hop and rhythm and blues women" like Missy Elliott, Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé and Jill Scott.⁵⁴ It employs Theophus H. Smith's *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* to articulate the conjurational nature of erotic defiance in the procurement of black women's moral agency in the form of self-possession and authorization. It also emphasizes the black female body as a transmitter of divine/supernatural energy and the ritual practices of erotic defiance as what I call corporeal incantations that call the will of black female bodies into being, emphasizing the relational power of bodies as more than

⁵⁴ The term "rhythm and blues women" is my own. It articulates the historical connection between the traditions of the blues women treated in Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (New York: Random House, 1998), and Kelly Brown Douglas's *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), and the black female artists of hip hop and rhythm and blues like Nicki Minaj, Rihanna and Beyoncé, to name a few.

just a physical phenomenon, affecting more than just the external world, but the formation of the self and its cultural imprint on the world.

The dissertation concludes with the possibilities that erotic defiance offers for accomplishing just relationality and the material reality of freedom for the oppressed in the here and now. Finally, it explores the *telos* of power accomplished through erotic defiance and offers prescriptions that may prove beneficial in the construction of an ethic of corporeal responsibility for all people that remains faithful to a womanist sense of justice and doctrinal Christianity's concept of the sovereignty of God.

Chapter 1

The Significance of Black Bodies, the Power of Black Flesh

All of us, no matter what kind of body we possess, are captive, figuratively and materially imprisoned by significations—perceptions, interpretations, and value meanings—imposed upon us by society, crystalizing as the *signified* body, trapped in the symbolic order. These significations hold the whole of us materially captive, in a system of meanings, limits, and the practices they inspire; practices which seize, contain, and mold our identities to their will in the social imagination. On those deemed outside the norm, these values sanction, and even encourage, violence for the sake of safety and the preservation of the “sacred” or “natural” order of things.

This chapter engages black feminist and literary critic Hortense Spillers’s haptic account of the disintegration of black subjectivity and her theorization of the flesh in her essay “Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” to explore the ways nondiscursive, haptic practices operate as a discourse,¹ communicating the coordinates of black—specifically African American—existence in the social order, and carving out the parameters of black identity and relationality. Underscoring the impact of the West’s theft of the African body on the psyches, status, and power of black people in America, I consider some of the historical and contemporary effects white control over black bodies has had on black female identity and practices. I then consider the possibilities the haptic/relational capacities of the flesh hold for healing the disfiguring and confining consequences of the white imagination’s construction of blackness for black people. Finally, I argue that as one of the few resources out of reach of

¹ Derived from the Greek *haptos*, the haptic is a form of bodily, nonverbal communication. For more, see n53 of my introduction.

white distortion, the haptic capacities of the flesh can be deployed by the oppressed as a discourse of the body that contests the significations of blackness and the limitations imposed on black existence.

The Flesh, the Signified Body, and Its Construction

In her canonical essay “Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers provides a haptic account of the distortion of black humanity through the physical negation of black subjectivity. Chronicling the disfigurement of black identity from the vantage point of black female flesh, Spillers articulates the dislocation and dispossession of black physical being, emphasizing the “theft” of the African body from its homeland and its separation from its active will.² The dispossession of black people’s bodies is the key factor of black political and social deformation. Usurping all human rights from enslaved Africans—the freedom to assert their will, the expression of their being, and therefore the capacity for interpersonal relationality—this bodily dispossession was so totalizing that despite the presence of black bodies, there was an absence of an active black subject position in white American society. Womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland comments on the discursive and cultural obliteration of black being, offering:

In a negrophobic society, black ontology suffers compromise. . . . In such a society blackness mutates as negation, nonbeing, nothingness; blackness insinuates another so radically different that her and his very humanity is discredited. Then black identity no longer offers a proper subject of sublation, of authentic human self-transcendence, but a bitter bondage to be escaped.³

Black being as absence or nonbeing maintains a lasting legacy within Western cultural hegemony. The West’s theft and plunder of black bodies has done irreparable damage to black

² Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.

³ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 19.

subjectivity and the status of black people through its influence in shaping the worldview of the masses. The history of the commodification of black embodied being as a possession of white society resounds through many periods of American history. More than 150 years after the abolishment of slavery, the majority of black people in America continue to be subservient to the whims of white desires, as well as silent and passive victims to the manipulation of black identity.

The laws of white society made it illegal for black people to read or write while enslaved. Even after slavery, black political agency in America has been denied formally for years and has been restricted practically through the withholding of the right to vote; by a lack of equal protection under the law as seen in the perennial issue of police brutality and the government's neglect of everything concerning black people; from access to food; with limitations on employment and housing and education. In addition, black humanity and subjectivity have repeatedly been denied and castigated by white institutional powers claiming black people have limited, if any, rational capacity, no connection to God, a lack of moral fiber, and a propensity to criminality and lasciviousness.⁴ These caricatures of black identity contribute to white supremacist ideology that demands the quelling of black freedom and the confinement of black identity to the boundaries of the musings of the white imagination. These circumstances leave black identity fissured—trapped, as Spillers contends, between two orders of being—that which the white imagination concocts and that which black people experience as truth in their flesh.

In her famous distinction between the flesh and the body, Spillers attends to black existential rupture, writing, “But I would make a distinction in this case between ‘body’ and ‘flesh’ and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-

⁴ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

positions.”⁵ Spillers underscores the duality of black ontology, represented as the difference between body and flesh, and the dialectical relationship of simultaneously held identities as both “captive object and liberated being.”⁶ The flesh, she argues, is the mode of black life incapable of alteration. For her, “flesh” connotes the very substance of humanness, dignity, freedom, and relational possibility possessed by black Africans prior to their disfiguring encounter with Western man. Spillers assigns black humanity a sense of corporeal materiality, identifying it with the flesh—thus her literary device, I argue, enables attempts to distort black humanity to be registered haptically, through relational transactions. Spillers records these transactions as “high crimes against the flesh,” which include the seizure of the African body, its abduction from its homeland, and its rightful authority—the will of the African.⁷ Both the abduction and dispossession of their bodies facilitated a severing in black existence. A lack of authority over their own bodies deprived black people of a vehicle to physically express their agency—their capacity to assert their will in the world. Consequently, I contend, the annexing of black bodies from black subjects’ authority, distorts black humanity, stripping away black freedom and agential power, which serve as principal aspects of ethical being and relation. With little control over their bodies, the status and purpose of black people in the world was subject to external powers.

Black corporeal impotence was perhaps most evident in the inability of enslaved blacks to protect or defend themselves from desecrating violence. Spillers articulates the manner in which dehumanizing violence functions as a metaphorical instrument of degradation. The slaveholder’s whip, a tortuous hallmark of chattel slavery, disfigured and degraded black

⁵ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

people, as Spillers describes, tearing small pieces of flesh “at almost every stake.”⁸ As Spillers suggests, the flesh extracted from those held captive was more than skin; it was the substance of black humanity and its sacrality. Therein it accomplished the ripping away of the dignity of the enslaved, symbolically attached to the flesh that every lash stole from the body.

In contrast to the flesh, “the body,” according to Spillers, has no physical properties. More clearly understood as a body of significations, or “the signified body,” it is the product of hegemony’s discursive construction of blackness, as well as practices and procedures of racism that escape discursive articulation. A prisoner of the symbolic order, the signified body exists as a phantasm of what womanist ethicist Emilie M. Townes describes as the fantastic hegemonic imagination.⁹ Its construction maintains a reflexive relationship with the normative gaze,¹⁰ in that it is inspired by it, and it regulates it, as it actively interprets all racial difference it encounters. Moreover, the meanings assigned to the body calibrate society’s haptic engagement

⁸ Ibid., 68.

⁹ Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 18. Townes argues the imagination is dangerously susceptible to hegemony—the ideology deployed by dominant groups to persuade the marginalized to docility. Consequently, stereotypes are embraced as truths. She writes, “Imagination is subordinated to the accepted moral landscape and its rules and sociopolitical and cultural realities.” In this way, Townes joins the chorus of scholars who maintain that the realities of black communities are regulated by hegemonic discourse, which casts black people as caricatures of racist ideology.

¹⁰ West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 57. Cornell West describes the normative gaze as the lens through which Western man orders and compares observations. The normative gaze is an ideal which privileges classical physical aesthetic values like light skin, blonde hair, bodily and facial symmetry, as well as classical cultural standards, which include moderation, self-control and harmony, prized in the Western imagination. As its discursive articulation, Enlightenment discourse was instrumental in codifying the normative gaze’s negative designations of blackness and establishing the black body as a symbol of savagery, inferiority and danger. Marked by an emphasis on empirical evidence, Enlightenment thinking fostered a preoccupation with what could be seen and what could be measured. Consequently what was visible, particularly physical appearance, was considered a reliable measurement of classification. Most greatly esteemed within this schema of classification were classical standards of aesthetics and decorum prized by what religious philosopher Cornell West describes as the normative gaze. As such those individuals who exhibited physical features most proximate to what they thought to be the Greco-Roman aesthetic ideal were perceived as the most beautiful and with that the most virtuous. Accordingly, Western notions of appropriateness and rationality mimicked the cultural standards of Greco-Roman culture. Enlightenment discourse formally established these discursive values of virtue, positioning African physical appearance and customs as the antithesis of whiteness and alienated black people from the category of humanness on the basis of physical characteristics, customs and perceived intelligence, all interpreted through a Western lens. The normative gaze limits, caricaturizes, and misrepresents every body because representation as an epistemology—the act of basing one’s knowledge on sight, leaves the world vulnerable to all sorts of interpretations, including the imposition of certain ideologies onto signs.

with it—how it physically and materially relates to / treats those who are different.

It is to this body of significations, operating as static representations of blackness, that W. E. B. Du Bois's famous query, "How does it feel to be a problem," is posed.¹¹ However, Spillers's theorization of the flesh asserts that the framing of black ontic being as "a problem" is far from the natural disposition of black consciousness prior to white hegemony's distortion.

Spillers writes:

The symbolic order that I wish to trace in this writing, calling it an "American grammar," begins at the "beginning," which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation. The massive demographic shifts, the violent formation of a modern African consciousness, that take place on the subsaharan Continent during the initiative strikes which open the Atlantic Slave Trade in the fifteenth century of our Christ, interrupted hundreds of years of black African culture.¹²

Contrary to European accounts, black flesh, for Spillers, does not begin with Western man's first encounter with African men and women, but, as she argues, comes before it. It has a history of cultural practices, creativity, community, and a spiritual connection to the divine that is hundreds of years long. Left undisturbed, black nations created civilizations, practiced various forms of spirituality, built their own architecture, and had economic and social relationships with neighboring countries and continents. The imposition of the white gaze, however, interrupts the unrestricted and unobstructed development of African identity, eclipsing it with its assumptions, and in many ways regulating its formation. Writer and public intellectual James Baldwin offers stark commentary on black identity formation's twisted mutation in the context of whiteness: "Negroes," he argues, "are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world."¹³ Before Du Bois's eye-opening realization that the world was not as he had imagined, and that he was perceived as something

¹¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003), 8.

¹² Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 69.

¹³ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial, 1963), 39.

inferior and to be despised, he enjoyed the freedom of thinking, relating, and experiencing without limitations. But, when faced with the reality of the significations attached to his black body, Du Bois discovered he was a captive.

Thus, Spillers's distinction between the flesh and the body articulates the black psyche's imprisonment in a state of double consciousness—the awareness of discordant realms of identity and the psychological foundation of Duboisian twoness. In fact, Spillers's theorization of the body and the flesh can be understood as a black feminist account of Duboisian twoness. While Du Bois's initial construction of twoness considered the struggle of blacks universally, to reconcile their blackness and their Americanness, Spillers attends to the societally imposed bifurcation of black female humanness and the brood sow, work horse, and sexual seductress that America created.¹⁴

The Disfiguring Dispossession of the Black Female Body

The disfigurement of black women's identity is an inevitable reality, inescapable regardless of any socioeconomic privilege an individual black woman might possess. Spillers contends that

¹⁴ The brood sow, workhorse and Jezebel are traditional archetypes or controlling images of black women. Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins calls these narratives controlling images in society; symbols that make racism sexism and poverty seem natural. She argues they are the means by which white patriarchal domination is upheld. These images foster dichotomous thinking and understand human difference in oppositional terms, constructing the black woman as devalued "other." Thus, she is easier to dominate and scapegoat. For more, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 77. The brood sow derives from images of a female pig, used for breeding. It captures the commodification of black women's reproductive capacity, as many of them were used to breed slaves after the act of 1807 which outlawed the trading of slaves, causing slave owners to turn to the black women reproductive capacity as a natural resource. Slave owners commonly mated enslaved people like animals, sometimes fathering the children themselves, thus black women lost all sexual authority over their bodies. This image continues in the contemporary moment through the stereotypes of the welfare queen / baby mama who is believed to use her reproductive capacities to generate income from the government and black men. The workhorse is another image ascribed to the black woman due to her ability to work in the fields with her male counterparts. Spillers emphasizes the degendering of black women through chattel slavery, arguing that black women were denied the distinctions of "real women." The degendering of black women makes them vulnerable to unrealistic expectations about their strength, an image many black women have adopted as their own. Chanequa Walker-Barnes writes in her book *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and Burden of Strength* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014) that the myth of the black superwoman embraced by black women is literally killing them.

black women are “at a locus of confounded identities,” stuck underneath “layers of attenuated meanings.”¹⁵ These meanings, constructed by a gaze in which whiteness operates as the baseline for all value measurements, fabricate narratives of black women as unwomanly, sexually destructive, ill-behaved, undesirable, disagreeable, and unworthy. Dehumanized and dispossessed on account of these perceptions, black women become defenseless victims of hegemonic practices like sexual coercion, physical and emotional violence, and exploitation of their labor and their agency. These acts dispossess them from the right to their own bodies and authority over their agency. Accordingly, the dominant culture, as well as their own communities, exploit them sexually, economically, politically and spiritually.

In an effort to survive the social imagination’s oppressive significations, black women fall into patterns of disassociation from their bodily and emotional needs as a means of coping, contributing to further disintegration of their (black female) subjectivity. In his essay “The Spirit Is Willing, but the Flesh Is Weak,” practical theologian Lee H. Butler argues that black people have historically operated in a mode of detachment, separating their spirits from their bodies as a way to survive the psychic and physical violence of domination.¹⁶ This, he contends, reveals a level of self-inflicted dehumanization. This division manifests itself most readily in black women’s relationship with the erotic, and the intentional divorcing of one’s spirituality from one’s sexuality. I argue such detachment widens the fissure in black female being, while further injuring black women’s ability to be relational beings. Womanist ethicist Katie Cannon concurs. Exploring the existential conundrum black women face as both sexual and spiritual beings, she maintains that the religious and social formulations of virtue that elevate the spiritual/rational above the body lead black women to sacrifice their sexualities for the sake of

¹⁵ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.

¹⁶ Lee H. Butler, “The Spirit Is Willing but the Flesh Is Weak,” in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, edited by Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 114.

spiritual and social respectability.¹⁷ These strategies represent the presence of rupture in the psyches of black women, caused by white significations of their bodies. Responding to these constructions, black women's selfhood becomes predicated on distancing themselves from the signified body through the denial of their actual bodies, desires, and needs in an attempt to disprove the myths of white society.

The signified body enacts all manner of abuse upon black female flesh, from the social position it is subordinated to, to the behavior it sanctions, and the demands it puts on black women attempting to escape it. Attending to the subordination of black women's subjectivity, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas takes critical aim at H. Richard Niebuhr's "responsible self," arguing:

Black women . . . are never afforded the status of being a responsible self in the normative ethical gaze of H. Richard Niebuhr. Recall that Niebuhr presumes the responsible self to be a moral agent who has the power and autonomy to exercise freedom in relating to God and neighbor. Such agency is unavailable within the everyday reality of black women because she has neither the power, nor the social regard with which she can engage a man or God. Her experience of what it means to be human is thus denied.¹⁸

The privilege/freedom of social relation is a mode of power. The social order for centuries dehumanized black people by denying them the authority to relate as human beings to the dominant culture and to each other. Spillers captures this injustice in her discussion of eugenics, as black women's and men's bodies are used as lab rats to conduct medical experiments and perfect medical procedures.¹⁹ This demoralizing practice, Spillers says, destroys, as Floyd-Thomas has rightly argued, the ethical dimension of humanity—the ability to relate “between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural

¹⁷ Katie Cannon, “Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority,” in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, edited by Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins, 12.

¹⁸ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, xii.

¹⁹ Robert V. Guthrie, *Even the Rat Was White: A Historical View of Psychology* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon), 2004.

institutions.”²⁰ Spillers continues, “To that extent, the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory.”²¹

While Western eugenics was perhaps the most striking iteration of the negation of black subjectivity and relationality, it is merely one of a chorus of practices that compromise black dignity. Beginning with the seizure of black bodies, which rendered black people objects in the American mercantile system, the negation of black humanity takes on a sexual dimension through the rape of black women by slaveholders and any white man who sought to fulfill their libidinous desires. With no legal protection or recourse, black women had little-to-no authority over their reproductive capacities, one of the most intimate aspects of their bodies. The fruit of their wombs was also subject to seizure.²² Slave owners regularly practiced the cutting of family ties as mother was separated from child, sister from brother, and loved one from loved one. Black dehumanization can also be traced through black women’s inability to choose a mate or breeding partner during chattel slavery. The practice of breeding that became so important after the prohibition of the importation of slaves in 1807 transformed one of the most sacred biological aspects of black femininity, her womb, into an instrument of industry, vital to the production of slaves. In summary, black women’s bodies have historically not been their own, nor have they enjoyed the freedom to engage in foundational aspects of human relationality like the practice of love, even when the object of their love was their own child.

The dispossession of black women’s bodies and authority continues in modern times through the demonization of their bodies through controlling images like the Jezebel, the

²⁰ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 68.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Daina R. Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved from Womb to Grave in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon, 2017), 10–32.

hoochie mama, and the newly emerging THOT archetype.²³ This is especially the case in the black church and even within families which, influenced by the controlling images of hegemony, demonize black women and exploit their bodies and labor to prop up black patriarchal power. Both demand that black women offer their physical being in the service of the community's good, at the expense of their own health and wholeness. As a result, black women become victims of cultural practices within their own communities that sexually objectify and mechanize their creative capacity in collaboration with patriarchal traditions of women's subordination and service in general.

To escape pejorative narratives, black women have suppressed the intimate parts of themselves—their sexuality, emotions, and even the need for bodily self-care, and have adopted the superwoman persona as a way of redeeming their being from designations of immorality. By performing industriousness and value through service to their communities, their jobs and their families, at the expense of their own personhood, black women themselves, continue in the tradition of erasure of their right to their bodies and their agency. Consequently, black women often cannot escape a warped sense of their bodies and their erotic power, resulting in the silencing and shaming of them, or buying into the trope of sexual danger and engaging in combative sexuality.²⁴

The Possibilities of the Flesh

While the effects of white significations on black embodiment result in black women's confinement, their flesh and its relational capacities provide opportunities for agency,

²³ THOT is a sexually charged term made popular by black popular culture. It is an acronym for "that hoe over there" and is meant to signify a woman who uses her sexuality to gain attention.

²⁴ Combative sexuality is my own term. It signifies the use of one's sexuality as a weapon or tool for climbing in status through the exploitation of romantic and sexual partners.

particularly in their quest to escape the totalizing effects of racist hegemony on their identities. Spillers's concept of the flesh, however, offers a glimpse of the complex world of black female humanity that lives behind and prior to the Duboisian veil.²⁵ The veil, in this case, is constructed by "the layers of attenuated meanings" assigned by a particular order that eclipse black female humanity and misname her according to the perceptions of the white imagination.²⁶ The veil, interpreted through Spillers's concept of the flesh, marks the split between the reality of black flesh and the signified body thrust upon black identity. The flesh thus demarcates the existence of the interiority of black subjects—that which is never sought or acknowledged by the dominant culture and rarely disclosed by black communities. Spillers writes, "The flesh is the concentration of 'ethnicity' that contemporary critical discourses neither acknowledge nor discourse away. It is this 'flesh and blood' entity, in the vestibule (or 'pre-view') of a colonized North America, that is essentially ejected from 'The Female Body in Western Culture.'"²⁷ More than just what is seen, the flesh exceeds the limitations of the white gaze; rather it exists prior to and transcends it. Spillers notes, "Before the body is the 'flesh,'" marking its existence before and beyond the gaze.²⁸ This critical distinction is necessary in order to locate the black subject unmolested, prior to what Spillers calls "a violent formation of a modern African consciousness"—the physical and psychic rupture encounter with whiteness induced in its being.²⁹

The opposing narratives of black embodied being render the flesh of the black subject divided between their existence prior to the intrusion of Western man and their realities as

²⁵ Du Bois's concept of the veil is the ever-present barrier, the line of demarcation between black and white existence, the space that signals the inferiority and perceived contamination of the black race. For Du Bois, it takes the shape of unasked questions, refusal and rejection from community, the alienation of the black man and woman from society. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 7–8.

²⁶ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 65.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

“captive bodies” in both the symbolic and material world. Spillers explains that as captive bodies, black humanity is constrained in the world of whiteness and its values, meanings, and limitations. The material captive body is an abject object, dispossessed of any authority itself and separated from its motive will (active desire) through all manner of physically and emotionally injurious dehumanization, including rape; torture; separation from mothers and fathers, sons and daughters; neglect; and loss of gender distinction. Within these circumstances, the flesh is disfigured, devolving from an agent of expression and relationship to a sight of occupation and the emblem of dominance. As such, the language of the flesh (i.e., lacerations, weathered wombs, the empty arms of mothers, broken bones, and compromised health) discloses what Spillers calls “a hieroglyphics of the flesh.”³⁰

In addition to marking the humanity/subjectivity and relational capacity of black people, the flesh, Spillers argues, functions as a cultural artifact.³¹ Within it lies the remains of culture, practices, and life before rupture. Spiller contends, however, that the narratives that the flesh bares evolve through time. This capacity to convey the cultural conditions through which it has lived contributes to the lexical value of the flesh.³² Spillers posits that the black female body “strung from a tree limb, its wounding and the psychological terror it inspires to other enslaved

³⁰ Ibid., 67.

³¹ When I use the term relational capacity, I am challenging the subordinated subject position black people are relegated to in the social order. Stacey Floyd-Thomas argues, “Black women . . . are never afforded the status of being a responsible self in the normative ethical gaze of H. Richard Niebuhr. Recall that Niebuhr presumes the responsible self to be a moral agent who has the power and autonomy to exercise freedom in relating to god and neighbor. Such agency is unavailable within the everyday reality of black women because she has neither the power, nor the social regard with which she can engage a man or God. Her experience of what it means to be human is thus denied (*Mining the Motherlode*, xii). In this way, the privilege/freedom of relation is a mode of power. The social order for centuries dehumanized black people by denying them the authority to relate as human beings to the dominant culture and to each other. This is most strikingly seen in the cutting of family ties during slavery, as well as in the inability to choose a mate or breeding partner; however, it continues in black women’s suppression of their sexualities, their suppression of their emotions and need for bodily self-care, and the superwoman persona they adopt in service to their communities, their jobs and their families, at the expense of their own personhood.

³² Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 68.

men and women contributes to the narratives of women a living dimension.”³³ It serves as a concrete example of the mechanisms of subjugation deployed to constrain and extinguish black female humanity. Spillers contends, “The materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh ‘ungendered’—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying.”³⁴

I argue that as both cultural artifact and incarnated being, flesh breathes; it feels, suffers, and emotes. It reaches out and is vulnerable to change. Spillers’s emphasis on the flesh’s vulnerability communicates its mortality and its defenselessness to attack. Bones break, flesh rips apart. The wounds that the flesh suffers mark it with cultural meaning. Consequently, Spillers perceives the wounds of the flesh as a kind of narrative, a record of the distortion it has experienced through the violence of dispossession visited upon it by the middle passage, three hundred years of slavery, and the various acts intended to communicate white dominance. In this way, the flesh is the material and psychic stuff of being. It is both the means by which black humanity mediates its desire, emotion, and relationship with the world and the other; as well as its corporeality, which is vulnerable to the corruption of violence, whose marks it bears as a supplementary narrative of its distortion.

The malleable nature of the flesh, however, points to liberative possibilities, as well. It suggests that the meaning of the body is always in flux, as a result of the change it undergoes through haptic encounters, and points to the liberative possibilities black women as enfleshed agents can create through their corporeal impact on the world. Haptic encounters, therefore, play an essential role in animating, communicating, and concretizing the significance of black flesh assigned by white hegemony and make the challenging of these significations possible, as well.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

To review, Spillers's distinction between the flesh and the body articulates the dramatic difference between a corporeal, black humanness, dignity and freedom that live before and beyond the white gaze and Western man's invention of the black body, its subordinate subjectivity, and its simulated meanings. So often in white culture the two are conflated, with the signified body masquerading as the true identity and limit of black life. Spillers's distinction discloses not only the substance of black humanity—namely, a subject position equal to and capable of relating to the dominant culture—but also the captivating veneer of the black body, laid over black flesh, that imprisons black humanity in abject objecthood, contorted and arranged at the will and pleasure of whiteness. This eclipse accomplishes a rupture in the psyches of black people, functioning as a perpetual stumbling block to the expression, freedom, and fulfillment of black identity. White significations of blackness mutate its impulse, so that rather than black selfhood emerging from the organic desire, will and emotion of black people, it becomes a response to the myths of white society. Additionally, Spillers's depiction of the flesh as a malleable cultural artifact that holds cultural meanings through its various markings amplifies haptic engagement of black bodies and black bodies' engagement with the world as a discourse by which the significance of black bodies is constructed and communicated. It is to this discourse that we turn to next.

Haptic Practices as a Discourse of the Body

My use of the term haptic signifies a discourse composed of human practices, the activity of the material body (the physical agent of the flesh), its impact on other living beings and their impact on the flesh. In this schema, the material body, as mediator between the self and its surroundings, is the site of the haptic as both actor and receptor, making sense of the world, its

place in it, as well as impacting and manipulating the world through relational encounter. My construction of the haptic constitutes practices that engage the experience of flesh in the material world. This includes: (1) tactile experience—the experience of the body being touched and touching; (2) corporeal perception—the body’s experience of its position in the world—its arrangement, the organizing of neighborhoods and various dimensions of material sociality, like space, access, and limitations; and finally, (3) intersubjective relationality—the mode of physical and relational contact between two subjects, and the messages and meanings communicated as a result. Accordingly, the haptic, I argue, discloses the relational power of the body and its vulnerability to the power of others. It accomplishes the material codification of the assemblage of values operative in the normative gaze, the animation of beliefs/theories of knowledge produced by those in power. It refers to the way the significance of bodies and the identities of the persons who inhabit them are shaped by the world they encounter, as well as their power to shape that which they encounter.

As meaning conveying acts of physical encounter, I contend, haptic encounters communicate the social location of bodies in the world, both the limits, restrictions and impotence of individuals who inhabit bodies deemed inferior by race and sex, as well as the freedoms, privileges, and power of those who inhabit bodies classified as superior through the same categories. The haptic also measures the effect of one body or group of bodies upon another. In the case of black bodies, the haptic signifies the handling/physical treatment of black people, as well as their scope of authority, or lack thereof, in the world.

The discursive nature of the haptic suggests that the sociality of the body—its engagement with other bodies—enables it to operate as a living sign, and that bodily practices contribute to the construction meaning, both psychically and intersubjectively. In other words,

the practices, performances of bodies and their experiences as objects in the world (i.e., the way they are situated and positioned, how they are experienced by others, and the manner in which they are handled, whether with care, fear, or even entitlement) offer instructive cues regarding their nature, identity and limits. Haptic encounters as discourse also inform an observer's relationship and behavior toward the bodies relating. Foucault suggests that these kinds of disciplines are a product of power's productive capacity—its ability to produce certain kinds of subjects and certain kinds of practices that these subjects engage in.³⁵

For example, the clutching of a purse by a woman on an elevator with a black man produces a number of meanings on a variety of levels. It can be interpreted as fear of being robbed, communicating the perception of black bodies as a sign of criminal danger. For the black person who incites this gesture, the experience of being a source of fear contributes to ongoing identity formation, as these acts directly correlate to the significance of black bodies in the social order. In the case of black women, the absence of recognition operates similarly. When they are overlooked in grocery store lines, ignored in corporate America and neglected by institutions like the church and the corporations that rely on their financial support, it registers haptically, indicating their invisibility and status of nonbeing in the social order. Literary theorist Michelle Ann Stephens affirms the haptic's ability to form subjects, writing, "The desire for difference is a fundamentally intersubjective formation felt on the body of the black subject as a touch. In other words, the black subject experiences symbolic capture in bodily sensational haptic terms."³⁶ Shared beliefs and standards experienced by the body in the form of containment assert the dominant community's distinction; communicating supremacy/inferiority through the manner certain bodies are handled and organized. Stephens's

³⁵ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1:101.

³⁶ Stephens, *Skin Acts*, 21.

words aim at the figurative aspects of black subjectivity's containment; however, the experience of subordination bears heavily on the material flesh, as well. Captured in a body of significations, black flesh is contained and abused by the hands that socially reject it, physically injure it, politically disempower it and spiritually desecrate it. These acts are experienced by black women and men as the intimate obstruction and limitation of their corporeal and existential freedom. It communicates their status and position in the world as one of no status, alienation, impotence, and contamination in ways linguistic modes of discourse do not.

For example, in *Enfleshing Freedom*, womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland underscores how slavery's haptic measures altered the identities of enslaved blacks. She writes,

The reduction and objectification of Blacks began with the seizure and binding of the body. The violent severing of the captive from community and personhood; imprisonment in dark and dank places below ground; packing and confinement in the slave ship. . . . More lessons in chattel slavery's idiom of power followed: handling and seasoning, bartering and selling.³⁷

Referencing the handling and seasoning, bartering and selling of black bodies during chattel slavery, Copeland articulates the role of touch / physical encounter in the deformation of African people in America. The haptic aspects of enslavement—the manipulation of enslaved bodies, their physical degradation and desecration—codified the status and function of black bodies as commodity and robbed black people of the basic freedoms of their humanity, such as the right of control over their own bodies and connection to their communities. Moreover, these violations disciplined and reoriented black flesh and being into a new identity mired in violence, neglect, and containment.

The prelingual nature of the haptic universalizes it, allowing these practices to be taken up by common people, and exchanged at the interpersonal, rather than the institutional, level. For example, W. E. B. Du Bois's discovery of his position in the social order is not discovered

³⁷ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 29.

in a book, but through the personal experience of the refusal of one girl, a newcomer to his classroom.³⁸ It is this interpersonal encounter that causes what he calls “the shadow of the veil” to sweep over his existence.³⁹ The rejection of Du Bois as suitable for such kinds of human interaction signaled to him his difference, producing a psychological alienation. What is striking about this interaction is that a child executes it. She, herself, was most likely ignorant of the formal institutional, discursive constructions of blackness, which promulgated black inferiority as the foundation of the authority of white supremacy. Yet, despite her youth, she was still attuned to the danger of relating with Du Bois, a black boy, as her equal, and the negative consequences it would have on her own status as a privileged subject. The young woman’s rejection of Du Bois demonstrates the way designations assigned by the white gaze are communicated through haptic encounters with black flesh.

I contend that the haptic allows us to trace what is often considered as the invisible hand of white supremacy, not just through its agential American institutions, but the people and practices that animate it, disclosing that racism and sexism are not merely structural realities, but carried out by flesh and blood. The study of the haptic, I argue, also reveals the power of the individual and the body’s capacity to influence and shift meaning. I assert that the body’s signifying power ultimately substantiates or disproves hegemony as a person chooses to submit to disciplinary power or not. Thus, I maintain that the haptic is a mode of knowledge production available to everyone, including those who have no access to institutional power. This includes the marginalized.

The haptic, as a site of intersubjective relationality, is a locus of potential power. As the site of bodily encounter, it discloses the persistence of the subjectivity of black flesh through its

³⁸ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

relational capacities (i.e., its ability to impact the world through its contribution to intersubjective meaning). My use of the term “relational capacity” aims to invoke the Spillersian distinction between the subordinated subject position black people are relegated to in the social order as bodies and their liberated/agential subject position as flesh. This is intended to underscore the privilege/freedom of relation as a mode of power.

Despite the West’s social negation of black humanity, the relational capacities of black flesh could not be snuffed out, on account of its embodied sociality—the material or existential body’s presence in a social world.⁴⁰ Through embodied sociality, black flesh, like all flesh, participates in the construction of shared meaning through intersubjectivity. Phenomenologist Robert Sokolowski perceives intersubjectivity as a product of the “publicness of the life of reason.”⁴¹ He contends the mind is public, operating out in the open, as opposed to remaining private or secret in the consciousness of individual subjects. The life of reason is not a private, but a social phenomenon, socialized through its expression/manifestation of actions, subjects’ interactions with one another, and the various projects in which they engage in the world.⁴² Sokolowski contends the life of reason lives in signs, words, and symbols operative in society, providing for the intersubjective assignment and codification of meaning.⁴³ Employing the logic of Stuart Hall, I add meaning-conveying encounters to Sokolowski’s list. It is meaning-conveying encounters facilitated by the existential body that fuel the signifying power of the haptic.

⁴⁰ The “existential body” is French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s term for the lived body, the body in motion in the world. For more on the existential body, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Paul, 1962).

⁴¹ Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 11–16.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 119.

Operating through the haptic, which governs the interpretive work and knowledge gained through encounter with other beings, I argue the relational power of flesh has the capacity to construct and rearrange meaning. Consequently, it stands as one of the primary resources for black women's liberation from the tyranny of discursive significations. French philosopher Merleau-Ponty argues that it is the primordial, pre-reflective knowledge grasped as a result of the body in dialogue or communication with the world that establishes the basis for the construction of meaning. The senses, he argues, work together in a common project, informing and synthesizing the data provided by the other, providing the body with knowledge of the world and the subject with identity. This capacity is always at work and is the ground of conscious existence.

I aver the flesh—the incarnated life principle, constitutive of desire, emotional intelligence, and the relational capacity of being—functions as the instrument of agency and freedom through the material/existential body. Spillers's narrative of black being before rupture maintains that the flesh was free, its consciousness unblighted by the imposition of the signified body and its disfiguring limitations and restrictions. Instead, the flesh was self-possessed and self-authorized. It was not coerced into subjection. It was capable of exercising its desire, demonstrating its emotion, and relishing in relationship. I argue that the black existential body's engagement with the world—its relationships with those within black communities and beyond—represents the form of humanity's physical existence that codifies identity. These interactions ground black people's self-concept, as well as facilitate their participation in the creativity of God and therefore God's image through the construction of meaning. Consequently, the creative capacity of all flesh, facilitated by the haptic—the reciprocal impact between the body and the world—defies empire's misrepresentations of black flesh as evil or

somehow severed from the divine, while setting the stage for black women to construct alternative meaning and experiences through bodily practices of defiance which enables them to co-create with God.

Relational/Signifying Flesh and Erotic Modes of Resistance

While Foucault argues that power is reinforced through the institutional production and transmission of knowledge, I argue the haptic discloses the power of the flesh of living beings to convey and reorganize meaning through its relationship with the world and other beings in the world. Despite the efforts of the West to produce a social system that rendered black flesh abject objects, devoid of the social gravitas for ethical relationality, the haptic underscores its persistent, unconquerable relational dynamism. As the object and actor of the haptic—the ability to touch, to relate and to impact the other physically, spiritually and mentally—the material body, the physical agent of the flesh becomes vital to the project of black liberation. Its influence on the imagination of others through experiences of encounter, or what phenomenologists call the sociality of the body, furnishes the technologies of signification—the ability to create meaning. Accordingly, flesh, as the conduit of physical relationality, has the power to shape and resist discursive constructions of objects in the world. This is particularly true of the flesh of those marginalized by race and sex, i.e., black women, given that the significations assigned to them are typically fabrications, produced and disseminated on behalf of white patriarchy, and fail to reflect the reality of their beings. The contradiction between the identities imagined by a social imagination warped by white supremacy and patriarchy and the realities of the oppressed position the flesh of black women as primary sites of resistance. Consequently, the activity of material bodies—the physical manifestation of the flesh—and

their impact on the imaginations of those who experience them ratifies, or challenges the construction of the hegemonic imagination, particularly the effects of racialized and sexualized stigma on the people it degrades.

Haptic resistance to discursive formations disrupts the codification of its limits and values and establishes an alternative reality. It also imposes existential boundaries on its captives—who are typically poor, typically black—demarcating the boundaries of being and power permissible for the oppressed to occupy. Consequently, haptic sensations, which involve many senses simultaneously, extend beyond the physical to define the nature and limits of the character and freedom of black people on psychic and social levels. More than simply touch, haptic sensibilities affect all aspects of the sensory experience of black people, what phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty calls “their situatedness in the world.”⁴⁴ For example, the black body harassed by police, incarcerated by the criminal justice system and the black communities over-policed by law enforcement experience the essential role haptic encounters play in animating and concretizing the significance of black flesh as contemptible, faulty and criminal.

I assert that institutional knowledge disseminated through speech acts relies on the signifying power of the flesh’s relationality, and that in the case of conflict, the discourse of the body—those meaning-conveying acts—prove more powerful than words. This is in part because experience engages our tactile sense as a firsthand account, shaping what we understand to be true. Religious scholar Marleen de Witte, in her explanation of the vitality of touch in religion argues, “Of all the senses, we take touch to be the one least prone to trickery, the most direct of the senses, providing us with unmediated access to what—we presume—is

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 137.

real. More than seeing is believing, touching is believing.”⁴⁵ Consequently, the haptic provides sensory data that funds our sense of reality by reinforcing and actualizing value and significance through the material world and animating and concretizing the meaning of an object or subject. That which we can touch, see, and experience operates as our reality and knowledge. Consequently, flesh harnessed in particular kinds of religious and social praxis reveal the theoretical or ideological as merely conjecture. This is not to say that dismantling said ideologies rhetorically is not an important aspect of resisting racist patriarchy, but that such strategies are incomplete until they are deployed materially. This is especially the case when it comes to assumptions about black flesh. As Copeland and Spillers illustrate, the haptic was one of the primary technologies of the deformation of black humanity. Thus, I maintain that interventions used to recover the humanity of black people must include the haptic, practices of fleshly relationality that audaciously declare the power and subjectivity of black people, as well. I argue that erotic defiance—the willful embodiment of a revolutionary and unapologetic love of, and pleasure in, the bodies and being of the oppressed—is such a practice.

Modalities of the Haptic: The Pornographic and the Erotic

Copeland writes in her book *Enfleshing Freedom* that the body is the means by which the love of God, or humanity’s impulse of domination is carried out.⁴⁶ The haptic, in my estimation, is the means by which Copeland’s ethical modes of enfleshment are executed. The body’s collaboration in the manifestation of divine transformative love, I argue, is a manifestation of the erotic, the defining characteristic of the ethic of resistance posited in this project, while the

⁴⁵ Marleen de Witte, “Touch,” *Material Religion: Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 7.1 (2011): 149.

⁴⁶ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 1.

pursuit of domination through exploitation, as rehearsed in this chapter, can be classified as the pornographic.

The Western capitalistic project of creating bodies as objects and property dispossesses subjects of their bodies, destroys the ethical relationality of black flesh—its freedom, authority and status represent a particular mode of embodied sociality, which I describe as pornographic. Pornographic in the sense that it is obscene, an abuse of black emotional sentience, and intended, as Audre Lorde argues, to “suppress true feelings.”⁴⁷ Black women’s bodily and emotional disassociation, survival strategies used in response to the United States’ pornographic use of their flesh, illustrates the manner in which the pornographic exerts a kind of creative control over black flesh, compromising its humanity for the profit and pleasure (often sexual) of whiteness and white people. In her essay “Uses of the Erotic,” black feminist Audre Lorde writes, “The pornographic emphasizes sensation without feeling.”⁴⁸ It relies on the disconnection of the body from its emotions, passions, desires and creative capabilities constitutive of humanity. Consequently, the pornographic is the operation of the physical body, void of, or operating under dysfunctional and exploitative interpersonal and intrapersonal relationality. Like religious racist Charles Carroll’s project, the pornographic also seeks to sever the relationship between God and incarnated being.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 54.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Writing in the late 1800s to early 1900s, Charles Carroll contributed to discourse that challenged the sacrality of black humanity by arguing that black people did not participate in the *imago Dei*—the image of God. While white humanity was connected to God through Adam and Eve, Carroll argued, black people had no such connection. He writes, “Let us bear in mind that the Negro, the lower apes and quadrupeds all belong to ‘one kind of flesh,’ the flesh of the beast. Diminishing black people to physical matter void of rational capacity or sacrality, Carroll’s assertions demonstrate the role of Christian theology in validating racist oppression by advancing theories that black people are divinely cursed and part of the order of beasts.” For more, see Charles Carroll, *The Negro as Beast* (St. Louis: American Book and Bible House, 1900; reprint, New York: Books for Libraries, 1980), 10, via Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do with It?*, 130.

As black women's lives demonstrate, these modes of existence produce, and are a product of, violence. For example, the pornographic practice of breeding slaves, of slave masters coercing black men to act as their proxy in the rape of black women as they looked on, or the trauma of watching as offspring were gathered and sold, desecrates enslaved black women's wombs and the human impulse for connection between mother and child. It also sows discord into the dynamics of black men and women's relationships. The indignity of having no control over one's own body, particularly one's sexuality and reproductive capacities; the participation of black men, whether coerced or not; and black men's inability to protect black women, black children and even themselves, leave gaping relational scars, as well as deep physical and psychic wounds carried by the flesh. Moreover, these practices install white slave masters and white Western powers as sovereign, or God, in these racially organized social universes.

On the contrary, the erotic is a mode of relationality, powered by a divine force constitutive of humanness. Christian theologian Sarah Coakley asserts that eros is a manifestation of love, and therefore a manifestation of the divine. Building on church father Gregory of Nazianzus's metaphor of perichoresis,⁵⁰ she contends eros bears the *imago Dei* through its perichoretic operation. According to Gregory, the Holy Spirit is the kiss, or desire enacted by the Father and received by the Son. Similarly, Coakley argues that the Holy Spirit demonstrates its erotic nature through its role of unifying the believer with God. She maintains that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit unites or coheres the believer to God and God to the

⁵⁰ Perichoresis signifies the divine dance between the three persons of the Godhead, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Signifying the divine ethic of binding/cohering, the term perichoresis is originally used by church father Gregory of Nazianzus. For more on perichoresis, see Gregory of Nazianzus, Epistle CI, par. 4.

believer, out of a desire for intimacy with each other.⁵¹ Consequently, eros is a cause of coherence. It is the desire to know one another, participate in one another's lives, and to find home in each other. It animates deep engagement, not only with the bodies of the others, but the hearts, minds, and spirits of our human counterparts. In this way, eros / the erotic is a divine resource for moral agency.

Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas insists that relationality calibrated by divine love is the intended aim of humanity. She writes, "A person's humanity is actualized when he or she, motivated by God's love, enters into a relationship with the rest of God's creation. To know the love of God is to be compelled to share that love with others. To do so is also to realize one's divinity."⁵² Moreover, she writes that the *imago Dei* is reflected by men and women who choose to live in the world as "agents of loving relationship with God's creation."⁵³ It is the presence of God within humans and their willingness to exhibit the divine in loving relationality that constitutes humanness. This same presence and capacity for love bonds them to the divine. As such, participation in the dignity of others, despite the estrangement racial categorization creates, defies the alienating mechanisms of systemic evil and facilitates the intended purpose of humanity—to reflect and vivify the loving nature of God in creation.

Audre Lorde describes the erotic as "the measure between the beginnings of the self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which once we know it we can aspire."⁵⁴ The sensual are those physical, emotional and psychic expressions of what is "deepest and richest within each of us."⁵⁵ Lorde locates the erotic between the origin of one's

⁵¹ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 49–50.

⁵² Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 113.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵⁴ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 54.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 54, 56.

identity and the fullness of one's desire. Her repeated connection of the erotic to feelings and the sensual tethers the erotic to the body, for it is through the body that we experience the sensory. In this way, the erotic is a form of self-knowledge, a bodily way of knowing, making us aware of our capacity for joy and excellence.⁵⁶ It evokes a love, pride and confidence in the wisdom of the body, the body itself as the arbiter of this knowledge and the truth of oneself, which it discovers as a result of sensory/bodily pleasure.

Based on its activity, the erotic discloses itself as a corollary to the spiritual, beckoning questions of the relationship between the erotic and God. Embedded deeply within us and inspiring our movements, the erotic functions on the level many religious communities describe as spiritual. However, for many Christians, likening the erotic to the spiritual constitutes blasphemy.⁵⁷ To mingle the sacred and the profane, or worse, to ascribe what is considered evil to God, seems too great a risk. To reconcile this conflict, I turn to Aristotle's theory of function and to the words of Jesus. From Aristotle's perspective, the function of a thing discloses its identity, while Jesus contends in the Bible, one can know a tree by the fruit it bears.⁵⁸ The fruits of the erotic—affirmation, regeneration, empowerment—testify of its likeness to God. Consequently, the erotic is neither profane nor evil, but a force, an emissary, or at the very least, a companion of the spirit that bestows the life-inducing, healing and empowering effects of the divine. Moreover, it is the erotic capacity of the flesh that connects it to the spirit through the kinship between the spirit and the erotic.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 56–57.

⁵⁷ Historically, much of Christianity's discomfort with the body grows out of its deep suspicion of the erotic, also known as the passions. In Augustinian and Thomistic theologies, sexual desire is one of the markers that delineate the holy from the unholy. Commensurate with the ecclesial culture of their time, their theologies foster the notion that the presence of sexual desire connotes the absence of God and vice versa. For more on Christian erotophobia, see John E. Theil, "Augustine on Eros, Desire and Sexuality," in *Embrace of Eros*, edited by Margaret Kamitsuka (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

⁵⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 1:7, and Matt 7:16–20.

Relational flesh operating in erotic modalities functions agentially to resignify the black body, particularly the defiant black body as something to be honored, celebrated, and engaged, disrupting the racial hierarchies of hegemony, which dictate the oppressive circumstances of black people. Operating in more than just symbolic power, erotic black flesh in celebration of itself and in pursuit of its own interests (practices of erotic defiance) offers more than a counterargument to the idea of black inferiority and the notion that black bodies exist for the profit and pleasure of whiteness. It offers an experience that can be participated in and the in-breaking of a new reality for black women in the midst of tyrannical systems of oppression. Through this posture / these practices, the body acts as the catalyst and locus of the in-breaking of material transformation.

In our contemporary moment, “the body,” secular humanist Anthony Pinn argues, “affords an opportunity to challenge the dominance of the spoken and written word as the primary means of exchange.”⁵⁹ With the advent of the digital revolution and the increasing popularity of video content, especially by the marginalized, the signifying power of black flesh presents a grave threat to hegemonic epistemologies, while providing, through its ability to produce alternative knowledge, an arsenal of resources to black moral agents who adopt its ethic of defiance. Jettisoning the need for validation from the dominant culture and embracing, and even revering, the gifts that come from bodies designated as inferior, dangerous and depraved, signifying relational black flesh disrupts oppressive constructions of blackness through the revolutionary practice and performance of self-love. These practices are a kind of body language, which operate at the haptic, as well as the discursive, level through what I call erotic defiance.

⁵⁹ Anthony Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 10.

Erotic defiance is resistance against the containment of black flesh to the significations assigned by racist hegemony. It is black flesh stepping outside of the limits of their position as a possession of white culture, contesting racist ideology's invention of black identity as false through the power of signification, a language of the body, "a language of ethics." I borrow this phrase from Penelope Ingram's *The Signifying Body*. Ingram argues for the relationship between ontology and ethics, arguing that "being is revealed in and through an ethical relationship with the wholly other."⁶⁰ While I am unwilling to stake a claim in the distinct ontology of blackness, if we consider ontology a way of articulating identity, her focus on the relational aspect of ethics as a source of disruption of false characterizations of black people is generative. Following in the footsteps of Martin Heidegger, Ingram pushes past the representational function of language, which she believes is compromised by colonization, to posit a different approach to language that operates beyond metaphysics, relying on physical signification.⁶¹ "This new language is gestural, corporeal, and proximate," she argues.⁶² Composed of the actions of the body, what we as people do in response to our encounter with others, this language discloses the authenticity of being. In this way, the experience of encounter then becomes a new source of knowledge construction; and that encounter provides alternative experiences of the body, experiences that contradict dominant depictions of the marginalized other.

As black signifying flesh enacts a defiant love for itself, an independence of being, and an awareness of the importance of its physical nature to its consciousness and moral agency, it obfuscates the perverse logic of racist ideology, which renders black inferiority and corruption

⁶⁰ Penelope Ingram, *The Signifying Body: Toward an Ethics of Sexual and Racial Difference* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), xi.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

as static. Erotic defiance, as a language of ethics, refutes the image of blackness as static, demonstrating through the audaciously relational and resilient life of black flesh, that the significance of black incarnated being, is in a constant process of evolution through its relational capacity. This language of physical signification, which Ingram argues is ethics, reveals authentic being-in-the-world through ethical encounter with the other.⁶³

These physical significations, Ingram argues, happen at the site of relational encounter. Bodies, in general, as objects in the world, have always functioned as living signs and symbols, which construct meaning through a corporeal language of signification. Operating at the level of the gaze, the culture of bodies is a prelingual language. It is the significance of bodies unmediated by words. Their arrangement, limits, and constraints; their inclusion and its criteria; their activity in the world; their interpersonal interactions; the body in motion independently and interpersonally are didactic, offering insight into the relation of things in the world. It was these social queues, provided through the haptic culture of racial hierarchy, that offered unsolicited instruction to the girl child who rejected Du Bois's valentine.

Barack Obama's presidency offers a contemporary example of how the arrangement of bodies in cultural and political space contributes to the significance and status of bodies and the world. President Obama's black body inhabiting spaces of power (i.e., the highest office in the United States) informs who can access power, what it means to be a political leader in America, the significance of America as a nation, while challenging the traditional limits of the black male body. Historically, the black male body resides in a position of servitude, subjection, with very little access to power. President Obama, however, provides a kind of visibility/representation for the black body in spaces from which it had previously been excluded in the past. Holding this office and occupying the White House with First Lady

⁶³ Ibid.

Michelle Obama and his children as the First Family, alters notions of what is possible in the social imagination. The presence of their bodies in these spaces introduces additional data/memories and experience to the intersubjectively established understandings of who can be president, and the value meanings and appropriate spaces for black bodies.⁶⁴

In this way, despite President Obama's hesitance to initiate policies specifically for black people, his presence, as a black man, advances the status and mobility of black people on a representational level, accomplishing a transgression of boundaries. More specifically, the particularities of his embodiment allow for the intersection of the meanings and values assigned to American presidents and black men. Thus, Obama's presidency expands the social imagination's horizon of possibilities when envisioning an American president, while also adding to the horizon of possibilities when thinking of a black man.

The expansion and shifting of possible realities by bodies in motion are indicative of the capacity of bodies as living signs and symbols to challenge discursive constructions. Demonstrating that what is deemed an impossibility based on racial ideologies is, in fact, faulty logic, the power of bodies as living signs impacts the perspectives of those who are separated by racial difference, as well as those who share the same bodily classification as Obama. As he is given entrée to political power, his presence broadens the realm of possibilities, and obliterates limits imposed upon black people, limits once operative in society. While political power may not readily come to fruition in reality for all black men, the range of possibilities imagined expands as a result of his presidency.

⁶⁴ It should be noted that no black woman to date has been able to penetrate high-ranking political spaces. Condoleezza Rice's presence as George W. Bush's secretary of state is the exception; however, I would argue she did not have the kind of visibility necessary to achieve the same kind of impact on the social imagination as Barack Obama. For this reason the use of a male example seemed most appropriate.

In addition, Barack Obama's black body is not only seen, but is also experienced. His ways and being contribute to intersubjective meaning on a larger level. As an ethical being involved in ethical relation with others, Obama as president relates to the country as their leader. The experience of this relationship, whether on an intimate and personal level or on a macro, communal level, contributes to the perception, memories, imaginations, and choices that constitute the social imagination. The mode of relationality Obama executes, his decision to build or tear down, his practices, his choices, and even his gestures provide additional data to the project of the intersubjective construction of meaning. Phenomenologist Howard L. Harrod's work is instructive here. He emphasizes the public nature of the life of the mind, and that the life of reason is a social phenomenon, and that the life of reason is a social phenomenon. Socialized through actions, interactions, and the various activity of subjects in the world, the diversity of our "lives of reason" amalgamate and congeal into a common language of meaning and values, which coalesce at the sites of symbols and signs.⁶⁵ Accordingly, the nation's social imagination shifts as a result of its experience of having had a black man as president. Assumptions about race, once adopted as truth, suffer a crisis of legitimation in the midst of the experience of a black male president, particularly one who is as intelligent, educated, eloquent, even-tempered, and composed as Barack Obama. The application of traditional tropes about black people being lazy, rationally deficient, incapable of self-control, and morally inferior were daily debunked. In this way, the experience of relating allows the perceptions of the other—that which is hidden or misrepresented in biased narratives—to be disclosed, and the shifting of perception, and therefore meaning, to occur.

Bodies function not only as living signs that contribute to intersubjective meaning through their relational capacity, but they also function as material causes in the world. This,

⁶⁵ Howard Harrod, *The Human Center: Moral Agency in the Social World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 5.

too, is rooted in the body's activity in the world. For example, bodies as living symbols that contribute to intersubjective meaning through the experience of ethical relation also inspire a number of practices. For the young black man with aspirations, President Barack Obama, as a living symbol, bolsters his confidence that his dreams are actually within reach. Moreover, Obama's actions and choices provide a roadmap to potential success. Accordingly, political aspirants of all races may enact Obama's corporeal and ethical posture as they reach for greater power and status. On the contrary, to the young white woman or man who depends on the limitations of black people to maintain their own status, Barack Obama, as living symbol, can motivate violence, both in speech and practice, as a way to diffuse the power of the corporeal symbol. There has been great speculation as to whether the increase in racially motivated violence, from police officers shooting unarmed black women and men to the election of Donald Trump, has been a form of backlash, inspired by the political achievement of a black man and his inhabiting space and power intended only for white men.

The haptic reach of the body—the way we use our bodies to impact the world, including our physical treatment of others; the way we use our bodies to call things into being; that which we create; the environments and realities we conjure through the construction of new meanings, are immediate products of the body's power as a material cause. The power to shape, conjure, and create is facilitated by the cohering properties of the erotic. It is the use of one's erotic power—the power to draw, attract, and assemble particular energies and forces to bring forth alternative realities in the world.

Black flesh holds divine power, the power to create as co-creators with God, and as M. Shawn Copeland argues, the power to manifest love on God's behalf. I contend that it is through the erotic that these bodies participate in the manifestation of God's love. Copeland tethers

black women's bodies to the divine through the *imago Dei*, which declares all of humanity is connected to God because it reflects God's image. Consequently, Copeland conceives of the body as a human sacrament—a symbol of God's presence in concrete reality. She suggests that black women's affiliation with God and the ability of their bodies and personhoods to reflect the many manifestations of God's love, presence, rebuke, revelation, and the like, oppose the conceptions of their existence funded by racist patriarchy.

The indomitable power of black flesh is its haptic/relational capacity, which shapes and informs the world and the identity of the subject through its respective agential and sensory roles. The exercising of erotic modalities of the haptic (i.e., loving touch, celebratory and affirming cultural expression and collaboration with the spirit of God on behalf of others) showcases the erotic's ability to repossess the bodies of black women and to declare the sovereignty of God's order and God's intention of freedom. The free will of humanity is disclosed in our participation in the haptic. It is the capacity to produce goodness or evil in the world, through the power of the flesh. The erotic produces goodness in the world, connecting the self to the body, the divine and others, and allowing the manifestation of the love of God to orient the construction of knowledge and meaning in the world. Consequently black women's deployment of erotic modalities of the haptic operate as the resistance of erotic defiance, declaring the freedom and power of black women and frustrating the validity of racist patriarchy's misrepresentations of their moral and social status, its claim to black women's bodies and the antagonistic dualisms that govern its ideologies.

Chapter 2

Erotic Care of the Soul and the Reflexive Impact of Eros

The literary tradition of African American women curiously holds numerous depictions of black women bathing one another. For example, in *The Women of Brewster Place*, a novel by Gloria Naylor, Mattie, a black woman from Mississippi who is experiencing economic hardship after losing her home as a result of her son jumping bail, uses the power of the erotic to resuscitate another character Ciel, and Ciel's will to live. Ciel, having just lost her daughter in a freak accident, is consumed by grief and disappointment. Her despondence suggests she has experienced psychic rupture, such that she sits as a mound of flesh with no emotions and no will to fight. Mattie, however, through the power of erotic touch, snatches Ciel back from the jaws of death through an erotic ritual reminiscent of baptism. Naylor writes:

Mattie drew a tub of hot water and undressed Ciel. . . . And she slowly bathed her. She washed her hair and the back of her neck. . . . She let the soap between the girl's breasts . . . soaped her pubic hair, and gently washed the creases of her vagina—slowly, reverently, as if handling a newborn baby.¹

Through erotic touch, Mattie snatches Ciel from the jaws of hopelessness. Her manner of bringing Ceil back to life demands Mattie's bodily participation, undressing, bathing, washing, handling Ciel's body as sacred. "Reverently," Naylor writes, Mattie attends to even the parts of Ciel's body that have been culturally and religiously coded as evil, blurring the lines of the sacred and the sexual. As a result, Ciel is healed. Her healing is signaled not in her standing triumphantly, but through tears that spilled over her body, baptizing them again in the reconciliation of her body and her spirit.

Womanist Katie Cannon argues that embedded within the black female literary tradition

¹ Gloria Naylor, *Women of Brewster Place* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 104.

are the values and attitudes black women have adopted to maintain a posture of dignity and survival in the midst of tripartite oppression. She writes:

Black women’s literature is the best available literary repository for understanding the ethical values Black women have created and cultivated in their participation in this society . . . they [black women] implicitly pass on moral formulas for survival that allow them to stand over and against perversions of ethics and morality imposed on them by whites and males who support racial imperialism in a patriarchal social order.²

Consequently, she argues that this literary tradition is key resource for womanist ethics, in that black women’s literature communicates, from one generation to the next, moral formulas for survival that allow them to stand over and against the perversions of ethics and morality imposed on them by whites and males who support racial imperialism in a patriarchal social order.³ Concomitantly, black women writers showcase and perpetuate black women’s values.⁴ Recording the specificity of Afro American life, Cannon writes, “The work of Black women writers reflects Black reality authentically, capturing the key aspect of the Black woman’s survival.”⁵

In keeping with Cannon’s claim, I argue the literary tradition of black women offers sightings of what I call erotic care of the soul—the healing power of erotic touch—to capture and articulate the erotic’s sacrality and capacity to redeem flesh and reinvigorate the will. Through scenes of erotic care of the soul, black women writers underscore the power of the divine that resides within the bodies of black women. Engaging in radically embodied relational practices, I argue black women deploy the erotic to reconsecrate the bodies and minds of other black women, empowering black women to fight another day.

² Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 61.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

Erotic care of the soul constitutes physical expressions of love of the flesh, like Mattie's bathing of Ciel, that when executed by and upon black women, minister to what womanist ethicist Emilie Townes calls the "isness"⁶ of black female being, affirming through acts of care the worth and divinity of black female corporeality. Communicated through physical love and religious symbolism, I contend that erotic care of the soul affirms black women's bodies and concomitantly, their entire being as beloved and imbued with the divine. Moreover, they provide black women with alternative experiences that defy the categorizations and overdeterminations of identity imposed upon them by hegemony. While the death of her daughter was the precipitating event for Ciel's breakdown, the circumstances that surrounded her death, including the dilapidated nature of the tenement apartment they were confined to and the fight with her boyfriend that distracted Ciel from more diligently watching her daughter could be ascribed to the oppressive conditions Ciel was forced to navigate, in this case unsuccessfully, as a result of racism, sexism and classism. The sense of hopelessness that Ciel experienced is not uncommon for black women, who repeatedly experience immobilizing traumas at the hands of white supremacy and patriarchy that sever, as Spillers writes in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," the will from the body.⁷

This chapter uses black women's literature and sermons to posit black women's practices of erotic care of the soul as a form of erotic defiance. It expands on theologian Mark I. Wallace's concept of haptology (the theology of touch)⁸ and lesbian feminist Audre Lorde's theorization of the erotic through a phenomenological investigation of erotic haptic encounters

⁶ Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 11. Townes describes "isness" as the intersection of the spiritual and physical components of their being, which results in a deeply embodied spirituality that honors the wholeness and continuity of the human experience and seeks transformation in the concrete realities of black people. A spirituality that involves both body and soul, "isness" unifies the sacrality of what is reserved for the divine with the everyday experiences of humanity.

⁷ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.

⁸ Wallace, "Early Christian Contempt for the Flesh," 34.

between black women.⁹ I argue black women's practices of erotic care of the soul are acts of embodied opposition against the report of empire that declare black women's bodies unworthy. Through loving haptic practices, sexual and nonsexual, I contend erotic care of the soul engenders corporeal conscientization that heals the wound of unworthiness inflicted upon us by society, accomplishing an epistemological shift in black women's approaches to identity and the mobilization of their moral agency.

Mining instances of the erotic care of the soul found in the black female literary tradition, I provide an account of the erotic care's capacity to facilitate transformative experiences of love and pleasure for denigrated flesh. I argue that the phenomena of erotic touch, which intrinsically operates as an act of care, functions as erotic defiance in that it contests the demonization of black female flesh by amplifying the sacramentality of black women's bodies and reconstructing the significance of black female flesh through experiences of love, belonging, self-authorization, and possession; and usurps empire's claims on black bodies, mobilizing black women to play an active role in their own liberation.¹⁰

Black historian of religion Charles H. Long contends, "As stepchildren of Western culture . . . the experiences of the oppressed were rooted in the absurd meaning of their bodies, and it was for these bodies that they were regarded not only as valuable works, but also as the

⁹ The haptic refers to anything related to the sense of touch or proprioception—one's movement and position in the world. From a phenomenological perspective, the haptic sense reinforces and actualizes value and significance, animating and concretizing the meaning of an object or subject. The haptic, or our sensory experience of the world through our bodies, provides us with a sense of what is "real." Religious scholar Marleen de Witte, in her explanation of the vitality of touch in religion, argues, "Of all the senses, we take touch to be the one least prone to trickery, the most direct of the senses, providing us with unmediated access to what—we presume—is real. More than seeing is believing, touching is believing" (De Witte, "Touch," 149). Consequently, the haptic provides sensory data that funds our sense of our bodily and worldly reality.

¹⁰ When I speak of empire, I am referring to the various powers that govern and coerce specific behaviors and political configurations. I also mean this in the religious sense, in that these coercive forces also exalt themselves above God's intended design.

locus of the ideologies that justified their enslavement.”¹¹ Demonized by bodily difference, black rational capacity, morality, and virtue—the very constitution of black being—have been maligned on account of the kinds of bodies that incarnate them. These bodies serve as both the source of white animus and the terrain upon which it was meted out. More than the subjects of disparaging ideologies in the atmosphere, the flesh of black people has been whittled, seared, pummeled, and violently dispossessed in the process of degradation from human being to nonbeing. Baring what literary critic Hortense Spillers calls the hieroglyphics of the flesh, the wounds that the material bodies of black people hold are a testament to their grievously violent transformation from human beings to chattel. Moreover, these wounds allude to the psychic scars whose healing goes beyond declarations of wholeness and the manipulation of ideologies. The physical trauma visited upon black people festers as a communal wound of bodily shame and alienation. This wound represents a sickness that is unto death, signaling a need for a vehicle of reincarnation, so that life may be born afresh.

In his explanation of haptology, the theology of touch, Mark Wallace argues, “The well-being for someone else’s flesh is the grounds for salvation and forgiveness in God’s new order of being.”¹² Wallace bases his understanding of haptology, at least in part, on Toni Morrison’s account of erotic care in her novel *Beloved*, “a kind of African derived, body-loving, nature-based religion” used by former slaves to heal themselves.¹³ Morrison’s narrative testifies to the restorative power of the erotic—the manifestation of love, sexual and nonsexual, in and through the flesh, capable of healing those disfigured physically and psychologically from the wounds of violence motivated by racial difference. Wallace maintains that defiled flesh can only be

¹¹ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora: Davies, 1995), 211.

¹² Wallace, “Early Christian Contempt for the Flesh,” 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 46.

restored through physical acts of receiving and giving love. He argues that erotic encounters hold “the potential to heal our culture of its penchant for abuse of one another’s flesh and to teach us to love our own and others’ innermost desires for pleasure, intimacy, friendship and love.”¹⁴

Wallace’s haptology exemplifies womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland’s concept of eros as embodied spirituality. In her theologizing of eros, Copeland emphasizes the centrality of Jesus’ body in his ministry on earth, writing, “He gave his body, his very self, to and for others.”¹⁵ Underscoring the way Jesus’ eros for humanity governs much of his healing ministry on earth, Copeland argues that Jesus operates as a divine union of spirit and flesh, seeking after humanity for hospitable and sacrificial action facilitated by bodily love and intimacy.¹⁶ Echoing the sentiments of black lesbian feminist writer Audre Lorde, in her seminal essay “Uses of the Erotic,” Copeland describes eros as a creative life force which motivates and incites Jesus’ sacrificial action, through embodied hospitality, welcoming the marginalized into physical and emotional intimacy.¹⁷ In other words, with his body, Jesus communicates his desire for connection with those who have been socially alienated, drawing them back into community and relationship and asserting God’s fundamental desire for unity with God’s people.

Wallace explains that throughout his ministry, Jesus enacted the erotic as hospitality, offering his body as gift as he invited the dispossessed and disconnected into physical intimacy with him. His bodily offering made the real (sensually discernable) presence of God available to those to whom he ministered.¹⁸ Copeland specifies that in many instances it was the oppressed; those excluded from society as a result of social status and illness, with whom Jesus shared

¹⁴ Ibid., 34.

¹⁵ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 65.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 64–65.

¹⁸ Wallace, “Early Christian Contempt for the Flesh,” 48–49.

physical intimacy. As such, Jesus' eros preempts the social order's alienation of the oppressed, as God's indiscriminate love of the world enacted through his erotic hospitality upends the hierarchical schemas that stigmatize and marginalize bodies marked by economic, religious, and social factors. Copeland offers:

At the center of Jesus' praxis were the bodies of common people. Peasants' economic and political refugees, the poor and the destitute. They were the subjects of his compassionate care: children, women, and men who were materially impoverished, as well as those who were socially and religiously marginalized, or were physically disabled. . . . Jesus did not shun or despise these women and men; he put his body where they were. He handled, touched and embraced their marked bodies. Jesus befriended them.¹⁹

Copeland describes the interactions Jesus has with the bodies of others as "intimate encounters."²⁰ Such intimacy enacts the exchange Wallace proffers for the restoration of defiled flesh, making it an emollient of the psychic wounds of social degradation and stigma. Through these intimate encounters, Jesus enacts erotic care of the soul, imparting relational and psychic healing and power, to those with whom he shares physical intimacy. I argue Jesus' haptic engagement of marginalized flesh recalibrates the identities of those systematically alienated by and from society, restoring their sense of worth, belonging, and purpose. His touch challenges empire's pornographic defiling and disorienting treatment of oppressed bodies, redeeming them from stigma, valorizing them as God's beloved, and reintegrating them into community. Throughout his ministry, Jesus erotically cared for the souls of the outcast—healing, redeeming, regenerating, and reintegrating them for the pleasure of reuniting them to community and restoring them to wholeness. In this way, I contend, Jesus' ministry on earth is a form of erotic defiance, in that he demonstrates great love/concern for and pleasure in, not only the souls of the oppressed, marginalized and stigmatized, but also their bodies—their material being—and

¹⁹ Ibid., 60.

²⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 113.

invites those who identify with him to do the same in resistance to the social and religious hierarchies operative in his time.

Healing through Touch

“Be Healed: A Black Woman’s Sermon on Healing through Touch,” written by biblical scholar Monya Stubbs, offers another powerful example of the efficacy of erotic care of the soul in the healing of shame rooted in the body. Suffering from a bout of impetigo, a highly contagious ailment that contaminates the skin and disfigures its victims, Stubbs was the victim of ridicule, shame, and isolation from her classmates. She laments, “Pus-filled sores covered my scalp, my right earlobe, and part of my nose. . . . A friend yelled at the school lunch table. ‘Hey, doesn’t Monya remind you of a mangy dog?’ He said it jokingly. Everyone laughed. I smiled to hide my sadness.”²¹ However, through erotic care of the soul offered by her mother, or what Stubbs describes as healing through touch, Stubbs experienced transformative psychological, spiritual, and physical healing. Stubbs recounts:

My mother always held prayer service as her hands washed my head and face. I was never certain of what she said; she talked under her breath. Between mumbles, she moaned old church hymns. Sometimes, though, in the midst of her mumbles and moans, I could hear the words, “Heal her. . . . Her steady intonations produced a sacred rhythm and the mere thought of disturbing her hallowed groove caused the sores on my head to sting.”²²

Stubbs’s describes HTT (Healing through Touch) as a holistic practice of healing, which attends to the mind and spirit through the body. Identical to the choreography of erotic care of the soul, I argue the body serves as the locus of encounter for the healer, the wounded and the divine. Through this erotic practice, Stubbs’s mother attends to Stubbs’s *isness* through a

²¹ Monya Stubbs, “Be Healed: A Black Woman’s Sermon on Healing through Touch,” in *My Soul Is a Witness: African-American Women’s Spirituality*, edited by Gloria Wade Gayles (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 305.

²² *Ibid.*, 305–6.

defiant appreciation for her daughter's body—a body deemed detestable/undesirable by the world's standards. Stubbs's mother conveys her love physically, affirming Stubbs's body as beloved and worthy of care, while exhibiting her own ability to harness the divine.

Stubbs's mothers' touch was no ordinary touch, according to Stubbs, it held sacred significance. I maintain her mother's touch was the collaboration of the materiality of love facilitated by the body and a plea to the divine to use her erotic ritual as a conduit for spiritual intervention. Stubbs relays that for her mother, healing was a very basic concept: "The spiritual and mental effects of the illness had to be cured along with the physical symptoms. Healing had to reach the damaged spirit and mind—the side effects of the physical illness—or consequences as detrimental as the physical illness, if not more so could occur"²³

Like Copeland and Wallace, Stubbs maintains that the erotic hospitality and care demonstrated through HTT are reminiscent of the erotic ministry of Jesus. She writes, "When remembering my mother's insistence on touching me I am reminded of biblical stories about the healing ministry of Jesus. . . . Jesus often used touch as part of healing and restoring ill persons to health. Seldom did he merely speak deliverance without some form of physical contact."²⁴ Stubbs distinguishes merely speaking deliverance and employing physical touch in healing psychological trauma and spiritual brokenness, arguing that the spoken word alone does not sufficiently attend to the spiritual and mental dimensions of illness.²⁵ Her mother's erotic acts of care, like the embodied spiritual care of Jesus, met Stubbs at the heart of her affliction. She refused to shun what the world deemed contaminated. Like Jesus, she shared the "space of sorrow" with her daughter—the place where her physical, psychic, and spiritual affliction met.²⁶

²³ Ibid., 306.

²⁴ Ibid., 306–7.

²⁵ Ibid., 307.

²⁶ Ibid., 308.

Incorporating these oft-neglected dimensions of healing, I contend that Stubbs's mother's erotic care illustrates how the spiritual and psychic are inextricably bound to our physical being. "The physical distortions of illness create a brokenness in one's self worth," Stubbs's mother contends.²⁷ However, I argue, through the power of touch—that is, through loving physical encounter with other bodies—the significance of one's body is transformed.

Erotic care of the soul, or HTT in Stubbs's case, I aver, declared, through radical acts of care and hospitality, what had been categorized as corrupt and obscene worthy of love and inclusion. I contend such encounters also have the power to transform the significance of the body by affording subjects of care experiences of their bodies as something other than a site of disease. Since Stubbs's skin was the impetus of her classmates' animus, it was vital that the shame inflicted upon her be dealt with at the source. As the subject of care, I surmise, Stubbs experienced her body and being as worthy, cherished, welcomed, and desired. Her testimony suggests that the stigmatized, when given alternative experiences of their bodies, have the capacity to reject social condemnation and the values foisted upon them by choosing to orient their sense of self in the affirming experiences provided through erotic relationality. In effect, erotic care, I argue, allows for the transcendence of one's identity from that which is rooted in shame and ridicule to that which is cultivated by a love that bests deleterious ideologies.

I posit that HTT as erotic care of the soul and erotic defiance "rejects social condemnation of the ill."²⁸ By touching those who are considered "unclean," healers reject the negative status of those afflicted with disease. Such practices, I argue, exemplify the power of the erotic to challenge the notion that particular kinds of bodies, whether diseased or misfortunately gendered or raced, are unworthy, undesirable, and inappropriate for contact and

²⁷ Ibid., 307.

²⁸ Ibid.

connection. What Stubbs gestures at but stops short of naming is the capacity of erotic care/healing touch to provide alternative significance for one's flesh. Unfazed by the contagious nature of her disease, Stubbs's mother treats her infected skin without gloves. I maintain that through acts of sacrificial embodied hospitality, she puts her own health at risk to meet and welcome her daughter's body as cherished and beloved, with her own. When Stubbs asks her mother if she is concerned about contaminating herself, her mother responds, "Yes. But there is more at stake. . . . Your self-esteem is being shattered; your spirit is troubled. In order to heal you, I must touch you, I must feel you."²⁹ I contend that Stubbs's mother's insistence on uninhibited encounter extends beyond the physical. Her touch is fortified by love that seeks to reach beyond her daughter's skin into Stubbs's *isness*. In this way, I argue, their physical flesh serves as the locus of a psychic and spiritual encounter in which her mother's desire for Stubbs's holistic well-being reaches deeply into Stubbs's mind and spirit, challenging and rejecting the violence enacted upon her by her classmates with the truth of her body as beloved.

The Wounds of Blackness

Meeting, rejecting, and empowering, Stubbs's mother's erotic/physical care for her daughter spans the distance between her physical ailment and her psychic and spiritual disease. I assert that as both a physical and psychic dilemma, the scandal of blackness functions similarly to Stubbs's impetigo, rendering those enfleshed with black skin subject to antagonism, ridicule, and exclusion. Ideological foundations of Western civilization and its pornographic handling of black flesh, disease and disfigure black humanity, both theoretically and practically, resulting in physical, spiritual, and psychological wounding. The physical scars the flesh of black people bear—the marks from slavery's lash, the mutilation of lynching, compromised digestive and

²⁹ Ibid., 306.

immune systems as a result of poverty, and even joints made arthritic as a result of manual labor, are not the only wounds of racial oppression. Their reach extends deeply into the minds and spirits of black people, confining black existence to the functions of white supremacy, i.e., productivity, alterity, commodity.

I argue that the disintegration of the black man and woman from the status of human being to commodified, degenerate other is a product of their pornographic encounter with white Western man. Lorde distinguishes the erotic and the pornographic handling of empire as opposing poles of relationality. She writes, “Pornography is the direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.”³⁰ I contend that while the erotic inspires subjects with desire, the pornographic severs them from their motive will. As such, as I lay out explicitly in chapter 1, victims of pornographic abuse experience the diminishment of their subjectivity and their humanity. The experience of such treatment and the intersubjective value assigned to all aspects of their being mutates the identity of these victims into one of commodity and possession, in which one has no political or social power to act, and instead, is acted upon. Literary critic Hortense Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” is again instructive in contextualizing the distinction between the erotic and the pornographic in the life of black flesh. My analysis of Spillers’s essay emphasizes the role of the haptic in the “severing of the captive [black] body from the motive will, its active desire”³¹—a haptic phenomenon in that Spillers traces how the violent and

³⁰ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 88.

³¹ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 69. In her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Spillers argues that fundamental to the codification of black women as subhuman and unfeminine is the American mercantile system’s pornographic treatment of them. Pornographic in the sense that they are sexually abused as well as exploited in ways that are contrary to their humanity, Black women were and continue to be objectified as servants and sexual outlets for all who enjoy greater social status in America’s symbolic order of difference. Impacting the way their bodies are handled by the masses and even those in their own community, the social order animates the world’s haptic engagement of black women, which in turn communicates to black women their diminished value in society. The experience of one’s body is the fundamental source out of which identity is constructed.

exploitative handling of black people's bodies imbues them with inferiority and reduces them to objects.³² It is appropriate to quote Spillers at length:

First of all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked a theft of the body—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. . . . But this body, at least from the point of view of a captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic and psychological fortunes join. This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses: 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of “otherness”; 4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness,” resonating through various centers of human and social meaning³³

Spillers articulates the violent nature of Western civilization's haptic encounter with black bodies. Transforming the very nature and being of African people, the manipulation of black flesh by Western modern civilization (read: white power) disrupts African cosmologies, distorts black communal practices and strips black people of their agency. I argue that the disintegration of black personhood is rooted in the mutation of the black body's creative capacity and the ability to operate according to its own desires. Those who once existed as the creation of God, created for loving relationality and God's activity on earth, became the commodity and utility of whiteness, so much so their own bodies are no longer their own.

The Role of Embodiment in Identity

Dispossession of the body colors all aspects of black consciousness and identity as a result of the body's role in identity construction. Merleau-Ponty argues that the disclosure of the world is

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 67.

experienced through the body. For him, human experience is the product of the relationship between the subject and the world (that which appears before him/her in a given setting). This relationship is impossible without the body—the subject of experience and perception. “The world is not what I think, but what I live through,” Merleau-Ponty writes.³⁴ He posits that the world as the contextual backdrop or setting of existence, establishes a horizon, or scope, of meaning for all things. Accordingly, disclosure of the world through the body’s experience of material phenomena through the senses grounds consciousness and identity. He explains:

Insofar as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world.³⁵

Underscoring the interdependent relationship between the body and the world as the ground of subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty avers that consciousness transcends the limits of the rational and is understood as an embodied undertaking. As such, he argues, subjectivity is dependent on embodiment, and identity becomes a product of the experiencing body-subject in the world.

While Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on the body as self in the world positions the body as the means by which the world is apprehended by a subject, it does not account for how the specificity of said bodies impacts experience and the ways these experiences construct a sense of identity. As Merleau-Ponty and later phenomenologists Howard Harrod and Robert Sokolowski point out, as agents apprehend the world, they do so with and through their bodies. The reaction to these bodies, based on phenotypical markers like race and sex, orient the reception of body-selves—the opportunities and exposure given to them, the way they are

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 407.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 408–9.

handled, and the limits imposed upon them. Womanist ethicist Katie Cannon's words offer specifics on the particularities of the black body's situatedness in the world and its impact on black existence. She writes:

Black existence is deliberately and openly controlled . . . “how we travel and where, what work we do, what income we receive, where we eat, where we sleep, with whom we talk, we recreate, where we study, what we write, what we publish . . .” The vast majority of blacks suffer every conceivable form of denigration. Their lives are named, defined and circumscribed by whites.³⁶

Cannon brings to the fore the drastically all-encompassing effect of white supremacy on the subjectivity of black people. She articulates the devastating reach and control of the culture of racism on the lives of black people as more than just an occasional nuisance.

If we apply phenomenological logic to the circumstances of black people, I argue that the confinement of one's being and the ideologies that facilitate such treatment must have tremendous implications on the construction of black identity. However, the racial and gendered aspects of what Harrod and Sokolowski call embodied sociality—the social dimension of the subject informed by one's embodiment, which contributes to the ways human agents construct and codify value intersubjectively (in community and in agreement with other selves in the social world)—go unnamed in their work.³⁷ The works of womanist practical theologians like Phillis Sheppard and Stephanie Crumpton, however, make clear the racial and gendered implications of embodied sociality on the construction of black women's self-concept through a womanist perspective of self-psychology.

Phenomenologists Howard Harrod and Robert Sokolowski contend that it is the mutual intention (attention to and understanding) of objects in the world (our bodies included) that grounds our sociality. As objects in the world, raced and gendered bodies are assigned value

³⁶ Katie Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1998), 59.

³⁷ For more on sociality, see Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*; Harrod, *Human Center*.

intersubjectively. The works of Sheppard and Crumpton underscore the relationship of embodied sociality, the intersubjective construction of negative racial and gender value meanings, and their impact on black women's self-concept in their discussion of self objects and the contextual relational self. In her book *Self, Culture and Others in Womanist Practical Theology*, Sheppard offers nuance to the phenomena of experience, noting that "it is always embedded in a cultural and historical relational milieu."³⁸ For Sheppard, the social world is "a world where gender, class and body are inextricably linked internally, and in the social negotiations in which we engage daily. Thus, we exist in a relational world where some are immediately related to on the basis on the color of their skin, their gender, and sometimes their sexuality."³⁹ Her explicit focus on the particularities of race and sex, when considering the experiencing self, highlights the circumstances (read: the ubiquitous reach of white supremacy) under which black identity is constructed. M. Shawn Copeland argues, "The body mediates our engagement with others, with the world and with the Other."⁴⁰ This mediation is facilitated by the symbolic meanings of bodies. She writes, "The social body's assignment of meaning and significance to race and/or gender and/or sexuality of physical bodies influences, perhaps even determines, the trajectories of concrete lives."⁴¹ In other words, our interpersonal engagements are calibrated by our cultural perceptions of different types of bodies. Moreover, the predetermined perceptions of those bodies have institutional and structural ramifications, dictating how particular bodies will be treated, educated, and cared for, as well as the opportunities that will be provided for them.

³⁸ Sheppard, *Self, Culture and Others*, 57.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴⁰ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

Erotic Care as a Reorientation of Identity

For many, including some of the most celebrated and influential theorists of black culture, the experience of racism is the foundational phenomenon of theories of black psychology and identity. However, in her book *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon*, womanist ethicist Eboni Marshall Turman characterizes the tradition of constructing black identity as a reaction to racial oppression as detrimental, specifically W. E. B. Du Bois's dialectical theories of double consciousness and the veil.⁴² Critiquing Du Bois's formulation of black subjectivity as derivative of white notions of blackness, Marshall Turman contends, "The thrust of Du Bois's argumentation concerning *the souls of black folk* is paradoxically contingent on the *kata sarka* gaze of a white girl."⁴³

Privileging an *en sarki dei* approach, Marshall Turman argues that the incarnation suggests that personhood is established by the primary activity of God in the flesh. Accordingly, she contends that *isness* is divinely established. Rather than constructed by what happens to a subject, it is a given, demanded by what happens *en sarki*.⁴⁴ On the contrary, Marshall Turman argues, "Du Bois's assertion concerning *dark bodies* 'born with a veil and gifted with second sight,'" follows a *kata sarka* orientation of identity, which "problematically confines the breadth and depth of black flesh to its contentious relationality with the white gaze."⁴⁵ Such formulations, Marshall Turman argues, severely delimit black identity, rendering it a mere reaction to the

⁴² Du Bois's theory of double consciousness is introduced in his seminal text *The Souls of Black Folk*. It articulates the existential conundrum of perceiving oneself through the eyes of whiteness. Du Bois argues, "The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self." W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994), 3.

⁴³ Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 86. *Kata sarka* or "according to the flesh," is based on what happens to his flesh in history and *en sarki dei*, in which the nature and identity of Jesus is established based on God's activity in the flesh of Jesus, are Chalcedonian categories proposed by the Alexandrian Church at the Council of Chalcedon and the Council of Nicea respectively, to describe the nature and identity of Jesus. Marshall Turman argues these categories are paradigmatic of approaches to black identity.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

perspectives of an adversarial other and the actions inflicted upon black bodies. Through her *en sarki dei* approach to black identity, Marshall Turman privileges the presence and activity of God in the flesh of black people, particularly black women, beyond the historical atrocities they have endured, as a means of communicating the sacrality, virtue, beauty, and fullness of their being.

While Marshall Turman critiques constructions of identity that too heavily rely on what has happened to the body from a sociohistorical lens, the works of Sheppard and Crumpton prove a necessary intervention because they highlight the importance of the specificity of bodies in the phenomenological concept of embodied sociality. Black women's experiences of their bodies in the world lead to their apprehension of the world as a toxic environment and the perception of their bodies as less esteemed than other bodies in society. This intersubjectively generated value, in turn, funds black women's identity construction. Consequently, I argue that the cultivation of opportunities for black women to experience themselves as something other than inferior, problematic, or immoral immediately contributes to a healthy self-concept. This, I maintain, requires the intentional curating of life-giving sociality, with special emphasis on relationality that offers new value meanings to black women's bodies.

The womanist pastoral theologies of Sheppard and Crumpton and their use of Heinz Kohut's self-psychology, which prioritizes relationality, especially that between child and mother, prove helpful in this endeavor. Kohut contends humans have needs that are fulfilled only in relationship with others. For him, the experience of being seen and affirmed is imperative to self-formation, providing mirroring, idealizing, and kinship needs to the subject. He calls those who provide these experiences self-objects, in that "the functions provided were so essential that in their provision or gratification the recipient experienced them as originating

within one's self."⁴⁶ In healthy self-object relationships, mothers provide essential mirroring to the child through recognition, affirmation of their worth, provision of a sense of belonging, and confirmation of the wholeness of their personhood.

Sheppard and Crumpton apply a womanist lens to self-psychology and utilize the theory as foundational to any effective form of pastoral theology. Self-psychology suggests the cohesive development of one's self-concept requires "an appropriately mirroring environment in which throughout his life a person will experience himself as a "cohesive harmonious firm unit in time and space . . . as long as, at each stage of his life, he experiences certain representatives of human surrounds responding to him."⁴⁷ Key in this psychoanalytic theory is the role of visibility and affirmation achieved through relationships. These needs identified in Kohut's theory echo the sentiments of Hagar, the sexually objectified slave girl whose moral circumstances are often compared to black women in the United States. Like many black women, her body was used for its reproductive abilities, in Abraham and Sarah's pursuit of an heir. Hagar is later exiled and left to fend for herself. In the biblical account, when Hagar encounters God, she names the divine presence *El Roi*, translated, "The One Who Sees Me," because her personhood finally becomes visible.

Crumpton clarifies the enduring relevance of cultural self-objects in the lives of black people offering:

Self-psychological perspective and intrapsychic development and growth take place in a shared relational context in which interpersonal encounters provide emotional exchanges that either promote or distort personality development. While the theory asserts that the personality's core forms in infancy, it also affirms that personalities continue to develop throughout life, and that interactions with others are critical components in this

⁴⁶ Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others*, 117.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, citing Ernest Wolf in the *Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

ongoing process.⁴⁸

Consequently, the mirroring, affirming, and confirmation offered to individuals through cultural self-objects continues throughout life, edifying, or in unhealthy scenarios, demeaning the self-concept of subjects on an ongoing basis.

Black women often operate as cultural self-objects in their communities, particularly for other black women who have undergone trauma. Crumpton offers a rich discussion of black women taking unique roles as cultural self-objects in the form of “OtherMothers,” “SisterFriends” and “Cultural Craftswomen.” OtherMothers and SisterFriends are vital sources of psychological healing through their provision of intimate empathetic relationships. These relationships fulfill crucial survival needs for black women, making them feel seen, heard, and empowered.⁴⁹ These women function as extended family or kinfolk who participate in the development and protection of black women in their community, aiding them in the construction of a radical subjectivity birthed out of positive and affirming interactions with caring black women.⁵⁰

In contrast, Cultural Craftswomen perform from a distance, disrupting the ritual space of oppression through the intentional transformation of the social milieu in which the conjuring of a new subjectivity takes place.⁵¹ Their presence functions as black female representation, offering black women examples to emulate in the negotiation of racism and sexism. While these women may not share the same kind of intimacy with the women they inspire, as OtherMothers and SisterFriends do, they have a similar impact on black women’s personality development, providing alternative narratives that resist and subvert deleterious characterizations of black

⁴⁸ Stephanie Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 10.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁵¹ Ibid., 91.

female identity. Using their presence to challenge the limitations of black women in the world, Cultural Craftswomen, through their artistry and acts of service, accomplish important psychological shifts in the black women they influence, opening vistas of possibility never imagined before.⁵²

For example, Michelle Obama engaged in cultural craft as she carefully curated her presence in the White House. Impacting millions of black girls and women, her beauty and dynamism challenged the idea that a black woman is unfit to represent the United States as the First Lady. From the projects she involved herself in, such as her commitment to college education for all, and her fight against childhood obesity, to the styling of her hair, which remained “laid” at all times, to her grace and dignity exhibited when she dealt with detractors, Michelle Obama demonstrated black women’s capacity to inhabit any space. Adhering to the function of Crumpton’s Cultural Craftswomen, women like Michelle Obama change the context of black women’s lives, radically changing the value meaning assigned to black women’s bodies in the social sphere. Sociologists Shanette Porter and Gregory S. Parks argue, “Exposure to Michelle Obama . . . could have lasting impact on both implicit and explicit attitudes toward black women and blacks more generally.”⁵³

Black women as cultural self-objects demonstrate embodied sociality, and the capacity bodies possess for radically recalibrating context. Such acts as Michelle Obama’s performance of black womanhood and Stubbs’s mother’s erotic deployment of the haptic demonstrate that what we do with our bodies ratifies, or challenges, the construction of the hegemonic

⁵² Ibid., 84.

⁵³ For more on Michelle Obama’s impact on the image of black women among black women and the social imagination, see Shanette Porter and Gregory Parks, “Michelle Obama: Redefining Images of Black Women,” in *The Obamas and a (Post) Racial America*, edited by Gregory S. Parks and Matthew Hughey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 116–33.

imagination,⁵⁴ particularly the effects of bodily stigma on the people it degrades. Through these acts, I argue, the significance of blackness and the impact of racial identity on the psyches of black Americans in both a social and spiritual context are recalibrated. Contesting the fallacies of the collective cultural imagination that wreak havoc on our self-concept, black women's practices of erotic care subvert empire's pornographic power through loving encounter with each other's bodies. I argue these acts of care valorize and authorize black flesh through the witness of black women's bodies as religious self-objects and the embodiment of God's loving activity in the here and now.

Through participation in erotic care, the significance of black women's flesh as both recipient and healer undergoes transformation, whereby the power of the spirit flows from one body to another, serving as a reminder of the activity of God within. As such, the sanctity of their bodies is reaffirmed. Such power seems an impossibility, yet I argue the same oppressed black body, which provides for the material manifestation of white supremacy, through strategies of counter creative signification, materially contests the myth of white supremacy through erotic care. I contend participation in the erotic remedies the disintegration of humanity.

From a theological perspective, I posit that the experience and deployment of the erotic make evident the connection between body and spirit, which connect us with the presence of God's spirit within—our ability to love and to feel passionately, our will and our desire. I argue that the erotic's regenerative effect signals a relationship between it and the Holy Spirit.

Ascribed the power of healing in the Bible, the Holy Spirit is the presence of the power of the

⁵⁴ Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 7. Townes contends that the fantastic hegemonic imagination, the psychological engine that drives the ideas we have about particular groups, and therefore injustice, transforms real people into caricatures (ibid.). These caricatures provide the psychological distance between reality and fantasy necessary for the evil of "isms" to persist. Encouraging the masses to maintain the physical distance necessary to keep society ignorant of real life and faithful to the images conjured by the fantastic hegemonic imagination, these caricatures/stereotypes dictate the ways we relate to one another.

Lord that enables Jesus to heal (Luke 5:17b). However, I contend even when the presence of God goes unnamed, loving encounters of the flesh impart meaning regarding the value of the bodies being cared for as beloved and disclose these bodies as principal resources in the apprehension of knowledge and the shaping of black identity.

If touch loves flesh back to life, the spirit of God redeems it back to wholeness. I aver that together they constitute the erotic's work of redeeming, reorienting, and connecting alienated beings with the community and the spirit of God and manifesting the materiality of love. I liken this work to an exorcism of sorts, calling the demons of self-hatred out of the black psyche and commandeering the authority of white ideology. I maintain that the witness of black women offering erotic care to other black women discloses the erotic's capacity to resuscitate annihilated personhood through affirmation, regeneration, and reintegration. It affirms the body as good, worthy of care, a resource for knowledge, and the site of pleasure. Through this, I argue the erotic annuls the psychic pain of bodily shame instilled by racial oppression by offering black bodies occasions to be received and declared as both valued members of the black community and the community of God. These experiences, I contend, are vital to the livelihood and psyches of black people. Through erotic care black women employ one of the only resources they have—their bodies, laying hands on each other to survive, to be revived and to be connected to God and their community as they continue in their ongoing fight to remember their identity, their gifts and their sacred worth.

I posit that as black women engage in the erotic care of other black women, they function as cultural self-objects or signifiers, recalibrating the significance of black bodies and therefore black identity by mirroring, idealizing and providing a sense of kinship to those upon which they offer care. In their encounter with other black women in erotic acts of care, black

women offer more than just visibility to one another. Through touch they acknowledge the other's existence, offer a reflection and tangible experience of black womanhood that affirms it as beloved and sacred, and that provides a sense of belonging.

Returning to Marshall Turman's paradigm of black identity construction, I contend that erotic care of the soul can be understood as a ritual context for conscientization that reorients black subjectivities from a *kata sarka* approach to identity to an *en sarki dei* approach. In other words, it accomplishes an epistemological shift that establishes identity based upon what God has done in their bodies as opposed to what has happened to their bodies.⁵⁵ I maintain that if the pornographic handling of white institutions and flesh animated by white supremacy denigrates black people, then erotic care of the soul resuscitates them through experiences of their bodyselves⁵⁶ as beloved by and connected to the community/God. This, in turn, engenders a sense of responsibility, or being beholden to both as a result.

Privileging the activity of God in the flesh of black women, I argue that erotic care is the foundation for the embodiment of womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas's concept of traditional communalism.⁵⁷ Born out of a sense of black women's sense of solidarity with and responsibility for each other, Floyd-Thomas defines traditional communalism as the transferal of wisdom, intended to emancipate black women from warped theological anthropologies, promulgated by Western notions of humanness. The wisdom offered is a by-product of black women's navigation of tripartite oppression. I contend that in the case of erotic care, black women, as cultural self-objects, subvert empire's pornographic power through transformative experiences of loving encounter with each other's bodies.

⁵⁵ Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*, 48.

⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 409.

⁵⁷ Traditional communalism is solidarity with and preference for black women's culture, and the wisdom and knowledge for survival and liberation that accompany it. For more, see Stacey Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 78.

Meeting one another, as Stubbs argues, at the locus of crisis, these rituals of erotic care, I argue, valorize and authorize black female flesh through the activity and testimony of their own bodies, and defy the narratives of black womanhood perpetuated by racist patriarchy. They affirm black women and their bodies as beloved and enact their connectedness to God and the community. Through these experiences and the sacramentality of black women who operate as caregivers, I maintain that erotic care of the soul provides the foundations for a dramatic epistemological shift in how recipients of care understand their bodies and their identities. Triggering the construction of a radical subjectivity undergirded by a belief in God's activity in the bodies and encounters of black women, I maintain that erotic care counters the claims of the *kata sarka* scandal of black womanhood.

The Erotic as the Experience of Being Beloved, Belonging and Beholden

Erotic care of the soul is comprised of rituals that ratify subjects of care as beloved. To be called beloved, womanist ethicist Emilie Townes argues, is a call to self-love and respect for radical isness in the context of African American life.⁵⁸ She asserts, in *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness*, "To love one's body is radical spirituality within structured dominion and control."⁵⁹ Townes correlates the ability to see oneself as worthy of love to the nature of being and survival. Returning to the example of Stubbs's mother, her attention to her daughter's body was integral to a call to self-love because of the impact of the world's reception of her body on Stubbs's psyche. Through her experience of her mother's erotic care, Stubbs becomes capable of seeing herself as someone worthy of love. I contend that through erotic

⁵⁸ Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 48.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

care, Stubbs's mother provides an example of the kinds of life-giving sociality necessary for combating the construction of *kata sarka* identities.

I argue that the realization that one is beloved, and the pleasure experienced as a recipient of love, reinvigorates the oppressed's internal subjectivity. According to Audre Lorde, pleasure underscores an individual's capacity for joy, making her/him unwilling to settle for less, and therefore "responsible to" themselves as the result of the revelation of the erotic makes possible.⁶⁰ She writes, "In touch with the erotic I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial."⁶¹

Consequently, I argue that the awareness and pleasure of being loved ignites the transformative power of eros in the oppressed. Manifesting itself as a sense of fulfillment and desire (read: aspirations and yearning for connection and attainment) that moves the will, the seat of subjectivity to present and assert itself, erotic care, and I argue the erotic in general, not only empowers the subject through an awareness of her own desire, but also imbues her with the capacity and the will to offer love. Reminiscent of Lorde's explication that eros is a transformative power, a creative force that makes it impossible for those who have participated in its pleasures not to act out of a desire for their own and the freedom of others, Stubbs contends erotic care in the form of HTT empowers the healed to a special kind of responsibility.⁶² Out of a deep sense of satisfaction in the knowledge that they are loved, or perhaps through the power imparted to them through vessels like Stubbs's mother, the healed are mobilized to share the love and transformation they have experienced with their communities and the world through their own moral agency. Stubbs asserts that her experience

⁶⁰ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 58.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

of being healed through touch incited and empowered her to “share the gift of love with others,” even spurring her to become a holistic healer herself, particularly for those who were experiencing similar feelings of hopelessness.⁶³

Similarly, black women’s literary tradition attests to the power of the erotic to mobilize black women to responsibility. Of note is the manner in which the bodies of those being cared for are described, the queering of the erotic as sexual, sacred and spiritual, and the variety of functions ascribed to the erotic in each scenario. One example is the occasion of Celie, in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, bathing the woman who should have been her nemesis, Shug Avery. Walker writes:

First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man . . .
What you staring at? She ast. Hateful . . .
You never seen a naked woman before . . . ?
No ma’am, I said. I never did . . .
She say, Well take a good look, Even if I is just a bag of bones now. She had the nerve to put one hand on her hip and bat her eyes at me. Then she suck her teef and roll her eyes at the ceiling while I wash her.
I wash her body, it feel like I’m praying. My hands tremble and my breath short.⁶⁴

Shug’s posture is striking. Though sick, frail, and soaking wet, her body wields an erotic power because of the confidence she has in its value. Despite its current infirmities, as her hand on her hip and her bat of her eyes suggest, she considers her body something special to behold. Additionally, Shug is a woman who has known pleasure. In fact, she has quite the reputation among the community as a “nasty woman.”⁶⁵ Based on the witness of Lorde, however, Shug’s embracing of sexual pleasure can be considered a good thing, as it functions as a gateway to a

⁶³ Stubbs, “Be Healed,” 309.

⁶⁴ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (Orlando: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1982), 49.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

greater sense of herself, her virtue, and her capacity for excellence.⁶⁶ I argue Shug demonstrates what womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas describes as radical subjectivity. She is aware that her worth is not a product of what others say or think about her, but begins with her esteem for herself, and that others would follow her lead. Shug's erotic power is also evinced by the impact she has on Celie.

Walker's erotic encounter between Celie and Shug depicts the emotional resurrection Celie experiences as a result of her desire for Shug. While the nature of her reaction can be described as sexual, Walker queers this through her obvious disregard for the traditional binaries that suggest that women must only be sexually attracted to men, the boundaries that distinguish the self from the other, as well as the idea that the sexual and the sacred cannot inhabit the same space. Through Celie's sexual desire for Shug, Walker demonstrates how sexual desire transcends the physical. Celie is propelled to the *isness* of Shug, her confidence, her command of self. More than just her body, Celie desires Shug's being for herself. She does not simply want to be *like* Shug, she wants to *be* Shug. Celie's desire for Shug's body borders on obsession. It exceeds a lover's typical desire to inhabit a woman's body in the coital sense. Were it possible, Celie would wear Shug's body like a dress; she would take up residence in her body in order to participate in Shug's self-determination and sass. I contend that it is Shug's posture in the world, *as well as* her "black plum nipples" that regenerate Celie.⁶⁷ Shug brings her back to life by inspiring in Celie the will to do more than survive, but to live.

Prior to her encounter with Shug, Celie's aim is simply to stay alive. Yet through Celie's discovery of desire for and connection with Shug—her tending to her, nurturing her, and witnessing Shug's audacity to think something of herself, even in her weakest state—life is

⁶⁶ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 88.

⁶⁷ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 49.

rekindled in Celie. Until this point in the novel, Celie functions more as an object of other people's whims, as opposed to a person with a will of her own. Her erotic encounter, however, as Lorde contends, is a reminder of her capacity for feeling.⁶⁸ It is an invitation into the fullness of her subjectivity. Such power is especially important to the oppressed because of bodily difference. As Spillers argues, the pornographic abuse of blacks has alienated them from their capacity for feeling. The erotic in this case is depicted as a bridge, which reconnects Celie with her desire and her will. The erotic's power of transcendence enables her to move from object to subject. After her encounter with Shug, Celie takes on a willful, even defiant posture. She speaks to her abuser, Mr., with greater authority, and even engages in covert rebellion by spitting in Mr.'s father's water.⁶⁹ Though his behavior of hurling around disparaging remarks about Shug was nothing new, Celie was. Her admiration and desire to participate in the love Shug had inside herself, made Celie different. It had ignited within her a desire to do more than survive; but to fight.

I aver that Celie's transformation, like Stubbs', exemplifies the erotic's power to move us to take responsibility for our lives and to "pursue genuine change within the world."⁷⁰ Lorde's words bear repeating: "In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness."⁷¹ Consequently, the erotic incites within us a deep responsibility to demand excellence of and for ourselves as those who have experienced the depths of such fullness and satisfaction within. Cultural critic and black feminist bell hooks suggests a satisfaction with and love for oneself threatens the social order. In her essay "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," hooks contends that an attitude of love of and responsibility toward oneself, as a

⁶⁸ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 57.

⁶⁹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 54–55.

⁷⁰ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 59.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

black person, is suspect, dangerous and threatening.⁷² Hooks writes:

Collectively, black people and our allies in struggle are empowered when we practice self-love as a revolutionary intervention that undermines the practices of domination. Loving blackness as political resistance transfers our ways of looking and being, and creates the conditions for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life.⁷³

In other words, the ability to love oneself makes possible a radical shift in our experience of the world and ourselves. Walker, through her depiction of Celie's erotic encounter, provides an illustration of this transition.

Another example of erotic care's capacity to heal and enliven the will is found in the novel *Beloved*, in which Toni Morrison articulates the importance of touch in the African American folk context as the materiality of love.⁷⁴ Woven throughout the narrative of Sethe, a self-emancipated mother who survived slavery, Morrison depicts the community's use of their hands to communicate intimacy, care, and praise. Literary critic Anissa Janine Wardie writes, "It is the action of the hands that materialize love."⁷⁵ While Wardie is correct, I argue that the hands are not the only actors in the communication of love, but the body as a whole. Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, used her body in some of the most erotic and intimate ways:

Sethe remembered the touch of those fingers that she knew better than her own. They bathed her in sections, wrapped her womb, combed her hair, oiled her nipples, stitched her clothes, cleaned her feet, greased her back and dropped just about anything they were doing to massage Sethe's nape when, especially in the early days her spirits fell down under the weight of the things she remembered and those she did not.⁷⁶

These material signs of love and healing sear with intimacy, again queering traditional conceptions of eros as Baby Suggs attends to the most private parts of Sethe's body—her

⁷² Bell hooks, "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," in *Black Looks*, 20.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Anissa Janine Wardie, "A Laying On of Hands: Toni Morrison and the Materiality of Love," *MELUS* 30.3 (2005): 201–18, 765.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 765.

⁷⁶ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 98.

genitals, her head, her feet, the nape of her neck, acknowledging the sacrality of the various parts of her body and affirming Sethe's sense of worth. These acts, which fortify the hallowed kinship she and Baby Suggs share with each other, tend to the sexually intimate parts of Sethe, but they do not intend to arouse sexual pleasure. I contend that the sexual nature of the abuse and diminishment Sethe endured make the locus of Baby Suggs's care appropriate. Imparting a kind of motherly love comparable to Stubbs's mother, Suggs communicates to Sethe the value of every part of her body and her being as something worthy of being cherished and preserved.

Baby Suggs's healing touch affirms a sacred connection between her body and Sethe's, fostering a sense of solidarity and psychic bonds. Furthermore, the act valorizes Baby Sugg's body as an agent of love and redemptive power and Sethe's body as beloved. In these practices of erotic care, Sethe finds the peace and security necessary to live and hope again. Baby Suggs's rituals of healing, like Celie's desire for Shug, function as Sethe's way back from being no one to being human again, while reaffirming the humanity Baby Suggs, a former slave herself, has carved out of her life through service to those who have made their way to freedom.

The healing touch of erotic care of the soul is intimate, explosive, and has the power to resurrect the dead. As Ciel's story suggests in *The Women of Brewster Place*, these redemptive spaces sometimes require handling the most intimate parts of ourselves, parts we cannot shy away from out of fear, shame, or confusion about our bodies or the erotic. The inclusion of instances of the erotic in black women's literature bring to bear the restorative possibilities of radical vulnerability to others as desecrated subjects in need of love and recognition. Erotic touch acknowledges existence in a world where black women are alienated, used, and neglected. I argue that when black women injured by the pornographic handling of society engage in erotic care of the soul, the encounter facilitates a kind of self and intra-communal

determination regarding their bodies, identities and the power of the erotic. I maintain that these practices birth in those constantly desecrated by their contexts the realization that they are worthy of love, they are more than their utility, and that redemption can be found in the power and love that resides in the body.

I argue such power is present in erotic practices like the act of bathing depicted numerous times by black female writers. Of note is how the erotic practice of bathing is comparable to the waters of baptism, which evokes the Christian ritual of the death of the subject of care to the ways of the world and the birth of new life in the Spirit of Christ. A transformative ritual, the metaphor again underscores black women writers' perception of the power of the erotic to transform subjects from a degenerate state of being to a state of wholeness. Returning to *The Women of Brewster Place*, Mattie's acts of care serve as an external baptism for Ciel. However, the efficacy of her loving works is evinced in the internal baptism Ciel undergoes through her tears.

Her tears no longer fried within her, killing her internal organs with their steam.

So Ciel began to cry—there, naked, in the center of the bathroom floor . . .

The tears were flowing so freely now Ciel couldn't see, and she allowed herself to be led as if blind. She sat in the chair and cried—head erect. Since she made no effort to wipe them away, the tears dripped down her chin and landed on her chest and rolled down to her stomach and onto her dark pubic hair . . .

Ciel sat. And cried. The unmolested tears had rolled down her parted thighs and were beginning to wet the chair. But they were cold and good. She put out her tongue and began to drink their saltiness, feeding on them.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Naylor, *Women of Brewster Place*, 104–5.

Ciel's tears represent the reintegration of her personhood, the uniting of her body, once again with her feelings. Her situation is a reminder that the severing of one's desire/will from one's body is the principle characteristic of black oppression. So devastated was Ciel by the horror of her circumstances, she had completely divorced herself from her feelings as a way to cope. However, Ciel's situation also communicates the power of the erotic to remedy this fracture. I argue that as black women use their bodies to heal other black women, through attention to their bodies, they enact a love that unites body and spirit.

The accounts of the erotic in black women's literature and Stubbs's testimony offer greater clarity about black women's understandings of the erotic and their bodies. These instances, not represented through accounts of sex alone, though they are sensual, demonstrate that through deeply intimate bodily encounters the erotic can transport one or both actors from one state of being to another. Moreover, these examples depict black women as vessels of divine power, and the intra-communal acts of erotic care which serve to reconsecrate black women and recalibrate their self-concept as subjects worthy of love as the vehicles by which divine power is transmitted. Resuscitated through the erotic, these women are rescued through the care and love of women who have experienced similar struggles, providing thought-provoking depictions of the connection between the erotic and the sacred. I maintain that through erotic, haptic encounters with other bodies, black women have countered the identities conscripted onto their bodies and used touch in their own re-creation and reorientation. These encounters maintain a sacred function making alienated bodies and minds new—by appropriating signs and meanings, similar to the way baptism does—through practices already operative and esteemed within the black community. Thus, erotic care of the soul carried out by black women is more than just loving touch. It possesses divine power, with the capacity for

radical spiritual and material transformation.

Chapter 3

Beyond Pleasure: Solidarity as a Practice of Communal Eroticism

This chapter examines communal demonstrations of erotic defiance like the protest ritual of the die-in to amplify the role of the erotic in generating solidarity. Grounding my analysis in the erotic accounts of the political by black lesbian feminist writer Audre Lorde and ethicist Keri Day, and the sacramental approach to the body by womanist theologians M. Shawn Copeland and Kelly Brown Douglas and womanist ethicist Marcia Riggs, I engage in an erotic reading of embodied protest which discloses a womanist ethic of kenosis as a foundational element of the erotic's power in cultivating the emotional and corporeal mutuality necessary for authentic solidarity. Emphasizing the role of the body in the concrete manifestation of reality, I describe the bodily practices of solidarity as communal eroticism that animates the power for sociopolitical transformation and instruction for moral formation in individual participants. Finally, engaging Anthony Pinn's scholarship on the body as signifier, I argue that through ritual and everyday acts of erotic solidarity, the body's signifying and sacramental functions are harnessed in the transformation of the social imagination.

The Erotic Defiance of Dying (In)

The protest ritual known as the die-in, comparable to the sit-in made popular by the various movements that dominated American attention in the 1960s,¹ was conceived by environmental

¹ The sit-in is a form of social protest, which aimed to promote political, social, and/or economic changes. The technique, introduced by union activist and civil rights worker Bernice Fisher, uses the tactic of disruption of public and government space for the purposes of keeping issues of injustice at the forefront of American consciousness. For more on the sit-in, see M. J. O' Brien, *We Shall Not Be Moved* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013).

groups and later utilized by AIDS activists.² Classified as nonviolent social protest (action), die-ins operate as social dramas and a site of contestation over the political and often moral structure of a society.³ Leveraging the erotic dynamism of the body as a catalyst of economic and social disruption, protestors lie on the ground in public spaces as though dead to dispute the normalization of injustice, characteristic of the false “Pax Americana”⁴ found in spaces of privilege.

In the nascence of the Black Lives Matter movement,⁵ begun in the wake of the spate of police shootings of unarmed black people (Rekia Boyd, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Jessica Williams), die-ins experienced resurgence as people from all walks of life began to stand up for justice by lying down in solidarity with black victims. Amid chants of “Hands up. Don’t shoot”⁶ and “I can’t breathe” the bodies of protestors from various socioeconomic, racial and cultural backgrounds stood as prophetic symbols and agents of disruption. Compromising the flow of goods and services in spaces of commerce such as malls, sporting events, and even busy thoroughfares; and interrupting the dignified beauty of elite college campuses and public

² For more on the history of the die-in, see Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ, 1982), 9–11. Here I am alluding to Turner’s concept of social drama and breach and repair. Turner describes social dramas as times of cultural and societal turbulence that can function as “a unit of description and analysis” that “revealed the ‘taxonomic’ relations among actors” (9). At this time, a community or society experiences a breach, or disruption in agreed-upon moral expectations. The social drama includes both the breach and the resolution of said breach, known as “repair.”

⁴ The Pax Americana is a play on the idea of the Pax Romana. The Pax Romana was a time of relative peace that came as a result of the Roman Empire’s conquests.

⁵ The Black Lives Matter movement is a social action movement created by Alicia Garza et al. It was initially intended to garner attention for the all-but-ignored tradition of state-sanctioned violence against black communities and the killing of unarmed black men and women. The movement later expanded its focus to attend to the civil rights of black people in general and the various injustices that contribute to black oppression, including poverty, unemployment, food scarcity, and other issues that disproportionately affect black people. For more on the Black Lives Matter movement, see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016).

⁶ The chant “Hands up. Don’t Shoot” was meant to call attention to the eyewitness account that Michael Brown, 18, had his hands up when police officer Darren Wilson shot him six times. “I can’t breathe” represents the last words of Eric Garner as he was choked to death by police officer Daniel Pantaleo. Both are used to emphasize the lack of human regard with which police confront black people suspected of committing a crime.

institutions, the bodies of protestors symbolized the corpses of America’s despised—black men and women, black boys and girls slain by racialized, extrajudicial violence. As sites of disruption, their bodies called to account the systems of mass injustice that produce black death, drawing the attention of the world with the intention of shaming an American government.⁷

For example, in the Longworth Building cafeteria on Capital Hill, an area described as heavily trafficked during lunch hours, about twenty-one clergy members shouted “Black Lives Matter!” and proceeded to lay down on the floor obstructing the path to the cash registers.⁸ In the moments that passed many others including congressmen and women joined the clergy on the floor, lying down as though dead in symbolic protest. On their bodies were signs that said “Black Lives Matter!” The *Washington Post* reported that the protest suspended the busy lunch rush in the cafeteria while diners and employees looked on; some proud of the statement that was being made.⁹ The police soon came, threatening to arrest participants and ending what was intended to be a four-and-a-half minute protest (typically used by protestors in memory of the four-and-a-half hours Michael Brown’s body was left lying in the street) at three minutes.¹⁰ At the close of the protest, clergy walked out singing, believing that their act of resistance would affect political change. I argue that protest rituals like the die-in represent a communal form of erotic defiance. Asserting the humanity and value of black people through the language of ethics, the die-in is a form of erotic solidarity that disregards social structures as sovereign, through a corporeal articulation of an audacious solidarity with black victims.

Erotic solidarity is a specific approach to suffering that necessitates concrete acts of love

⁷ In some cases, die-in protests garner attention as a result of the interruption of the flow of goods and services caused by mass traffic jams incited by the bodies of protestors in the street, which can deal a consequential blow to the economic systems of oppression that profit from the exploitation of the black people.

⁸ Wesley Lowery, “Black Lives Matter Protestors Stage Protest on Capital Hill,” *Washington Post*, January 21, 2015.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

to communities and individuals who suffer as a result of demonized corporeal difference.¹¹ Following in church father Athanasius's assertion that "what is not assumed is not healed," it emphasizes the centrality of the body in racist oppression, and the importance of the body as the locus of connection for all humanity, the site of healing encounter between God and human beings, and the body's role as the arbiter of concrete reality.¹² Consequently, it prioritizes the involvement of the flesh in the love we profess for those who suffer. Defiantly rejecting and threatening the social order, rituals of erotic solidarity ignite communal and personal transformation as protestors make a material assertion of their alignment with the countercultural belief that black people are more than objects of profit and pleasure for the dominant culture, and are human beings created for freedom.

Approaching solidarity as a facet of the lived transformative characteristic of Christian discipleship, theologian M. Shawn Copeland, in her book *Enfleshing Freedom*, weds the practice of solidarity to the body, describing it as a set of compassionate practices that heal the social and political dynamics that oppress black people. Such transformation, I argue, is made possible by the erotic. I perceive Copeland's articulation of Christian solidarity as a form of communal eroticism, in which communities of difference share their bodies in loving service to one another, on behalf of God, in the pursuit of divine justice. The erotic shows up in Christian solidarity as the divine impulse to operate on behalf of the other as human kin. This impulse, I argue, is made possible by the conscientiacizing force of the erotic and its ability to heal the perception of believers from the abstractions of the hegemonic imagination. Restoring right

¹¹ Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*, 67. Douglas explains demonized difference as a religious and cultural phenomenon, influenced by platonic dualism in which difference is automatically perceived as dangerous, necessitating its expulsion for the safety of the community.

¹² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, translated by Penelope Lawson (USA: readaclassic.com, n.d.), 12. Athanasius asserts the incarnation is the beginning of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. Through the incarnation, divinity assumes humanity through the act of assuming flesh for the sake of redeeming it. Athanasius writes, "For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all."

relationality with their fellow human, the erotic compels participation in the pursuit of justice for all.

For Copeland, Christian solidarity is a mystical joining together of believers in the service of Christ to identify with and share in the material and corporeal struggle of those whom Christ came to liberate. She contends that solidarity is embodied, relational service to and for others for the kingdom of God. Solidarity involves not only the concrete practice of love in our relationships with the Other, but also requires the service of our flesh as a spiritual witness of our allegiance to God and God's truth and justice. "Solidarity," Copeland argues, "sets the dynamics of love against the dynamics of domination making the openness of relationality, as reciprocity and mutuality possible."¹³ These acts, therefore, have the capacity to dramatically reorient our world and create new modes of relationality, oriented by our service to God and our connection to one another.

An emphasis on the erotic nature of solidarity, or simply erotic solidarity—the demonstration of love for the oppressed in and through one's own flesh—represents an important shift in theological approaches to suffering. Though she uses the language of "enfleshing," Copeland's belief in Christian discipleship's ability to cultivate a "recognition and regard for the victims of history" and a sense of responsibility to shoulder their suffering as a form of spiritual witness, is an erotic undertaking, congruent with my concept of erotic defiance.¹⁴ It is erotic in that they are the enfleshed, concrete manifestations of love and representations of the divine. Acts of solidarity like embodied protests allow participants to reject and rebuke systems of oppression that attempt to thwart human beings of their divine right to freedom. They mark an unwillingness to ignore the bonds of connection between us, by

¹³ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 94–95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

looking away and numbing ourselves to the suffering of fellow human beings who lack power.

In her book *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, ethicist Keri Day posits the erotic as a resource in the disruption of oppressive political postures that disconnect us from our humanity and our relationship with others. She argues that the neoliberal rationale, operative in our political economy, foments a passionless, disconnected posture in the world as a means of survival and economic flourishing.¹⁵ As a mindset and mode of sociality informed by white patriarchy and capitalism, the neoliberal rationale compels people to relate competitively rather than cooperatively.¹⁶ In this schema, individuals are perceived and operate as enterprises rather than human beings, and human relationality is reduced to economic transactions.¹⁷ The influence of the neoliberal rationale is expansive. Day argues it orders our sociality, our customs and our ethics—all too often demanding a pornographic mode of relationality in which people exploit others for the purposes of their own gain, and/or are exploited themselves. As a result, neoliberal approaches foment a dynamic of domination that causes many, especially those marginalized by bodily difference, to experience alienation from their sense of humanity as various economic systems separate them from their creativity, self-possession and passions.

In the Lordean tradition,¹⁸ Day argues that the erotic challenges passionless and numb ways of being encouraged by the neoliberal rationale.¹⁹ In her essay “Uses of the Erotic,” black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde suggests that for those struggling with the oppressive forces of racist patriarchy (which would include the marginalized and the privileged), numbness often feels like “the only alternative.”²⁰ However, the political power of the erotic exists in its ability

¹⁵ Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, 98.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ This signifies the tradition of rereading the erotic by Audre Lorde, which has become quite popular in African American studies.

¹⁹ Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, 98.

²⁰ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 58.

to inspire confrontation of and resistance to deleterious pornographic modes of relation inspired by greed and a lust for power. In the words of Audre Lorde, “In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement.”²¹ The erotic informs and illuminates our engagement in the world around us. It radicalizes us by locating and connecting us to our humanity, our will, and our worth. Identifying our deepest feelings, it inspires us to reject anemic, dispossessed, despondent ways of being in the world and instills a sense of self-worth, power, defiance, hope, joy and pleasure.

When placing Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic” in conversation with Katie Cannon’s *Black Womanist Ethics*, it becomes evident that erotic energy is a catalyst in the discovery and formation of black women’s virtue, helping black women discover and maintain the feistiness and tenacity that womanist ethicist Cannon avers is necessary for black women to survive their caustic environments.²² Again, I maintain that erotic energy is the remedy for the historic severing of the motive will of black subjects by slavery, which Hortense Spillers speaks of in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” Reincarnating responsibility for ourselves that was once dislocated by oppression, I contend the erotic reconnects people suppressed by racism and sexism with our bodies, our emotions, and our desires so that we are no longer willing to accept relationships and situations that compromise our individual and communal fulfillment. Instead, I argue, the erotic informs an ethic of defiance that impels us to destroy all that would restrain or divert us from the fullness of being.

Expanding on Lorde’s articulation of the erotic, I argue that our refusal to accept injustice, suffering, and self-negation is a sign of movement toward wholeness furnished by

²¹ Ibid.

²² Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 104.

erotic knowledge, born out of embodied experiences. When awakened by the erotic, individuals have the courage to reach beyond the limits enforced by society. This erotic knowledge motivates them to action. I affirm Lorde's account of the personal effects of the erotic; however, the effects of the erotic energy extend to our communities, as well. I argue that the erotic mobilizes people to take responsibility for their joy, and most importantly, justice through action and protest.

The joy and pleasure of experiences of the erotic instill a sense of worth and agency, imbuing individuals with the gumption to take up space in the world by asserting their will. However, erotic energy not only inspires us to reach more deeply within ourselves, but also to reach toward one another, as well. Feminist theologian Carter Heyward describes the erotic as the urge and movement toward mutuality and rightness in relationship. Her concept of mutuality entails "sharing power in such a way that each participant in the relationship is called more fully into becoming who she is—a whole person."²³ The pursuit of mutuality is a principle aim of the erotic. Heyward writes, "The erotic is our embodied yearning for mutuality."²⁴ Yearning for Heyward, implies "a desire for something we don't have yet," but is something we must work to achieve.²⁵ I contend that erotic solidarity is a way of working toward mutuality with the divine and with the other. When we act and give ourselves in the service of others, we accomplish mutuality with Jesus. When we renounce our power and privilege in concrete ways, we pursue mutuality with those with less power and who are more prone to suffering. I contend that touch or haptic encounters can be a shortcut to mutuality, functioning as a temporary sharing of space and sensation; however, the kenosis, or giving of self that is required for erotic solidarity is indicative of the work necessary to make lasting mutuality a reality. Both methods can be erotic,

²³ Heyward, *Touching Our Strength*, 191.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

as the erotic functions as a bridge unifying God and humanity, person to person, and even the disparate aspects of our singular lives like the rational and the emotional.

Awakening individuals to their humanity, I argue that the erotic inspires a wealth of alternatives to a state of numbness and disconnectedness. It restores our humanity by reviving the power of our flesh—our relational being. Reviving us from disassociated relationality, the erotic reconnects us to the bodies societal institutions continually encourage us to forget and shows us the way to ethical living that privileges the humanity of others and our relationships with them. As such, I maintain that the erotic ushers us into a liberated mode of existence in which we feel and feel deeply, connect with others, and are aware of our divine right to freedom. It also enables us to discern and challenge the absence of mutuality in “hierarchical relationships sponsored by oppressive regimes like racism, neoliberalism, sexism, etc.”²⁶ Further, the erotic revitalizes us through our experience of erotic knowledge, which Lorde and Day observe cultivate a sense of responsibility, which incites action.²⁷ As such, I argue, the erotic inspires us to transgress the societal boundaries that systems of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy have installed and to challenge their legitimacy.

Day conceives of eros as a mode of cognition, “a way of gaining deep insight in the world we inhabit.”²⁸ I contend the cognitive product of the erotic is erotic knowledge, a form of conscientization that acts as a standard by which to discern the good, satisfaction, fulfillment, as well as when our circumstances fall below them at the expense of our dignity. Such conscientization, is often accompanied by anger, perhaps one of the most politically constructive emotional manifestations of the erotic. Feminist ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison avers that anger is an emotional signal that alerts us that something is amiss in the dynamics of a

²⁶ Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, 98.

²⁷ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 58.

²⁸ Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, 99.

relationship.²⁹ She writes, “Anger is a mode of connectedness to others, a vivid form of caring . . . anger is a sign of some resistance in ourselves to the moral quality of the social relations in which we are immersed.”³⁰ Alerting us to the need for change, in the service of justice for the self and the community, I aver that erotic knowledge, the emotional responses it inspires and the action it provokes, function politically because, as Day argues, “it contributes to the organizing of basic resources in order to live well.”³¹ But, what are the circumstances necessary for the erotic to impact one’s thinking, especially where political configurations of society are concerned?

Day contends that the erotic is a resource for ethical living that moves us beyond abstractions or the theoretical, to an understanding of the concrete ways in which oppression compromises one’s humanness, connections, and freedoms. In this way, erotic knowledge, as Lorde argues, connects the spiritual to the political through shared sensual, emotional, and psychic expressions. It, therefore, becomes a bridge, a point of encounter and connection capable of reconciling the estranged.³² For example, within the context of extrajudicial violence against black people, I argue erotic knowledge moves beyond the abstract concept of order, crime, and obedience (societal facets perennially invoked as responses to racialized violence) and sees the killing of unarmed men and women from a human lens, like the perspectives of the families and communities affected. I maintain, that the sense of connection to a young man lying dead in the street for hours, or the feelings associated with the loss of a family member to police violence or disproportionate incarceration resonates in ways that statistics and theory

²⁹ Beverly Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers,” in *Making the Connection: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, edited by Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 14–15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

³¹ Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, 99.

³² Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 56.

cannot.

I posit that the erotic intervenes in the disconnected theorization of Western moral logic and action by reminding us that the active pursuit of justice and authentic relationships of mutuality is vital to the work of solidarity. The erotic I contend, underscores the necessity of the concrete practice of love, particularly toward the oppressed. The inclusion of the erotic in the work of solidarity signals the importance of the body in the manifestation of the concrete, especially in the case of love. Keri Day tackles the apolitical and abstract sense of love operative in the fantastic hegemonic imagination. Building on theologian Paul Tillich's notion of the ontological unity of love, Day argues, "Love is a concrete revolutionary practice that integrates the ways in which eros enables an 'enfleshment' of *agape* and even *philia*."³³ *Agape* and *philia*, the forms of love more readily palatable to Christian communities and orthodox Christian theology, signify godly and brotherly love, while eros has been demonized and diminished to *epithymia*—physical desire deemed self-serving and inferior to its counterparts. In agreement with Tillich's repudiation of a hierarchal approach to love, Day argues for an ontologically unified approach to *eros* and *agape*. Maintaining that these facets of love are not in opposition, as the Christian tradition has often suggested, Day argues they "must be seen as expressions of the same ontological drives toward reunion."³⁴ The erotic as the manifestation of love in and through flesh provides the basic condition of love's expression in human life.³⁵

In the case of extrajudicial violence, I argue that suffering touches the lives of marginalized communities, even those who evade violent encounters with police because of the erotic connections many with families in poor communities have with the victims. They have

³³ Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, 105.

³⁴ Alexander Irwin, *Eros toward the World: Paul Tillich and the Theology of the Erotic* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*; and Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, 80.

birthed them, loved them as infants, shared holidays, and lived in neighborhoods with them. Consequently, I contend, they share love and a mutuality of experience that motivates those erotically connected to interrogate the notion that police violence is somehow deserved. In the same way, it is no surprise that black cultural institutions from the church to the arts have been some of the greatest proponents of justice in the community. I aver that these spaces have allowed black people to cultivate erotic knowledge through the movement of their bodies in connection with one another and with the Spirit. These forms of erotic awakening revive and harness human passion into communal responsibility as a result of their affirmation of the personhood of all people and their right to freedom.

Day rightfully articulates the contributions of the erotic to the organizing of resources for good living and the cultivation of mutuality, or shared feelings. Using the example of a mother sharing her concrete struggles with being present with her children and providing safety and fundamental resources for them in the midst of working a low-wage job, Day argues that erotic knowledge allows her audience to emotionally connect with the mother's situation. Through hearing of this mother's struggle, Day contends, the listeners have the opportunity for transformation, prompting others toward responsible action. She writes, "The erotic in this case sponsors connection that becomes the grounding for protest and political action"³⁶

I would describe Day's example as an example of emotional encounter. The audience that hears the mother's story encounter, or rather are confronted with, the concrete struggle of an individual whom they can choose to commiserate with and mobilize on behalf of as a fellow human being, or not. For many, encounters with these mothers has been a transformational experience, spurring them to join and fight against police violence and other abuses of black people. Yet, true to the disconnected posture of Western civilization, countless mothers have

³⁶ Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, 99.

shared their pain with the nation, via articles, stories, and rallies, only to be disregarded. I press Day's logic that the hearing of a story can produce the kind of connection that motivates us toward "movement toward each other in support of one's collective well-being."³⁷ My challenge is based on the way the erotic manifests love in the concrete. Day argues an affective politics allows the sentiments of love to inspire active commitments to particular political causes. However, I aver that it is virtually impossible to love someone that you have no identification with. While Day acknowledges that love is a concrete practice, it is unrealistic to believe people will be inspired to be emotionally connected to people they are not concretely unfamiliar with. I argue that the erotic moves us beyond sentiments to right relationality, by producing experiences of identification that move us to a form of virtuous relationality in which competition, domination and exploitation are abandoned for more just modes of encounter that seek mutuality. Love as it is understood cannot be the impetus for such relationality among strangers. In fact, many, though familiar with the emotional accounts of how lives and families have been devastated by the government's lack of regard for black life, remain unaffected, continuing in the counter-rhetoric of "All lives matter," and the notion that cooperation with the police will keep black people safe. The differences in responses raise a curious question about encounter and its efficacy in generating erotic knowledge. Do these encounters need to be physical? Does the distance of media make a difference, and why?

I surmise that the varied responses to the stories of these mothers signals the importance of bodily engagement. I maintain that experience makes a difference. I argue that the erotic requires more than theorizations of suffering—it also requires flesh to facilitate concrete experiences of identification with those who suffer. In this way, my concept of erotic solidarity demands a more radical corporeality than Day's account of the erotic's political power. I

³⁷ Ibid.

maintain that the erotic connotes the mutuality of a *shared* corporeal experience as the building block of political transformation. While I imagine that in the realm of the ideal, the ontological mutuality of humanity would be enough to engender solidarity, I posit that the alienating powers of classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and every other oppressive ideology that creates hierarchies on the basis of bodily difference are constantly working to negate these connections. Encounters with the flesh of others, I contend, eliminate the power of these distinctions by resuscitating our sense of connection to one another. Hearing the experience of a mother, concrete or not, is different, I argue, when it is mediated by light waves and video. Experiencing the visceral effects of the anguish of not being able to feed one's own children, I maintain, is the difference between sympathy and solidarity.

Erotic Solidarity as a Kenotic Posture

I posit that the distance between sympathy and solidarity is personal experience. Theologian and mystic Howard Thurman underscores the necessity of what he calls experiences of identification in the cultivation of solidarity. Echoing Gabriel Marcel's premise that to understand suffering, it must touch you, Thurman conveys the power of Jesus' kenosis—the act of divesting himself of his power for the sake of mutuality with the vulnerable.³⁸ Thurman argues that Jesus' experiences of being apprehended, tortured, and ultimately killed in the undignified way many who are powerless have experienced, bolstered the enslaved's confidence in Jesus to understand and act on behalf of their own struggles. Thurman's observation marks the importance of corporeal mutuality in erotic solidarity. Thurman asserts

³⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existence*, translated by Manya Harari (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 9.

that Jesus-on-the-cross operates as a quality of identification in experience with the crucified.³⁹ I would argue his life as a disenfranchised Jew, sharing in the struggle of the oppressed through the concrete experience of their vulnerability to oppressive political powers, is another manifestation of Jesus' willingness to relinquish power for the sake of mutuality with, and ultimately liberation of, the oppressed. These experiences exemplify the kenosis of Jesus as a form of identification with the exploited and their suffering in the flesh.

Similarly, the act of dying-in, like other acts of erotic solidarity, I argue, present opportunities for the renunciation of privilege through corporeal identification with the oppressed. These performances enable protestors to take on the vulnerability of black and poor communities by exposing themselves to the threat of coercive technologies of the state, like arrest, violence, and even the threat of death demonized communities experience daily. Allowing those with privilege to be "touched by the suffering," rituals like die-ins, I argue, facilitate experiences of identification that model solidarity as a corporeal manifestation of love and communal accountability and the praxis of womanist kenosis.

Distinct from the traditional doctrine of kenosis, womanist kenosis is a renunciation of one's privilege for the sake of the mutual sharing of power. Taking into account how the doctrine of kenosis has been deployed as the theological justification for the dispossession of the bodies and agency of women, especially black women, womanist theologian Delores Williams and womanist ethicist Marcia Riggs have contested the merit of an ethic of sacrifice that offers no relief from the hierarchical relationality that degrades and suppresses black women's freedom.⁴⁰ Reinterpreting kenosis as the relinquishing of power, privilege and

³⁹ Howard Thurman, *Deep River: An Interpretation of Negro Spirituals* (Whitefish, MT: Literary Licensing, 1945), 27, via Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015), 178.

⁴⁰ Black women's bodies, being and personhood were seen as instruments of sexual pleasure and economic profit; first of white people, then black men, and finally the black community at large. Under the auspices of Christian

exceptionalism in the pursuit of the mutual sharing of power, womanist theological scholars like theologian Kelly Brown Douglas and ethicist Marcia Riggs have expanded the social implications of the Christian discipline, making it relevant to the moral situation of black women specifically, and black people in general.⁴¹

Douglas demystifies the kenosis of Jesus on the way to the cross, contextualizing its implications in concrete reality. She argues, “Jesus empties himself not only of his divinity, but his worldly status.”⁴² Refusing to respond or advocate for himself in any way, he renounces any sense of power or privilege he possesses and chooses instead to identify with the despised by allowing his body to be subject to the violence of governmental and evil powers. Douglas’s description points to the material and physical experience necessary in the forging of political solidarity. Jesus shares in the vulnerability of the oppressed by risking his own flesh. Through his refusal to shun experiences of marginalization, ridicule, and injustice, Jesus was able to truly identify with the vulnerable in the flesh. As such, he models the erotic nature of solidarity as a concrete practice of love and communal accountability, which requires a renunciation of privilege and encounters of vulnerability.

I argue that Douglas’s characterization of solidarity with the oppressed is as an erotic endeavor that operates beyond warm sentiments and even pleasure and desire. As Lorde contends, the erotic demands from us excellence.⁴³ While Lorde’s focus is more personal in nature, I maintain that her assertion can be extended to an ethic of excellence in our romantic

obedience, they have been spiritually coerced into making themselves small as a way of following in the service and suffering of Christ. Ignoring their own needs for survival, suppressing their personhood and living for the service of others, they have been the victims of a society hell-bent on their exploitation. For more on the death dealing ethic of sacrifice operative in black women’s Christian communities, see Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, and Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013).

⁴¹ Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do with It?*, 177; Marcia Riggs, *Awake, Arise & Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1994), 94.

⁴² Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do with It?*, 177.

⁴³ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 55.

and our interpersonal relationships. Excellence, however, is not easy. It requires a sense of disciplined responsibility and even sacrifice. Like the passion of Jesus, and in the case of embodied ritual protests like die-ins, I contend that erotic solidarity requires an embodied kenosis—a movement toward *corporeal* mutuality for the sake of solidarity with the oppressed. Enacted through the disciplined and risky renunciation of privilege, authority, and power, it highlights erotic solidarity’s accountability to the community, in that these efforts are not merely mystically symbolic acts of submission between protestors and the divine, but are motivated by a desire for right relation with the oppressed, demonstrated through fleshy vulnerability, that is embodied identification with the marginalized, pursued through *experiences of*, rather than *reflection on* vulnerability and suffering, as witnessed in the passion of Jesus Christ.

Copeland writes, “The praxis of solidarity is made possible by the loving donation of the crucified Christ, whose cross is the origin, standard and judge.”⁴⁴ Through the praxis of solidarity illuminated by Christ, “we not only understand the suffering of the other, but we are moved to confront and address its oppressive cause and shoulder ‘the other’s’ suffering.”⁴⁵ The suffering of Christ is the original source and ultimate example of authentic solidarity, Copeland argues, emphasizing authentic solidarity’s costly requirement of sacrifice. Through his bodily affliction and distress, Copeland argues, Jesus takes on the suffering of the black body, interrupting its torment by offering hope.⁴⁶

Copeland maintains all Christians can participate in this solidarity and hope by modeling Christ’s actions through “Eucharistic solidarity.”¹ She proffers that the Eucharist makes the hope of Christ’s interruption of the abuse of black bodies tangible because it makes Christ

⁴⁴ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 99.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

present with us. For Copeland, as believers join their own bodies with the mystical body of Christ through the ritual of Eucharist, they assert solidarity with those who have been exploited and despised, as well. This ritual, Copeland argues, reorients Christians' way of being in the world, causing them to put their all into eradicating the marginalization and abuse of women of color.⁴⁷ However, it is important to emphasize that participation in the ritual alone does not fulfill the full demand of Christian solidarity. The ritual, I argue, serves to reorient believers' understanding of proper relationality with the oppressed, giving them a rubric of how to conduct themselves in concrete reality. Christians demonstrate their discipleship, Copeland avers, by following the example of the crucified and struggling on the side of the exploited, despised, and poor.⁴⁸ Similarly, I argue, the erotic solidarity of protest rituals like the die-in have the potential to morally form those who participate.

I posit that bodily acts like those found in rituals guide the way forward for a new way of being in the world. Through ritual performances of protest, I argue, the body becomes the erotic space where humanity meets divinity through solidarity. As Christ takes on the flesh of humanity and the frailties that accompany it in his incarnational, loving work of the cross, participants in die-ins follow suit by standing in solidarity with the dead and despised. By making victims visible, while also taking on their vulnerability, I contend, protestors engage in the sacrificial eroticism of solidarity. Through a bodily renunciation of privilege, protestors share experiences of identification with the oppressed. These experiences, I maintain, inform a kenotic, ethical posture in those who participate and those who witness such protests and habituate them toward the renunciation of all forms of privilege as a way of life.

In this way, I argue that rituals of embodied protest, though not explicitly Christian, can

⁴⁷ Ibid., 125–28.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 128.

operate similarly to the ritual of Eucharist. Similarly, the erotic defiance of die-ins stands in solidarity with the oppressed while meeting the divine in the disruption of a culture that abuses black people with impunity and offers hope in communal transformation by giving people the opportunity to resist racism and white supremacy and to demonstrate to the world alternative ways of being.

Through the ritual of dying-in, protesters acknowledge their connection to a social body that is made of diverse communities, perspectives, and experiences. This interconnectedness, funded by their corporeality and a mutuality of space, demands justice for the oppressed with the same urgency with which one would pursue justice for oneself. While the ritual of Eucharist, Copeland argues, reorients Christians' way of being in the world, causing them to put their all into eradicating the marginalization and abuse of women of color, the ritual of dying-in offers a metaphor for moral formation.⁴⁹ Both their embodied representation of death and identification with the marginalized through experiences that constitute embodied solidarity underscore the integral role of sacrifice in erotic solidarity and political transformation. Through participation in the mystical body of Christ and solidarity with the oppressed, Copeland contends, Christians demonstrate their discipleship. She writes, "Only those who follow the example of the crucified and struggle on the side of the exploited, despised and poor 'will discover him [Jesus] at their side.'"⁵⁰ The presence of Jesus, at the side of those who fight for justice, can be understood as divine help. This divine help is made available to those who seek to uphold/reinstitute the will of God through resistance to hegemonic ideologies, which, Copeland argues, oppose the power and sovereignty of God.

A womanist ethic of kenosis discloses additional dimensions of the erotic. I argue that it

⁴⁹ Ibid., 101.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 99.

reveals that in the midst of erotic defiance, the focus cannot be self, alone, but must be fully committed to the exchange, communion, and connection it accomplishes; otherwise, initially prophetic and transformative acts can slip off the rails and devolve into the pornographic. Lorde's words are instructive. She writes, "To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using each other's feelings. When we look the other way," (a metaphor for disconnected exchanges between individuals), "we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate with us. . . . We use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share joy in the satisfying."⁵¹ Accordingly, the erotic demands mutuality. It is the reciprocal exchange of deep feelings, the energy produced in the pursuit of shared goals, in the sharing of experiences, as well as the impetus and energy to accomplish transformation in our world.

Embodied Protest and the Prophetic

Erotic solidarity produces erotic power through shared mission. It is generated through people donating their corporeal agency to a shared pursuit and its impact on the world and themselves. The corporeal agency offered through embodied protests like the ritual of the die-in include that of representation and care, through which the signifying capacity and sacramentality of protestors' bodies allow them to operate prophetically because of the unified action of humanity and the divine through erotic solidarity. Through her analysis of the Black Clubwomen's Movement, a socioreligious phenomenon in which black women organized nationally and locally into social clubs for the purposes of racial uplift and the improvement of the larger society, Riggs articulates a theo-ethic of sacramentality in which black women understood their activity in the world to be a sign of God's truth and justice in the world. Riggs explains that the clubwomen were inspired by a God-consciousness that enabled them to see the injustice of the

⁵¹ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 58–59.

world through a divinely inspired, justice-oriented lens. Holding to the belief that all people were made in the image of God for God's intended purpose of freedom and loving relationality, "The black clubwomen," Riggs writes, "undertook their social reform efforts in terms of what they understood as the intrinsic connection between work and on behalf of black women and all black people (the particular) and the greater good, reform of society aimed at justice for all (the universal)."⁵²

Black women's sociopolitical activity cunningly leveraged the signifying power of their bodies and presentation in the world as a means of transforming the social imagination. Representing what they believed to be an alternative vision of black womanhood, black clubwomen conformed to very disciplined dress and comportment to disprove a culture that daily maligned black women as uncivilized and morally deficient. Using themselves as symbols of a black femininity, clubwomen showcased a morality and civility so conservative that it was above reproach. These strategies represented clubwomen's prophetic attempts to present the dominant community with a conflict of consciousness, or cognitive dissonance. Their sociopolitical and spiritual witness contested the discursive designations accepted as truth by the dominant culture. Accordingly, their activity operated as a site of contestation of the ideologies of the oppressive powers of alienation and the truth of God's presence in all human life and his mandate for justice.

The erotic solidarity of embodied protest, both subtle and contentious, follows in this tradition. It disrupts the socialization of community members that forms people's imaginations and, therefore, behaviors according to the social image. It is by this process that individuals

⁵² Riggs, *Awake, Arise & Act*, 95.

adopt the conventions of the given world.⁵³ French philosopher Roland Barthes contends that once the practices of society take root in the body, they are ratified or codified as “transcendent truth.”⁵⁴ In other words, cultural customs are perceived as objective truth, as opposed to cultivated, social technologies. In contrast, secular humanist Anthony Pinn asserts: “The body, affords an opportunity to challenge the dominance of the spoken and written word as the primary means of exchange.”⁵⁵ Within this struggle for power, the social body and physical body act on each other, the former attempting to define the possibilities of meaning and movement for the latter. They exchange meanings through a dialectic process of pressures and restrictions. In short, social systems, both the status quo and newly emerging systems born out of the new communities of protest, determine the ways in which the physical body is perceived and used.⁵⁶

A concrete example of this dynamic is the historic treatment of black flesh. Pinn argues it is not just the bodies themselves that serve as symbols, but rather the treatment of said bodies that is symbolically significant. Violence visited upon the black body, he argues, functions as a marker of white domination and the scandal of blackness. The lynched black body, or in its more contemporary iteration, the black body brutalized by police, serves to terrorize black people and keep them ever mindful of the violent measures that will be taken in the maintenance of white supremacy and the containment of black existence. Conversely, the community’s embodied protest to violence against black people operates in a similar manner. Just as lynching as a public spectacle worthy of celebration communicates a particular communal ethos and racial politics, the choice for those with privilege to take action on behalf

⁵³ Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 7.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Pinn, *Embodiment*, 10.

⁵⁶ Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 143.

of black people communicates something, as well. Pinn argues that bodies, their presentation and their activity in the world, even have the capacity to reframe notions of the religious, revealing what is perceived as virtuous and what is constructed as evil, what is valued and what is discarded as insignificant.⁵⁷ The embodied protest of die-in protesters marks black bodies as not only significant, but also as integral members of society, worthy of risky, fleshy representation.

In this way, the bodies of protesters function as “material realities that shape information within the context of the world.” In effect, the bodies of protesters acting as symbolic representatives have an effect on the worlds they live in.⁵⁸ The activity of these bodies has the capacity to materially ratify or contest socially constructed meanings assigned to them and to other bodies, as well as to contribute to or combat the oppressive circumstances that rely on these formulations as a result of bodies functioning as signifiers. The symbolic identification and representation of black people through economically and racially privileged communities’ ritual protests poses a great threat to the racially and class-biased political framework currently operative in the United States.

Pinn, Copeland and philosophers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty have long held that the body has an effect on the world it lives in. Functioning like a living organism, the social body, or otherwise stated a community’s collective consciousness, absorbs concepts and messages that are integrated into commonly held understandings. These shifting meanings, which are perpetually reorienting the meanings of reality, make embodied solidarity a unique opportunity, through embodied moral agency, for cultural and moral transformation for the individual and

⁵⁷ Pinn, *Embodiment*, xiii.

⁵⁸ Ibid. For more, see Harrod, *Human Center*, and Copeland, introduction to *Enfleshing Freedom*.

the community.⁵⁹

Black women's political activism also represents the divine through the incarnation of God's love for the marginalized. Clubwomen aimed to cultivate a sense of confidence and pride in their poor and working-class sisters. They promoted the virtues of excellence, diligence, self-respect, self-determination, and temperance. These virtues were not solely about the aesthetics of being civilized; rather clubwomen saw their instruction as a way of producing more skilled, self-reliant, moral citizens and of meeting the demands of justice as mandated by God. This presents itself in the impulse to be vocally and politically engaged, and to address inequities in criminal justice, poverty, child welfare, education, and labor. Clubwomen also facilitated the political engagement of the greater black community, encouraging them to fight race-based injustices through the courts, petitioning state and federal government, boycotting and political writing.⁶⁰

By empowering their sisters, upwardly mobile black women incarnated God's love and provision in a meaningful and relevant way. Their efforts manifested the protection of God for the black community in concrete ways, including politically organizing for justice and advocating for fair treatment. They also preserved the dignity of poorer black women who remained vulnerable to sexual predators as they worked in white homes. By providing domestics with alternative skills, clubwomen gave them access to other employment opportunities, which greatly decreased their vulnerability to sexual violence.⁶¹ Riggs describes these acts as responsible moral agency. She avers, "Their efforts were fitting responses that

⁵⁹ For more on the construction of meaning and the perpetually shifting values of the body and reality, see Harrod, *Human Center*, and Sokolowski, *Moral Action*.

⁶⁰ Riggs, *Awake, Arise & Act*, 73.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

mediated the fulfillment of their obligation and duty to racial uplift with their belief in God's justice."⁶²

While participants of die-ins may not subscribe to the same theo-ethic, they engage in similar acts of agitation of the status quo, and like clubwomen, operate as signs and agents of divine. As people willing to enact allegiance to the despised by dispatching their agency on their behalf, participants in the erotic solidarity of embodied protest confront configurations of power and point to new social visions by modeling a new way of being in the world. In so doing, they become sites of contestation between the hegemonically orchestrated consciousness of the dominant culture and a consciousness oriented by justice and solidarity. As such, they represent a threat to the current political powers of America. As representatives of the oppressed and the spirit of truth and justice, the bodies of participants represent bodies out of order—bodies engaged in the disruption of white privilege and power—and must therefore be disciplined. Consequently, the bodies of protestors have become vulnerable to the violence the marginalized experience daily. Putting their bodies on the line, protestors are made subject to arrest, violence at the hands of police, and violence from counterprotesters, as seen in August 2017, in Charlottesville, Virginia, when a white supremacist, enraged by protestors' display of allegiance to black and brown people, plowed into a crowd of activists, killing Heather Hayer, a white woman, and injuring many more.

These experiences of identification, in addition to fellowship and collaboration with the oppressed in the struggle for liberation, make possible a sharing of pain and struggle most privileged communities never experience. Actualizing love for those who suffer from the abstract to the concrete, these embodied acts of protest are enfolded manifestations of the solidarity with the oppressed we profess. Through the movement of our bodies as corporeal

⁶² Ibid., 96.

representatives of both the vulnerable and the divine, protestors advocate for those deemed unworthy of consideration, and relinquish status through representation that risks bodily vulnerability for the uplift of their fellow human.

Escaping Prescribed Boundaries of the Erotic

The illumination of the prophetic and the sacramental functions of erotic solidarity of the die-in, I argue, reveal the expansive nature and function of the erotic beyond traditional categories of pleasure and desire, particularly its political dimensions. I contend that the role of the erotic in embodied protest illuminates a relationship between the erotic and sacrifice that contributes to the ongoing womanist dialogue of kenosis and the role of sacrifice in religio-ethical practice.

Western society's suppression and mischaracterization of the erotic is a political strategy used to deprecate, disempower, and isolate women and people of color as a means of large-scale community control. The debunking of the erotic as demonic, and its embrace as a resource for moral agency contests the power of erotophobia over our personal and political freedoms. As Lorde argues, the erotic gives us access to the resource inside us that gives way to corporeal and relational power and agency, especially among those who are oppressed.¹ Facilitating the fullness of our personhood through revelatory knowledge about ourselves and the world, the erotic also spurs personal and communal accountability. Hence, the erotic is a conscientiacizing and guiding agent of truth. Lorde writes, "It [the erotic] is an internal sense of satisfaction"—a fullness or sense of wholeness—"to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect, we can require less of ourselves."⁶³ The erotic moves us from mediocrity to excellence. It reinvigorates our lives with passion, waking us from a strategy of numbness

⁶³ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 54.

(the suppression of our humanness) for the sake of survival, to a place of proactivity that challenges injustice and oppression.

This analysis of erotic solidarity's transformative power illuminates the relationship between the erotic and sacrifice. Much of this chapter has been dedicated to explication of the idea that authentic solidarity is an erotic endeavor of the body, made possible and effective through the sacrificial pursuit of mutuality in the manifestation of an authentic and demonstrated love of the bodies and beings of the oppressed. However, I argue that Western society's suppression and mischaracterization of the erotic has taken root in the psyche of the marginalized to such a degree that in our attempts to redeem the erotic, womanist and feminist scholars have neglected the erotic's role in seeking fullness and fulfillment in other kinds of human relationality.

From an ethical perspective, the siloing of gratification and satisfaction is a dangerous tendency that causes us to go searching to fulfill often misunderstood yearnings for justice, connection, and wholeness in solely sexual ways. However, I maintain that attention to the expansive dimensions of the erotic orients us to the many modes of abundant living humanity was created for and its power for political transformation. I contend that the function of the erotic in authentic solidarity as seen in the protest ritual of the die-in discloses that its virtues extend beyond individual pleasure or desires. I argue the erotic promotes our sense of communal accountability, responsibility, and our participation in the work of creativity in the world. I posit that essential to black women's liberation is the erotic's role in creating systems of mutuality and wholeness. However, current popular expressions of the power of the erotic present truncated assertions of the unapologetic wielding of one's sexual power, often in unethically exploitative ways, as the totality of black women's liberation.

For example, if art indeed imitates life, depictions of black women's erotic power in various mediums of black popular culture, from pop icon Rihanna to newcomer Issa Ray's character on the hit HBO series *Insecure*, indicate that a pervasive presence of black women's self-determination / radical subjectivity is often predicated on freedom through a posture of sexual self-possession. While I agree, a healthy understanding of one's sexuality as one's own, and pleasure as a right—constitutive of human freedom—are crucial aspects of black women's freedom, I argue that the experience of sexual pleasure and exercising of desire in and of themselves do not make black women free nor ethical arbiters of the erotic. In fact, I would characterize these approaches to erotic defiance as failed attempts at liberation on account of their myopic view of progress and their lack of attention to a communal flourishing. Without an eye for the impact on the community, a solely self-affirming approach to black women's sexualities represents nothing more than a new iteration of disfigured erotic politics that continue to truncate black women's being and political potential.

The erotic as a divine resource of moral agency draws us toward one another, not only in a sexual or romantic capacity, but in solidarity as human beings and children of God. It is the desire for community, the impulse that moves us toward each other, the desire to know one another, to participate in one another's lives, to find home in each other. Eros, I argue, animates deep engagement, not only with the bodies of the others, but the hearts, minds and spirits of our human counterparts. I contend that this intimate engagement impels us to contest all agents that obstruct our coherence and communion with each other through various forms of erotic defiance—the concrete divestment of hegemonic conventions and their performance. Consequently, erotic defiance diverges from a focus on self and fully commits to the exchange, communion, and connection it accomplishes. When it does not, I aver, initially prophetic and

transformative acts can devolve into the pornographic.

I assert that acts of embodied protest, like die-ins, are especially prophetic because they offer material/corporeal disruptions of aesthetic, economic, and political systems that instantiate white, capitalistic, patriarchal power to the neglect, disregard, and exploitation of vulnerable communities. Moreover, the erotic ritual activity of the body provides conscientiacizing experiences for protestors and informs a kenotic ethical posture that privileges mutuality above hierarchical notions of power. As such, they operate as erotic defiance in that they are grounded in a love for the bodies and beings of black people, and that they demonstrate this love through the flesh. Through symbolic representation and experiences of vulnerability, protestors embody solidarity, seek mutuality, and collaborate toward a shared vision, cohering those once estranged in united struggle. Moreover, the communal eroticism of solidarity demonstrates the multiple dimensions of erotic agency, including those beyond individual pleasure.

Chapter 4

The Erotic Conjure of Hip Hop and R&B Provocateurs: Where Is the Love?

As the willful embodiment of a revolutionary and unapologetic love of and pleasure in the bodies and being of the oppressed, erotic defiance brazenly challenges hegemony's confining grip on black women's subjectivity and agency. Impacting black women and their spheres of influence through the relational capacities of their bodies, these practices enact resistance and corporeal freedom that contests racist patriarchy's claims on the lives and physical being of those oppressed by race and sex. The preceding descriptions of erotic defiance, in the form of erotic care of the soul and erotic solidarity, declare black women valuable, beloved, sacred and powerful members of humankind. The focus of this chapter, the erotic conjure of the Hip Hop and R&B Provocateur, an explicitly sexual and morally contestable strategy of erotic defiance, asserts that even the sexual practices considered contemptible in normative moral schemas can be sacred manifestations of love that possess transformational power for black women and the community at large.

The Hip Hop and R&B Provocateur is a term I have coined to describe black female musical hybrids like Missy Elliot, Jill Scott, Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, who dance double-dutch on the lines that separate rap emcees and songstresses. These artists operate as signifiers and change makers as they defiantly assert their agency through the celebration of black and female sexual power. Descendants of blues women like Alberta Hunter, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith—black secular sirens, who defiantly contested the gender- and race-based limitations imposed upon black women in the early twentieth century—I argue that through erotic ritual performances of sexual freedom and racial pride that transcend gender, provocateurs conjure

greater freedom for themselves and black women in general. Spiritually transforming their circumstances through what I call corporeal incantations, I aver that the provocateur not only functions as a descendant of the blues woman, but the conjure woman, as well. Using their bodies and sexualities as conjure women did material elements, they embody the inner power of their will.¹

In this chapter I build on religious scholar Theophus Smith's account of conjure as an African-based form of magic—a system of mapping and manipulating the world through signs, symbols, and symbolic phenomena—and Africana scholar Kameelah L. Martin's amplification of the bodies of conjurers and their erotic capacities as a spiritual power and point of privilege. I argue that Hip Hop and R&B Provocateurs deploy sexuality as supernatural power, conjured through self-veneration and sexual authority with the aim of surviving and surmounting the deleterious and coercive forces of racism and sexism of the United States. Commanding a dominant presence, I contend that provocateurs represent a driving influence in the American cultural ethos, such that they make accessible to black women and the masses, black female living bodies in motion. As a result, I maintain provocateurs “conjure culture” by interrupting and reorienting the significance of the discursive/signified black female body through their ability to evoke black female desirability, authority and freedom.²

Conjure, according to religious scholar Theophus Smith, is an African-based form of magic and a tradition of healing and harming that “transforms reality through performances and processes involving a mimetic use of medicinal and toxic substances.”³ Mapping and manipulating the world through signs, symbols and symbolic phenomena, Smith argues that

¹ Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 115.

³ *Ibid.*, 31.

conjure is an enduring form of ritual speech and action, “intended to perform what it expresses.”⁴ Underscoring the pharmaconic nature of conjure, Smith argues the practice accomplishes the curative transformation of the obstacle-laden experiences of everyday life.⁵ Stories of conjure, canonized in African American cultural expression like folktales, literature and the blues, depict men and women soliciting the assistance of a conjure woman or hoodoo doctor to assist them in negotiating the seemingly impossible struggles they faced in their everyday realities. Some sought the mystical curative power of conjure to heal sick family members, while others sought otherworldly intervention to escape the tyranny of violent and unjust masters and later, employers. Still others used the power of conjure in matters of the heart to manipulate the desire of philandering lovers or romantic competition, or more malevolently, to kill them.⁶ Also known in folk communities as hoodoo, root work or voodoo, conjure has historically offered spiritual recourse to those disenfranchised and dispossessed by race in a negrophobic, white supremacist culture hell-bent on black containment and erasure through violence, political and social oppression.

Africana scholar Kameelah Martin amplifies the relationship between conjure and the erotic, explaining that conjure women used the erotic capacities of their bodies as a spiritual power and point of privilege, invoking deities through dance, and offering their bodies as temples in which spirits could dwell.⁷ Accordingly, black folk traditions in which these spiritualities are operative maintain the belief that the female body and its erotic power are

⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁵ Ibid., 3, 4. Pharmacoepia is derived from the Greek word pharmakon, which means both medicine and poison. It is a method of healing that spiritual agency that calls upon and harnesses the supernatural through ritual behavior and elements of pharmacoepia for the human ends.

⁶ Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 5–8.

⁷ Kameelah Martin, “Conjuring Moments and Other Such Hoodoo: African American Women and Spirit Work” (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2006), 145, referencing Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 91.

intrinsically linked to the divine and possess the power to harness the supernatural on their behalf.⁸

Blues representations of conjure showcase the spiritual role of the erotic, depicting it as a mysterious power to emotionally control.⁹ In “The Arts of Loving,” Lisa Gail Collins explores representations of conjure in African American visual arts, particularly the manipulation of love and the divine arts of seduction. Defining conjure as “the practice of summoning spirits and forces,” Collins underscores the harnessing of erotic power as one of the key functions of conjure in black American culture. Writing from the historiography of the blues, she writes, “Conjurers are frequently consulted for assistance with affairs of the heart. Deep desires to procure and secure love through conjuring are central to the blues.”¹⁰ Muddy Waters’ “Got My Mojo Working,” a song that finds a man having difficulty working his charm on what seems to be a particular woman, exemplifies Collins’s assertion. In the song, Waters declares, “I got my mojo working, but it just ain’t working on you.”¹¹ To remedy his impotence, he plans to go down to Louisiana to get a mojo hand—a charged conjurer’s charm that entices and seduces romantic interests. Once he has secured this mojo hand, Waters sings, “I’m gonna have *all you women* right here at my command.”¹² Invoking the power of the erotic through charms and potions, conjurers are known for spiritually coercing unrequited lovers into irresistible desire, and unfaithful lovers into curtailing their extra relationship affairs. Collins explains the power of conjurers is their knowledge of how to influence and direct spiritual forces, especially in an

⁸ Mining African American literary sources like Jewell Parker Rhodes’s novel *Voodoo Dreams*, and *The Salt Eaters*, by Toni Cade Bambara, which deploys the cultural idiom of conjure to defy the Western estrangement of spirit and the erotic, Martin offers an enlightened articulation of black female sexuality that depicts its deep connection to the spiritual that not only contests the boundaries of racist patriarchy’s separation of the erotic and the divine, but posits the erotic as one of the divine’s primary manifestations (Martin, “Conjuring Moments,” 121).

⁹ Lisa Gail Collins, “The Art of Loving,” in *Women and Religion: Knowledge Power and Performance*, edited by R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 199.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹¹ Muddy Waters, “Got My Mojo Working,” written by Preston Red Foster, recorded 1956, Chess Records.

¹² *Ibid.*

effort to manipulate desire for power and control.

As the supernatural power of love, desire, passion, and coherence are manifested through physical bodies, it is common knowledge that the erotic is a force available to those without traditional forms of power, called upon as a means of self-preservation in a dangerous world. Using her sexuality as a form of seductive subversion, many a desperate woman has employed erotic conjure, that is, she has summoned the power of the erotic to cast a spell of desire over her oppressors as a means of securing her survival; or to use Smith's language, as a "curative transformation of [her] reality."¹³ As ancient as the sexual-gender oppression of women and girls, erotic conjure has been and continues to be used by women (and men) to disarm and gain favor by cultivating and manipulating desire to foment privilege in relationships marked by an imbalance of power. Though fear of legitimizing the jezebel stereotype assigned to black women hinders many scholars from this line of argumentation, it is indeed logical to assume that some, if not many, black women who found themselves in bondage employed their feminine wiles—their capacity for seduction—to negotiate better standing and treatment, particularly when the protection of their children hung in the balance.

I argue that erotic conjure represents one of the primary modes of influence through which provocateurs manifest greater freedom as moral agents and contribute to construction of meaning in the world. More than a performance, I argue, the provocateur's conjurational dynamism is a carefully crafted combination of the performer's ability to call forth the power of the erotic through the manipulation of the signifying body and the deployment of ritual behaviors and symbolic language in a way that moves her audience to participation. Our participation, I contend, is beckoned primarily by her erotic virtuosity. Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde avers the erotic registers not simply in the doing, but the depth of feeling in which

¹³ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 5.

a person acts.¹⁴ I assert that the depth of feeling provocateurs bring to the task of performance is a vital element of erotic conjure. Present in Beyoncé's and Missy's 2013 and 2015 Super Bowl performances, or the hush of the crowd when Jill Scott or Erykah Badu belt out a ballad live on stage, these women carry out a union of feeling and doing that captivates us, draws us in, and begs our participation to such a degree that we cannot help being seduced by its power.

The same affective force is described in James Weldon Johnson's account of his encounter with the preacher who inspired his poem "The Creation." Johnson describes himself as a reluctant participant, uninterested in involving himself in the "frenzy" associated with black church worship expressions. However, after witnessing the erotic virtuosity of the preacher, Johnson, too, is swept up in the affective undercurrent of the preacher's performance that compels him not just to join in but inspires his own creativities, as well, as he crafts the poetic rendition known as "The Creation." In *Conjuring Culture*, Smith uses Johnson's account to offer a theo-poetic analysis of the mimetic aspects of black cultural performances to radically transform Euro-American ideologies for the consumption and philosophical aims of black communities; however, his attention to Johnson's words regarding "the art by which the preacher was able to evoke through dramatic performance, the embodied presence of the God he preached" provides a relevant launching point for my theorization of erotic conjure as the praxis of erotic creativity, which I contend is a form of divine instrumentality.¹⁵

Johnson's discussion of the arts and powers of the preacher is emblematic of erotic conjure as the praxis of erotic creativity. Erotic creativity consists of the power of corporeal incantations to call forth, draw in, and transform reality. It represents the body's ability to generate erotic power and its transformational effect on psychic and material realities. Johnson

¹⁴ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 54.

¹⁵ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 23.

describes the performativity of the preacher, his body language, his use of voice, his rocking back and forth, and even his moaning as a catalyst for a “compelling force” that fascinates, deeply moves, and evokes an irresistible emotional effect.¹⁶ The preacher’s erotic creativity, that is, his creative bodily performativity, generates the erotic through the human body, which I argue acts as a transmitter—a collaboration between sense and spirit, à la the connection of the preacher’s body with the divine. Channeling the supernatural force harnessed by human corporeality in the sacred union between flesh and the divine, the preacher provides the material substance, and acts as a conduit for the delivery of divine energy into reality in the form of performances of the divine intelligible to human senses. In this way, the preacher’s, and I argue, any cultural performer’s erotic artistry, exhibits a supernatural command/possession of one’s body in which an artist’s performance mediates creative, curative, and transformative power which registers in the affective—the production of emotion and desire.

In the case of the Hip Hop and R&B Provocateur, I contend that the secular siren, as a cultural performer, engages in the same erotic creativity as the preacher. Exhibiting the same performative virtuosity described by Smith, which entails creative command of one’s bodily self and its irresistible affective impact, the ritual practices of the secular siren acts as a causal or incantational force that transforms atmospheres and even worldviews. It solicits an emotional reaction that has the potential to transform perspectives, and therefore call forth new realities for those who participate. In this case, the body’s haptic capacities transcend physical encounter. Though the body remains central, it functions in the phenomenological sense, as an object in the world generating new meanings by acting on the consciousness or imagination, rather than the bodies of the audience, as it would in physical haptic encounters. From a religious perspective, as the performances of black cultural performers haptically contribute to the construction of

¹⁶ Ibid.

meaning in the social imagination, their bodies achieve divine instrumentality, offering a dramatization of humanity's ability to create with God.

Calling on the life force of the ungoverned being of relational flesh—the erotic, the conjurational nature of secular song magnifies the body's role in generating the power of revival, release, and calling forth the vitality of life. I argue, provocateurs' erotic creativity operates as divine instrumentality as they generate creative and transformative power for the curative transformation of black women's status, relational dynamics, and identities in America. Deploying erotic conjure similarly to their ancestors, as a capacity of the flesh, a curative strategy and point of privilege, I posit provocateurs' imaging of self-possessed and authorized versions of black womanhood operate on the social imagination by reinstating the possibility of black women as complex ethical subjects. These images, I contend, work to alleviate the debilitating social erasure and containment produced by racial and sexual gender oppression by provoking the interrogation of accepted meanings, values, and procedures through erotic defiance—the love and celebration of their black and female bodies and sexualities, and the use of the creative power of the erotic to disrupt the societally imposed significations that stunt the fullness of black female subjectivity and ethical freedom.

Signaling the religious deployment of their sexualities, I aver that provocateurs use their sexualities similarly to the way witch doctors use their conjuring instruments to communicate, interpret, understand, and shape the physical and spiritual world.¹⁷ Like other religious symbols and phenomena, erotic conjurors' sexualities orient and help them come to terms with their ultimate significance and place in the world.¹⁸ Through her artful wielding of her sexuality, the

¹⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁸ Theologian Charles Long's definition contends, "The church is not the only context for the meaning of religion." For Long, religion signifies the processes by which an individual orients oneself and finds one's place in the world. Long, *Significations*, 7, via Chireau, *Black Magic*, 14.

provocateur invokes and directs divine feminine forces for assistance in negotiating her place in society and manipulating the symbols erected by racist, patriarchal hegemony for her own agenda.

Sexual Signification and the Conjuring of Freedom

The hypersexuality of provocateurs, I argue, operates as a principle practice of resistance, asserting their freedom and humanity, subverting the control various regimes of power imposed on black women's bodies and being, and allowing them to transcend their status as object, to the status of complex subject. For example, on Beyoncé's 2014 "Rocket," on her self-entitled album, *Beyoncé*, she sings, "Let me sit this ass on you, show you how it feels."¹⁹ Signaling her sexual authority, her sexually assertive words effectively disrupt an attempt on the part of the audience to consume her as a passive sexual object, and establish in the mind of the audience her active will. Often misconstrued, I argue that provocateurs' hypersexuality is their manipulation of sexual desire for the purposes of commanding attention and ingratiating themselves in the minds of their audiences. These manipulations assert their sexualities as their own, and their authority to determine who may have access to it, how it will be deployed, and to what ends.

Perceived as mere vulgarity by outsiders, expressions of sexual desire, expertise, and pleasure in black music like the blues function as metaphors for one's existential freedom and a signifier for black humanity, "covertly speaking back to the denial of black men's masculinity and humanity in white society."²⁰ Angela Y. Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* offers that the emancipatory power of the blues aesthetic was not only available to black men, but

¹⁹ Beyoncé, "Rocket," recorded 2013, Sony Music.

²⁰ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 16.

black women, too. Showcasing the blues as a platform for the expression of black women's sexual agency, she demonstrates how Blues Women's exhibition of desire and pleasure declared their humanity and emancipated them from expectations of the cult of domesticity. The crafting of sexually authoritative images in the vein of their blues antecedents enables provocateurs to transcend the status of sexual object, and to offer audiences insight into their complex subjectivity. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins argues, "In a context of male dominance, heterosexual men's access to women's bodies as sexual partners constitutes another important benchmark of hegemonic femininity."²¹ Despite the hypersexualized images produced by provocateurs, sexual access to these women, on screen and in reality, is not easily attainable.

Typical of African American defiance, in what cultural anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston explains as "featherbed resistance," provocateurs execute sexist tropes with a subversive intent. "[This] feather bed resistance," states Hurston, patronizes *white curiosity*,

that is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries. The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."²²

Similarly, provocateurs distract by beckoning audiences into a subaltern world of their own making with their sexuality. As mastered in the 2012 video "Monster," hip hop's prevailing provocateur, Nicki Minaj, in a teddy and lace thong, amplifies her sexual desirability and attracts those driven by the traditional conceptions of desirability as virtue. Putting on theatrical sexuality, as one would a costume, Minaj stages sexuality without allowing access to her

²¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 198.

²² Zora Neal Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1935; reprinted, New York: Collier, 1970), 1.

personhood. Giving a nod to the notion of dissemblance,²³ she denies access to her reality—subverting by her featherbed resistance those who wish to oppress and subjugate. The genius of the strategy is that much like whites attempting to engage blacks, those who engage Minaj, as a result of this ruse, believe themselves to have apprehended the fullness of her existence, when in actuality they have been imprisoned and subjugated by their own imaginations. Distracted, and in many ways consumed by Minaj’s erotic power, male dominance is inoculated, and she is given the space to freely determine how her sexuality will be deployed and when.

In more recent examples, Minaj’s self-celebratory quip, “Get you a straw nigga, you know this pussy is juicy,” represents the height of sexual defiance and transgression of the rules of respectability.²⁴ A salacious vernacular expression which refers to an increased amount of natural vaginal lubricant present when a woman is sexually aroused, “juicy pussy” connotes Minaj’s active sexual desire and her willingness and freedom to express it in terms coded as crude and therefore masculine. Though Minaj is the most overtly sexually transgressive provocateur, perhaps because she is the most direct descendant of hip hop, the prevalence of references to possession of a “juicy pussy” is notable. Rapper, singer, and producer Missy Elliott boasts her superiority over other women, singing “I’m betta” because her “pussy get wetter.”²⁵ Through this linguistic device aided by innovatively sensual choreography Missy pushes against normative notions of sex appeal and declares herself a sexually desirable and desiring subject. Taking pleasure in her ebony skin and larger frame, which she moves with confidence and command, Missy defies Western aesthetical values and uses sexually charged

²³ Darlene Clarke Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” *Signs* 14.4 (1989): 912–20. Investigating Black Clubwomen’s histories in Detroit, Michigan, Hine observes that the sexual vulnerability of black women greatly impacts cultural attitudes and strategies of public presentation, i.e., dress and comportment. In a struggle for their dignity and autonomy, black women deployed a culture of dissemblance, in which “black women as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives.”

²⁴ Migos, Nicki Minaj and Cardi B, “MotorSport,” recorded 2017, Quality Control, Motown and Capitol Records.

²⁵ Missy Elliott, “I’m Better,” recorded 2017, Goldmine and Atlantic Records.

lyrics and choreography to celebrate her black sexual body and her authority over it. Newcomer Cardi B solidifies expression of sexual pleasure as a foundational element of the female rapper. Employing the linguistic device, the emcee raps: “My pussy feel like a lake, He wanna swim with his face.”²⁶

Such raunchy sexual language is not limited to rap. Though more discreetly coded in language like waterfalls and liquor, reigning pop diva Beyoncé also employs what is considered vulgarity, recounting sexual scenarios between her and a lover as she sings/raps, “Yoncé all on his mouth like liquor,”²⁷ and “Rocket ’til water falls,”²⁸ in songs consumed and celebrated by black communities as well as the dominant culture. Similarly, crossover artist Rihanna croons, “U know I got the sauce. You know I’m saucy and I’m always wet a bitch never had to put lip gloss on it” on a song that spent thirteen weeks on the Billboard charts. Interestingly, “juicy pussy” as a colloquialism depicts these women as individuals who unapologetically enjoy sexual pleasure while simultaneously improving their status as desirable and knowledgeable sexual partners. Referred to as sexual entrepreneurship, the seemingly hyper-visibility of some provocateurs’ sexuality not only affords them a freedom often resigned to men, it bolsters their sexual capital in a system that privileges sexual desirability, generating more money and exposure, and therefore more power.²⁹

²⁶ Cardi B, “Bodak Yellow,” recorded 2017, Atlantic Records.

²⁷ Beyoncé, “Partition,” recorded 2013, Sony Music.

²⁸ Beyoncé, “Rocket,” recorded 2013, Sony Music.

²⁹ Much of the raunchy talk deployed by provocateurs is deployed as spectacle—theatrical sexuality used to draw attention. Off stage, provocateurs continue in the tradition of dissemblance, maintaining privacy about their sexualities and personal relationships. Beyoncé, who has maintained a monogamous relationship with rapper Jay Z for more than ten years, kept the world guessing about the status of their relationship well into the first year of their marriage. Nicki Minaj also draws a line of distinction between her celebrity persona and personal life. Most recently she was romantically linked to Rapper Nas. In a 2017 interview on the talk show *Ellen*, Minaj remained tight lipped about the extent of the couple’s sexual activity, claiming the two were friends who enjoyed sleepovers, but were refraining from sexual relations. Missy Elliott has also been private about her sexuality, which was the subject of much conjecture in the press. When questioned about rumors that she was same-gender loving, Missy offered no clarity, but used the opportunity to critique sexual gender politics, commenting on society’s confusion when they see an independent powerful woman. For more, see Theresa Renee White, “Missy ‘Misdemeanor’

Provocateurs' use of sexual expression and autonomy as an assertion of power and self-possession is rooted in black women's historical strategies of negotiating sexual-gender politics. Based on the proprietary nature of patriarchy, women's bodies, no matter their color, have historically belonged to or been controlled by men; first their fathers, then their husbands, and, in some cases, their lovers. However, black women experience dispossession of their bodies and bodily agency twice over. At one time diminished to the status of object, through chattel slavery, black women experienced a different kind of proprietary relationship with white men who owned them. While white women were robbed of their bodily authority through their implicit status as property, they were often pedestaled and protected as highly valued possessions through marriage and familial relations. Enslaved black women, on the other hand, as the property of white men, were robbed of the defining marks of their humanity, including their ability to freely relate socially, sexually and familiarly as human beings. Such constraints stunted their capacity as ethical agents in the social imagination and in everyday lived reality.

As womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd Thomas avers:

Black women . . . are never afforded the status of being a responsible self in the normative ethical gaze of H. Richard Niebuhr. Recall that Niebuhr presumes the responsible self to be a moral agent who has the power and autonomy to exercise freedom in relating to God and neighbor. Such agency is unavailable within the everyday reality of black women because she has neither the power, nor the social regard with which she can engage a man or God. Her experience of what it means to be human is thus denied.³⁰

After emancipation, the bodily markers of race and gender continued to confine black women to the status of devalued and dispossessed other. Their physical appearance, forced

Elliott and Nicki Minaj Fashionistin' Black Female Sexuality in Hip-Hop Culture—Girl Power or Overpowered?," *Journal of Black Studies* 44.6 (2013): 607–26.

³⁰ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, xii.

labor and sexual vulnerability made them unfit for inclusion in the cult of true womanhood.³¹

Branded aesthetically grotesque (ugly, displeasing) on account of their dark skin, sturdy physiques (no doubt genetically modified by the breeding practices of chattel slavery), and kinky hair, black women were considered too manly to be real women. In addition, scarce employment opportunities for black men compelled black women to seek work outside the home, behavior considered outside of the boundaries of the cult of true womanhood.

Employment was often domestic work inside the homes of white family's where, despite their unfeminine designation, black women experienced great vulnerability to unwanted sexual advances by the white men of the house. Darlene Clark Hine contends this treatment continued after emancipation and became a daily threat to the security of black women's bodies. Hine cites black women's need for escape from white employers, who used their physical and economic power to coerce black women into pleasuring them sexually, as one of the principal motivating factors behind the great migration.³² The story of Ruby McCollum, a black woman who murdered a prominent white doctor after he repeatedly raped her and forced her to bear his child, contextualizes black women's existential conundrum.³³ Convicted in 1952 and sentenced to death, Ruby McCollum provides a chilling example of the lack of options available to black women caught in the crosshairs of white men's desires.

Such dangers demanded that black women develop strategies to keep themselves safe.

³¹ The Cult of True Womanhood ideology classified true women as pure, domestic, pietistic, and submissive (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 79). Higginbotham expounds on these issues in her explication of the radical orthodoxy of black women. In her article "African-American Woman's History and the Language of the Metalanguage of Race," historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham underscores the difference in perception and treatment of black women's bodies in comparison to white women, especially in the realms of the division and conditions of labor, the sexual vulnerability of black women's bodies, and the organizations of class. Diving deeply into the distinctions between black and white women's status, she emphasizes that "womanhood did not rest on common female essence, shared or mere physical appearance"; in fact, America's historical statutory rubric did not include black women. For more, see Evelyn Higginbotham, "African-American Woman's History and the Language of the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17.2 (1992): 252-72.

³² Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women," 91.

³³ For more information on Ruby McCollum, see *You Belong to Me: Sex, Race and Murder in the South*, directed by John Cork (documentary, 2015).

Accordingly, middle- and upper-class black women, like those of the Black Clubwomen's Movement, cultivated a "dialect of black womanhood" to transform the image of black women in the public imagination that persists to this day. Heavily influenced by Eurocentric formulations of femininity, sacrality, morality, and civility, and guided by an ethic of sexual purity and sacrifice, these characteristics were religiously symbolic, perceived as a characteristic of holiness, congruent with black women's invention of themselves as holy vessels for God's use.³⁴ As such, black women seeking additional safety and status through respectability, presented themselves as modestly as possible, taking great care to mute any aspects of their sexuality that might inadvertently call attention to itself.³⁵

Despite its well-meaning intentions, the Black Clubwomen's socioreligiously inspired strategy facilitated black women's self-erasure, or at least the erasure of their bodies for the benefit of social progress, unwittingly exacting horizontal violence, reinforcing the white perception that black female sexuality has a corrosive impact on black women's morality and exacerbating the Western dichotomy between the sacred and the sexual on the very flesh of black women. Thus, black women had to choose between the expression of essential aspects of their identity and the benefits that came with being considered worthy of dignity and respect.

The celebration of black female sexuality displayed by the hyper-visibility of black secular songstresses' sexualities contested the validity of these ideologies, disputing the binaries associated with Christianity that made it imperative to relegate sexual pleasure to the realm of

³⁴ Kelly Brown Douglas describes "blasphemous body denying and body phobic sanctified narrative of civility." For more, see Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church*, 181–82.

³⁵ Historian Evelyn Higginbotham asserts that more than "mindless mimicry of white behavior," respectability has historically been used in a variety of ways. In the context of the black clubwoman and the politics of respectability, a term coined by Higginbotham, respectability is the feeling an individual has when others find worth and value in them and treat them as such, procured through self-respecting, professional representation strategies. For more on the politics of respectability, see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Woman's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 185–229.

sin.³⁶ While their celebration of dimensions of human existence that were considered evil and immoral to the tenants of Christianity caused black and white Christian communities to associate blues singers with the devil, within vernacular culture, Davis argues, blues women were highly esteemed, “precisely because they offer enlightenment on love and sexuality.”³⁷

Contemporary sexual politics continue to demand the expression of black women’s sexual autonomy as an assertion of power and self-possession. More than two hundred years after slavery, black women’s bodies continue to be objects upon which male power is demonstrated. Though they have reached record-breaking heights in education, buying power, and position, black women continue to be the primary outlet for the displaced lust for power, anger, and sexual aggression of black men who believe themselves entitled to the profit and pleasure of black women’s bodies. Womanist ethicist Marcia Riggs and pastoral care professor Chanequa Walker-Barnes argue that black women are the disenfranchised, sacrificial lambs and depositories of blame for the black church and the black community who continue to exploit their efforts for the benefit of the community, while requests for sustained and intentional advocacy from the same institutions fall on deaf ears.³⁸ Furthermore, black women continue to be the victims of assault, manipulation, and disdain by governmental and institutional powers, which parasitically benefit from their labor, intellectual capital, and the fruits of their wombs.³⁹ Hence, provocateurs’ sexual autonomy represents a method of necessary resistance against the control of various regimes of power’s attempts to impose upon black women’s bodies and

³⁶ Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 123.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁸ For more, see Marcia Riggs, *Plenty Good Room: Women versus Male Power in the Black Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), and Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*.

³⁹ For more information of the mistreatment of black women in the United States on an institutional and personal level, see Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*; Stephanie R. Bush-Baskette, *Misguided Justice: The War on Drugs and the Incarceration of Black Women* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2010); Shatema Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female and the Body Politic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Ebonong Hannah Branch, *Opportunity Denied: Limiting Black Women to Devalued Work* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

being.

Like blues women, provocateurs understand their bodies as a fundamental source of their power, as opposed to burdens, or obstacles to be negotiated. Consequently, they express the dynamism of black female sexuality and venerate it as a treasured resource that contributes to their survival in a world that seeks to dominate them. Through the sexual autonomy and pleasure portrayed in their performances, provocateurs assert their self-possession, a fundamental aspect of the constitution of what Western frameworks conceive as an ethical being, which emancipates them from confining identities imposed upon them by white cultural standards and offers a necessary articulation of freedom that allows them to be self-authorized subjects as well.

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that the moral agent is circumscribed by his ability to reason, judge, and *choose, free of coercion*.⁴⁰ It is the freedom of the will that determines moral choice in human agents. While reason guides the process of deliberation, it is freedom that enables ownership of an action by an agent. Consequently, at the crux of moral agency is the issue of corporeal freedom, which within an Aristotelian schema is agential power.⁴¹ While Western concepts of moral agency assume the freedom to act in the world, such freedom has eluded black American women as a result of chattel slavery and its influence on the social standing of black women in America until this day. Consequently, I argue, the quest for agential freedom for black women begins with a repossession of their bodies and their ability to self-authorize. Expanding the possibilities of their erotic subjectivity, I argue provocateurs' sexual authority draws their audiences into relationship with them as subjects of and with desire, and endows them with the capacity to impact and be related to as ethical subjects.

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bks. I, II, and III (chs. 1–5), VI and X, translated by W. D. Ross, in *Ethical Theories: A Book of Readings*, 2nd ed., edited by A. I. Melden (Englewood: Prentice Hall, 1967), bk. 3.1.3, 110.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, bk. 3.3, 114.

Through brazen participation in the erotic, women who had been historically dispossessed of their authority over their bodies and the relational elements of their personhoods, are given an outlet to express their desire, combating the stifling and erasure of black women's subjectivity, and in many ways reconnecting them to the seat of human will.

Despite the power available through sexually erotic conjure, historical investigations of the reflexive relationship between erotic power and conjure unearth classic images of the beguiling seductress, using her sexuality as a kind of sorcery in an effort to captivate her victim so that she might control him. Such images immediately hearken back to the racialized sexual stereotypes, which depict black women as sexually insatiable, promiscuous, and dangerous as a justification for white men's rape of black women.⁴² Consequently, argumentation that likens the erotic power of black women to conjuration can be misconstrued as the rehashing of an age-old form of violence against black women's flesh. Conjure, after all, is classified as a contested category of religion; thereby, the assertion that conjure is a black folk practice of defensiveness and a constructive tactic of self-preservation renders black people heathens—those who subscribe to unholy, evil, and demonic forces for the purposes of doing harm to those they seek to captivate.

Religious historian Yvonne Chireau's approach to conjure is instructive here. She argues that the distinctions between religion and magic are not as rigid as Western studies of religion and culture have depicted. Far from being antithetical to traditional conceptions of religion, Chireau maintains, "magic is the religion of the other."⁴³ Offering a clearer definition, she

⁴² The Jezebel is what Patricia Hill Collins calls a controlling image, an image constructed and deployed to legitimize pornographic social relations between the dominant culture and black women. The Jezebel is characterized as a whore, a sexually aggressive immoral woman, marking white society's attempts to categorize black women as deviant, which served to validate their desire to control black women's sexuality (i.e., their reproductive capacities and unlimited sexual access to their bodies). For more on the Jezebel, see Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 89–93.

⁴³ Chireau, *Black Magic*, 3.

writes, “Magic is a particular approach or attitude by which humans interact with unseen powers or spiritual forces.”⁴⁴ In this way, magic and religion “enclose identical experiences.”⁴⁵ African Americans’ affinity for the supernatural, Chireau argues, can include Christianity and conjure simultaneously, revealing the similitude of the categorizations of both.

Situating African conjurational spirituality in Christian terms, Smith emphasizes not only the validity of conjure as a spiritual methodology of agency, but the way it hides in plain sight in much of black Christian religio-praxis. Arguing that conjure is, in fact, a prominent organizing feature in all of black religious experiences, Smith contends the presence of African conjurational spirituality is not only present in various black diasporic religions such as the voodoo practiced in the Caribbean Islands, Candomblé practiced in Brazil, Santeria practiced in the Spanish-speaking Americas, but also in the black Christianity practiced in the United States.⁴⁶ Smith describes traditional black Christian practices of invoking divine power through ritually patterned behaviors like the performative use of language and symbols—what Western society perceives as heathen behavior—as an alternative expression of an identical desire for supernatural assistance. Moreover, he argues that behaviors like obedience and righteousness have “conjurational intent,” in that African American Christians use them to invoke divine help from a liberating God in the same way practitioners of conjure deploy incantations and the pharmacopeia of conjure.⁴⁷

Smith’s comparative investigation of Christianity and conjure underscores the discursive properties of magic and conjure as a special mode of signification. As Smith attests, magic is a way of managing the world in the form of signs. It is, in fact, a language system constructed to

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 3–6.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 22.

manipulate the world, or at least worldviews, or as Smith argues in *Conjuring Culture*, ritual speech and action intended to perform what it expresses through the crafting of signs that embody the inner power of the will.⁴⁸ The same kind of mapping accomplished by the magic of conjure, I argue, is operative through Western hegemony's construction of the discursive (signified) black body. Exercising the will of Western white subjects, pornographic fabricated caricatures, like the Jezebel stereotype, cobbled together by figments of the white imagination, exalt themselves above the divine design of the *imago Dei*, masquerading as the true identity of black flesh.

Intracommunal Incantations

Through their ability to conjure self-determined, self-possessed and self-authorized images of black womanhood, and their influence on their audiences, I contend provocateurs facilitate concrete social and cultural transformation that impacts real black female flesh. Smith's assertions regarding black North American "conjuration spirituality" provide guidance in understanding provocateurs' power to conjure new realities for black women. In addition to black Christian religio-praxis, Smith contends conjuration spirituality is operative, in the various cultural performances that make up black expressive culture.⁴⁹ He argues black cultural performances are intrinsically conjuration, mediating an African worldview within black American interpretation of its Western contexts and communicating and performing black Americans' intentions for sociohistorical transformation.⁵⁰

The erotic power of women has always been understood as a compelling force with supernatural characteristics, particularly in African-inspired black folk culture. As Martin and

⁴⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 6, 137.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4, 6, 14, 57.

Collins have conveyed, African American folk culture perceives the dynamism of female sexuality as supernatural power. Martin writes, “Historically, black women engaged in healing and spiritual wellness, were seen as a kind of generator of life force and [her] presence in the community as essential to the maintenance of the ‘quality of life that allowed’ black folk to reach and sustain their highest ontological being.”⁵¹ Similarly, the erotic, as has been demonstrated, has the power to nourish, revive, generate, and even possess. Considered a special *charm* “available to every woman,” women’s sexuality, like the mojo arm of conjure, has the power to control its mark through mimetic desire. While the mojo arm and its inclusion of elements of the earth that represented both romance and the object of their magic provided the *materia medica*⁵² effective in activating a spirit that made trifling lovers who mistreat their women behave, I contend that the enchanting erotic power of self-love, authority, creative virtuosity, and pleasure deployed by provocateurs has the power to summon an elevated, self-possessed and self-authorized image of black women.

I maintain that the provocateur’s conjuring of a more powerful image of black womanhood provides a contemporary example of Smith’s incantatory construction of the divine and communal identity. In his rehearsal of Jahnheinz Jahn’s study of African culture, Smith notes that Jahn spoke of “African and African American religions as traditions of ‘active worship’ which ‘create’ God, and which ‘install the divine being as such.’”⁵³ Smith emphasizes that Jahn’s language “coincides with the conventional meaning of the word ‘conjure’ as an act of the imagination: to conjure up a picture image or idea.”⁵⁴ Just as we can conjure an idea, Smith avers that humans have the capacity to conjure God. He also argues that in the act of

⁵¹ Kameelah Martin, *Envisioning Feminist Voodoo Aesthetics: African Spirituality in American Cinema* (Lanham: Lexington, 2016), xv.

⁵² Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 5, 31.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

conjuring God, humanity makes itself over.⁵⁵ Using the theory of Kenneth Burke, Smith contends,

To designate a deity is also to image or reimagine the self. Moreover, such reciprocity allows for an extension of the incantatory dynamics beyond the primal context of worship. In its original context of ritual worship, imaging or designating of the deity may be said to occur integrally within the primal experience of religious fascination. . . . But under the exigencies of historical experience the designation of the deity may acquire some intention other than ritual worship.⁵⁶

Smith posits that God is conjured in the African American tradition, and not just for the sake of worship, but for liberative purposes. In conjuring a God that frees them, black Americans become a liberated community.⁵⁷ In so doing, black people make themselves over in the image of the god they imagined.

The African American practice of conjuring a God for freedom remains alive in the provocateurs' reciprocal imaging of self-possessed, autonomous, black womanhood and the mimetic participation of black women in their performances. In the case of the provocateur, the remaking of self is not through the conjuring of a God, but the provocateur's summoning of erotic power for the calling forth of an alternative elevated image of a black woman with the power to engage the world in her own terms. I contend that the incantatory conjure of the provocateur uses her body's ritual behaviors to generate a portal of transcendence in which particular bodily performances or behaviors, e.g., the expression of self-love, bodily command, or creative virtuosity, mimic the characteristics of a free ethical agent, and thus transform the status and identity of black women.

Mimesis also plays a part in the provocateur's impact on the cultural consciousness of black women. Through the performance of a self-possessed authoritative identity, provocateurs

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 59.

become that identity for themselves and in the realm of the social imagination. Indicative of this is Beyoncé Knowles Carter's transformation into her alter ego, Sasha Fierce. An article posted to Oprah.com maintains:

The woman sitting next to Oprah is Beyoncé—but the force you see strutting her stuff in the music videos is actually her alter ego, Sasha Fierce. “She doesn’t do interviews,” Beyoncé says. “She only performs.” Beyoncé says she crafted her stage persona to help her overcome challenges and give the best performances she can. “It’s kind of like doing a movie. When you put on the wig and put on the clothes, you walk different,” she says. “It’s no different from anyone else. I feel like we all kind of have that thing that takes over.” Sasha Fierce usually appears right before Beyoncé is about to take the stage. “Usually when I hear the chords, when I put on my stilettos. Like the moment right before when you're nervous,” she says. “Then Sasha Fierce appears, and my posture and the way I speak and everything is different.”⁵⁸

Just two years later, however, Beyoncé confessed in an interview with *Allure* magazine that she was done with Sasha Fierce. “I don’t need Sasha Fierce anymore, because I’ve grown and now I’m able to merge the two,” she explained. Ashkana Kumari, scholar of rhetoric and popular culture argues, “Sasha Fierce allowed Beyoncé to visibly and internally grow as both a person and performer. While she uses the name ‘Sasha Fierce’ to reinvent herself, she let go of this separate entity once her new subjectivity had been actualized.”⁵⁹ Kumari alludes to the ability of performers to integrate their stage personas into their subjectivities. This integration, I contend, is a product of the conjurational capacities of the performance of the body in general and the provocateur specifically.

The erotic defiance of provocateurs’ erotic conjure marks a different way of enacting the world. Their music, lyrics, and dance performances project ritual significance or religious meaning in the world that orients those who watch them to the status and worth of black

⁵⁸ “Beyoncé Is Sasha Fierce,” Oprah.com, November 13, 2008.

⁵⁹ Askana Kumari, “‘Yoü and I’: Identity and the Performance of the Self in Lady Gaga and Beyoncé,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 49.2 (2016): 403–16.

women.⁶⁰ In the ritual sense, the act of generating the image of the powerful black woman causes it to become a part of real black women's identities, as well, in that the religious fascination with celebrity and, more importantly, the erotic power black women conjure with these images accomplishes a ritual practice of freedom as black women emulate the self-possession and autonomy provocateurs model by singing their lyrics, imitating their dances, and adopting their sexual gender politics in their everyday lives to emancipate themselves from the status of nonbeing they hold in Western society. Commenting on the role of hip hop in shaping the worldviews of black youth, Africana studies scholar Imani Perry describes hip-hop as "a space of transgression, where new identities and radicalized black subjectivities emerge."⁶¹ Consequently black people, especially black girls, flock to the hip-hop cipher for its liberative possibilities and consider its practices and aesthetics empowering. Patricia Hill Collins expounds upon the influence of black popular culture, offering,

In modern America where community institutions of all sorts have eroded, popular culture has increased in importance as a source of information and ideas. African-American youth in particular, can no longer depend on a deeply textured web of families, churches, fraternal organizations . . . and other community organizations to help them negotiate the challenges of social inequality. Mass media fills this void, especially movies, television and music that market Black popular culture aimed at African American Consumers.⁶²

Provocateurs' incantatory strategy of conjuring a more powerful identity differs little from the strategy of the Black Clubwomen, who offered a particular performance of black womanhood to contest discursive constructions of black women. Both can be described as a tactic of erotic defiance, in that both deploy self-esteem and self-definition to posture themselves as

⁶⁰ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 57–58.

⁶¹ Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 122.

⁶² Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 121–22.

authoritative in their relations with a more politically powerful other.⁶³ However, while clubwomen's defiant assertion of their value leveraged American Christian sexual social mores to assert worth through moral superiority, provocateurs contest the validity of these ideologies through the performative manipulation of their sexualities as a means of asserting bodily control and freedom and autonomy.

The differences in these strategies signal a shift from the clubwoman's enlisting of the politics of respectability and the provocateurs' use of what I call the politics of authority. Both maintain the self-definition and resistance historian Evelyn Higginbotham intends to convey in the historical term; however, provocateurs' less assimilationist leanings hinder them from adopting criteria of character constructed by white Christian American's erotophobia.⁶⁴ Rather than conceal their sexuality, they model a love of pleasure and cast themselves as subjects of desire, reconstituting desirability as a form of power, rather than vulnerability. Moreover, uninterested in the perspectives and value designations of white society, this twenty-first-century-embodied radical subjectivity has shed its psychic handicap of double consciousness and conjured a world in the subaltern where they define the parameters in which they will engage.

Where Is the Love? Sexual Conjure to What End?

In addition to its impact on the identity consciousness of black women, the erotic conjure of provocateurs offers a homeopathic remedy to the erasure and confinement of black women's identities in the social imagination. Governed by the phenomena in which like affects like,

⁶³ Kimberly Foster, "Wrestling with Respectability in the Age of #BlackLivesMatter," *For Harriett*, October 13, 2015, <http://www.forharriet.com/2015/10/wrestling-with-respectability-in-age-of.html#axzz4f0ufsrWp>.

⁶⁴ Erotophobia is a term used to convey a fear of physical pleasure, especially sexual pleasure. It is a natural response in an anti-erotic culture that isolates the erotic and God from each other. For more on erotophobia, see Ince, *Politics of Lust*, 7.

Smith explains that homeopathic magic relies on relationships of similarity which are used to embody or direct the magic of conjure “for good or ill in order to benefit or harm.”⁶⁵ Smith writes, “By definition, homeopathic practices consist in using a substance or process to affect a like substance or process . . . the practitioner typically uses a skillfully prepared or modified dosage of a disease in order to cure the disease.”⁶⁶ In the context of the provocateur, the disease of concern is the imposition of hegemony’s truncated identities upon black women. In keeping with Smith’s logic, I argue the remedy demands a modified dose of the same.

To be sure, provocateurs trade in stereotypical sexist notions of sexually assertive women. In fact, provocateurs’ power is generated through the taboo. Their brazen participation in the erotic, their radical sexual subjectivity, their unapologetic ownership of their pleasure, their sexual assertiveness and mastery, and their disclosure to their interiority operate as spiritual power and a point of privilege, subversively transforming the significance of the discursive black female body in the dominant culture.⁶⁷ Rather than fight against the inevitability of the commodification of culture and identity, I contend, provocateurs exploit its marketing to, and consumption by, the dominant culture. Despite the selfish gains of white corporations from their craft, for provocateurs, the market provides a vehicle into the hearts and minds and wallets of millions who devour black culture as a right.⁶⁸ Thus, I aver that the work of the provocateur is subversive seduction. Rather than deconstruct or consider the impact of the structures of the social imagination that make stereotypes possible, I argue that provocateurs pragmatically operate as tricksters within them. Audre Lorde writes, “In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers. This

⁶⁵ Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 27–28, 169.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁶⁷ Martin, “Conjuring Moments,” 108.

⁶⁸ Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 3, 6.

‘watching’ generates a dual consciousness in African-American women, one in which Black women become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection.”⁶⁹

I argue, these strategies can offer opportunities for the resignification of symbols and their dissemination in the cultural consciousness of both black and white people in the United States and beyond. In this way, provocateurs adoption of the tactics of their oppressors emulates the homeopathic magic of conjure, curing the prescribed limitations of black female identity, by feigning the identity expected and flipping the script.

I argue that provocateurs operation in the world takes on the task of what Hortense Spillers describes as “gaining the insurgent ground for black women as a female social subject.”⁷⁰ In the last passage of “Mamas Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” she writes of “problematizing of gender” and the ways in which black women are not included in the “traditional symbolics of female gender.” Spillers avers that more important to the well-being of black women than becoming a part of the cult of true womanhood is a radical subjectivity, which gives her the power to name and narrate the world as she sees it.⁷¹ In a world where black and female-bodied people are possessions or objects of patriarchy, provocateurs’ performances of erotic conjure function as a sexualized sapphire,⁷² marking her attempts at empowerment. They take into consideration the distinct circumstances of the black women’s situation in the world, specifically the sexual politics that surround her body, and the many ways she has attempted to liberate herself from the cage of social significations.

⁶⁹ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 114.

⁷⁰ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 80.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² The sapphire is racialized stereotype. It represents black women as sass-mouthed troublemakers and contributes to the belief that they are unfeminine, sexually perverse, and uncivilized nuisances who need to be controlled. For more on the sapphire, see Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 88.

The erotic conjure of provocateurs, therefore, produces counterhegemony—deliberate artificial inventions used to negotiate a meaningful existence in contemporary society.⁷³ My use of counterhegemony is inspired by Townes’s use of a term coined by Antonio Gramsci through which she articulates her concept of countermemory. Townes argues that countermemory exists as microhistories, or narratives created and recreated by dispossessed communities in response to deleterious political and social circumstances that stifle them.⁷⁴ She writes:

Microhistories are the ignored or forgotten or discounted histories of real people experiencing the ebb and flow of their societies and their cultures. They are microhistories only because the larger society selects certain markers of the past and invests them with symbolic, political and theological significance while ignoring others. Put more bluntly, the histories of dominant cultures and societies have most often bolstered ruling ideologies, philosophies, or states that run roughshod over competing ideologies that do not carry commensurate abilities to exert coercion and/or force.⁷⁵

Townes’s words account for the ways in which the social frameworks and relational dynamics of history empower or disempower human agency and silence the moral philosophies of the oppressed and their potential impact on the social imagination to our will through force.⁷⁶

However, the erotic conjure of provocateurs represents the mobilizing of the erotic as a spiritual force of seductive coercion, or the aggressive inclusion of the humanity and complex subjectivity of black women in the social imagination. In this way, an investigation of erotic conjure becomes the tactic that allows the perspectives and moral frameworks of the excluded to be, as Townes writes, “included into the discourse—not as additive or appendage, but as a resource and codetermined of actions and strategies.”⁷⁷

However, as Townes points out, the power of influence, manifested through force or

⁷³ Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 14.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

persuasion, facilitates the interpretation and perception of the world in a particular way, typically that favoring the maintenance of power by a particular dominating group.⁷⁸ She writes, “We often operate out of structurally determined limits that do, at points, offer some creativity and autonomy—but these are controlled and managed by hegemonic forces.”⁷⁹ I posit that provocateurs are emblematic of the ways the fantastic hegemonic imagination gives birth to our identities and our tactics for survival and confrontation of the various regimes of power that seek to suppress the flesh. Shaping the provocateur by structuring the caricatures that she seeks liberation from, the hegemonic imagination provides the method she mimics through the casting of new phantasms to counter those that have taken up residence in the social imagination.

Challenging the fantastic hegemonic imagination as a monolith by operating within it, the erotic conjure of provocateurs represents their construction of a homeopathic counterhegemony—their attempt to interrupt hegemony with their own voices, “to tell the story a different way,” and as a result, make possible the therapeutic transformation of their realities.⁸⁰ Townes contends that images, or what I am calling phantasms, are produced by the interplay of imagination and history acting as truth.⁸¹ These images, “acting as conductors or seeresses,” function as guides for understanding the anatomy of evil, and therefore, strategies for dismantling it.⁸² The phantasms of provocateurs, on the other hand, are the interplay of imagination and art conjuring a new reality as truth. As such, these homeopathic images of counterhegemony open up the space for the interrogation of accepted structures of domination—the very work of erotic defiance, through the coercive force of the sexually

⁷⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 18–19.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 7; Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 5.

⁸¹ Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 12–14.

⁸² Ibid., 12–13.

erotic.⁸³

Provocateurs accomplish a coercion of their own. Facilitated by the ubiquity of these images in popular culture, I aver that provocateurs simulate haptic encounters between black women and the imaginations of communities that have little exposure to black people. Mark Anthony Neal's analysis of the contemporary appropriation of black iconography in his book *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* provides a helpful analytical lens in understanding this phenomenon. Neale argues, "Mass culture fills the void of both communication and history . . . while producing a generation of consumers for which iconography of blackness is consumed in lieu of personal relations, real experience and historical knowledge."⁸⁴ This is important, because without real flesh-and-blood interaction, these phantasms constructed for and distributed through mainstream media function as surrogates for true encounters with real women. These simulated interactions and the exploitative motive that inspire many secular songstresses call attention to the fact that all sexual conjure does not line up with the erotic ethic operative in erotic defiance.

What remains to be reconciled is the manner in which the erotic conjure of the provocateur, which is admittedly the manipulation of desire for their own gain, can be categorized as a manifestation of the erotic, when the definition employed by this project maintains that erotic action manifest love, install agency, call participants to responsibility and facilitate mutuality.

I locate love in the Provocateur's performance of self-love through celebrations of black women's creativity, beauty and pleasure. I argue that the love of oneself, particularly the embodied aspects of one's being, and those things related to them, is a manifestation of the

⁸³ Ibid., 21.

⁸⁴ Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 21.

erotic. It is loving, fleshy, affirming relationality with oneself. It is Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj asserting, “I’m feeling myself,” Missy Elliot exclaiming, “I’m betta I’m betta I’m betta,” Erykah Badu declaring, “I’m cleva.” However, this self-veneration is more than simply lyrical. Provocateurs offer sexual expressions of their love of self, as well. They move their bodies in ritual celebration of the fullness of their being, including their sexualities. These include revealing clothing, sexually suggestive contortions and gyrating, and a command of their bodies that captures the attention of the masses similarly to the affectively irresistible performance of the preacher in James Weldon Johnson’s “God’s Trombones.” This self-love, I argue, has spiritual/magical power, calling into being / modeling an esteem for black women’s bodies that is infectious, thereby elevating the image of black women and transforming the relational dynamics between them and their audiences. Consequently, provocateurs’ self-love is redemptive.

Through acts of self-love, provocateurs engage in what Emilie Townes calls “radical spirituality within structured dominion and control.”⁸⁵ This self-love, I maintain, fuels black women’s moral agency. As womanist ethicist Katie Cannon maintains, the necessity of black women to defy white supremacist categorizations of blackness as evil functions as the epicenter of black women’s virtue ethics.⁸⁶ Through the transformative commitment to loving themselves unconditionally, which I argue is often made possible through erotic experiences, provocateurs’ celebration of themselves through erotic conjure give them and the black women they inspire the perseverance, as Cannon avers, “to maintain a fierce love for themselves and a tenacity about life that no person or institution can overwhelm.”⁸⁷ In *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness*, Emilie Townes echo’s these sentiments, correlating the ability to

⁸⁵ Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 55.

⁸⁶ Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 142–44.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

see oneself as worthy of love to the nature of being and survival. I contend that an erotic spirituality that aids black women in seeing themselves as people worthy of love and coming to the realization that they are loved mobilizes them to share that love with their communities and the world through their own moral agency. Consequently, I assert that provocateurs celebration of their bodies and sexualities is erotic defiance and operates as a self-preserving strategy of perseverance in the world.

I maintain that as provocateurs engage in their brand of erotic self-love they conjure alternative images of black womanhood that deviate from acceptable images of black womanhood, reconstructing the social imagination and reinstating black female personhood. As a result, their humanity is revived, as they are restored from being simply a means to quench desire, to being humans who have desires themselves. Rapper Cardi B's meteoric rise to stardom and the support she receives from black communities and the mainstream media serves as an example. Starting out as a stripper who made a name for herself on social media through performances of disrespectability, Cardi B has become "the people's champion," touting five songs on the Billboard top 100 in January 2018 and two Grammy nominations. In a culture where just ten years ago she would have most likely been dismissed as just another stripper, consumers of hip hop, both male and female, radio stations, and mainstream outlets like the Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon have demonstrated their willingness not only to laud the accomplishments of Cardi B, but to advocate for her success, as well.⁸⁸ I posit Cardi B's success as an example of black women's (Cardi is Afro Latina) emergence—though baby steps—from the corners of abstraction of the fantastic hegemonic imagination, as the public not only seeks to consume her as object but promote her flourishing in the material world, as well. While such

⁸⁸ Cardi B's "Bodak Yellow" rose to number 1 on the Billboard charts due, in part, to a social media and radio campaign to increase her streams. For more, see Cardi B's September 15 interview with the *Breakfast Club* on Power 105.1 in New York, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJ4yhjTkuNE>.

advancements do not fulfill romantic or even emotional conceptions of love typically trotted out in the service of Christian ideologies, they do gain traction in restoring black women's humanity from the distortion of the images of black women in our collective cultural imagination. To be sure, sexual stereotypes of black women will persist. However, the conjure of provocateurs ensures that such caricatures will always be met with resistance in the various technological mediums that these women dominate, and through encounters with black women who model the self-possession and complex subjecthood that provocateurs portray. These steps, though often misunderstood and strategically questionable and even exploitative, can be considered a curative transformation and labor of love in the service of finding our way back to erotic relationality for those empowered by race and those who are defiled by it.

Conclusion

This project began with the moral dilemma of black women's bodies. Stigmatized as dangerous, grotesque, hypersexual and animalistic, black women's bodies are used as fodder for racist and sexist overdeterminations of black female identity. These mischaracterizations desecrate black female flesh through physical and sexual exploitation sanctioned by Christian theology in collusion with white supremacist powers and exclude black women from being esteemed as moral subjects worthy of sympathy and care. However, as black cultural practices and everyday ethics demonstrate—from the revelry of juke joints, Sunday morning shouting, physical acts of care and affection, and even instances of sexual passion, like the one depicted by Halle Berry's character Leticia begging Billy Bob Thornton's character Hank in the 2001 movie *Monster's Ball* to “make her feel good”¹—the erotic, the experience of life affirming bodily pleasure, is an effective resource used by oppressed communities to resuscitate the will when the confining powers of racism and sexism seek to stifle it.

This dissertation has offered feminist, womanist and black theology, ethics and theory, as well as profiles of erotically defiant bodies in motion, to attest to the erotic's power to regenerate. Linking erotic phenomena to the capacity of flesh to manifest love for oneself, God or others, I have expanded on Audre Lorde's assertion of the erotic as the energy for change, arguing that the erotic is a key capacity of black flesh in the disruption of hegemony and the construction of alternative realities, free of the desecrating powers of racism and sexism. As Lorde theorizes, the erotic connects, enlivens, and inspires women who have “numbed up and dumbled down” to keep their sanity in a world that coerces them into disembodied and

¹ *Monster's Ball* (Lion's Gate, 2001).

disimpassioned existences in the maintenance of male power.² Recognizing the disfiguring similarities of racism and sexism, their correlation of raced and sexed bodies with sexual danger, and their mutual strategies of dispossession and disempowerment, I have posited erotic defiance as an appropriate means of disrupting Western hegemony's assault on the bodies of black women and an effective way of declaring their moral and political agency.

One of the primary questions I sought to investigate in this project was the relationship between discourse and the body. I have consistently wrestled with the effectiveness of discursive strategies to truly transform our praxis and the status of subordinated and excluded groups in our society. While I agree that discourse is an effective method for challenging hegemonic powers, this project represents my assertion that the manner in which we use our bodies is all the more effective. I make this argument amid contemporary campaigns that assert black lives matter and black girls rock and historical campaigns that assert black is beautiful, while black people are gunned down in the street by the authorities, black girls have their heads beaten in day after day by men claiming to love them and people with power use the strategy of distancing themselves from black identity as a survival mechanism. Seemingly, efforts to change the discourse are choked by the barrage of messages we perceive through our culture's actions/practices to the contrary, which inevitably triumph.

I approached this project privileging the activity of bodies as a discourse and presenting the erotic as a catalyst for transcendence, a movement from one mode of thinking and being to another. Demonstrated through the power of erotic haptic encounters, erotic solidarity and erotic conjure, this dissertation articulates the erotic power of black women's bodies as a divine resource for black—with special emphasis on black women's—moral and political agency.

² Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 53–59.

Grounding this assertion in a womanist/feminist rereading of the erotic I contend the erotic is a modality of the haptic that creates alternative realities by offering subjects new experiences that contest normative hegemonic claims as valid. My turn to experience has aimed to keep the body central. The experience of one's body in the world and of other bodies and their impact, I have argued, constitutes the haptic. I have described the haptic as the mode of physical sociality that allows bodies to transform and be transformed by the world. It accounts for the power of material bodies to shape and inform the world and their sensory role in experience, which shapes and informs the identity of the subject. I have argued that the exercising of erotic modalities of the haptic (i.e., loving touch, celebratory, affirming cultural expression and collaboration with the spirit of God) showcase its ability to resuscitate the will and declare the sovereignty of God's order and God's intention of freedom. The free will of humanity, I maintain, is disclosed in our participation in the haptic. It is the human capacity to produce goodness or evil in the world, through the power of the flesh. Thus the erotic, I argue, generates goodness in the world by drawing back together dismembered counterparts like the subject and the body, humanity and the divine, and human beings separated by difference and allowing the manifestation of the love of God to orient the construction of knowledge and meaning in the world.

The haptic also underscores the importance of the experience of the body in the work of transformation and the role of erotic encounter in facilitating experiences that move humanity toward empowered, loving relations of mutuality. It is my way of locating instances of encounter, penetration, mutuality, the beginnings of solidarity and therefore the first step toward union. Chapter 1, "The Significance of Black Bodies, the Power of Black Flesh," laid the foundation for such work, employing philosopher Michel Foucault's theories of discursive

power, Hortense Spillers' haptic account of the disintegration of black subjectivity and phenomenologists Howard Harrod's and Robert Sokolowski's phenomenology of the body to outline the ways power operates both discursively and relationally to constrain and diminish black flesh. Drawing on Spillers', Copeland's, and Mark Wallace's use of the term "haptic," the project diverged from traditional aesthetic approaches to black bodies and asked instead how the sociality of material bodies impacts their identity and function, as well as other bodies and beings in the world. The haptic thus operates as an ethically neutral category of relationality, which afforded me the space to account for the erotic as a moral modality of the haptic and the pornographic, which the Western world often conflates with erotic activity, as the opposite end of the spectrum, and an immoral (read: exploitative) mode of relationality.

My investigation of black women's erotic haptic practices in chapter 2, "Erotic Care of the Soul," disclosed the importance of alternative bodily experiences facilitated by the erotic by grappling with the experience of pleasure as an epistemology in the service of identity and moral formation. Expanding the theory of Audre Lorde, I have asserted that erotic experiences produce self-knowledge through pleasure, which I argue have evangelistic and transformative affects. Underscoring the erotic experience of pleasure as a bodily event, I have argued that erotic care declares the body loved, valuable and worthy of divine presence and collaboration. Such realizations, facilitated by black women's roles as receivers and givers of erotic care, I argue, accomplish an epistemological shift in black women's approaches to identity and moral agency. I maintain alternative experiences of black women's bodies furnished by erotic relationality destabilize the faulty logic of racist patriarchy and reconsecrate them through conscientization, reconciling them to their divine power, animating self-love and reuniting black women with their motive will. Moreover, I have argued that as black women shape the

experiences of others through their haptic relationality, the importance of gearing those interactions toward the erotic become vital to the material liberation of black women and black people in the here and now.

In addition to offering a new experiential narrative of the flesh, I argue the erotic reinvigorates the will, spurring the once dispossessed to moral responsibility through personal and communal accountability. I contend that the erotic moves black subjects from nihilism to moral and political engagement. It (re)sensitizes and reinvigorates black life with passion, waking us from a strategy of numbness for the sake of survival, to a place of proactivity that challenges injustice and oppression. Ethicist Keri Day's most recent work, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, makes a similar move, espousing the benefits of the erotic in society's recovery from political postures that disconnect us from our humanity and our relationship with others. While Day's work aims more broadly at the neoliberal rationale, operative in our political economy among all people, my work focuses on those oppressed by racist and sexist configurations of power. Of note is the erotic's universal efficacy over all forms of power that foment passionless, disconnected postures in the world as a means of survival and economic flourishing. However, this dissertation focuses on the ways the suppression and mischaracterization of the erotic has functioned as a political strategy used to deprecate, disempower and isolate women and black people as a means of large-scale community control.

I have argued that the debunking of the demonization of the erotic and its embrace as a resource for agency stunts the power oppressive designations of the erotic have over our personal and political freedoms. It gives us access to the resource inside of us, which gives way to corporeal and relational power and agency, especially among those who are oppressed. As such, erotic defiance at its heart is a moral *and* political strategy for black liberation. I maintain

erotic defiance usurps control from empire's coercive regimes of power, defying and contesting the ideologies of hegemony through the willful rebuke of Western values, including the unapologetic embrace of bodies, sex and pleasure as an assertion of freedom, autonomy and self possession.

Defiance is a womanist virtue. The necessity of black women to defy white supremacist categorizations of blackness as evil is the epicenter of womanist ethicist Katie Cannon's construction of black women's virtue ethics. She draws on the tradition of enslaved blacks to reject any attempt to reconcile acts of human desecration, like slavery, with the gospel. "Slave religion," she argues, "was dominated by a tradition of defiance which emphasized the communal struggle for survival." Cannon explains that these systems aim toward the quality of moral good that allows black people to maintain a fierce love for themselves and a tenacity about life that no person or institution can overwhelm.³ Cannon maintains that the "quality of moral good," or perseverance, is made possible through a posture of celebration.

I maintain that erotic defiance invalidates the superiority of Western aesthetics through willful disregard, revering that which is coded as inferior, dangerous and deprived in Western grammar as a way of asserting the beauty and goodness of black womanhood and asserting their authority over their bodies and being. Accordingly, I have posited erotic defiance as a form of self-love, a deep engagement in and celebration of the subordinated and demonized experiences, perspectives and cultural meanings of blackness and black womanhood. As such, I posit erotic defiance as a practice of resistance to the dehumanizing, objectifying exploitation and confinement of black existence. I have argued that the erotic inspires us to resist and can be used as a device of resistance in light of its significance in Western Christian culture. In this way, the erotic and black self-love represent similar technologies of the embodied self that rely

³ Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 44.

on self-definition and self-formation. Erotic and self-loving postures prove beneficial for black moral agency, in that they transgress normative expectations of docility by asserting authority and ownership over one's own body and mobilizing the marginalized to action.

This dissertation describes the erotic not just as life-affirming physical encounter, but animation of one's own body in love and pleasure of one's own being. For black people, especially black women, engaging in pleasure and taking pleasure in oneself is the essence of defiance, because it represents black women's deployment of their own bodies—bodies that were supposed to be doubly dispossessed for the purposes of white people and men—in the pursuit of their own good, celebrating the goodness of their bodies and authority over their own being.

Vital to the cultivation of formidable black moral agency are the virtues of self-love, defiance and audacious responsibility. In the tradition of womanist ethics, self-love and defiance are dialectical in nature, in that self-love is a form of defiance within a system that demonizes and diminishes black identity, while the will to defy requires, and is typically inspired by, self-love. Chapter 3's exploration of the erotic as conjure gets at this. While according to the criteria set forth by the womanist ethic of the erotic this project constructs, Hip Hop and R&B Provocateurs' deployment of the sexual theatricality teeters dangerously on the side of exploitation, their use of the mechanisms of conjure as a means of spiritual agency to protect themselves and negotiate tripartite oppression through self-celebration signals a form of self-love.

Erotic defiance, I argue is self-love in action, made possible by the conscientiacizing experience of the erotic. Womanist ethicist Floyd-Thomas describes conscientization as “a salient experience” in which the oppressed realize their embodiment is incapable of meeting the

standard of normative ethics.⁴ According to Floyd-Thomas, the dissonance between black being and normative standards spurs black women to reconcile the dissonance of their existence with an aim of ultimately achieving self-love. In this journey of discovery, self-love then becomes the energizing force that impels black women to publicly denounce social injustice on behalf of an entire alienated community.⁵

The erotic's role in inspiring black women to self-love and resistance renders it a political resource, as well. Bell hooks states,

Collectively, black people and our allies in struggle are empowered when we practice self-love as a revolutionary intervention that undermines the practices of domination. Loving blackness as political resistance transfers our ways of looking and being, and creates the conditions for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life.⁶

All assertions of black humanity and dignity are inherently protest. All black moral agency begins with the fight to maintain one's dignity in a society that profits from their disgrace. In this way, black moral agency is always political. Consequently, this dissertation posits various profiles of erotic defiance as examples of moral and political agency. Through haptic practices, organizing principles of particular political rationales are enacted. Consequently, the erotic as a mode of the haptic represents the power to contest pornographic modes of being instilled by racism, sexism, homophobia, and the like.

While erotic care of the soul and erotic conjure are less combative, in that they use less confrontational measures to confront oppressive regimes of power head on, they are no less political. Both assert black women's somebodiness, their values of self-possession and autonomy as free subjects, exemplifying the erotic as political power/resource that confronts and resists the deleterious pornographic modes of resistance fomented by greed and a lust for

⁴ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 84.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 20.

power. Erotic solidarity turns to more explicitly political activities, meaning intentional attempts at communal power through acute clashes and conflict with governing powers, employed by black women, the black community and their allies in the assertion of freedom, pursuit of justice and the fullness and richness that constitutes wholeness.

The profile of erotic solidarity turns to the traditionally political aspects of the erotic, expanding erotic discourse beyond pleasure. While pleasure, as I have argued, functions as an epistemology and is an important feature in identity formation and the impulse for resistance, I am fearful that sexual gratification has overdetermined our understanding of the power of the erotic. This for me suggests that the mischaracterization of the erotic has taken root in us to such a degree that we have forgotten how to seek fullness and fulfillment in other kinds of human relationality. I have argued that the siloing of gratification and satisfaction is a dangerous tendency that causes many to go searching to fulfill yearnings for justice, connection and wholeness in solely sexual ways. This, I aver, is a distraction from the many modes of abundant living for which humans were created. Moreover, this siloing can hinder our participation in communal responsibility and accountability and the work of creativity in the world, which includes the construction of systems of mutuality and wholeness.

Accordingly, this project contributes to theological discourse on sexual ethics. Many people, especially young people—both church and un-church—allow their theologies and ethics of their bodies, particularly their sexual ethics, to be shaped by popular culture. Chapter 3's engagement of Hip Hop and R& B Provocateurs attempts to offer a sympathetic reading of the often misunderstood strategies of black female celebrities attempting to assert their autonomy as they navigate the treacherous waters of social scrutiny. Audre Lorde captures the ethos of these strategies when she writes, "In order to survive, those of us for whose oppression

is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers. This ‘watching’ generates a dual consciousness in African American women, one in which black women become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection.”⁷

I have argued that provocateurs, harnessing the erotic as conjure in trickster fashion, navigate the world through manipulation. However, I am not convinced such strategies accomplish human flourishing in ways that extend beyond individual success. In fact, the prevalence of exploitative sexuality, which emulates the power of domination in expressions of black female sexuality in black popular culture, suggests these strategies have negative effects on the community, as it teaches us to engage in relationally pornographic rather than life-giving modes of being. Exploitative/combatative sexuality is not the intent of erotic defiance. In fact, they could not be any more distinct. Erotic defiance operates in love moving toward mutuality for the sake of reconciliation with oneself and other human beings. Exploitative sexuality uses sex as a point of privilege and power, that it then uses to manipulate others at their expense.

Clarity regarding the intentions of erotic defiance provides insight into the impact womanist/feminist rereadings of the erotic have on Christian ethics. The promotion of a healthy relationship with the erotic serves to encourage future church leaders to move away from the dichotomy of “evil and holy” and engage in teaching that might function to circumvent and challenge media messages with a fuller, healthier approach. Instead of the systematic condemnation of all things sexual, redemption and expansion of the erotic offers the church the opportunity to participate in crafting alternate perspectives that challenge images and ideas that have until recently wreaked havoc upon the psyches of men and women, and remained completely unchecked.

⁷ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 114.

Exploring the holy and sacred power of the erotic in the church is also instrumental in contributing to a liberative ethic of erotic power for marginalized communities—especially black and female communities who struggle with the denigration of their bodies and their agency on a daily basis. These women and girls often take one of two approaches toward their erotic power. They stifle and hide it, as society has taught them to do, or they wield it as a weapon, seeing it as one of the few tools they have with which to navigate through life. A theology that affirms bodies as more than sexual objects and an ethic of the erotic that assists in understanding and employing erotic power are needed. Framing the erotic as sacred promotes such a theology and lays the foundation for an ethic of the erotic grounded in love and justice. Moreover, redeeming the erotic promotes a reintegration of the human experience that is both inclusive of the erotic and body affirming, resulting in individuals who are more likely to bring concerns about their bodies, including sexual and erotic concerns and the treatment of others' bodies, on a micro and macro level, to God and to the church, rather than burying them in destructive practices like meaningless relationships and violence against others for selfish pleasure/profit.

The major theological contribution this project lends to the study of religion is sustained reflection on the relationship between the erotic and the Holy Spirit from a womanist perspective that embraces doctrinal Christianity. Mainstream feminist theologians have been interrogating the erotic for its religious significance for some time. For instance, feminist theologian Sarah Coakley traces the Trinitarian mark of coinherence (unity through a cleaving together) within the function of the erotic. However, most feminist theological accounts of the erotic lack intersectionality and fail to take into consideration how racism and classism might affect their interpretations of the politics of the erotic. Womanist scholarship on the other hand,

with the exception of theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher's essay "The Erotic in Contemporary Black Women's Literature" and ethicist Keri Day's most recent book, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives*, tends to limit the erotic to the sexual, lacks a political critique or ignores Christian doctrine as a relevant/reliable resource.

Like the projects of Baker-Fletcher and Day, this dissertation employs a more robust concept of the erotic, considering the potential political impact black women's erotic defiance would have on black women's lives and the world at large. Beyond these similarities, the dissertation's incorporation of doctrinal Christianity allows for a critique of the incoherence of normative Christian ethics to the ethical situations of marginalized communities. It also makes possible a critique of radical ethics of erotic liberation, espoused by popular culture, which have been lauded as affirming to the identities of black women but have escaped Christian ethical scrutiny. The dissertation also provides new insight on the womanist discourse on kenosis, suggesting new ways of understanding the Christian concept of sacrifice from the perspective of those who have been historically dispossessed from their bodies and their personhood. Moreover, it expands the traditional concept of religious praxis to acknowledge and celebrate practices often dismissed as secular for their power in disrupting the evil of oppression and facilitating the in-breaking of God's kingdom on earth.

The contributions of this project to the study of religion have a potential impact on the vitality of religious life in the United States, as well. Though black women's bodies as demonized others bear the brunt of Christianity's discomfort with the flesh, all people, especially Christians, daily wrestle with the idea that the body is a spiritual impediment, begging the question: "What should I do with my body?" Most often this wrestling is quieted by a series of prohibitions of sex, pleasure, and association with the wrong kinds of bodies, with

very little instruction on how to embody one's Christian moral agency. Consequently, the body becomes something to negotiate, rather a gift through which we experience pleasure and create change in the world. Erotic defiance's affirmation of the body offers a Christian posture of being in the world that stands in resistance to injustice and domination, and reconciles our relationship with our bodies, presenting them as key resources in bringing about God's kingdom.

This dissertation's connection of the erotic to the haptic also accomplishes important work in the interrogation of institutions that demonize and misappropriate the erotic in the work of oppression through racism, sexism and homophobia. Challenging the moral validity of these institutions is authentically the work of the church. The reframing of the erotic as moral, life-affirming relationality reorients Christian discourse on sex, embodiment, love and justice from questions of right or wrong to questions of intent and justice. This dissertation's focus on erotic defiance as womanist ethic of moral and political agency has explored how a womanist rereading of the erotic informs a justice-centered, embodied ethic of love and resistance to oppression.

From the demonization of black bodies and the question of how Christians should respond to same-gender loving couples to issues of sexual purity and the myth of Anglo-Saxon chosenness, Christian doctrine about the body matters. I have argued that what we do with our bodies has creative power. In addition to reproductive power, our bodies construct meaning and generate material and relational consequences in the world, which has lasting significance in the material realm. In addition to investigating the role of sexual theatricality in black women's self-authorization, the profile on erotic conjure has demonstrated the power of the body to manifest the power of the will. It is my belief that our corporeality is the principle means by

which we participate in divine creativity. My exploration of the sacrifice of erotic solidarity has emphasized the importance of the body in the concrete manifestation of love.

Accordingly, I argue that all human transformation requires the participation of flesh and blood. All progress demands the erotic activity of material bodies. This dissertation serves as an emphatic plea to Western white Christianity to repent of its demonization of the erotic and to take up erotic modes of the haptic, specifically erotic defiance as a form of embodied witness to the world of the good news of the body and the freedom and value of all of God's children. For it is only through the power working in and through our flesh that justice and love can reign.

Final Thoughts

Erotic defiance facilitates alternative experiences of black flesh—first, for black people who have been wounded by the stigma of blackness, and second, for those of other races and cultures whose concept of blackness has been stunted by Western hegemony. Such experiences operate as more than just traditional representation strategies, but allow black flesh to contest hegemony's overdetermination of black identity through experience.

After completing this project, I continue to wrestle with whether erotic relationality has the power for systemic transformation. At the outset of the project I was confident that embodied experiences would and could beget crises of legitimation for those whose exposure to black women was limited to the discursive. However, this dissertation was written during a period of exceedingly pronounced racialized violence in the United States. The deaths of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, Michael Brown in Kansas City, Missouri, Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland, Sandra Bland in Houston, Texas, Jocques Clemmons in Nashville, and

Korryn Gaines in Randallstown, Maryland, and the pervasive apathy that accompanied black death caught on video suggests to me that hegemony colors experience to such a degree that even interpretation of that which we experience is governed by racist, sexist significations. This realization has underscored the importance of intimate relationality among different communities and the power of the erotic to transform. Visual reports from the media are not enough. Firsthand accounts and stories are not enough to call the humanity of “the other” to people’s attention. This dissertation has disclosed that only the erotic—that is, embodied, intimate engagement with others through shared pursuits like creative expression, worship, care and political engagement—can accomplish transformation. The spoken and written word are powerful, but embodied experience transforms.

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