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### Sacred Sexuality: Spirituality and Wholeness in African American Women's Texts

Abstract:

As Evelyn M. Hammonds suggests in her article "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," there are certain aspects of black female sexuality which have been under analyzed such as pleasure and agency. Departing from AudreLorde's affirmation that black sexualities can be read as one expression of the reclamation of the despised black female body focusing on female desire and agency, our round table would like to introduce and theorize sexuality as a site where silence is disrupted, imagining a positive affirming sexuality. To this end, we would like to explore the concept of sacred sexuality as a dimension of the search for wholeness in African American women's literature, and the view of African cosmology which focuses on the principles of interconnectedness, interrelatedness and interdependency of everything. Lorde warned us about the dangers of separating the sexual from the spiritual, bringing forward the role of spirituality and arguing that there is a simultaneous relationship among sexuality, spirituality, and the personal and political empowerment for women. Therefore our round table aims to explore the theoretical implications of eroticism and spirituality in the works of several African American women's writers such as AudreLorde in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Paule Marshall in *Daughters* (1991), Tina McElroy Ansa in *The Hand I Fan With* (1996), Pearl Cleage in *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (1997) and Alice Walker in *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998).

#### The Theoretical Grounds of the Politics of "Articulation"

Ever since the 19th century, black women's discourse on sexuality and the body has been shrouded in secrecy and silence. During slavery black women's sexuality was seen as exuberant and it was used by the white male to abuse and subject the black woman to his illicit desire. During the reconstruction the reaction of black women to this legacy was a self-imposed behavior obsessed with chastity and piety because they wanted to claim their place within the cult of true womanhood in vogue at the time, and

applied till then, only to upper-class white ladies. All this gave way to an obliteration and rejection of their sexuality as shameful and to the creation of a discourse based on silence.

During the last decade of the 20th century and well into the 21th century, there has been an effort among black women writers to repair the guilt and confusion around the discourse of black women when it comes to give a freely expression to their sexual identity, and to their sexual and erotic desire.

As theoreticians of black female sexuality, we need to develop a methodology that allows black women to contest as social and cultural agents the legacies of symbolic power in order to define the terrain of black women's sexuality, based on black women's sexual experience by exploring the expressions of sexual desire, enlarging not repressing, exploring instead of restricting, emphasizing pleasure instead of danger, focusing largely on the building of agency by reclaiming the body as well as subjectivity, transforming the "politics of silence" into speech and telling. Audre Lorde's essay "The Uses of the Erotic,"<sup>1</sup> reminds us about the need to read agency as responsibility, and define difference as growth in order to transform our fears into dialogue and speech. Overcoming our fears, means identifying "the mockeries of separations" imposed upon us and that we often accept as our own. It also means disrupting the "paradigm of resistance"<sup>2</sup> and contesting the notion that sexuality is abnormal, opening to speech and rendering desire loose. For instance, Audren Lorde in her biomythography *Zami* reveals a fluid identity located at "the very house of

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<sup>1</sup>AudreLorde, « Uses of the Erotic : The Erotic as Power » in *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches*, (New York : The CrossingPress, 1984), 53-59.

<sup>2</sup>Judyllyn S. Ryan, *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women's Film and Literature*(Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 16.

difference,”<sup>3</sup> learning that strength comes from everyday’s survival, accepting fear as the very rhetoric of growth.

As theorists, we have to explore how difference is established, how it operates, and how it constitutes subjects who see and speak in the world. The goal is to develop a “politics of articulation” that builds on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act; to theorize difference as agency, as a way of knowing, and power.

This dynamic sexuality breaks the patterns of the representations of black women in the past, either as hyper-sexual and/or sexually deviant for most part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as silent beings who adhered to strict moral and sexual standards dictated by propriety in the 20<sup>th</sup> century or the boldness of hip-hop music videos and other manifestations of black female body currently in vogue “centered on the fragmentation and fetishization of the female body” (Henderson 127). Either in the representation through fictional characters through literature, or in the lives of black women themselves and reflected on the media, black women have not been able to express themselves sexually without constraints, and thus they have been denied the “liberating potential of an empowered and empowering embodied spirituality.”<sup>4</sup>

This process of gaining sexual agency which is part of the landmarks of black women writers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is linked to the search for sexual wholeness, as an intrinsic part of black women’s liberatory discourses about spirituality and sexuality. There is a need to delineate a necessary poetics of eroticism foregrounding the search

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<sup>3</sup>AudreLorde. *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name* (New York: Persephone, 1982), 197.

<sup>4</sup>Donna AzaWeir-Soley, *Eroticism, Spirituality and Resistance in Black Women’s Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 2.

for wholeness implicit in the African American experience by focusing on the transformative power of the erotic. Contemporary black women writers proclaim the power of eroticism as sexual healing. In these works, sex is sublimated as a major vehicle for human communication. It is through sex that these women are writing themselves into subjects, and it is through a right understanding of their desire that they create liberatory discourses, free from a pathological expression imprisoned in the neurotic by the imposition of the patriarchal order. Weir-Soley understands this “merger between the sexual and the spiritual [as] a political act, an act of recovery that can potentially restore the black woman’s sense of wholeness” (41).

The search for sexual wholeness implicit in the novels of contemporary black women writers provides an epistemic grounding unifying black female identity, sexual power, and spiritual agency. They contribute to the development of a methodology to read black women’s novels focusing on the achievement of a kind of subjectivity where both sexuality and spirituality are key to identity formation based on agency. The search for wholeness both in the spirit and in the flesh provides a model of black female subjectivity whose ultimately quest is a divine quest for wholeness. As Weir-Soley contends,

the divorce in Western cosmology between the body and the mind, the physical and the spiritual, leads to disruption and imbalance in the female psyche, and in order to regain their integrity, black women must incorporate their physical bodies and sexual expression into an acceptance of their entire being (Tally, review, 1).

This concept of wholeness entails an understanding of sexual desire, female empowerment, and spirituality as interdependent mores, and it is informed by the

principle of polarity, which dictates that the different parts of a whole complement one another, once they are approached with the right frame of mind. In contemporary black women writings, the search for wholeness is enhanced by Marasa consciousness<sup>5</sup>, inviting us to observe, with the help of the imagination, beyond the binary, in order to look for movement and change pointing towards the transformation of cultural oppositions which may occur on several levels of experience. The term spirituality encompass and individual's inner feelings, together with her own experiences and their religious attitudes, not requiring belief in God nor adherence to any institutional forms of worship. In the case of African American women writers and artists, it includes their sensibility towards creativity and artistic self-expression rooted in agency and a certain degree of wholeness. In order to enter the dynamics of the transformative power of wholeness, women must obtain a certain degree of individual agency, to become self-enabled, not only surviving trauma but also healing themselves. To enter into wholeness one must build, as Joyce Pettis points out, "an essential identity grounded in cultural knowledge."<sup>6</sup> Individual agency facilitates a dialogical process of community, of a true collectivity. The influence of African thought, philosophy and world views is present in contemporary black women's writings, suggesting a distinct interpretive tool that is rooted in African American cultural and spiritual history. Those aspects of philosophy and spirituality regarding time and African American mythmaking contribute to the development of a literary history rooted in orality, explaining beliefs, practices, and ways of knowing; helping to retrieve distinct female knowledge which functions as a transformative activity that transcends the mere representation of gender power relations. Wholeness is within this context, a kind of spiritual energy that the person can

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<sup>55</sup>Vevè Clark, "Diaspora Literacy and Consciousness" in Hortense S. Spillers ed. *Comparative American Identities. Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 40-61.

<sup>6</sup> Joyce Pettis, *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1995), 147.

have, receive, or lose, but cannot be: wholeness is not a constant. For this reason, we refer to the concept of wholeness on the one hand as a restorative transformative energy, and, on the other, as a process which needs to be searched for by the individual as reflected in his or her connection with the community, and which works against fragmentation because it is integrated in a set of principles which according to Benoit, “cohere into an archetypal pattern informing and influencing black American culture.”<sup>7</sup> The different interconnected parts of a human being include ancestral consciousness and spirituality which mutually strengthen one another to integrate a sense of unity which is the foundation on which black women writers structure their vision of empowerment and that informs narrative construction and characterization.

Judylyn S. Ryan inserts black women’s writings in a “paradigm of growth”<sup>8</sup> which views black women as “powerful, independent subjects”<sup>9</sup> and which is proactive, reacting in this way against the “paradigm of resistance”<sup>10</sup> used in most theoretical approaches to African diaspora cultural studies. In Ryan’s opinion, the paradigm of resistance has viewed black women as victims, as fragmented individuals marked by trauma, and lacking a sense of wholeness. One of the most silent features of the “paradigm of growth” is that it reveals “a democracy of narrative participation” as a narrative strategy in which the standard binary casting of central and marginal characters is obliterated to give way to interdependent/interconnected relationships “to reveal that even individuals whose presence is temporally or socially limited have full

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<sup>7</sup> John Benoit, “Archetypal patterns underlying traditional African cultures” *Contributions in Black Studies* vol. 4 (1980): art. 5, 35-42

<sup>8</sup> Judylyn S. Ryan, *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women’s Film and Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 17.

<sup>9</sup> Deborah King, cited in Ryan 16.

<sup>10</sup> Judylyn S. Ryan, *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women’s Film and Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 16.

personalities and unlimited human agency.”<sup>11</sup> This narrative strategy also serves another purpose, that of allowing the reader to be able to recognize her/his own human agency, “thus extending their transformative impact beyond the fictional realm to the social universe in which the work of art is designed to function”<sup>12</sup> and accomplishing the goal implicit in the search for wholeness and individual agency: stabilize identity, and strengthen social/communal relationships, providing black women with a departure point from where to build liberating epistemologies, recognizing their sexual and spiritual agency demonstrating black women’s “narrative engagement with an ethos and ideology of interconnectedness.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Judylyn S. Ryan, *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women’s Film and Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 18.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 18.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 29.

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