

Introduction

Spirit and Flesh: Black Female Aesthetics

Since their emergence on the literary stage, New World black writers have faced the challenge of representing a worldview that is inherently syncretic while using a literary model that privileges Western theoretical and epistemological precepts. In *Black Subjects*, Arlene Keizer argues that during slavery black identities were invented out of the conflict between two competing ideologies: the capitalist and patriarchal system of American slavery and “the subjugated system of West African beliefs and practices” that continued to lay claim to these captive Africans and their descendants (23). Despite the putatively dominant Eurocentric ideology that undergirded the slave system, Keizer argues that West African cosmology fostered “a culture of resistance” within the slave communities that ultimately culminated in the synthesis of Western and African worldviews that characterizes New World black identity. Evidence of this syncretism can be observed in early African-American writings.¹

However, having come to literacy (and to subjectivity) under the aegis of a dominant and hegemonic Eurocentricity, New World black writers have chosen from among accommodation, assimilation, denigration, denial, or repression of their African sensibility in their texts.² One of the literary repercussions of this has been the assignment of certain themes to the secular and others to the spiritual realm, as well as an apparent inability to integrate the two (secular and sacred) as overlapping or interrelated categories.

While Western epistemology locates the sacred and the secular in separate and even opposing realms, the African worldview recognizes no such separation. For instance, to the extent that sexuality has been discursively constituted within the framework of Judeo-Christian morality in the West, and given that Christianity allows very little latitude for the full exploration (either discursively or ritually) of human sexual expression, any engagement with the subject of sexuality in Western literature is necessarily shaped by ideas that coalesce around concepts of “sin” and “immorality.” Plainly

speaking, although sex is sanctioned within marriage between a man and a woman, outside of these narrow parameters it is considered “sinful” according to traditional Christian doctrine, and this sinfulness is constitutive of how we read and write about sex in the West. Understood within the context of a Western paradigm that is informed by Judeo-Christian notions of morality and propriety, this dichotomy between the spiritual and the sexual has its corollary in the separation of the secular from the sacred in our discursive traditions.

By contrast, in many West African-based spiritual traditions, sexual expression is an integral part of the spiritual experience. The dramatization of human sexuality can be observed and practiced through rituals, prayers, and deities who present as sexual beings, either overtly or covertly. But if contemporary as well as historical black Christianity is to be taken at its basic doctrinal level, it appears that the separation of the sexual from the spiritual was one of the earliest adaptations of the black subject to his New World environment.

For the black female subject in the New World, this separation between the sexual and the spiritual had to be maintained within the framework of black women's historical subjugation, not just physically, but more significantly, sexually. Therefore, the central challenges for black women writers have revolved around the issue of how to represent black female characters as both sexual and spiritual beings while working within the constraints of a discursive tradition that historically maligned black women as sexual deviants.

Nineteenth-century black women writers formulated a dual strategy for addressing this issue: they internalized the moral standards of Judeo-Christian theology to support the maintenance of this separation, while simultaneously claiming that due to their condition of sexual servitude, black women were incapable of living up to the Victorian standards of sexual purity that the cult of true womanhood demanded. Black women's responses to charges of sexual immorality resulted in further institutionalization of the separation between the sexual and the spiritual spheres as evidenced by nineteenth-century texts written by black women.³ Female characters who adhered to strict moral and sexual standards of propriety were forced to repress their sexuality, while those who did express themselves sexually were denied all legitimate claims to the redemptive and liberating potential of an empowered and empowering spirituality.

Beginning with Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, twentieth-century black women writers have attempted to heal this rift and

reestablish the interdependence between spirituality and sexuality that is central to the formation of black women's identities. They have done so by relying on the inscription of a symbolic, discursive, literal, and theoretical framework based on the spiritual precepts and epistemology of West African belief systems. Janie Crawford's liberating reclamation of her sexuality provides (in part) one noteworthy contravention to the most notorious example of how the black woman's body was historically appropriated to disenfranchise her of human dignity: the haunting episode of Sara Baartman, who was literally placed on display like a circus animal, first in public exhibitions in London, and later in similar venues in Paris, where she eventually died at the age of twenty-five. Upon her death, Sara's buttocks and genitals were embalmed and displayed in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris . . . and there they remained for 160 years. In 1974, her private parts were removed from public view. She was called the "Venus Hottentot," but the fascination she held for Europeans had nothing to do with adoration. Sara's tragic story stands as a warning to today's black women about the treacherousness of the objectifying gaze.

As Keizer convincingly argues, "the black slave in rebellion against white domination is the prototype for a black resistant subjectivity, a founding model of African-American and Afro-Caribbean subjectivity" (9). Implicit in Keizer's cross-gendered analysis is the recognition that these forms of resistance had to be multilayered, multidirectional, and multifaceted precisely because white domination took place (ubiquitously) upon multiple discursive and material planes. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston's creation of a character such as Janie constitutes one such act of rebellion against the discursive and material violence to which the black female body and image were subjected under white domination. In this study, I argue that Hurston's creation of Janie is an act of rebellion that constitutes a major catalyst in African-American letters: the black woman writing back to right the great wrong written (and performed) against her—a wrong that robbed her of a unitary subjectivity.⁴

Zora Neale Hurston's engagement with the character Janie Crawford—who is far from idealized, yet consciously determined to achieve spiritual, sexual, political, and emotional wholeness—provides a prototype for Hurston's literary daughters writing across the black diaspora. In *Tell My Horse*, Hurston wrote capaciously about the role of women in Haiti and Jamaica, making her, as Daphne Lamothe argues, the sole writer of her day to interrogate black female subjectivity from a broad diasporic rather than a single African-American perspective.⁵ *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance* takes

into account the diasporic reach of Hurston's intervention by reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* alongside (and as a precursor to) Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the Jamaican writer Opal Palmer Adisa's *It Begins with Tears*, and the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*. This diverse group of writers intent on reclaiming the lost ground of black women's sexual and spiritual wholeness creates female characters who are uniformly in conversation with Hurston's Janie and with each other.

Theoretical Implications of Eroticism in African Cosmology

In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde theorizes about the dangers of separating the sexual from the spiritual: "we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing" (56). Lorde unsettles conventional theories about subjectivity by introducing the role of spirituality and arguing that there is a coterminous relationship among sexuality, spirituality, and personal and political empowerment for women. In the process, Lorde attempts to tear down the hierarchy between thoughts and feelings, ideas and emotions, by examining the relationship between political action (external forms) and "internal knowledge and needs" (58).

According to Lorde, the separation of spheres that are inextricably linked leads to a world of "flattened affect" that cannot support creative transformation. Scholars of African cosmology are diverse in their political and disciplinary orientations, but they all seem to share the view that the principles of interconnectedness, interrelatedness, and interdependency of everything in the known cosmos is the basic tenet of the African worldview.

For the purposes of this study, I would like to propose that Lorde's definition of the erotic contains an implicit definition of spirituality. Spirituality implies and hinges upon interiority. Spiritual people are inwardly focused, relying more upon internal acquisition of knowledge (intuition, messages from the body, insight gained from meditation or fasting, gut feelings, dreams, sensory and supersensory perceptions, prayer, praise, and rituals) than upon external directives and epistemes to guide their choices. Spirituality may center on the belief in one supreme, omnipotent being or, as in many African religions, on several divine powers.⁶ However, for the purposes of this study, spirituality is only one part of the equation. Lorde's definition of the erotic hinges on the self-conscious awareness that to truly effect transformation one must be spiritually and sexually in balance. Lorde's premise is not a prerequisite for every spiritual tradition, and especially not