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"How We Got Ovah": Afrocentric Spirituality in Black Arts Movement Women's Poetry

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

“HOW WE GOT OVAH”: AFROCENTRIC SPIRITUALITY IN BLACK ARTS
MOVEMENT WOMEN’S POETRY

By

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This project is dedicated to my Grandmothers, Lennye W. Green and Wanda Clark,
who live within the marrow of my bones.

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ABSTRACT

This study, using poetry by Carolyn Rodgers, Sarah Webster Fabio, Sonia Sanchez, Sharon Bourke, Ntozake Shange and Jayne Cortez, examines the manifestations of Afrocentric spirituality in women's writing during the Black Arts Movement. Until recently, there has been a paucity of scholarship on the movement. When studying the BAM, critics have heretofore concentrated on sexism, homophobia, nationalism, and racism as its most prominent aspects. However, BAM writers also have a marked concern with spirituality from an African epistemological standpoint, which brings new possibilities for critical analysis to the forefront. Theorists such as Larry Neal furthermore termed the movement as a spiritual sister to the Black Power Movement. This project contributes to the burgeoning conversation on BAM women's poetry by evaluating the ways in which they deem spirituality as essential for agency as women and as black citizens. I identify three major themes in which women's spirituality serves as a prerequisite for or an enabler of black liberation and revolution. Chapter One explains how Carolyn Rodgers, in her books *Songs of a Blackbird* and *How I Got Ovah*, creates personas that initially reject Christianity as a Eurocentric religious construction, but subsequently acknowledge the Afrocentric spirituality of the black church and ascribe to it a revolutionary blackness. Chapter Two demonstrates, through Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* and Sonia Sanchez's *I've Been a Woman*, that women must first give birth to themselves spiritually before they can successfully accomplish the birth of the black nation. Chapter Three examines five poems by Carolyn Rodgers, Jayne Cortez, Sonia Sanchez, Sarah Webster Fabio, and Sharon Bourke, arguing that black women poets activate *nommo*, the power of words to influence action, when they write jazz poetry; as cultural and spiritual leaders in their own rights, they serve as a type of co-priestess to the black community when they recognize the jazz artist as a spiritual priest. Conclusively, I determine that there is indeed space for the recognition of the intended spiritual goals and accomplishments of the Black Arts Movement, and especially of marginalized black women's poetry.

INTRODUCTION

Afrocentric Spirituality in Black Arts Movement Women's Poetry

Poet-critic Larry Neal, in the seminal anthology *The Black Aesthetic*, describes Black Art as the “aesthetic and spiritual sister” of the Black Power Movement; in other words, cultural black art was necessary to furnish the political rhetoric with a soul (272). His statement then prompts the question, how does the spiritual materialize in the “politico-aesthetic” poetry written by women? (Benston 2). Building on Neal's often-cited definition, this thesis endeavors to answer the question of how black women poets expressed a revolutionary, Afrocentric spirituality. The examined texts, while situating themselves in opposition to hegemonic, masculinist ideals, yet align with the theme of Black Nationalism prevalent during the Black Arts Movement (BAM). Their concurrent location and dislocation within the Movement provides an opportunity to address black feminist/womanist and racist concerns in spirited ways. My project closely examines the various manifestations of African-centered spirituality in the poetry of “spiritual sisters”: Carolyn Rodgers, Jayne Cortez, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, Sharon Burke, and Sarah Webster Fabio. Within this study, I hope to expand the conversation on women poets in the Movement and demonstrate the methods with which they navigate the respective spaces of blackness and femaleness through spirituality.

While, in the past fifteen years, scholars have increasingly started to examine various facets of the BAM such as homophobia, sexism, and nationalism,¹ surprisingly little has been written about the role of spirituality in the poetry written during that time span. But I argue that the art created throughout the BAM cannot be properly discussed without at least acknowledging the import of a mindset that regarded black writers as spiritual leaders, griots, and even priests to the black populace. Amiri Baraka proclaims, in the foreword to *Black Fire*, that the writers included are “the wizards, the bards, the *babalawo*, the *shaikhs* of Weusi Mchoro” (emphasis author's; xvii). Indeed, according to the Movement's founders, the spirit should serve as the locus of aesthetic cultural production, and the artist should “speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of black people” (Neal 273). Black art had to function as both teacher and lover of black souls. In *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, Stephen Henderson notes of the Black Arts Movement and spirituality:

And even in the contemporary poetry, with all of its preoccupation with the immediate problems of political assertion and the raising of consciousness and the celebration of the Black cities, there is a pronounced concern with the spiritual, sometimes rooted in the idiom of the Black church, sometimes exploring religious concepts of Islam and African religions, sometimes seeking analogues to modern music. (Henderson 22)

Henderson's assessment of the presence of spirituality in black poetry very much supports the components of this study; in particular, I look at the intersections of the black church and Black Nationalism, African religious beliefs, and jazz as a vehicle for spiritual mysticism. I will later explain my theoretical basis for separately and conjointly evaluating Afrocentricity and spirituality as concepts in poetry.

My focus on women writers during the period follows and advances the work of critics such as Cheryl Clarke, Madhu Dubey, Margo Natalie Crawford, and Wahneema Lubiano. Historically, black women writers experienced a conspicuous marginalization during the BAM, both as critics and as artists. Many of the principal anthologies were edited and dominated by men. Only two women, Sarah Webster Fabio and Carolyn F. Gerald, were featured in Addison Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic*. Belying this paucity of women writers—in an anthology that ambitiously sought to define a Black Aesthetic for all black authors—Sonia Sanchez (1968, 1970), June Jordan (1969, 1970), and Carolyn Rodgers (1969) had all published collections of poetry and critical articles in *Negro Digest/ Black World* prior to the appearance of *The Black Aesthetic* in 1971. Additionally, in the much-praised, massive collection *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, edited by LeRoi Jones (Baraka) and Larry Neal, women comprised just five of the book's fifty-six poets.² Not until Toni Cade Bambara's publication of *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) were women given a central platform upon which to voice their primary concerns. Cherise A. Pollard points out that by solely recognizing male voices in the black discourses concerning politics and the use of language, editors and authors had been effectively discounting viewpoints important to black women. And although, as part of the united front, women writers affiliated with the Movement stressed communalism and the metaphoric consanguinity of all black people, they could not (and some would not) deny the problematic alterities between black men and women.

The BAM theorists in general prescribed writings that were concerned with the eradication of institutionalized racism, the intent to form a segregated, nationalist black community, the uplifting of the signifier Black as “beautiful,” and the abandonment of the conformist policies promulgated during the Civil Rights Movement. In the wake of civil rights leader Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965, black writers no longer believed in emulating Negro spirituals that spoke of overcoming their racial and economic trials in America. Nor were they willing to write poetry that pleaded for white mainstream recognition of their art. This activist art—which, in its complexity, truly defies a comfortable definition—aimed to give teeth to an African-American poetic tradition thought to be accommodationist. Rather, poets desired to write, as Baraka called them, “‘poems that kill’/ Assassin poems, Poems that shoot/ guns” (“Black Art” 302). In their quest to prescribe a concrete Black Aesthetic, however, theorists invariably *proscribed* certain thematic concerns, limiting the poetry of black writers who also fit into the category of female, among others. Ron/Maulana Karenga affirms in “Black Cultural Nationalism,” “For all art must reflect and support the Black Revolution, and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid, no matter how many lines and spaces are produced in proportion and symmetry [...]” (33). Any writing that placed itself outside of this aesthetic imperative earned the rancor of those who remained within it. David Lionel Smith, in his timely 1991 article “The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics,” asserts that a concrete aesthetic of the Movement is difficult to characterize because of the semantic differences between the phrases “Black Aesthetic” and “Black Aesthetics.” The Black Aesthetic denotes one common view based upon race, while the term Black Aesthetics denotes a diversity of outlooks. This very lack of a diversity of outlooks problematized the expression of gender concerns in poetry, and created a masculinist literary environment.

Several authors have contributed to our understanding of the uneasy relationship between black male writers and black women during the BAM. In a partitioned chart titled “Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic,” Larry Neal makes a brief (unexpanded) listing of his thoughts on the Black Aesthetic. Neal’s 1968 inventory of black neo-mythology is particularly telling in reference to the Movement’s theoretical position toward women. Women appear in this list as “Oshun, Yemaya, Urzulie, Soul Momma, Evil women, Good loving women, *woman as primarily need/ man as doer*” (14; emphasis added). This last phrase echoes the prevailing sentiment in Black Arts poetry that women were to principally support the black male’s actions

and fade into the background. His statements provoke two similar interpretations; he either means that a woman is primarily something for a man to need, or he implies that, in terms of gender-related performances, a woman needs and a man does. Poet Cheryl Clarke, in her thorough study *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*, firmly describes and delineates the instances of masculinist thought among male writers. As an example of the male-centered rhetoric, Clarke cites Haki Madhubuti/ Don L. Lee's poem "blackwoman," which characterizes the black woman as an inverted, indistinct carbon-copy of black men. Regarding another Madhubuti poem, "Blackman/ an unfinished history," she says, "Blackness structures manhood and manhood becomes the desired end of blackness" (Clarke 18). Signifying on the visual position of "man" at the end of "black," Clarke points out that the elision of spaces between the words "black" and "man/woman" demonstrates the erroneous belief in the inseparability of race and gender. She objects, "No space for black women is given between race and gender in the best of all possible Black (male) worlds. And there is no space for black women to be identified as nonconcentric to or separate from black men" (Clarke 49). Women were under a constant challenge to uphold the race, and still "[let] that woman thing fly at no risk to [their] revolutionary identity" (Llorens 7). Undeniably, this perceived proscription of space between identities caused friction among male and female writers, forcing women poets to engage in a binary dialogue that simultaneously addressed both racial oppression and the sexism they endured within their own race.

Notwithstanding this opposition, black women writers flourished during the BAM, writing widely recognized works and becoming figureheads of the Movement in their own right. Even though this project also features lesser-known writers Sharon Bourke and Sarah Webster Fabio, poets Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, and Carolyn Rodgers enjoy extensive to moderate celebrity. At least part of this success indubitably stems from their ability to create a space for themselves and slyly wage their own revolution parallel to—and sometimes in collaboration with—the predominantly white Women's Liberation Movement during the 1960's and 1970's. Pollard has efficiently researched and documented the instances of subversive female writing, and notes that, even though black males ignored the black female perspective, the women did not always take the passive role ascribed to them. In her article "Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women's Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement," she writes:

In the process of addressing complicated social, racial, and political issues, many black women poets give voice to the ambivalent power dynamic that exists in the black community, envisioning new imaginative spaces for black women to occupy in relation to their ‘brothers.’ The focus of their poetry is primarily political such as race riots, poverty, and institutionalized racism, as well as traditional issues such as rearing children and romantic relationships between men and women. (Pollard 179)

In effect, women had to “move un-noticed to be noticed,”³ and undermine an ideology that told them their primary position was “prone.”⁴ Black women’s problems were not necessarily unknown, but they were certainly ignored for the sake of Black Nationalism. While Ron Karenga insists that the collective art permits an expression of shared experiences within a given community, this approach creates a conflict when situations are articulated outside the parameters of that common experience (36). The overall repeated articulation of social divisions in the Movement did not necessarily seek to overcome division, but to state it in terms of black consciousness (Harper 239). Pollard also discusses women’s linguistic resistance, in which they used the rhetorical strategies employed by black men, but often signified and applied critical double entendres that pointed at men. Having situated black women poets within the context of the BAM, I contend that their expression of a spiritual black female self also constitutes opposition. My study of the poetry of this period builds on the supposition that, despite the rampant chauvinism and sexism they faced, women writers found methods to express feminist and womanist concerns without placing themselves completely outside of the Movement.

It is imperative to the foundation of this project to situate my usage of the terms “Afrocentric” and “spirituality”—individually and collectively—within the framework of an academic discourse. The reclamation of an African selfhood separate from Eurocentric epistemologies was essential to both the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement. The praxis of a yet theoretically undefined Afrocentricity manifested in poems about Africa as both a mythological and an actual location.⁵ I glean my understanding of Afrocentricity as a sociological formation partially from the theories originated by scholars Ama Mazama and Molefi Kete Asante. In her essay “The Afrocentric Paradigm,” the anchoring article from the book of the same title, Mazama states:

Inasmuch as it places ‘African values and ideas’ at the center of African life, Afrocentricity espouses the cosmology, aesthetics, axiology and epistemology that characterize African culture. Karenga [...] identifies the following ‘shared orientations’: 1) the centrality of the community; 2) respect for tradition; 3) a high level spirituality and ethical concern; 4) harmony with nature; 5) the sociality of selfhood; 6) veneration of ancestors; and 7) the unity of being. (9)

The placement of “aesthetics” within the list of values and ideas coincides with the desire to create a rubric for evaluating black writing that was distinct from Eurocentric standards.

Afrocentricity functions as the matrix for the Black Nationalist thought which pervades BAM poetry; therefore, any examination of spiritualities expressed must take into account a non-Western system of orientation. I specifically mean to point out that the manner of spirituality that the writers manifest seeks to deliberately emphasize its Africanness, that is, celebrate and give homage to those aspects that reflect the African Diaspora. Based upon these characteristics, it is possible to identify the linguistic role of specific Afrocentric qualities in the poetry written during the Movement. Furthermore, Asante identifies the ideology of Afrocentricity as crucial for action in black revolutionaries. He posits, “Afrocentricity liberates the African by establishing agency as the key concept for freedom” (Asante 50). Logically, without freedom, the ability to be centered on the “shared orientations” that comprise Afrocentricity becomes limited. Within an African cosmological viewpoint, this struggle for agency enlists the community, the ancestors, and the self as partners: a sacred balance of interdependent associations (Ryan 29). Women’s poetry during the BAM reflects a strong sense of interconnectedness to the African family unit (hence the common use of “sister” and “brother”), foremothers and fathers, and ultimately, an acknowledgement of self as belonging to multiple groups. In titling this project “Afrocentric Spirituality in Black Arts Movement Women’s Poetry,” I am simply recognizing the basic origin of the spirituality they manifest.

As for the term “spirituality,” I do not mean by its usage to denote a necessary connection to religion, although spirituality may include religious praxis. Rather, my interpretation and application of spirituality for this study integrates the awareness of self with the knowledge of an inner purpose (whether or not a person has the agency to pursue it). Judylyn S. Ryan theorizes that “[...] spirituality refers to consciousness, ethos, lifestyle, and discourse...as a primary attribute of self, and that defines and determines health and well-being” (23). In line with the

self-proclaimed intentions of the Black Aesthetic, these women produced spiritual art not only to uplift and instruct black masses, but also to maintain their own “health and well being.” Ryan also argues that black women’s familiarity with their own spirituality is essential to their relationships with their communities and with themselves. Thus, spirituality is comprised of a cognitive transformation, which subsequently affects the entire community through an ethos of interconnectedness (Ryan 10). This transformation, as observed through the poetry of the authors in this project, may occur through the media of Africanized Western religion (Christianity), through an Afrocentric personal spirituality that recognizes self as crucial to the advancement of community, and also through music that acts as both byproduct of and medium for transformation.

Collectively, Afrocentric spirituality denotes the practice of an ideology that realizes personhood as intrinsically spiritual. In this sense, to be Afrocentric is to be spiritual. Mazama refers to the Afrocentric credence in the “primacy of the spiritual,” and points out the relationships between physicality, spirituality, and an “interconnectedness of all things” (26). For example, the African belief that the dead exist through spiritual forces requires a psychological interaction with the spirit in ways that encourage a knowing or intuition outside of Eurocentric/ Western cosmology. In Afrocentric spiritual women’s poetry, the black woman is the subject of selfhood, aesthetic impulse, communal interdependency, and sacred ancestry. Each of the works examined in this thesis engages and employs an African-centered spirituality that affirms self in conjunction with community.

Chapter One, ““This Far By Faith: Rejections and (Re)visions of Christianity in *Songs of a Black Bird* and *How I Got Ovah*,”” begins by presenting the ways in which Carolyn Rodgers addresses the black spiritual history of Christianity, or rather, presents a personalized treatment of the part Christianity—as an assumed “white” religion—plays in the life of a black nationalist. Many of the poets in the BAM use the language of Judeo-Christian religion to symbolize freedom and equality—much as their forebears did—but subversively point out the inconsistencies of that religion with the same stroke of the pen. For example, Nikki Giovanni published the dual poetry/ gospel record *Truth Is on Its Way* with the New York Community Gospel Choir in 1971; the album contained poems such as “Great Pax Whitey” paired with classic gospel hymns like “Peace Be Still.” Carolyn Rodgers’s poetry illustrates a thoughtful examination of the religious paradigm shift between the Civil Rights Movement and the Black

Arts Movement. This chapter seeks to answer two key questions about her writing: 1) what results from Rodgers's encounters (within the poetry) with Christianity? And 2) how does she navigate and revolutionize the Christian mythology with her language? Within the context of the BAM's ideological stance, Rodgers complicates simplistic views of Christianity as a white man's religion.

In this chapter, I also demonstrate how Rodgers's poetry initially rejects Christianity as a white construction, but subsequently ascribes a revolutionary, intrinsic blackness to the belief system. Her treatment of the Christian religion differs from her literary predecessors' in that she maintains the Black Arts aesthetic of activist poetry as opposed to favoring a longsuffering disposition. In poems such as "Jesus Was Crucified," "It is Deep," "Breakthrough," and "Love—The Beginning and the End" within the 1969 book *Songs of a Black Bird*, Rodgers presents in dialogic ways the break with Christianity that appears in much of the Movement's poetry. The individual personas in her poems label it a Negro's religion, and reject a gospel of love for that of anger toward racism and sexism. The personas in her poems truly do not believe that Jesus brought them this far, but still acknowledge a mother's faith as an instrumental connection to their current position in life. However, despite the apparent struggle with the influence of Christianity, its themes and motifs consistently appear throughout Rodgers's poetry. In her 1975 collection *How I Got Ovah*, she seemingly comes full circle and writes in a voice that calls for a new respect for the role that Christianity played in preserving and forming the black American community. However, even with this acknowledgment, she reshapes Christianity in the image of revolutionary blackness and retains her previous vernacular voice.

The subsequent chapter, "'What I Know and Touch': Womanist Images of Black Women's Spiritual Bodies," discusses the ways in which a woman's self-discovery transforms into a new spirituality: worship of the female body within/without. I posit that these works embody the definition of Womanism as given by Alice Walker in her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Images of the female body appear quite often in the poetry, juxtaposed with language ordinarily reserved for religion. Most exemplary is the climactic ending of Shange's influential choreopoem *for colored girls...*: "i found god in myself/ & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely" (*a laying of hands*, ll. 49-50). Although Clenora Hudson-Weems' *Africana Womanism* argues that racism and its effects must be eradicated before black women can turn the microscope onto their personal problems (161), the works suggest an immediacy

that parallels the fight against racism. This chapter applies the African Dogon concept of Yere Wolo, giving birth to oneself, to exemplify how these women's poetry confronted the Black Arts mandate that black females exist primarily for the support of black males. Ultimately, I argue that these texts, revolutionary in their descriptions of the roles of women, indeed worked toward the establishment of the black nation.

Of black women novelists, critic Madhu Dubey astutely observes, "the gender identity of black women complicated their position as the racial subjects of black nationalist discourse" (13). The same holds true for nationalist women poets who wrote during the BAM. Belonging to both communities as black and female, women were still subjected to patriarchal, hegemonic sexism through its male leaders. Margo Natalie Crawford states that "the male gaze of some Black Arts poets and photographers objectified black women even as it engaged in the laudable attempt to remove black women from the dominant visual culture that continues to define quintessential femininity through the sign of the white woman's body" (154). One major element of Black Arts ideology, in its reactions and resistances to Eurocentric American culture, was the construction of a "lost-found nation / within a nation" (Benston 315). The black woman, or ideally, the reproductive black woman, became the site upon which this new black nation would be built. This directive appropriated the female body, essentially barring celibacy, and reassigned all expression of sexuality and female self-realization to the specific goal of procreation. This chapter looks at how Ntozake Shange and Sonia Sanchez (in *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, and *I've Been a Woman*, respectively), challenge the idea of the female body for childbearing only and transform self-recognition into a divine, affirming experience through the poetic concept of yere-wolo. Through collective and individual asseverations and (re)visioning of sacred bodies, the women portrayed within these works simultaneously subvert and reinforce the building of a black nation, not by the physical birth of children, but by their own spiritual rebirth.

The final unit of the thesis, "'And the Word Became Flesh': Nommo as Spiritual Force in Women's Jazz Poetry," focuses on the position of jazz as an Afrocentric representation and transmitter of spirituality. Significantly, many of the women (as well as the men) in the BAM abandoned the exaltation of the blues to support the improvisational jazz movement. Although more marginal Black Arts Movement writers, such as Jayne Cortez, unapologetically wrote blues poems, the majority of poets emerging from that period proclaimed, like Sonia Sanchez, "am I

blue? / [...] no. i'm blk" (qtd in Clarke 65). In his poem, "Extension," Askia Muhammed Touré writes of "a New Thing bursting out of Black saxophones like / Coltrane, Sun Ra, Pharoah [Sanders] and all black spiritual men./ RESURRECT REBIRTH REVERT EVOL-UTION" (Touré 305). What Touré termed a "New Thing," Amiri Baraka included as part of the "changing same" in his 1966 article on various forms of black American spiritual expression through music. Notably, Toure's characterization of the "New Thing" as the verb-noun-verb-noun juxtaposition "resurrect rebirth revert evol-ution" reinforces the theory that jazz speaks to and serves as a medium for the spirit. Consistent with the African veneration of ancestors, they hold the musicians, many of them dead from tragic demises, as a pantheon of black, spiritual leaders. While Cheryl Clarke asserts that in doing so, "Poetry is once again put to the task of making an idol of black music and found wanting," perhaps the aim is not to create an idol, but evoke consideration for the artist as priest (103). Indeed, Black Arts theorists such as Amiri Baraka called for poets to turn to jazz to understand blackness. They describe jazz in such a manner that it becomes not only a listening experience, but also an interactive spiritual and meditative experience.

Poet and critic Lorenzo Thomas states that many BAM writers "explore a spiritual dimension of jazz that can be compared to an almost religious fervor, with all the many implications of that term" ("Communicating"; 291). I suggest that the "implications of that term" extend to an evaluation of jazz musicians as activating the generative power of words (*nommo*) through their musical performances. Consequently, as the writers structured their own poetry in a manner to imitate and interpret the music, jazz poetry performs re-enactments and appropriations of *nommo* through the written word. In this chapter, the discussion centers on black women's use of *nommo* as spiritual co-priestesses with jazz musicians; I analyze Carolyn Rodgers's "Me, In Kulu Se & Karma," Sarah Webster Fabio's "Tribute to Duke," Sonia Sanchez's "a/ coltrane/ poem," Sharon Bourke's "Sopranosound, Memory of John," and Jayne Cortez's "How Long Has Trane Been Gone." I also examine how the formation of jazz in women's poetry lends itself not only toward a spiritual resting place, but also as a means of revolutionary force.

CHAPTER 1

THIS FAR BY FAITH: REJECTIONS AND (RE)VISIONS OF CHRISTIANITY IN *SONGS OF A BLACK BIRD* AND *HOW I GOT OVAH*

At first glance, Chicago native Carolyn M. Rodgers's books *Songs of a Black Bird* and *How I Got Ovah* appear to be diametrically opposed in relation to their encounters with Afrocentric spirituality. The speakers in *Songs of a Black Bird* reject Christianity as a solely Eurocentric construction, one which has shackled the minds of black people like slavery's chains. However, the idioms that Rodgers employs to describe Afrocentric spiritual experiences outside of the realm of Christianity parallel that of the black church tradition. In an interview with fellow poet Mari Evans, Rodgers informs, "In terms of style, I like to be as modern as I am traditional, thus combining the two" (Rodgers, "Amen" 373). Throughout the book, the "bridge" of the black church is held up by sturdy black mothers; believing male figures are conspicuously absent in the collection. Even through the antagonistic rhetoric, Rodgers manages to convey a sense of respect for the mother who is "religiously girdled in/ her god" (Rodgers, *Song* 12).

How I Got Ovah, published in 1974, combines new poems with those previously printed in *Songs*, but its arrangement, "sense, touch, and feeling" situates the repeated poems in a separate consciousness (Rodgers, *Ovah* xi). In this collection, that same religion is analyzed with less hostility and is imputed African-American characteristics that reflect the Black Arts Movement (BAM) tendency to transcribe black speech onto poetry. Women again appear as a leading subject in relation to Christianity, especially in the female personas that populate Rodgers's poetry; but the female persona also comprises the young revolutionary black woman in *How I Got Ovah*. Both collections are, however, consistent in their (re)visioning of Christianity apart from the constricted Black Arts Movement viewpoint. The cognitive transformations visible in these works lead to a broader understanding of the spiritual impact it has on the black community, and consequently produce a greater affinity with Christianity. Instead of dismissing the religion and using it to "blow down [...] Christs," they point out characteristics of its Afrocentricity: the centrality of the community, respect for tradition, a high level spirituality, and the veneration of ancestors (Delegall 278). In this chapter, I argue that, through language that employs religious imagery and use of the vernacular, the poetry in both

Songs of a Black Bird and *How I Got Ovah* applies the new revolutionary definition of blackness to Christianity, and places the black woman as essential to this Afrocentric spiritual experience.

When Rodgers published her third collection of poetry, *Songs of a Black Bird* in 1969, the BAM was still relatively in its infancy; LeRoi Jones had become Imamu Ameer/ Amiri Baraka only four years before, and poems were still being published about Malcolm X's assassination. However, by then, writers and theorists within the group had already moved toward defining a Black Aesthetic that put black culture and politics at the center of acceptable black literature and art. Aligned with the Black Power Movement, the BAM observed a drastic move away from the integrationist policies of the Civil Rights Movement and held derision for those who still supported it. Along with this paradigm shift came the embracing of the word "Black" as a description for African-Americans, and the rejection of the designation "Negro."

The Black Arts Movement had more than one avowed enemy; they vehemently opposed not only the white establishment, but also Negroes, black people who desired to integrate with the mainstream. June Jordan's poem "Okay 'Negroes'" exemplifies the Movement's attitude of towards more conservative, predominantly Christian black people. The speaker demands, "Tell me where you got that image/ of a white male mammy. / God is vague and he don't take no sides" (Jordan 243). Here, Jordan positions God (the white male mammy) in a role that belies the effectiveness of spirituals that proclaimed black worshipers as God's people or children. Christianity, then, became known as a religion accepted by Negroes who found no problem in worshipping a "white Jesus." James A. Emmanuel notes that, after the initial onset of Black Nationalist writers, "The Church, which has recently suffered from the disaffection of Young Blacks, has been scored as an institution that encourages racism" (198). Significantly, many of the major authors would have had some interaction with the black church, and would therefore be familiar with its traditions, songs, and phrases. In this vein, Rodgers's initial presentation of Christianity as a *Negro* mother's religion falls in line with that of her colleagues.

However, by the time of the BAM's waning in 1975,⁷ a number of writers in the movement had shifted their political and spiritual alliances. Amiri Baraka moved from Black Nationalism to staunch Marxism, Sonia Sanchez left the Nation of Islam, and Carolyn Rodgers began writing poetry that reflected a new understanding of the role the black church had played in the formation of the existent black community. Angela Jackson, former Chair of the Organization of Black American Culture Writers' Workshop (OBAC, of which Rodgers was a

member), writes in the poem/foreword to *How I Got Ovah*, that “the painstruck girl of ‘songs of a black bird’ / has been transformed” (viv). What Jackson does not say is that Rodgers is also, in a sense, transforming two opposing views of Christianity and (re)visioning the religion into the newer image of Blackness. The personas, in a sense, do not abandon the Movement’s political and spiritual base, but instead use Christianity to negotiate the congruencies between one form of Afrocentric spirituality and another. Even so, the explicit acceptance of the religion automatically sets Rodgers at odds with the ideological stances of her revolutionary counterparts. Much of the poetry is woman-centric in that it sets black women at the center of a dialogue on spirituality that includes belief in Jesus. Angilene Jamison aptly notes, “There are no earth mothers or African queens or matriarchs in her poetry; instead there are real women struggling to make sense of their past and present” (378-379). Certainly, the Christianity with which Rodgers is dealing is that of the Africanized black church, and therefore contains Africanized traditions in and of itself. The author shows this awareness in poems such as “and when the revolution came,” and “mama’s God,” which point out the communal aspects of the church.

Parts of the introduction of *Songs of a Black Bird* by editor David Llorens hint at Carolyn Rodgers’s navigation between her femininity, blackness, and spirituality. Llorens’s masculinist approach to introducing the poet almost reads as an apology, quite reminiscent of eighteenth-century male editors who would validate female authors to a general audience through a preface or foreword. The tone of the piece alternates between uncertainty and justification. He first stipulates that Rodgers needs no introduction, and describes his role as presenting “Black Woman.” His use of the monolithic term defies the efforts of black women writers to state their unique black womanhood, as opposed to fulfilling a preconceived mold of the ideal Black Woman.⁶ Most troubling is his choice of words and actions toward Black Woman; he observes, “[introducing] ain’t so simple as hittin her, hatin her or lovin her, none of which is, finally, so simple” (Llorens 7). Perhaps Llorens places physical violence at the forefront to indicate its cheap facility as a solution to conflict; but he negates his own acknowledgment by saying that none of the previously mentioned actions are simple. Thus, it is unclear whether or not the reader is to understand his list of recourses as descending or ascending.

Later, in the introduction, he explains a clash at an OBAC Workshop, where “‘revolutionary’ brothers” had warned him against interacting with her (Llorens 8). Llorens, as an editor at *Negro Digest*, was influential in publishing new writers such as Nikki Giovanni;⁷ in

the tight network of BAM writers, a notorious reputation could cost authors associations and potential opportunities for publication. But Rodgers's talent apparently outweighed the bad report, and Llorens affirms that Rodgers "lets that woman thing fly at no risk to her revolutionary identity" (7). He appears to recognize a separation between a revolutionary black identity and femininity, but markedly places her status as a woman behind that of a revolutionary. In this viewpoint, concentrating primarily on women's issues—or criticizing black men—could be construed as threatening to the proper identity of a black female revolutionary. The almost pejorative phrasing of "that woman thing" locates him as an Other outside of that particular grouping, despite his insistence on Rodgers's poetry as universal to the black community. Llorens's ultimate achievement in his introduction was to delineate Rodgers's position within a precarious space between blackness and a spirituality that emphasized her identity as a woman.

As a whole, *Songs of a Black Bird* reads as a work that can rightfully be included within the spiritual directive for the Black Aesthetic. Poems like "Plagiarism for a Trite Love Pome," "For Sistuhs Wearin Straight Hair," "Greek Crazeology," and "For H.W. Fuller," reinforce three major politico-aesthetic trends common in BAM poetry: affirmation of the (romantic) need for black males/ black females, disapproval for "Negroes" entrapped within the Eurocentric value system and aesthetic, and praise for/ acknowledgment of prominent BAM writers and mentors. Other pieces in the collection deal directly with the problems between the two sexes; namely, "Non-Poem" boldly tells black men that calling black women "sistuh" will not gain him access to her "porkchops/ purse or/ pussy" (ll. 5-7). Although this type of poem departs from the masculinist standpoint to address an issue pertinent to women, Rodgers is in company with poets such as Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, June Jordan, and Nikki Giovanni, who also wrote similar woman-centered poetry.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the collection is the group of poems that dialogically address the "seemingly dichotomous entities of black life" (Sales 74). Rodgers's treatment of Christianity within her poetry is singular because, instead of simply appointing the image of the "white Christ" as the signifier for the religion, she gives it a black representative: often the persona's mother. In keeping with the lyrics of spirituals and black hymns, she consistently refers to either "God" or "Jesus," rather than naming "Christ." Professor Bettye J. Parker-Smith remarks, "Religion is more than a metaphor in her poetry. To Rodgers, her mother was, in some ways, like God—strong and omnipotent. She had walked the waters, fed the sick,

and, for someone who had ‘cut uh slave’ the way she had, she may also have been able to raise the dead” (400).

Songs of a Black Bird begins with two of her most widely-anthologized poems, “Jesus Was Crucified, or, It Must be Deep (an epic pome)” and “It Is Deep,” which showcase two comparable conversations between the speaker and her mother. In the first poem, the daughter is sick, and her mother calls to offer sympathy. Most of the poem shuttles back and forth, with the black revolutionary countering each platitude that the religious mother offers. Both Parker-Smith and Sales have noted the mother’s implying that her daughter’s illness is not merely physical, but psychological. Cynically, the daughter recognizes a hidden mission behind the call:

i was sick, but what
she wanted tuh tell
me was that I shud pray or
have her (hunky) preacher
pray for me.
(ll. 5-9).

Rodgers skillfully formulates the narration in such a way that the mother appears to be rushing through the pleasantries to proselytize her daughter. The only identifiable occasion when she alludes to Christianity as a white construction in this poem is her description of the mother’s pastor as a “(hunky) preacher.” Given that the overwhelming majority of Rodgers’s poetry about the church deals with the black church—and the lingering segregation of black and white churches during the 1960’s—it is uncertain whether or not the speaker truly means that her mother’s preacher is white, or if she is merely signifying. The narrator signifies on her mother a few lines later, when the elder woman insists that the sickness resides in her daughter’s mind. Her reply, “yes, i was aware a lot,” insinuates that her Negro mother, as a Christian, is not conscious (l. 18). Here, Rodgers continues to frame the conflict between “enlightened” Black revolutionaries and “unenlightened” Negroes. The daughter repeats the mother’s phrase “negroes ain’t readi”; but where the mother means that Negroes were not ready to accept white people as good, the speaker is implying that Negroes, as ideologically regressive blacks, were not ready for the revolution (l. 41). The daughter does profess some spirituality when her mother asks her if she prays. The young woman replies, “sorta when i hear Coltrane,” and shows the influence of spiritual jazz by John Coltrane (l. 60). This, of course, is not what her mother was expecting, and the banter continues.

In spite of the unresolved differences, the mother proffers her support at the end of the conversation, proving to remain the “bridge” on which the daughter has crossed over. Sales identifies Rodgers’s “bridges” as being her parents, Christianity, and her community, her own voice, and her recognition of her ancestral roots (74). Rodgers aligns the mother’s religiosity with Jesus himself, writing, “catch yuh later on jesus, i mean motha!” (l. 88). In this way, she offers a second reading of the title’s meaning; if the daughter symbolically equates her mother with Jesus, then “Jesus Was Crucified” may allude not only to the Crucifixion, but also to the racist persecution of a black woman who has to practically extort her pension from the Social Security Board. Toward the end of the piece, Rodgers recognizes the profundity of the black mother’s belief in Christianity with her emphasis and positioning of the phrase “it [the truth] must be d/ eeeep” (ll. 89-90). The persona cannot separate her mother’s Christianity from the mother herself, and, in effect, the religion undertakes the face of a black woman.

Despite the signifying and ironic statements, the persona demonstrates a respect for her mother’s beliefs that carries over into the next poem, “It Is Deep (don’t never forget the bridge that you crossed over on).” The title derives from the line in the previous poem “Jesus Was Crucified.” “It Is Deep” slightly resembles its preceding companion piece; there is less conversation, but a face-to-face meeting that begins with another telephone call. The “conversant quality” of Rodgers’s works allows her to explore dichotomies through imagined dialogue (Sales 75). In both poems, the mother is the caller, still reaching out to her daughter and stretching out like a “sturdy black bridge” (l. 45). Significantly, there is little vocalized acknowledgment of the spirituality necessary to sustain such a belief, solely the negative connotation of religion. Rodgers refers to the mother as “religiously girdled in/ her god” and “religious-negro,” reinforcing not only the equivalence and indistinguishable connection of the black woman to her religion, but also the idea of Christianity as a construct that limits her; a girdle encircles *and* confines. She reconstructs the dichotomy between Negro and Black when the narrator recalls her mother’s objection “when I talk about Black as anything/ other than something ugly to kill it befo it grows” (ll. 24-25). The poem as a whole features less of the revolutionary persona, but instead centers on the mother’s trials in order to underline her strength. It closes with a touching tribute to black motherhood:

My mother, religious-negro, proud of
having waded through a storm, is very obviously,
a sturdy Black bridge that I

crossed over, on.
(ll. 43-46)

The speaker calls her mother a “Black bridge,” which contradicts—if not amends—the appellation “religious-negro”; even though the older woman would not call herself “black,” her daughter feels as if she merits the title because of her tenacity. In an almost circular fashion, the last two lines of the poem hearken back to the subtitle “don’t never forget the bridge that you crossed over on.” The persona demonstrates, through the Akan principle of Sankofa, her own Afrocentric spirituality by her observance of the necessary respect for tradition and her veneration for her mother, notwithstanding their differences (Mazama 9). She understands that her mother’s Negro past is equally as important as her own Black future.

Another poem that exemplifies Rodgers’s marriage of BAM ideology with the customs of the black church is “Love—The Beginning and the End.” This piece primarily falls in the category of poems that praise and promote black male/black female romantic relationships. However, the poet, in urging black people to move within each other, uses spiritual language associated with Christianity to drive her argument home. The narrator admonishes, “[Black Man and Black Woman] / have not/ explored the Black Holy Ghost of spiritual feeling” (ll. 4, 8-9). Rodgers attempts to distinguish the universal meaning of the “Holy Ghost” from her intended Afrocentric connotation by the insertion of the word “Black” in front of it. Again combining the “modern” with the “traditional,” this placement, like that of the previously discussed poem, highlights the apparent ability of blackness to absorb and transform negative constructs into affirmative implications. Furthermore, the repetition of synonymous phrases “*intra means within*” “-gether,” and “into/in” alert the reader to Rodgers’s metaphoric juxtaposition of the relationship of black lovers to a believer’s relationship with the Holy Spirit. The poet’s positioning of the Black Holy Ghost in this poem showcases her intimate knowledge of Christian doctrine; after salvation, the invisible Holy Spirit is said to indwell within the new believer. Through phrasing that can be interpreted as sexually suggestive, the speaker commands the Black Man:

move into a Woman, Black Man move
her/us, rush into her
scatter your seeds, plant your dreams
in her
(ll. 13-16).

She describes the “Black Holy Ghost of *spiritual* feeling,” albeit a spiritual feeling that encourages the ordained procreation of black revolutionaries. The narrator’s final word in the poem is “Revolution,” thereby identifying revolution as the appropriate result (the offspring) of the seed the Black Man has planted inside the Black Woman. Notably, the black man is told to carry out a progressive action, but the black female is simply advised to open herself. The persona advises Black Woman, “[...] open & bare your/ softest fear, your nakedest secret” (ll. 20-21). Rodgers, here, returns to the dominant, masculinist Black Arts Movement vision of passive black women (sexually) beneath men. Cheryl Clarke asserts, “[T]he new blackness demanded sexual submissiveness from women” (71). Still, the poet’s imagination remains faithful to the metaphor, as the individual members of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost/ Spirit) are usually referred to with masculine pronouns. Additionally, the “spiritual feeling” she mentions is reminiscent of the Pentecostal Christian practice of “catching the Holy Ghost,” which, like the poem’s narrator, motivates the individual to “move” with emotion. The Black Holy Ghost appears in just one line in this poem, but Rodgers’s use of the term, and its central place in the poem’s meaning, works to subvert the simplistic notion of Christianity as a “Negro” concept.

These three poems constitute the major examples of Carolyn Rodgers’s treatment of Christianity, but she also incorporates various symbols of the religion into her poetry in less essential ways. Her poem “5 Winos” illustrates a woman’s observation of five singing men outside her apartment window. The men, who are “sitting on the stone gray church steps/ cupped in expensive shrubbery and lilac” (ll. 1-2), attempt to “croon” like the R&B group The Temptations. The poet concentrates on depicting the men, but she has deliberately situated an impromptu performance of black secular music outside the walls of the church. Metaphorically, this juxtaposition collectively locates the men, and the observer who is singing with them, on the exterior. However their secular location, the result of the men’s singing is “the most carefully/ constructed a-melodic coltrane psalm” (ll. 29-30). The word “psalm” is used here to connote that their song has spirituality—black like Coltrane—that comfortably exists outside of the stone gray church. Additionally, “5 Winos,” which is an excellent example of Rodgers’s talent for bringing to life scenes in black neighborhoods, also lends itself to the book’s overall sense that the personas are sited both within and without the Christian religion.

The five-year span between *Songs of a Black Bird* and *How I Got Ovah* represents the second ideological shift associated with the BAM. The ostensibly abrupt transformation

between the two collections parallels Carolyn Rodgers's personal activities. Parker-Smith reveals: "At this point, Rodgers moved away from Third World Press, the publisher that accommodated most of the OBAC writers and which published her first three volumes, to a larger commercial publishing house. She also broke, it seems, abrasively with OBAC" (397). As in *Songs of a Black Bird*, the front matter of *How I Got Ovah* serves to situate the poetry and provide a perspective for its contents. Poet Angela Jackson wrote a telling poem as the foreword; she apparently understood where the author rooted the work. The foreword is riddled with references from the black church. Jesus (neither white nor black) is not mentioned, but Rodgers is praised in a number of ways that locate her in the black streets and the church simultaneously. Whereas the previous book associated the black (Negro) mother with the church, Jackson's poem now testifies, "[Rodgers] remind u of the church" (viv). This testimony foreshadows the proliferation of black *Christian* women in the book, not necessarily representative of the author herself, but certainly indicative of the relationship between black women's spirituality and the church. Particularly, Jackson's idiomatic expressions set the tone for the author's own continued, widespread usage of black church vernacular. Despite the intensification of her analysis of Christianity, the poet's focus on the twin concepts of blackness and revolution do not waver. In her insightful article on Rodgers's body of work, Parker-Smith states, "While it is impossible to separate the poet's new attitude toward religion from her attitude toward revolution (the one seems to have evoked the other), they have converged to assist her in her continuous search for 'self'" (407). The foreword/poem additionally maintains and re-establishes Rodgers, after her literary absence and apparent defection from Black Nationalism, as a rightful poet-priestess in the vein of the BAM. It proclaims, "her eye is seeing holy/ [...] she a witness. humming her people/ to the promise/d land" (Jackson viv). As a now "sanctified" poet with holy vision, Rodgers is more fully prepared to act as a spiritual leader in the realm of poetry. Scholar Judylyn Ryan's explanation of Afrocentric cosmological spirituality in black women's literature includes a classification of artists as theologians, priestesses, and theorists (11). Supported by Jackson's appropriate positioning, Rodgers's (re)visioning of Christianity as a partner of— rather than a hindrance to— the new radical blackness settles comfortably into context.

Rodgers's own "Author's Note" at the beginning of *How I Got Ovah* also reinforces the titular message of the book. Ostensibly addressing those who would criticize her book's spiritual

location, she asserts, “When a book is finally published, an author is very likely to have changed his style and his mind. [...] Still, a person does not wish to offer apologies for where she or he was. For certainly where one has been makes where one is more meaningful” (Rodgers, *Ovah* xi). Indeed, the phrase “how I got ovah” indicates the commencement of a testimony that consists of both a telling of where the witness was, and also where the witness is currently located. The black vernacular word “ovah” signifies both a crossing of an obstacle and the completion of a passage. As Rodgers affirms, the testimonies would be invalid if either account of the journey was omitted. Estella M. Sales notes of the phrase, “The meaning of the recurring expression is generally defined by its contextual usage and can be appropriately connotative of how one has triumphed spiritually; how one has overcome worldly hardships; how one has outwitted his adversary; or merely how one has swindled his loved ones” (Sales 74). Rodgers carefully insists on the needlessness of an apology in order to retain the validity of her statement, and thus prepares the reader to receive the black spiritual narrative of “how I got ovah.”

Unlike *Songs of a Black Bird*, *How I Got Ovah* contains a greater number of poems that explore spirituality, but it is in many ways a logical continuation of the preceding book. Rodgers does not abandon her realistic portraits of black neighborhoods and their inhabitants, and she also resumes her conversation on romantic relationships. However, the most dominant theme in the newer book involves the spiritual struggle of overcoming one’s trials, and what ensues once the storm has passed. The image of water appears in many of the pieces, performing binary spiritual functions: that of an endangering force and a cleansing and purifying agent. Most importantly, *How I Got Ovah* reveals a spirituality that emanates from the black self, coupled with an adaptation of Christianity that partially integrates the black revolutionary ideology of *Songs of a Black Bird*.

The beginning of the collection places the reader on the other side of an odyssey where the sojourner glances back, commencing, this time, with a poem “for muh’ dear” and stating in the second poem, “i have changed so much in this world.” And immediately following this declaration of change, the third and title poem, “how i got ovah,” fulfills the metaphoric association of emotional trials with violent water storms. While she does not overly use the vernacular, (the phrase “how I got ovah” does not expressly appear), Rodgers invokes an oral quality through the stated preface to the testimony: “I can tell you.” Almost as if responding to an unheard prompt, the narrator begins, “I can tell you/ about them [rivers]” (ll. 1-2). The

speaker is volunteering to be a witness to the struggles she has endured. The next lines, “I have shaken rivers/ out of my eyes,” may signify the end of a submersion, in addition to the cessation of weeping (ll. 3-4). The inundation of this piece with water imagery signals not only a successful fording, but also a spiritual baptism and even resurrection. The rigorous nature of crossing demoralized her to the point where she wanted to “sink down/ and float as water” and wish for her own death (ll. 26-27). But she does not drown. Perhaps the most striking and beautiful depiction of the narrator’s journey occurs when she tells who offered her succor: her ancestors. She says:

[I] have kneeled on the banks
and kissed my ancestors of the dirt
whose rich dark root fingers rose up reached out
grabbed and pulled me rocked cupped me
[...] carried me
(ll. 16-19, 21).

The author’s recognition of “ancestral roots” recalls the Afrocentric spiritual credence in the agency of non-living relatives. Anthropologist Janheinz Jahn, author of *Muntu*, thoroughly explores aspects of African philosophy and religion, cosmology, African diasporic literature, and African tribal traditions. In regards to the relationship of ancestor to descendant, he surmises, “As spiritual force, the dead man, the ancestor, is in communication with his descendants. He can [...] ‘let his ‘life force’ work on his descendants’ (109). Rodgers herself recognizes the position of the ancestors in spiritual writings. She writes in her 1969 article “Black Poetry - Where It's At” that a “spaced poem,” which expresses an “inner calm” subsequent to “shoutin poems,” “becomes [...] a mystical and positive way of looking at the Black man’s relationship to the universe” (9). She further states that this type of poem “returns to the spiritual wisdom of our Egyptian African forefathers. Returns to the natural laws, the natural state of man [...]. Spaced poems say that our ancestors are in the air and will communicate with us” (10). By Rodgers’s own creative definition, “how i got ovah” qualifies as a “spaced poem.” The ancestors reach for their daughter from the rich, dark soil in the case of “how i got ovah,” but the implications are identical. Through the continuous interaction of reaching, they perform the mothering tasks of comforting her and carrying her for a portion of her journey. The poem concludes with a restatement of “i have shaken rivers/ out of my eyes,” putting emphasis on the speaker’s validity to give evidence of how to get over, as the rivers are no longer flooding her eyes. With this sense of clarified vision, the persona is then able to lead others as a spiritual authority.

The next two poems that focus specifically on spiritual location are the recurring “Jesus Was Crucified” and “It Is Deep.” As I stated earlier, the effect of these pieces changes slightly because of the context of the collection as a whole; rather than standing as a repetition of old favorites, they also contribute to the theme and overall meaning of the book, marking the author’s good judgment in including them. Because they are companion poems, the juxtaposition of “it must be/ deeeep” (the last lines in “Jesus Was Crucified”), and the title “It Is Deep” evokes a feeling of affirmation, as if the persona has come to a conclusive agreement with her past self. In the framework of *How I Got Ovah*, the latter piece functions as a reinforcement of the water imagery in the title poem. Recall that the speaker identifies her mother as “proud of/ having waded through a storm,” and recognizes her as central to the process of crossing over. The mother has probably “shaken rivers out of her eyes” as well, and stands with the ancestors to aid in the passage of those who still need to cross.

Later in the collection, Rodgers places herself as the subject of spiritual change in “Some Me of Beauty.” The persona disavows all hatred for any (white) people, and recalls suddenly noticing that her mother’s hair was gray. The seemingly overnight aging of her mother sparks her own reflection. She describes herself as looking into a mirror one day and seeing “carolyn/ not imani ma jua or soul sister poetess of/ the moment,” as if she had not been herself for a long period of time prior to this reawakening (ll. 18-20). This introspective search for self involves an awareness of the numerous communities to which she belongs, and thus relays a sense of vulnerability. She admits, “I saw more than a ‘sister’.../ I saw a Woman. human./ and black” (ll. 21-23). Even though her blackness is still central to her self-definition, it is only after this realization of herself as more than the Movement’s “sistuh” that she can change. The speaker undergoes “a spiritual transformation/ a root revival of love” (ll. 24-25). This Afrocentric spiritual conversion relies on the concept of the aforementioned root of love, a place from which the individual can grow. Mazama states, “The concept of center [...] is fundamentally based on the belief that one’s history, culture, and biology determine one’s identity” (25). Therefore, Rodgers’s poetic likeness must acknowledge all of her selves in order to become rooted as an individual. The “me of beauty” stems from the acceptance that “many things/ were *over*,” and the understanding that she had to abandon those things in order to get over (ll. 26-27; emphasis added.) According to Judylyn Ryan, black women must, of necessity, reconcile their own spiritualities in order to form strong relationships with the larger community (10). From the

water of storms and the earth on the other side, Rodgers creates a fertile ground in which to plant her persona.

The majority of *How I Got Ovah* scrutinizes life and spirituality from an ostensibly female perspective, but two of Rodgers's poems sensitively explore a black male's point of view. "This Is No Promised Land" continues the quasi-Biblical theme of exodus and arrival, but this time features a man as the subject, with an unnamed narrator recounts his journey toward self-knowledge. Notably, near the end of the poem, the speaker includes (her)self in the passage, relating, "we ride over the rough waves and/ come to hills on dry land" (ll. 25-26). The water is again representative of tribulations, but this time, the narrator tells what the other side is like. Dissimilar from the welcoming dirt of the ancestors, the dry land here proves to be disappointing to the pair; as the title of the poem suggests, "this is no promised land." The pessimistic ending presents an ominous alternative to the safety implied after the traveler has gotten "ovah."

In "For Our Fathers," Rodgers directs the reverential manner that she adopted towards mothers in "Some Me of Beauty" and "It Is Deep" toward the elderly fathers of her rebellious generation. The poem relates the story of a black father's passage from South to North during the Great Migration, and illustrates his transformation from hopeful to disillusioned in the face of North's unexpected harshness. He is "a prayer, a jitterbug hymn and a collard/ cornbread sweet potato/ green country psalm" that his daughter sings with loving attention and hero-worship, delineating his southern background with healthy helpings of soul food (ll. 4-5). And, much like a prayer orated by a southern preacher, the poem is replete with Biblical references and idiomatic phrases. As in a previous poem where men belted out a "coltrane psalm," the poet's metaphoric (re)visioning of black people as religious songs (hymn and psalm) connotes both praise for the individual and recognition of the musical form as a bearer of spiritual meaning. Watching her father at her brother's funeral, the narrator describes him, "I saw the Jesus in my father's hands, saw the wino in his/ feet turned out like shuffle, saw the doctor, lawyer, preacher/ in his face [...]" (ll. 97-99). Consistently, the naming of Jesus in Rodgers's poems represents not the literal Son of the Christian God, but a trope in which she imputes God-like characteristics to black people. For the speaker, seeing "the Jesus" in her father's hands implies a holy strength that transforms him from tired day laborer to doctor, lawyer and preacher. But while she commends her father, who stands for all black men in this poem, she censures herself and other proud revolutionaries for neglecting to respect their elders. She laments:

we stripped ourselves of our heritage, of tradition,
of the strength of old wise men who were our cushions of love,
who gave us extravagant care, who were our rocks
in this weary land
(ll. 83-86).

She rewrites the old hymn that declares “Jesus is a rock in a weary land” and replaces Jesus with the fathers of her community to emphasize their importance. Although Rodgers’s application of Christian symbolism differs from that of her literary peers in the BAM, her writing is yet informed by their aesthetic ideas for poetry. Larry Neal, in his plotting of the various mythological elements of a Black Aesthetic, included “Jesus as somebody you might know, like a personal deity” along with African Orishas and ancestors (13). Neal’s statement accurately describes the interchangeability of familial characters for Jesus in the preceding poems. Neal’s concept of a “personal deity” parallels the African credence in the importance of ancestors that guide individuals; thus, Rodgers’s association of black mothers and fathers with characteristics of Jesus contains dual spiritual meaning. The narrator closes with an express statement of the poem’s underlying tone. In the vein of many Black Arts writings, she sends out an appeal to all black people; but instead of joining the revolution, she wants them to *love* their forebears. Her last hailing stems unmistakably from the “spiritual transformation” and “root revival of love” depicted earlier in “how i got ovah,” as the majority of the following poems discuss love as a solution to the problems in the black community.

The remainder of the book overtly attempts to demonstrate that while younger revolutionaries sought to create a new black aesthetic centered on spirituality, the people they derisively called (Christian) Negroes already possessed a sense of their own blackness. Thematically, Rodgers continues her endeavors to “embarrass the ugly” in revolutionaries and remind them to respect the people from whence they came (Jackson *viv*). She first targets the mindset of those who would attribute an intrinsic whiteness to Christianity. Her poem “mama’s God” aims to redefine revolutionaries’ vision of Jesus with its initial announcements, “mama’s God never was no white man. / her My Jesus, Sweet Jesus never was neither” (ll. 1-2). Rather, she indicates that her mama’s God is the color of spirit. The God discussed in this poem is, notably, associated with a mother figure, which further solidifies the book’s view of black women’s inseparability to Afrocentric Christian spirituality. Over the next few lines, the speaker rationalizes that her mother’s God cannot be white because there was no evidence of racist

spiritual discrimination. Rodgers's pointed usage of black vernacular animates the poem's voice and, although the persona identifies herself as the daughter, transposes the mother's tone onto the younger woman's speech. The narrator insists that the God her mother prayed to "didn't and ain't got/ no color" (9-10). Such a declaration is in direct opposition to ideology that proclaimed that Jesus was white; the speaker is here showing a definitive break with those who positioned Christianity in dichotomous black and white terms.

The subsequent piece in the group of strongly religious poems combines black revolutionary vernacular with a focus on Christian spirituality. In "Jesus must have been some kind of dude," Rodgers's (re)visioning of Jesus as a "revolutionary cat" and "militant dude," although radical, is by no means singular in the context of a time that desired to transpose the image of blackness onto religion (ll. 22-23).⁸ Even though the previous poem asserts that mama's Jesus has no color, the author certainly uses black language to describe him, coloring, if not Jesus' skin, at least his characteristics black. The speaker sassily claims:

Jesus must have been
some kind of dude [...]
I think he whipped game on em
though
cause he strutted on up and out
again
(ll. 1-2, 5-8).

As Sales indicates, "whipping game" on opponents constitutes a portion of getting over troubles, and Jesus' "strutting on up and out" of the grave qualifies in the speaker's eyes as praiseworthy. Through Rodgers's careful phrasing, the witness of Jesus' miracles and triumphs easily blends in with a collective poetic narrative that details "how I got ovah." Although it is phrased as a monologue, the mixture of Biblical storytelling and slang locates this potential dialogue outside the more traditional language of the church. Furthermore, Sales appropriately points out that Rodgers fuses the "amen corner and the street corner" in a manner that reconciles both sites of blackness through their commonality (76). (Re)visioning Christian theology in modern blackness, she adds, "And Jesus had a boss black natural too/ they say it was natural like lambs wool," using the image of the ubiquitous Afro in relation to the Daniel 7:9 reference (ll. 28-29). Rodgers subsequently returns to the root of love and further positions herself outside the normative—albeit waning—BAM viewpoint of aggressive, exclusionary Nationalism. Moreover, she makes an atypical reference to Malcolm X's universalist politics *after* his

pilgrimage to Mecca and conversion from the Nation of Islam to Sunni Islam. Putting him in company with other assassinated leaders Martin Luther King, Jr. and Medgar Evers, she instructs black men to be “be like martin/ a love rock like Jesus/ be like malcolm was be-coming” (ll. 49-51). Because Malcolm was assassinated at the onset of his shift from Pan-African philosophy, she notes that he was “be-coming” and implies that he would have completed his spiritual transformation otherwise.

One of Rodgers’s most expertly written poems in terms of imagery and language is the ironic piece “and when the revolution came.” The title gives the impression that, because revolution is primarily associated with the younger black generation, the poem will discuss the changes that the revolutionaries have effectuated in the community. In actuality, this dialogic poem adopts the voices of both black revolutionaries and church members in an argument where the church people consistently get the last word. Rodgers effortlessly captures the forcefulness of militancy: “niggers wake up/ you got to comb yo hair/ the natural way” (ll. 3-5). Short words and lines, combined with the punch of “nigger,” recreate the sense of striking, offensive verbal communication. Among other things, the revolutionaries attempt to revise their parents’ food, dress, and spirituality, claiming that they must relinquish their Christianity, “cause that’s the white man’s religion” (l. 41). The church folks’ rejoinders are the powerful, wordless choruses of spiritual congregations: “sho’ nuff, uh hummmm, well well” (ll. 6, 32, 42). Indeed, the poem’s strength lies in the ways it showcases the richness of black vernacular that belongs to two distinct subgroups of black society. Despite the explicit challenges and commands, the church members manage to effectively ignore their self-appointed adversaries and continue on with their usual activities. However, once the revolution actually comes, the revolutionaries look around and notice the visible aggregation of institutions constructed by the same church folks they had reviled. The Christians then respond:

we been waiting fo you militants
to realize that the church is an eternal rock
now why don’t you militants jest come on in [...]
we can show you how to build
 anything that needs building
and while we’re on our knees, at that.
(ll. 55-57, 59-61).

Rodgers cleverly evinces the Afrocentric valuing of communalism inherent within the black church, realizing that these same traits are desirable among the illustrated revolutionaries.

Notably, I do not believe that she is abandoning the idea of revolution itself; rather, as her persona Joe suggested in the poem “The Revolution is Resting,” she has merely changed and tightened her strategy (ll. 23). Her recurring use of the concrete words “root” and “rock” in tandem with the abstract concept of love presages the attitude of the “church folks” as they then welcome the revolutionaries into the buildings for which they worked. Finally, their offer to teach the younger generation what they learned, in lieu of proselytizing, makes plain their willingness to contribute to the longevity of the black community—revolution included—despite differences.

Carolyn Rodgers, over the course of five years and two poetry collections, firmly establishes her position as a dynamic writer of the Black Arts Movement with her insightful interrogation of spirituality. She has deftly negotiated the spaces between black revolutionary philosophy and Christianity, not discarding either viewpoint offhand, but merging them to produce an alternative that yet qualifies as an expression of revolutionary blackness and spiritual transformation. *Songs of a Blackbird* takes the first step in exploring the ethos of connectedness between these two ostensibly separated groups, paying homage to black mothers for their roles in carrying families on their backs.⁹ Although the later collection is titled *How I Got Ovah*, she actually carries the reader with her; her stated purpose is to “bring you across the bridge our/ blood and bones create” and to restore the black community as a whole from its fragmentations (ll. 58-59). Empowering herself by adopting an outlook that acknowledges her powerful black, female and spiritual selves, the last speaking narrator appropriately concludes in “Living Water”:

i am surely a shout that can
shimmy right on up to heaven [...]
when i write
God has his hand on me
i am his little *black* slim ink pen.
(ll. 72-73, 75-77; emphasis added).

After consistently positioning other subjects as holy songs, the speaker has at last realized her own potential as a black shout of praise in her own right. Rodgers’s (re)visioning of Christianity leads to the conclusion that not only does the black church possess Afrocentricity, but also that it is adaptable to the progressive ideals of revolution.

CHAPTER 2

“WHAT I KNOW AND TOUCH”: WOMANIST IMAGES OF BLACK WOMEN’S SPIRITUAL BODIES

*who are you/ iden./
tify yourself. tell me your
worth amid women.*

--Sonia Sanchez

If black men were the ubiquitous faces of pan-African Nationalist movements during the 1960’s, then women writers like Ntozake Shange and Sonia Sanchez were most certainly the feet of the movement, propelling and organizing the direction of change in the literary black community across the country. These two women count among the most prolific African-American women poets who wrote during the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and their contributions certainly helped pave the way for burgeoning black feminist works in the late 1970’s. Set in the background of the women’s liberation movement, their poetry also spoke to women’s growing desire for self-definition, and sought to depict women on their own terms. Their commitment to Nationalism as a method of black unification, and their use of poetry as an activist art form, dictated that they discover ways to simultaneously promulgate the nationalist ideology of nation-building and build up women. Using theories of Afrocentric spirituality, this chapter analyzes the woman-centered images of black female bodies and spirits in Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, and Sanchez’s *I’ve Been a Woman*. Significantly, the titles of both books discussed in this study contain some reference to womanhood, and additionally allude to their race, underlining the importance of both categories being separate and distinct. Through the tropes of birth and rebirth, these poets reimagine black women in ways that depart from the predominant BAM viewpoint of female submission, emphasizing their multiplicity of roles as a spiritual woman (or colored girl), mother, sister, and daughter. Collectively, using the idea of *yere-wolo*, Shange and Sanchez demonstrate that before a woman can give birth to a nation, she must first be rooted and able to give birth to herself.

Retrospectively, it would be erroneously simple to categorize the relationships between black men and women writers during the Movement in dichotomous shades of either misogyny or love. Critics must also acknowledge the varying complexities within that rapport. David

Llorens states in the Introduction to Carolyn Rodgers' *Songs of a Black Bird* that no action or emotion is so simple when it comes to Black Woman. Black women were often treated as both subjects *and* larger-than-life objects in black men's poetry. Indeed, a considerable amount of the poetry written by men during the time extols women as queens and goddesses. Poet Yusef Rahman declares, "BLACK WOMAN/ when I probe to define beauty/ my heart's dictionary thumps your melody," and places his muse as the very definition of the Black Aesthetic (72). Larry Neal, one of the most eloquent and influential writer-activists during that period, describes black women as "exploding suns green yellow moons" (310). If nothing else, black males showed a profound trust in the strength and ability of black women to shield them from the perils they faced in a racist white society. Women were placed onto high pedestals of men's making, and perhaps that is where the aesthetic and cultural worship of women became more constrictive than empowering. As informed by their "brothers," they were expected to be the homemakers of the revolution, support the men's work and give birth to little revolutionaries. Writings that criticized sexist tendencies, or even imagined sexually free black women, were effectively marginalized. Amanda J. Davis aptly explains:

The pressure to silence what is difficult to hear and, perhaps even more so, to change, is certainly not unique to the black aesthetic that emerged during the period of black nationalism, but this pressure did come at a particularly crucial time, in which the very foundation of what it meant to forge a revolution and strive for liberation was being articulated. (49)

Scholars such as Barbara Christian and Cheryl Clarke have systematically examined masculinist tendencies of men in the BAM, accurately pointing out that theory without practice leads to narrow prescriptions. Within this restrictive role, black women could only exercise enough agency to make black men their "deepest concern," which left them little room to address the gender-based inequities that they themselves faced (Lockett 351).

Thus, it is not surprising that women would begin to work from within the Movement to change their own statuses, keeping in mind that black men were yet their beloved brothers but still needed to be "rapped to" concerning their visions of their sisters' roles in constructing the new black nation. Cherise Pollard points out that black women were "pulled between their allegiances to their race...and their own female identities" (179). She establishes the absence of female characteristics inherent in the Black Arts Movement, saying that male writers/theorists

“articulated black manhood through the pen, the gun, the penis, and the microphone” (Pollard 173). Many of the men regarded femininity as a risk to a revolutionary identity.¹⁰ Because the parallel movements of Black Power and Black Arts were directly associated with heterosexual *male* power, many women writers had to assume that language in order to be considered true revolutionaries by their counterparts. In a poem published in the *Black Panther* newspaper, Black Panther Party leader Elaine Brown threatens, “That this silence will end/ We’ll just have to get guns/ and be men” (qtd. in Jennings 117). Her direct association of power and blackness with maleness leaves little room for her to be a woman, as she includes women in the goal to “be men.” However, as I will later demonstrate, Shange and Sanchez write in such a way that connects the idea of black power and agency with black womanhood.

My method for engaging these two works incorporates the Afrocentric concepts of connected spirituality and physicality, the unearthing of self through *yere-wolo*, a womanist perspective toward nation-building, and the necessity of art in healing women. These woman-centered writings, as tied to the Black Arts ideals of pan-African spiritual writing, create new ways of interpreting Nationalist impulses. In an Afrocentric Nationalist culture righteously obsessed with the liberation of black people everywhere, women were caught in a double bind of love for black men and love for themselves. Molefi Kete Asante posits, “Afrocentricity liberates the African by establishing agency as the key concept for freedom. I am most free when I am most active on the basis of my own volition. Even if I am active and believe myself to be free under the will of another, I am not truly liberated” (50). Hence, according to this understanding of African-centered philosophy, black women who were subsumed beneath the male interpretation of blackness could not truly be liberated without establishing their own agency as women, separate from men. Poet Calvin Hernton demands in his salient article “The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers,” “How is one to meaningfully participate in the struggle between the races when one is the victim of subjugation within the race?” (144). This in turn begs the question: how did black women define and subsequently express the parameters of a womanhood that men were eager to delineate for them? One manner of reconciling their dual identities as black and female was to artistically envision themselves in a way that recognized their inherent value as women to the black community. They had to reclaim the aspects of their own bodies that had been appropriated by the mandate to literally bear black maleness, exalting the characteristics of black womanhood that were the complementary opposites of men’s

aggressive phallogentricity. Margo Natalie Crawford theorizes that black submissive womanhood became fetishized through the concept of black nationhood within the Black Power movement. Women were simultaneously sexualized and desexualized through their imagined roles as mothers of this new black nation. In terms of sexual roles ascribed to black women, Clarke notes that “celibacy is not possible, given the BAM prescription of procreation, with black women quickly becoming custodians of the revolution” (51). As the very site upon which the black nation would be built, women’s figurative bodies were as central to the Movement as their spirits. Because physical and spiritual well-being is inseparable within an Afrocentric epistemology, the logical progression was to recognize the spiritual divineness of black female bodies.

In the works of Shange and Sanchez, this self-reclamation first transpires through the establishment of a spiritual base from which the characters in their poetry can parse their black and female selves. In *Flash of the Spirit*, his influential exposition of African cultures, Robert Farris Thompson states, “[...] one masters something in the Mande world by stripping away the superficial covering, by discovering its inner and true nature, as in the poetic concept of *yere-wolo* (giving birth to yourself), in which a person finds his or her true self, his or her true essence” (196). Hence, by giving birth to themselves as black women, black women poets shed male-appointed definitions—or even erroneous self-appointed ones—and are free to accomplish activism in a way that is beneficial to them. This study argues that through this concept of *yere-wolo*, these women writers establish an Afrocentric spirituality that stems from self-knowledge, and position this transformation as essential to the establishment of a black nation. I also contend that, rather than disrupting the move toward black communalism, these women writers push for a stronger community by first attempting to remedy the injustices that women endure.

Furthermore, these works embody the meaning of Alice Walker’s designation “womanist,” published in her book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Infusing spirituality into womanist discourse is indispensable to the survival of black women because it functions as a “life-affirming ideology” in artists (Ryan 146). Walker describes a womanist thusly:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/ or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of

entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health.
(xi; emphasis author's)

There is a marked connection with an imagined (or, in Shange's case, quite real) community of women present within the two books of interest. Notably, a womanist's fight is for the continuity of her entire community, unless members of that communal group endanger her own life. If these woman-centered works do not align with normative BAM writings, perhaps it is of necessity. Shange's and Sanchez's poems qualify as womanist because of their concerns with the liberation of the black community as a unified entity, their exploration of healing via women's cultural production, and because they place the female self as central to either group's collective progress.

Like their male peers, black women poets saw themselves as the cultural and spiritual leaders of black America; therefore, the activist art they produced reflected purpose, as well as the awareness of self as an agent for change. Judylyn Ryan posits that in creating art, women become theologian, priestess, and theorist (11). In other words, as exercisers of creative force, women writers become the spiritual agent which enables their readers to undergo transformation. I add to Ryan's premise that in positioning themselves as creators, these women writers employ metaphor and imagery of their own sacred bodies, correlating their self-healing abilities with that of the divine. Davis astutely recognizes that black women's writings "continue to serve as a critical recentering and examination of violence against women and the challenges violence poses to women's attempts to achieve and maintain wholeness in a society where liberation itself is often gendered" (Davis 25). Ryan further notes that "as priestesses, Black women exercise righteous/creative agency by mediating between cultural/spiritual community, its oppressors, and divinities and/or ancestors" (Ryan 12). Her theory presents a viable means of approaching black women's poetry as a medium for spiritual agency outside the confines of Western religious philosophy. Likewise, in exercising a strength that places them as priestesses, the female personas presented in these books are able to negotiate between their respective identities.

The first book, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*, primarily searches the intersections between physicality and spirituality, as well as the tropes of rebirth and the ways in which art heals women. Ntozake Shange does much to situate her play within the background of Berkeley, California and Third World women's artistic productions around 1975. According to Shange, her work, including *for colored girls...*, stands as a woman's

examination of the knowledge of her body, both inside and out. She states that she writes “[...] to ferret out/ what i know & touch/ in a woman’s body” (i). Her use of the words “know” and “touch” indicate a twofold method of exploration: both spiritual and physical. The characters depicted in her choreopoem sense that their female bodies and spirits carry the potential to become more than what they are, and therefore embark on a journey to uncover their true essences through a recollection of their female histories. As they recount their stories, we learn that the majority of their encounters with physicality deal with outside limitations on and exploitations of black female sexuality, which in turn affects how they view their spirits. The author’s own realization of her body as a holy place additionally emerges as a main factor in the direction of the choreopoem. She explains in the foreword, “With the acceptance of the ethnicity of my thighs & backside, came a clearer understanding of my voice as a woman & as a poet” (xv). Shange indicates that the corporeal traits of her blackness (her thighs and backside) affect her production as a priestess-poet, which further underscores the importance of the connection between physical and metaphysical bodies in this play. She describes her dance training prior to the production of the play as “pulling ancient trampled spirits out of present tense Afro-American dance” (xvi). Shange undoubtedly reconstituted those same trampled spirits and breathed them into her play through dance.

Moreover, reading the play through a womanist lens facilitates an understanding of the impact that this self-realization has on women. The spirit of Walker’s adopted term, “womanish,” seeps through Shange’s poetic narrative, as the “colored girls” yearn to be *women* in ways that celebrate all possibilities of their femininity. From the bedrock of her personal childhood experience, Walker recalls the term womanish as “usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up” (xi; emphasis author’s). Being womanish, in essence, is a black folk term that describes a young woman’s awakening hunger for agency as portrayed in *for colored girls...* Walker’s third definition for a Womanist also accurately speaks to the importance of woman-centered activity in *for colored girls...* She explains that a womanist “loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*” (xii). To Walker, womanism, as a construct similar to black feminism, gives black women a space to freely and creatively love. Shange's play can be

interpreted as women's struggle to love themselves, regardless of circumstances, through the artistic media of music, dance, and the word. Carol Christ describes the choreopoem as "a quest for new being" (98). Specifically, in affirming their own spirits, the "colored girls" additionally become masters of their bodies and realize the divine within themselves.

A combined awareness of body and spirit is pervasive throughout the work, especially through the instrumental songs and dances the ladies perform. The characters use their dancing as a means of saving themselves, an outward motion with an inward result: "we gotta dance to keep from cryin / we gotta dance to keep from dyin" (*i'm a poet who*, ll. 23-24). Singing and dancing, prominent characteristics of worship, serve a medium for self-realization from the onset. Indeed, their songs and monologues can collectively be read as praise hymns, as one cohesive praise hymn, even, a manner of "righteous gospel" extolling their worth as black women (*dark phrases*, ll. 43). Shange immediately establishes the concept of self-knowledge as the ladies' motives for activity in the choreopoem. The lady in brown commences, early into the first monologue, "sing a black girl's song/ bring her out/ to know herself" (*dark phrases*, ll. 27-28). Because the women have been mired in devaluation for so long, they cannot grasp their intrinsic merit, and must look at themselves from the outside in order to clearly see. The "righteous gospel" is their song of inception, as the lady in brown chants, "let her be born/ let her be born/ and handled warmly" (*dark phrases*, ll. 45-47). Evoking the image of the birthing process, Shange positions the seven women as co-midwives who communally assist each other, and prepares for the labor pains associated with stripping away superficial ideas. Immediately following the invocation of birth, each woman locates herself *outside* of her given city, reinforcing the titular line of dedication, "& this is for colored girls who have considered/ suicide/ but have moved to the *ends* of their own/ rainbows" (*dark phrases*, ll. 55-56; emphasis mine). The "colored girls" are alienated from their inner selves in addition to their communities, and must remedy their internal wounds before they can reconnect with the society as a whole. As the play progresses, the women also recognize that the intersection of their femaleness and their blackness pose problems that transcend the surface of skin: "[...] bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma/I haven't conquered yet/do you see the point my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul & gender (*no more love poems #4*, ll. 10-13). Shange notably places ampersands in between each identity, stressing that each one

requires space. The unity of “soul & gender,” as she describes it, further places the spiritual as essential to the welfare of the physical.

The first steps toward the ladies’ self-familiarization are taken when they recreate the graduation from girlish to womanish selves through the girlhood chants “mama’s little baby likes shortnin bread” and “little sally walker.” These innocent songs, and their placement in the play, demonstrate a rising awareness of the power of womanly attributes (e.g. hips, backbones, and shakes). From there, Shange makes a logical progression to the piece *graduation nite* which signifies both the high school commencement and the transformation from a teenaged girl to a sexually active woman. The sexual female self also constitutes one of the appropriated aspects of women’s bodies that the author comments on in the choreopoem. Because, within the social environment of Nationalist movements, black male sexual power was celebrated through homophobic language aimed at white males, a black woman’s use of sexual power was “counter-revolutionary” (Pollard 181). The women of *for colored girls...* unabashedly discuss their respective experiences and impressions of sex; the lady in yellow declares, “yeh, and honey, it was wonderful,” while the lady in green reveals, “we used to do it all up in the dark/ in the corners” (ll. 88-90). Their appreciation for their sexual bodies then gives way to disillusionment in relationships, as they discover that disregarding their own feelings for another yields pain. Through introspection, the lady in red realizes, “[...] i waz capable of debasin my self for the love of/ another” (*now i love somebody more than*, ll. 18-19). But the women continually express a growing independence and a sense of their own self-worth, even after they assiduously pursue love at the expense of their spirits. The lady in red charges her former lover:

 this note is attached to a plant
 i’ve been waterin since the day i met you
 you may water it
 yr damn self.
 (ll. 26-29)

She returns the plant to symbolize her return to herself; although she instructs him to water the plant, her sardonic tone indicates that her true desire is for him to allow the plant to die, as she has not been able to. The growth of the plant, and her relationship with the inconsiderate boyfriend, signal the inverse within her: a death of her spiritual self. Shange’s theme of shedding dependency and grasping one’s own sexual and emotional independence repeats itself subsequently in the poem, when the lady in blue angrily threatens an unidentified lover: “maybe

tonite/ i'll find a way to make myself come without you" (*no more love poems #3*, ll. 8-9). Her warning is laced not with the threat of violence, but with an exertion of her own power. The women's recognition of the detrimental forces in their lives, and subsequent divesture, allows them to commence rebirth through *yere-wolo*.

The spirit and the spiritual hold as much importance within the play as do the body and crimes against women's bodies. Spirits, in essence, hold agency in the text and effectuate change in the women's lives through metaphysical bodies. In the poem *toussaint*, the lady in brown tells the story of the 1804 Haitian Revolution and her historical imaginary friend Toussaint L'Ouverture. The history she recounts is replete with "the spirits of ol dead africans from outta the / ground/ [...] zombies/ walkin cannon ball shootin spirits to free slavery" (ll. 43-46). Enthralled with his command of powerful, spiritual bodies, she enlists Toussaint as her personal lover at age eight, and consults with him on how to survive being a colored girl in racist America. Indicative of an African cosmological belief, the intangible spirit holds agency in *for colored girls*...in that the narrators attribute powerful occurrences in their lives to spiritual beings. The lady in purple says of the lady in green/ Sechita, "[G]od seemed to be wipin his feet in her face" (*sechita*, l. 34). At the end of the lady in brown's retelling of her own Toussaint Jones, she optimistically thinks, "no tellin what all spirits we cd move" (*toussaint*, l. 149). Her engagement with the historical Toussaint equips her with the strength to believe she can "move spirits" of her own volition.

Throughout the remainder of the play, Shange gradually introduces depictions of the "colored girls" as goddesses in ways that acknowledge and reclaim their sexuality. Subverting the ostensibly negative concept of a single, sexually active woman who ejects lovers from her bed, the piece *one* depicts the lady in red as "so divine" (l. 104). The lady in green, the only character who is named, embodies as Sechita the dichotomies present within black women. Sechita is a can-can dancer clad in red garters and sequined skirts who subjects herself to men's ocular consumption, but she is also "egypt/ goddess/ harmony" (*sechita*, l. 54). Shange writes in her introduction to the play, "Studying the mythology of women from antiquity to the present day led directly to the piece *Sechita* in which a dance hall girl is perceived as deity, as slut, as innocent & knowing" (xv). The piece repeats that Sechita is egyptian, goddess of creativity and love, concurrently embodying sexuality and sacredness and retaining her identity as a woman (l. 19). The playwright's conception of the "mythology of women" explains the recurrent

juxtaposition of the words “egyptian” and “goddess.” As kings and queens in ancient Egypt underwent a process through which they became gods and goddesses to cement their authority to rule over their people, Sechita’s status as a goddess is reminiscent of the power she exerts over her spectators while on stage. However, the narrator reveals that the dancer dons a facial mask, separating her stage persona from her true self: “[s]he made her face like nefertiti/ approachin her own tomb” (*sechita*, ll. 42-43). The goddess-dancer is at once exalted and degraded as her patrons toss coins between her thighs. Shange also establishes the idea of woman as her own priestess through the language of the piece; on stage, dancing, sechita is “performing the rites/ the conjurin of men/ conjurin the spirit” (ll. 48-49). Later in the play, Shange further associates traits of sexuality with the divine when the lady in blue threatens to bring herself to orgasm with “[...] no fingers or other objects just thot which isn’t spiritual evolution cuz its empty & godliness is plenty is ripe & fertile”(no more love poems #3, ll. 9-11). She attributes two female characteristics, fertility and ripeness, to her description of godliness, insinuating that she herself carries the possibility for godhood within her. The author here demonstrates the multiplicity of roles that women may assume— conjure woman, goddess, and priestess—and uses the character of Sechita to point out that any woman may embody these traits.

Building on each of the previous pieces, Shange positions love—especially self-love—as the most precious and sacred instrument a woman owns. With great feeling, the women declare that the love they give to men is both “too sanctified” and “too magic” to be rejected callously (*no more love poems #4*, 19-21). As women who intrinsically possess the possibility for the divine, their love is indeed sacred and reflective of their roles as priestesses. Significantly, in the concluding poem *a laying on of hands*, the women indicate that they had been lacking a *spiritual* interaction that would make them whole. The lady in blue articulates this occasion as “all the gods comin into me/ layin me open to myself” (12-13). This almost violent imagery reflects the power of her statement; she could not see herself without the possession of the spirit. Using the African-American spiritual tradition of laying on of hands, Shange again shows the connection between physical and spiritual healing, as the women are healed from both the outside (through hands) and the inside (through introspection). Carefully, the lady in purple differentiates this physical touch from that of a sexual nature: “not a layin on of bosom and womb/ a layin on of hands/ the holiness of myself released” (27-29). The dual efforts produce spiritual result, with the women bestowing upon themselves that which is most holy: love. “[I] found god in myself/

& i loved her/ i loved her fiercely” (49-50). Perhaps it is only after the gods have shown her exactly who she is can the “colored girl” recognize that same holiness within herself. In a womanist fashion, the lady in red’s progression to finding god in herself is devoid of any other human presence, but is populated by nature: a tree, wind, dew, the sun, the sky, and the moon (36-47). At the close of the play, although Shange ostensibly repeats the line “& this is for colored girls who have considered/ suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own/ rainbows” there is a significant variation in the verb tenses (51-53). The initial line in the earlier piece *dark phrases* reads “*moved* to the ends of their own rainbows (55-56; emphasis mine). The change from simple past to present progressive tense indicates a shift in the target audience; perhaps, after witnessing the inner transformation of the colored girls on stage, there is salvation for the participating spectators. In its first appearance, the play’s title reads as an invocation. Whereas, at the conclusion of the play, after the women joyfully sing “i found god in myself,” it becomes a benediction in seven-part harmony. Christ affirms that each colored girl in the play “will be born as a human being for the first time, because she will be aware of herself as a person with value and a range of choices” (100). Additionally, the concept of agency is fundamental to the ladies’ rebirth; they cannot possibly take advantage of the range of choices they contain as black women without the power to pursue them. As shown in the stage directions, the ladies first repeat the affirmation to themselves, then to each other, and finally to the audience. The women may now symbolically present their new, whole selves to the congregation, having labored successfully to achieve rebirth as spiritual goddesses.

Sonia Sanchez’s approach to depicting black womanhood in *I’ve Been a Woman* differs from Ntozake Shange’s in that it focuses primarily on the spiritual and physical characteristics of women in terms of birth.¹¹ My analysis centers on a connected sequence of pieces that originally appeared in *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women*: “Past,” “Present,” and “Rebirth.” These poems depict “[...] the fundamental transformation which occurs in the necessary reaching back to one’s self” (Williams 147). “Past” includes the three subpoems, “Woman,” “Earth Mother,” and “young/black/girl.” The individual subpoems are phrased as responding monologues, with an unidentified woman commencing the request to her earth mother to detail the circumstances of her birth. The earth mother then replies, seeing in the adult woman the little black girl she used to be. The woman subsequently returns to her present, and, after journeying to herself, finally undergoes a rebirth of spirit. As the short, introductory poem

in the group of three, “Past” sets up the following pieces, inviting the reader (and assumedly its intended poetic addressee) to “come into Black geography [...] / come up through tongues / multiplying memories” (ll. 1, 3-4). Sanchez has made geography black, imagining the earth as a black mother who has intimate knowledge of her black daughter. This invocation speaks to the function of ancient memory contained within not only the earth mother herself, but also the black woman who is the subject of the poems. The narrator relates that because she was born into the world, girl-woman, with “two black braids,” she “cut a blue/ song for america” to express her pain (ll. 12-14). Within the face of America’s poverty and class disparities, she “sang unbending/ songs and gathered gods” to help her cope with her troubles (ll. 23-24). Ostensibly, “Past” presents the plight of black women in the United States, and prepares the stage for the black woman to address her concerns and undergo a regeneration to heal.

Sanchez, like Shange, commences the process of rebirth in “Woman” with a recollection of the black woman’s passage from childhood to womanhood. Because she has lost her own spiritual memory and sense of self, the narrator must ask the earth mother to recount the stories of how she became. In essence, this collaborative gathering of memory is a salvation from a world hostile to black women, as she appeals, “pull me from the throat of mankind/ where worms eat, O earth mother” (ll. 8-9). Sanchez lends urgency through the disturbing imagery of an enclosed throat infested with feeding worms; the woman’s life is in immediate peril if she remains there. Also, the recovery of her original identity is inextricably tied to her role as a mother and her ability to love her children limitlessly.

tell me how i have held five bodies
in one large cocktail of love
and still have the thirst of the beginning sip
tell me. tellLLLLLLL me. earth mother
for i want to rediscover me. the secret of me [...]
(ll. 12-6)

As she often does, Sanchez duplicates the “L” in the preceding line to imbue her poetry with orality and to stress the insistence of voice. Finally, the black woman supplies the hungering for self-awareness as the reason for her summons. We receive the feeling that this knowledge is imperative to this woman’s survival; she is unaware even of her own secrets, and must turn to an outside source to be reacquainted with them. After having endured such a separation, the narrator desires to “make the world [her] diary/ and speak rivers” (ll. 19-20). Ultimately, she

wants to be so open to and with herself that she is able to inscribe her thoughts onto her surroundings.

In the successive piece, “Earth Mother,” the earth mother she entreated arrives as an old woman calling for bells to announce her entry; the narration has changed to the higher being’s point of view, which is the authoritative insight the woman sought. The earth mother instantaneously perceives the black woman not as the creation the woman appears to be, but as the individual she once was. Although the very title of the poem “Woman” pronounces the black woman’s adulthood, the earth mother rewinds time and proclaims in present tense, “And you *are* born/ BLACK GIRL,” indicating that she indeed holds the key to both time and identity (ll. 7-8; emphasis mine). She essentially replaces the grown woman with the young girl, summoning her, so that she comes “running from seven to thirty-five/ in one day” (ll. 22-23). Like the ladies in *for colored girls...*, she first envisions the character full of pigtails, jumping double dutch ropes as a girl, and hurtling towards womanhood.

Then, the black woman is no more, successfully supplanted in the poetic dialogue by the girl who will tell the story of who she once was. It is the young girl who has the longest monologue, as she is the bearer of the forgotten memories that will help the black woman on her passage to spiritual transformation. Appropriately reminiscent of the seeking and finding theme that unites the three poems, the final piece, “young/black/girl,” opens with a breathless recital of a child’s hide-and-seek countdown. Sanchez skillfully positions the earth mother’s last, presaging comment, “i can see you coming,” with the girl-woman’s “REAdyornothereicome” so that it acts as a response to the old woman and also fits into the framework of the third poem (l. 8). The girl first addresses her new stepmother, who angrily throws her into closets and inadvertently begins her habit of emotional concealment. She begins to turn into herself, painfully cognizant of a need for protection from others. Huddled on the floor, she chants:

no matter what they do
they won’t find me
no matter what they say
i won’t come out.
(ll. 28-31)

Much of the poem parallels Sanchez’s own biography; she recounts in an interview her childhood introversion because of her tendency to stutter, and also her early discovery of poetry as an alternative means of communication.¹² The young black girl in the poem burrows inside to

screen herself from her family's sharp questioning of her lack of facility with language. Even as she tries to communicate, she says, "i have hidden myself behind black braids/ and stutters and cannot be seen," understanding the frustrating reality that her utterances only make her more incomprehensible (ll. 32-33). Again like *for colored girls...*, the narrative segues into the scene of a teenagers' dance rife with promising sexuality. No longer a little girl in Alabama, the narrator recalls dark basement parties where she would "grinddddDDDD/ and grindddddDDDDDD/ but not too close" (ll. 67-68). She is especially aware of the sexual politics of youth by this time, explaining that everyone knew and told about the girls who had sex in the neighborhood; grinding had to be sufficient for those who wanted to keep their reputations. It is in this background of double standards that she grows to be a young woman. The same hunger she expressed as her adult self in the previous poems manifests itself, as her coming of age in America cannot and will not sustain her full potential for growth. Her final revelation of continued estrangement, while poised at the door to change, is that she "could not hear the rhythm of / young Black womanhood" (ll. 91-92). The reader may surmise that because of the young woman's spiritual distance from her own womanly pulse, this later causes the spiritual crisis in the woman she becomes.

After having taken the reader through the black woman's past, Sanchez revisits the current state of the character in "Present." This poem connects the necessity of reaching back with the equal requirement of moving forward in order to positively change. As before, the main female character narrates, but this time she speaks to herself and no one in particular. She has received the help necessary for her to recover her spiritual memory and relocate herself. She announces:

This woman vomiting her
hunger over the world
this melancholy woman forgotten
before memory came [...]
is telling you secrets
gather up your odors and listen
as she sings the mold from memory.
(ll. 1-4, 16-18)

Notably, the black woman has lost possession of the hunger that plagued her in the past, and can now release it in a purging stream. Because she has unearthed her spiritual memory, she is able to realize that she has too long been ignored (by the world and herself) as a woman. Whereas

she previously petitioned the earth mother to give her the secrets she once lost, her spiritual journey has equipped her with the agency to now orally communicate her own secrets—and command others to listen. She states:

there is no place
for a soft/black/woman.
there is no smile green enough or
summertime words warm enough to allow my growth.
(ll. 19-22)

Sanchez here makes it known that the causes for the black woman's spiritual estrangement are the hostile environments that she has inhabited. Her resulting sense of dislocation has forced her to center herself within her own spirit and revisit her history. Singing and dancing also play an integral role in the spiritual transformation of Sanchez's character, as it does in Shange's play. The black woman chants lullabies and sings songs of her ancient, black female self, performing remembrance of African tribes. The art of singing positions her as her own griot. She also establishes the significance of her birth and that of her female ancestors; essentially, they inhabit her body, "gathering/ from [her] bones like great wooden birds/ spread their wings" (ll. 36-38). Her ancestors take part in her spiritual homecoming with their presence and laughter. The climax in her spiritual struggle to return to her rightful place as a black woman occurs when she, at last, broaches her womanness and embraces it. Described through imagery that likens self-knowledge to the act of eating, the black woman *tastes* the seasons of her birth, *drinks* her woman coconut milks, and is refreshed (ll. 41-43). Sanchez further demonstrates the character's regeneration through her imagined physical actions. We see her "tremble like a new/born/child troubled/ with new breaths" (ll. 67-68). After enduring the labor necessary for her birth, the black woman is new, renewed, and reifying her existence with each successive breath. But the poem does not end with a benediction or even a pronouncement of arrival; rather, the ending transmits the impression that the woman must constantly stay acquainted with herself, and that her journey must be life-long. Still singing, she recognizes herself as a "blue/black/magical/woman. walking. / womb ripe. [...]/ making pilgrimage to herself. walking" (ll. 71-73). Now that she has accomplished *yere-wolo*, she is able to become a priestess and go outside herself, mediating between her spiritual communities. Effectively, the poem has concluded, but Sanchez implies through her use of the present progressive tense that

the black woman ever continues on her pilgrimage to herself, womb ripe with her awakened femininity.

All through the sequence of poems, Sanchez alternately concentrates on the character's separate identities as black and woman, emphasizing the importance of each one. The black woman's spiritual transformation in "Present," necessitated by her harsh environment in America, must now be preserved within a nurturing environment. "Rebirth" centers on the woman's surroundings, since her internal struggle has been won. The final poem in the series places the narrator on a more literal crossing, disembarking a plane at the poem's opening. Indicating that she is finally in a geographic place she can call home, she dances, allowing her feet to revel "in the green dance of growth" (l. 14). Although the previous pieces name her as an Alabamian woman, this new, unnamed location is the site of her initial spiritual birth, where she can flourish as a black woman. Thus, the narrator describes her new home as a place where "the warm/blue/green seas cradle / your blackness," as opposed to her cold former habitat (ll. 25-26). She grows with laughter, reminiscent of her ancestors. It is only then, after both the woman's spiritual and physical bodies have been restored, that Sanchez introduces the first interactive non-female character into the narrative. He is initially characterized by a silence the black woman vows to paint with seeds, which further demonstrates the fecundity of her ripened womb. She tells of her lovemaking with him and understands that her body fills "only a small part" of what he needs (l. 58). Because she has enacted her own completion, she is able to share herself with him without endangering her own wholeness. She depicts her subsequent pregnancy, "nine months passed and my body / heavy with the knowledge of gods / turned landward. came to rest" (ll. 74-76). The seed she carries, the "gods turned landward," connote her own divinity as a spiritual vessel worthy to bear them. When she finally gives birth to her offspring, she further manifests her divine womanhood. She is "mother of sun. moon. star children" (l. 81); in truth, cradled by the sea, she evokes the African river goddess Yemoja, patron of pregnant women and mother of the Orishas. The persona is then able to articulate and proclaim the name of both her lover and child: Black Man. Significantly, only after the black woman's spiritual transformation and journey does she identify her consort and communicate with him. When he appears catatonic, staring blankly ahead, she tells him: "LOOK. a savior moves in these breasts" (l. 87). She offers her spiritual body as a site of salvation because he is the generator of her seed. But Sanchez does not mean to insinuate that the righteous black woman can single-handedly rescue

the black community. Instead, as whole as she is, the black woman addresses him as her “Black redeemer star” (l. 90), signifying that he is both her progeny and the means for her continued survival.

Both Ntozake Shange and Sonia Sanchez, through the aforementioned works, directly and indirectly address the notion of black nationhood, and the role of women in building black communities. But black nations cannot be constructed successfully if women are oppressed or estranged from themselves, and *for colored girls...and I've Been a Woman* thoroughly investigate the ways in which women undergo spiritual transformations through rebirth. They do not engage with the black community as a whole until they have dealt with their own struggle. Notably, both poems engage the womanist idea of a female community of spiritual midwives who aid in this process; Shange employs the group of “colored girls” and Sanchez invents the personas of the earth mother, the young black girl, and ancestral grandmothers for the black woman. The main characters may not indulge in self-worship in the religious sense, but their realization of themselves as possessing divine spiritual bodies leads to previously denied agency. This agency as cultural and spiritual priestesses allows them to subsequently recognize problems in the larger community and *act* toward repairing them. The haiku epigraph by Sanchez at the beginning of this chapter succinctly pinpoints the nature of these women authors’ works; once women have identified and defined their worth among themselves, only then can they safely become the literal and spiritual bearers of the black nation.

CHAPTER 3

“AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH”: MANIFESTATIONS OF NOMMO AS SPIRITUAL FORCE IN JAZZ POETRY

Among the several black musical forms emulated in poetry during the Black Arts Movement (BAM), avant-garde jazz certainly stands out as most consistently being transposed onto poetry. This is largely because BAM writers were often critical of black music that seemed to capitulate in the face of racism or express discouragement at their social and racial injustices, especially the blues. Many prominent writers undoubtedly agreed with Maulana (Ron) Karenga’s statement, “the blues are invalid; for they teach resignation, in a word acceptance of reality—and we have come to change reality” (38). Discussing the politics of black activist poetry in a 1969 *Negro Digest* essay, Nikki Giovanni casually mentions (and concurs with) a previous statement made by Karenga: “The Maulana has pointed out rather accurately that ‘The blues is counterrevolutionary’” (Giovanni 30). Karenga’s political stance, which is representative of the predominant sentiment during the time, valued the tenets of revolution versus perceived resignation.¹³ Thus, the “New Thing” of jazz, as theorists and poets called it, with its cacophonous and anarchic sounds of rebellion, figuratively grew up with the Movement’s concept of revolutionary blackness. Jazz musicians frequented poetry readings and often played sets with the poets themselves. A notable example is jazz artist Sun-Ra and his then-titled Myth-Science Arkestra, who were vital members of Amiri Baraka’s short-lived Black Arts Repertory Theater School in Harlem, and even performed on the recording of Baraka’s mythical play *A Black Mass* in 1966. Although Larry Neal’s prescription of black-centered aesthetic writings applied to primarily authors, the move toward Blackness was not confined to literary artists; musicians such as Sun-Ra and Pharoah Sanders habitually adopted pseudonyms that reflected their Afrocentric spiritual and philosophical beliefs, and spiritually influenced black poets as much as the poets influenced them.

This symbiotic relationship between poets and musicians produced the phenomenon of experimental jazz poetry, which served the purpose of imitating qualities of the music and identifying the artist as a spiritual leader of black people. Poet and critic Lorenzo Thomas notes

the jazz musician's role as a figure in poetry: "he is the leader of rebellion against postwar conformity and the spiritual agent of the politically powerless" ("Communicating" 291). David Lionel Smith also discusses the tendency of Amiri Baraka/ Leroi Jones and Addison Gayle to ignore the accomplishments of earlier black writers in order to recognize their own conceptualization of blackness and black writing. Thus, he says, the movement has a "peculiar tendency to cite nonliterary (mostly musical) models as antecedents in a tradition of authentic black expression" (Smith 98). In many ways, the elevated position of jazz musicians in black literary culture is redolent of the role black women writers take on as spiritual artists in relation to readers: that of a priest/priestess. As an artist who also acts as a spiritual agent, but who is yet affected by the musician, poets occupy a unique space when they incorporate jazz into their works. I suggest that, in relaying the jazz artist's message into word, women poets locate themselves as co-priestesses with the musicians in that both mediate between spiritual forces and the community at large. Examining poetry by Carolyn M. Rodgers, Sarah Webster Fabio, Sonia Sanchez, Sharon Bourke, and Jayne Cortez, this chapter demonstrates the ways in which black women poets operate as co-priestesses to jazz artists by activating *nommo* (the power of the word) through their writing.

Nommo is an African philosophical concept that operates on the premise that human beings exert agency through their verbal communication. Molefi Kete Asante defines *nommo* as being the "generative power of the word" (425). Asante additionally states, "*Nommo* generates the world and creates harmonious collectivity. The human activator of *nommo*—whether priest, prophet, protestor, or professor of rhetoric—can succeed only when he speaks in an interactive context" (Baker "Afrocentric," 425). The interactive context to which Asante refers especially applies to an oratorical setting where an individual is addressing an audience, but it also indicates instances of communication where a response is *expected*. Furthermore, the ideological aesthetic of the BAM, either intentionally or by coincidence,¹⁴ projected the theoretical frame of *nommo* onto poetry, in that poems were to do more than exist and hold meaning; poems were to *perform* actions as the verbal embodiment of volition and agency, or the prescription of agency, for black people. Janheinz Jahn thoroughly explicates the connection of poetry to *nommo* and places the function of written poetry, as a structure of words with meaning, alongside that of vocalized language:

According to African philosophy man has, by the force of his word, dominion over 'things'; he can change them, make them work for him, and command them. [...] African poetry is never a game, never *l'art pour l'art*, never irresponsible. [...] the African poet is not 'an artist using magic,' but a magician, a 'sorcerer' in the African sense. (Jahn 135)

Hence, as Smith acknowledges, the binary meaning of the *Black Arts Movement* as both an association of black artists and word "magicians."¹⁵ The idea of purpose in activist poetry is complementary to the concept of *nommo*. Because it is the creative power of words, to use *nommo* in poetry is to speak action into being through words. Jahn further maintains that "Nommo, the life force, is the fluid as such, a unity of spiritual-physical fluidity, giving life to everything, penetrating everything, causing everything" (Jahn 124). Therefore, in the context of poetry that holds black agency as its foremost subject, the actuation of *nommo* could be considered crucial.

As the widely acknowledged founder of the BAM, Amiri Baraka demonstrates the desired effect of *nommo* on Black Aesthetic poetry in his much-cited poem "Black Art." He writes, "We want *live* / words of the hip world live flesh & / coursing blood" (Baraka, "Black Art" 302; emphasis mine). In willing words to be live, or *alive*, like black bodies, he is in fact commanding the generative power of the word to perform liberating acts. His lines calling for "live flesh and coursing blood" in poetry bear a striking similarity to Jahn's account of the quasi-physical status that *nommo* brings into play; Jahn asserts, "The driving power, however, that gives life and efficacy to all things is Nommo, the 'word', of which for the moment we can only say that it is word and water and seed and blood in one" (101). Baraka's closing edict in the poem, "Let the world be a Black Poem / And Let All Black People Speak This Poem," contains a twofold meaning in regards to *nommo* and its emphasis on verbal communication in a written and oral sense ("Black Art", 302). If, through the power of his pronouncement, the world becomes a black poem, then "This Poem" in the second line refers to the world black people have created. Alternatively, "This Poem" could also allude to "Black Art," the very poem with which the reader is interacting. Baraka is encouraging writers to use the life-giving power of the word to voice a black world into existence (e.g. craft poems). Speaking poems aloud further constructs an interactive, vibratory platform where *nommo* is able to create a reality. The concept of responsibility such as this one is essential to *nommo*; there can be no power without

the impulse propelling the word. Adetokunbo Knowles-Borishade asserts, “Although *Nommo* is vibrantly potent, that potency evanesces if utterance does not emerge from and apply to the African experience” (495).

Additionally, because *nommo* is set in motion by utterances that originate from an individual’s will to correspond to another, I argue that jazz artists make use of this power, often imputing spiritual messages into their music. Knowles-Borishade asserts that, in a public environment, “*Nommo* activates Spirit through *vibratory sound* or vocal rhythms” (496; emphasis mine). This corresponds to the many depictions in Black Arts poetry of spiritual, ecstatic experiences instigated by listening to jazz music, or even the correlation of that sound to a dialogue. Indeed, the improvisatory spirit of avant-garde jazz exemplifies how musicians converse through sounds on stage utilizing seemingly non-verbal messages. It is not, perhaps, farfetched to consider the music as a form of non-verbal communication, but communication nonetheless. For, as critic Stephen E. Henderson suggests, “even in jazz the verbal component lurks somewhere in the rhythms, in the coloring, and in the phrasing, so that one hears talk, for example, of ‘speech inflected jazz’; one reads descriptions of the ‘scream’ of Coltrane’s horn” (31). According to Houston A. Baker, the spiritual role of an artist is parallel to that of a priest in terms of how they direct the power of words. Baker states, “And the transmitters of African sacred energies are defined as priests, houngans, and preachers whose lineage continues through conjurers, soothsayers, and seers to blues men and women as poets, rappers and moral judges in a rocking world of popular entertainment” (Baker “Poetics,” 157). Although Baker is here referring primarily to the trope of blues within the African-American literary tradition, his analysis of the effects of this particular black musical form also applies to the appearance of jazz within poetry.

Just as instruments “talk back” to each other during a jam session, poets, sometimes literally, talk back to the musicians through their words. In this case it becomes “jazz-inflected speech” that derives from the aforementioned speech inflected jazz. Moreover, the African cultural practice of call and response is figuratively executed in the writing of jazz poetry. The musician is the caller and the poets are both the responders and callers in their own right, as translators of the music into Word. As a force composed of words, their poetry transmits a correspondence, and the reader/listener in turn provides the response (optimally through collective action). Kimberly Benston concurs, stating, “it is in music that the poet hopes to

achieve both the individual creation – the call bearing the shape of his own spirit – and communal solidarity – the response of infinite renewal” (119). Jazz poetry can be read as a score to the music, as well; the poet essentially conjures words from sound. Henderson and Thomas agree that poems “interpreting” jazz are contingent upon a close knowledge of the music, much like the relationship between a songwriter and a composer writing one cohesive piece.¹⁶ “So, in fact, the poets are translating what the instruments say, but in order to understand them fully, one must know the original text, as it were” (Henderson 54). By writing jazz verbally into their poetry, poets act as a conduit through which the words pass. Thus, women poets serve as co-priestess to the musician’s priest, engendering additional, often revolutionary meaning by providing lyrics to their hymns, so to speak. They reify sound through *nommo* into a verbal message of action for the responding poetry audience. As spiritual leader, writers additionally perform the acts of remembrance with stage directions in the absence of the musician and his craft. Not only is the poetry oral in the sense that it is written to be read aloud, but jazz poems often perform actions within themselves. For example, the narrators in the poems may “sing” pieces written by the jazz musicians or give indications to the reader that the poem should be imagined with chanting or music in the background. Asante recognizes the importance of sound and aurality to an Afrocentric movement:

Thus, African American oratory becomes the totalization of the Afrocentric perspective, emphasizing the presence of *nommo*, the generative and productive power of the spoken word, in African discourse with respect to resistance to the dominant racist ideology. In the oratorical experience, much as in the jazz experience, the African person finds the ability to construct a discourse reality capable of calling forth *nommo* in every instance of communication. (51)

BAM men and women writers systematically activate *nommo*, which is also characteristic of jazz itself, by inscribing the music’s vibratory sounds into their work. As writers who hold spirituality as a principal factor in writing, black women poets independently call forth the same power when they disseminate their own ideas. Conclusively, if *nommo* relies upon an interactive environment of communication, then it manifests in jazz poetry through the poet’s engagement with the word as a representation of sonority, message, and living agency.

The five poems by Rodgers, Fabio, Sanchez, Bourke, and Cortez analyzed in this chapter each take an understandably different approach to transmitting jazz, but there exists important

correlating factors that unite them as jazz poems. The majority of the included poems are written as tributes to the musicians as priests able to influence others' spirituality. In regards to music as a poetic reference, Henderson counts "the musician as subject/poem/history/myth" and "the use of language from the jazz life" as two important methods used by poets to convey rhythm and musicality through poetry (47). Almost as an example to readers, the poets first demonstrate the ability of the music to influence them as listeners. Particularly, there is an emphasis on the effect it has on the poet's—and general audience's—mind and/or spirit, and its capacity for persuading the individual toward action. They also convey a similarity of function. Janheinz Jahn notes, "Since the word produces, commands and conjures, [Afrocentric] poetry speaks in imperatives. Its basic form is the form of command" (Jahn 136). The majority of the poems analyzed contain a charge to black audiences to listen to the jazz artist's underlying message. As co-priestess and agent between music/musician and black congregation, women poets assume responsibility for a) transmitting their own spiritual experience b) speaking for the people, c) speaking for the musician by conjuring words from sound, and/or d) calling to remembrance the musician as priest.

Carolyn M. Rodgers's poem "Me, In Kulu Se & Karma" was first published in *Songs of a Black Bird*. It fits in context with the expressions of spirituality within that collection, and is also representative of an extended theme of jazz as a spiritual medium throughout her earlier body of work. Therefore, using the female persona as the subject of ecstatic trance, Rodgers's poem primarily works to exhibit the validity of jazz as a form of spiritual music. The title refers to two jazz records: John Coltrane's *Kulu Se Mama* (1965) and Pharoah Sanders's *Karma* (1969), and the poem also mentions the two musicians. Employing the system of evaluation she published in *Negro Digest*, she calls it a "bein" poem, which describes the persona as she/he is (Rodgers "Black Poetry" 12). The poem is singular among those discussed in this chapter because it is the only one that places a female subject as the primary subject for spiritual transformation.

The first line situates the speaker, stating plainly, "it's me" (l. 1). She presents herself as stripped but comfortable in her blackness, resting on her couch, and eventually invites the reader to come sit with her. The narrator proclaims unabashedly that she is "bathed and ashy / [...] me, with my hair black / [...] me sitting in my panties" (ll. 2, 3, 5). Primarily, over the first half of the poem, Rodgers works to characterize the speaker through these physical descriptions and a brief stream-of-consciousness narrative about the pillows on her AMVETS sofa. Outside of her

single invitation, the persona appears oblivious of the reader as a potential audience for the majority of the poem. Excusing her homemade pillows, she offers, “[...] but *u* can sit on it anyway and listen / to pharaoh ring into *ur* room like now” (ll. 19-20; emphasis mine). This ringing, like a bell, heralds the commencement of the narrator’s captivation with the jazz music pouring through her record player. Her body figuratively becomes lost in the music, ceasing to exist as a corporeal subject in the poem; her voice henceforth narrates the sound of the music and her own vocalized reaction to it. She begins:

it’s me [...]
hearing the trills and
the honey rolling through the air and the gravel roll-
ing and fluting and sweet sweeeet sweeeet
(ll. 20-23)

Although these lines begin with the repeated statement of self-affirmation, Henderson attests that “[...] the poet’s sense of *bein* is clarified and heightened by the music” (59). Through its placement in the book, even, the poem strikes a balance between the physical and the spiritual. One page contains the description of the narrator’s virtually naked physical form, and the other concentrates on the effect jazz has on her open spirit; the two selves are conjoined by the proclamation “it’s me.” The speaker reiterates the phrase at several instances in the second half of the poem, continually affirming herself in a spiritual state.

Only one line in the poem is devoted to the musicians themselves, but they are notably located *within* the narrator, who has imbibed them as their music. The playing music launches her “[...] in the sky moving that way going freee where pha / raoh and trane playing in [her] guts” (ll. 24-25). As before, when she declares that Pharaoh Sanders “rings” into the room, she equates the persons of Coltrane and Sanders with the sounds they produce through their instruments. Bombarded by their discordant notes, the speaker gradually learns to privilege other manners of aural reception, exclaiming while experiencing the music that her ears are “forgetting how to listen and just feeling” (l. 26). This generates a trance-like state; experiencing jazz creates a space in which she, as a black woman, articulates through *nommo* the freedom necessary to be her black self. The trance she has entered, according to Baker, “is dependent upon folk sounds for its very inducement” (107). In an essay on black literature, Rodgers reaffirms the prevailing view of the essential connection between liberation ideology and avant-garde jazz. She states, “John Coltrane and Sun-Ra utilized non-european sound patterns. other

sound progressions. A-flat no longer had to be used with b-flat to sound “right”. Use it with infinity z-sharp y-minus x-nothing every sound nonsense sound inner *liberating* sound. Black. much untapped” (Rodgers, “Literature” 11; emphasis mine). Additionally, Baker explains that “trance produces, in turn, further sounds or songs that are, at best, metonyms for the deepest spiritual reaches of inaudible valleys” (Baker 107). The “sound” to which he refers subsequently manifests in a literal call and response between the narrator and the musicians. “[Y]eah me i am screammmmmming into the box and the box / is screammmmmming back, is slow motion moving sound / through the spaces in the air” (ll. 27-29). The ultimate outcome of the experience leads to the speaker’s accelerated language as an imitation and translation of the jazz sound. Her improvisatory speech combines words like clashing musical notes, always returning to the poem’s underlying melody of “me.” She exclaims, “feeling laughs alloverme and feeling/ screams mejoy and me flies feelings wild and laugh and / its me oh yeah its me rise feeling its me being music” (ll. 32-34). Through the power of her verbalization, she simultaneously embodies the music, the soloist, and the answering reaction. In terms of message, the poem avoids the usually explicit directive; but this does not preclude an implicit communication to readers. As an artist and co-priestess, she leads the spiritual experience by example. Regarding “Me, In Kulu Se & Karma,” Henderson points out that “the basis for the ecstasy of the experience is the assumption that the reader has felt the same way about the music” (59). The poem’s effect depends on its interaction with the reader’s memory. By vocalizing the results of listening to jazz music, Rodgers is able to *demonstrate* rather than simply state the validity of the musicians as priests to her audience.

The construction of Sarah Webster Fabio’s elegiac poem “Tribute to Duke” is reminiscent of several poems about jazz musicians, including Sanchez’s, because of its use of italicized, orchestral directions. The narrator sings, chants, and makes notations of when various instruments are to enter the composition in columns parallel to the primary poem. The instructions correlate directly and indirectly with the main body of the poem, at times extracting a word from the non-italicized portion and expanding on an association made from that particular word. The poet accomplishes this especially at the beginning of the poem; when she writes that Ellington was a child of Rhythm and Blues, the adjacent strophe moans, “Ohh, Ooh, Oh / [...] I got / the blues” (ll. 1, 3-4). Fabio establishes his spiritual significance early on, equating Ellington’s music with “praying in the / miraculous language / of song-soul” (ll. 5-6). To the

poet, the music he plays speaks its own language, one that is understood by the Creator and contains the power to communicate similar to words. Since, through the instrument, Ellington is in “communion with / his maker,” the vibratory sound he puts forth becomes “a sacred offering” (ll. 8-10). As a priest, his offerings emanate from his spirit, or what the narrator calls the “God-in-man,” to the “God-of-man” and effectuate changes on the audience (ll. 12, 14). She consistently recognizes it as a successful means of linguistic correspondence throughout the poem, often repeating the words “language,” “sound,” and “blow.” The poet additionally combines the spiritual and the physical actions of the musician through her description of his playing abilities, claiming that he was “blowing minds with/ riffs capping” (ll. 67-68). She puns on him literally *blowing* air through his instrument (the orchestra) and spiritually “blowing minds,” noting that the effect his music has on the audience is not merely auditory. His music projects *nommo* in that, when he plays, it has the effect of “changing minds / with moods and / modulations” (ll. 71-73). As he orchestrates from his “Harlem Airshaft,” the narrator locates Ellington as:

World Ambassador
translating Life
into lyric; voice
into song; pulse
into beat
(ll. 101-105)

If he is the Ambassador/priest, translating the basic components of black life into vibratory elements, then Fabio proves herself equally priestess as she transposes those same elements into poetry. Playing on Ellington’s composition “A Drum Is a Woman,” Fabio extends her music-as-language metaphor and asks, “and what more / language does / a sweetback need” (ll. 112-114). The author here makes a startlingly appropriate allusion to Melvin Van Peebles’ groundbreaking 1971 film *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, in which the protagonist Sweetback only says six lines during the entire movie.¹⁷ However, as his primary—and most skillful—means of communication is sexual—through women (drums)—Sweetback apparently does not require any other form of “language.” Bourke implies that, for Ellington, music served as a sufficient form of communication.

Besides the piece “A Drum Is a Woman,” Fabio names several of Ellington’s individual compositions not only to evoke the audience’s circumstantial memories, but also to demonstrate her qualification to speak elegiacally on the musician’s merits. According to Cheryl Clarke,

“One’s black music literacy was also a measure of one’s authentic blackness” (62). The narrator does more than list his attributes and songs by weaving them into her words; in a fashion, she also participates in the poem’s musical performance on the italicized sidelines, urging him to “BLOW, MAN” (l. 58). While she does not embody the poem like Rodgers’s persona, her frequent imperative directions to Ellington place her as a simultaneous interactive audience member and leader. She appropriates the tone of his songs with her own hip language throughout the piece, saying, “Right on, Duke / Do your thing, / your own thing” (ll. 117-119). At the close of her tribute, she promises, quoting from the Ellington composition, “We love you / madly,” rightfully speaking for the black community through the musician’s own words (ll. 133-134).

In “a/coltrane/poem,” Sonia Sanchez crafts an exuberant memorial to musician John Coltrane that accomplishes the dual functions of praising the artist and also extending his perceived message into a revolutionary critique. The narrator first imagines Coltrane as both artist and priest who, through the medium of his music, “blew away our passsst / and showed us our futureeeee” (ll. 22-23). Situating him as a priest provides the rationale for her initial preoccupation with “brotha john’s” death and the early demise of other black musicians. Benston astutely notes that, in his position as a spiritual leader, “‘john’ is not so much a musician as an activity that quickens collective voice” (169). As indicated by the speaker’s employment of “our” and “us,” her concern extends primarily beyond her own grief to the black populace as a unit; ostensibly, the loss of such a visionary as Coltrane threatens to leave the entire community bereft of spiritual guidance. She also ascertains his sound’s spiritual effect on the listener, describing it as “stretchen the mind / till it bursts past the con/fines” (ll. 4-5). In this way, she demonstrates her own credence in the jazz musician’s ability to activate *nommo* and subsequently effect change in people. She writes that Coltrane’s orchestral solos extend beyond the physical ears “to the many solos / of the / mind/spirit” (ll. 7-9). Sanchez pictures minds literally expanded by the music carrying the spiritual force of *nommo*, reminiscent of the air inflating a trumpet player’s jowls. Logically, she then interprets Coltrane’s ultimate achievement not as a specific musical composition, but as “showen us life/ liven” through his futuristic revelation of a “love supreme” for all black people (ll. 124-125).

Structurally, the poem’s arrangement can be understood as both a written jazz duet performance and also a rewording of Coltrane’s rendition of “My Favorite Things.” The two

listening to the original source. Additionally, the music itself seems to serve as a cue for action, calling for the prosecution of untrustworthy white liberals when the saxophone begins to play. At one point during the performance, she cleverly parallels the cacophonous sound of the jazz instrument with the “SCREEEEEEAM” of the penitent liberals (l. 78). Henderson parallels the poet’s involvement as song leader of the written “jazz music” with that of other black musical forms, stating, “Coupled with this, [Sanchez] comments on the melody in the traditional manner of the blues singer and the Baptist preacher, modifying this, however, into a coherent Liberation Rap” (58). Her insertion of the stage direction “(soft/ chant)” near the conclusion recalls Coltrane’s 1965 recording *Om*, in which he utilizes chants from the epic Hindu Bhagavad-Gita; likewise, the muted intensity of the adjacent line “rise up blk/people. rise up blk/people” (ll. 18) mirrors the quiet insistence of a chant.

Presumably, the audience has been listening to the narrator speak for and through Coltrane during the course of the poem—he is only mentioned by name at the beginning and end—but she refers them back to the musician for instruction. Finally, in the last two lines, the speaker again points to Coltrane as the symbolic herald for black liberation, insinuating that there is more to his music than just sounds. The ultimate significance of the presentation is to demonstrate to black people that John Coltrane, as musician/priest, has the means to guide them toward enlightenment and revolution, “if we just/ lissssssSSSTEN” (ll. 129-130). Like the chanting heard on “A Love Supreme,” the message is persistent and low, but steady. By including herself in the “we,” she reaffirms her own position as a listener. The narrator does not mean to imply by the exaggerated consonants that jazz fans have not previously listened to Coltrane’s music, but that they have not listened long or hard enough. This last activity as co-priestess leaves readers with a directive that will allow Coltrane to perpetually call *nommo* forth and influence revolutionary action in the black community.

Sharon Bourke also offers a memorial to John Coltrane with “Sopranosound, Memory of John.” Of the five poems, “Sopranosound” occupies the smallest amount of space (seventeen lines), and therefore seems to have a greater concentration of metaphors. Bourke differs from the previous poets in tone and theme, but her poem is still similar to Sanchez’s in that it highlights the spiritual qualities of Coltrane’s music and encourages the reader/audience to take note. The predominant voice of the poem is the imperative tone that Jahn identified; it appears as the speaker commands the reader to continue listening to Coltrane. This poem focuses less on

the vocal qualities of his sound and centers on the artist himself as a mystic; to Bourke, the artist has *become* his music in death. She plays with the concept of slightly differing solo voices as well, interchanging between physical and metaphysical descriptions of the musician. The repetition of “soft” and “smooth” throughout the piece deviates from the previous translation of Coltrane’s music as a dissonant and strident call for liberation. Contrasting images of both light and dark are employed to describe his death; however, both are used in a positive connotation. Despite his physical disappearance, the narrator recognizes him in the resonance of his music: “And sound now, utterly / He stays” (ll. 7-8). Evocative of an African ancestor, Coltrane has transformed into pure sound as the very essence of *nommo*, living and mediating for his listeners in perpetuity. The “Coltrane sound” therefore becomes his legacy and his very being. As co-priestess possessing spiritual authority, the poet commands their joint audience, “Listen to the reed, / To his mind / As it opens and closes the valves of the universe” (ll. 9-11). The narrator juxtaposes the influence of the instrument’s voice with that of the musician’s mind, so that the reed becomes a tool of amplification for his message. Furthermore, Coltrane is master player of the reed/universe itself, opening and closing its “valves” and releasing the secrets of life; or as Sanchez’s poem insinuated, giving his black listeners the agency to strive for liberation. The final statement of the poem reiterates the directive to turn to Coltrane’s music for leadership:

To his song
From the throat of future time

Listen
To John.
(ll. 14-17)

If Coltrane himself was human and transient, his message was not; his avant-garde jazz music descended from “the throat of future time.” Like Sanchez’s narrator, this speaker sees the music as divinely inspired, able to foretell a future for black people. Markedly, there is no interpretation of a perceived, defined idea emanating from Coltrane’s music. Bourke’s elegy reads overall as a description of his spirituality and, based on that qualification, issues the sole mandate to listen to him.

Jayne Cortez’s “How Long Has Trane Been Gone,” instead of issuing simple directions to her reader, continuously poses challenges that echo the sentiment of keeping Coltrane’s—and all black musicians’—memory alive through the music. However, whereas the previous poems only go so far as to demand that the reader listen to jazz music, Cortez questions listening as a

passive consumerism and instead issues the order to actively recognize the value of black musicians to the community. Cheryl Clarke confirms that “the homage to black music was part of the process of cultural revivification”; thus, by paying respect to Coltrane through her words, and calling for others to do the same, Cortez is in reality activating *nommo* in order to enliven the black populace (62). The speaker first asks, “Will you remember / or will you forget / Forget about the good things” (ll. 3-4). She identifies the black community as the principal subject of black (jazz) music and consequently charges them with the responsibility to commemorate the artists: “And the musicians that / write & play about you / [...] Will you remember their names” (ll. 9-10, 16). Because the interlocutor in a conversation is able to conjure metaphysical “things” by releasing *nommo*, the act of vocalized remembrance (e.g. remembering names) serves to maintain the musician’s living spiritual influence. Examining the question of what happens when the music fades, this narrator’s concern is with the activity of recollection as performed by a *scattered* audience; she recognizes the power of the music but equally comprehends the danger of silence—silenced instruments and silent voices. Certainly, in the framework of a liberation movement propelled by the black arts of *nommo*, silence could not be affordable.

In the latter portion of “How Long Has Trane Been Gone,” the narrator begins to focus specifically on Coltrane’s importance to the black populace, and slightly changes the urgency of her tone, as if circumstantially affected by the spirit of his message. Henderson notes the significance of “John Coltrane” in poetry, attesting that “the Trane sound is the sound of the real, of the natural, of the spiritual” (55). Therefore, much like the previous poets, Cortez yet points readers to Coltrane in order to endow them with the ability to perceive black life in a different light—or musical pitch.

John Coltrane who had the whole of
 life wrapped up in B flat
 John Coltrane like Malcolm
 True image of Black Masculinity
 (ll. 57-60)

Malcolm X, as a spiritual father of the Black Arts Movement, parallels Coltrane in this verse, since both men used *nommo* to galvanize the black community toward change. Ostensibly, the jazz musician deserves his appointment as the prototypical black male because of his spiritual vision, rather than his potential to physically intimidate. Jazz music becomes Coltrane’s flesh and blood in place of his body; the narrator states that sons “need the warm arm of his music /

like words from a Father” (ll. 68-69). Reiterating the title, she again demands, “How long how long has that Trane been gone” (l. 54). This refrain appears several times, indicating that black people have abandoned Coltrane, because the artist still exists through his records; absence, then, becomes both spiritual and physical when “Trane been gone” from people’s hearts. Coltrane himself is portrayed as “palpatating [*sic*] love notes / in a lost-found nation / within a nation” (ll. 74-76). Articulating the idea of Black Nationalism, Cortez reaffirms the actuality of the musician’s “love supreme” for that nation. Her interpretation of his message centers wholly on that love, rather than an aggressive revolutionary stance. And through this nation, she further attempts to rewrite (or *right*) black geographical identity using *nommo*. Her speaker declares that black people should proclaim, “Proud to say I’m from Parker City – Coltrane City – Ornette City / Pharoah City living on Holiday street next to / James Brown park in the State of Malcolm” (ll. 87-89). Additionally, this conjunction of musical heroes with locations suggests that music should be built into the structure of black lives as a source of pride and self-knowledge; it also evokes the custom of honoring an individual by naming a site after them. For those who, spiritually, have “no city no state no home no Nothing,” daily pronouncing the names of black musicians generates a spiritual resting place that they can rightfully claim (l. 97). *Nothing*, like silence, implicates the absence of words and of *nommo* to create a reality for black people to live in. The last lines in the poem lose steam, plaintively asking, “How long/ Have black people been gone,” but arguably deliver the poem’s strongest rhetorical question (ll. 99-100). In other words, black people stand to lose more than just the sound of music by forgetting the spirituality in their musical legacy; they risk losing themselves.

In terms of the relationship of the poet-as-eulogist to jazz musician, Benston maintains, “The poet’s quest is thus a movement to catch a vanishing ‘Trane,’ an effort to (re)construct what was originally heard and felt by treating the scene of performance as a kind of communal palimpsest” (171). Whether or not these five poets attempt to capture the message, experience, or effect of jazz music in their poetry, each one manages to convey the music’s spirituality and essentiality to the black community. They seek to honor these musicians as priest-like leaders who contributed to the spiritual enfranchisement of black people, rather than to make idols of black music. Using the generative power of their words, these five women poets demonstrate as co-priestesses that the chief objective is not to worship black music or even musicians, but to liberate black people through spiritual means.

CONCLUSION

We are they whom you seek. Look in. Find yr self. Find the being, the speaker. The voice, the back dust hover in your soft eyeclosings. Is you. Is the creator. Is nothing. Plus or minus, you vehicle! We are presenting. Your various selves. We are presenting, from God, a tone, your own. Go on. Now” (xviii).

--Amiri Baraka

Throughout this study, I have demonstrated the ways in which Black Arts Movement (BAM) women poets explore their own spirituality as a means of reconstructing self concurrently with their communities. Centering their work on self-exploration both subverts and reinforces the ideals of Black Nationalism; they do see themselves as the literal foundations and mothers of the black nation, and therefore realize that they must contend with themselves first before healing the community as a whole. Additionally, this thesis has identified several African epistemological concepts in BAM women’s poetry and assessed their various roles in relation to meaning; the theories of *nommo* and *yere-wolo* provide alternative means of critical analysis. Based on the Afrocentric belief in the interdependence of the physical and spiritual, black women’s poetry could not simply focus on outside issues; the spiritual bears an essentiality that is present in their work. The discussion of Afrocentric spirituality in women’s poetry during the Movement is, above all, an examination of the cultural motivations behind activist writing. Because the Black Arts Movement, by self-definition, originated with a spiritual *and* political impetus, focusing solely on the political aspects leaves out future potential methodologies for evaluation. Analyzing Black Arts women’s poetry with spirituality in mind often uncovers a duality of purpose and orientation; thus, as Houston A. Baker states, “A religious spirit from both God and the depths of a distinctive (“Your own”) soul arises as the numinous discourse of a black cultural self-in-motion” (Baker 113). The spirituality in BAM women’s writing is a direct product of their emerging definitions of their “own soul,” a purposeful communication of “how we got ovah.” The conjoint study of Afrocentricity and spirituality attempts to recognize the intersections and influences of both spheres on women’s poetry.

In Chapter One, I have demonstrated how Christianity is interrogated and subsequently revised through the framework of the new blackness in *Songs of a Black Bird* and *How I Got Ovah*. Rodgers questions the perceived Eurocentricity of the religion, using the figure of the

black Christian mother to point out the Afrocentricity already present within the black church. Furthermore, her dialogic interrogation presents the reader with a cross-section of the paradigm shift between the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, and positions black women's spirituality as essential to the momentum of both periods. Chapter Two shows how, in *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* and *I've Been a Woman*, black women must first rebuild and give birth to themselves before they can engage in building the black nation. Its womanist concerns do not exclude care for black men, but instead recognize their own sexual and emotional freedom as intrinsic to black collective agency. In Chapter Three, I have demonstrated the importance of women as spiritual leaders and co-priestesses who attempt to reform the black community through jazz poetry. Their poetry reflects a deep credence in *nommo* as a force that is able to carry out the functions that they describe. All three chapters highlight the importance of the communal in their poetry, but consistently locate black women—body *and* spirit—as central to that community.

In concluding this thesis, I want to address potential implications for my research in the criticism of contemporary black women's poetry. This project furthers the research of scholars who have begun to view the contribution of women poets during the BAM as more than imitations of black male posturing, and revises the belief that black women remained in the background of revolutionary writing. At its smallest level, it seeks to introduce scholarship on African-American women poets who have largely been marginalized within the black scholarly community. These women writers—Bourke, Cortez, Fabio, Rodgers, Sanchez, and Shange—collectively paved the way for black feminist discourse in the literary canon, but most remain conspicuously absent from major conversations about black women's literature. At times, their concentration on woman-centered writings means opposition to even Black Arts theorists, and further disappearance as their books go out of print. Marginalized works within the background of the Movement, Amanda Davis writes, showcase “its struggles with gendered expectations and norms for men and women” (25). For example, although my inclusion of Shange in this study presupposes her association with the artistic group, she is located within it chronologically versus ideologically. Topically, as a poet during that movement, she has been marginalized by prominent writers such as Amiri Baraka, who charged her with “[dealing] in effects but not causes” (qtd. in Martin 58). Shange has also been maligned by male critics who perceive her work as damaging *to* the relationships between black men and women.¹⁸ This problematic

viewpoint negates acknowledgment of the existence of sexism and violence against women in the black community through its premise that power must be institutionalized in order to be used for subjugation. The unearthing of previously ignored works by women within and without the BAM, and the subsequent evaluation of their works through womanist/ black feminist lenses, will undoubtedly bring to light the ways in which they resisted (black) male hegemony and maintained their blackness.

Moreover, disregarding the Black Arts Movement as a valid literary period in American literature yields an incomplete mosaic of African-American women poets' contemporary contributions, and results in missed opportunities to explore the ways in which activism and art unite. My interest in this particular field was sparked not by a university course, but by observation of the chasm present in black literature classes that leaped from Toomer's *Cane* to Morrison's *Beloved*. The relative paucity of current scholarship on the BAM and the number of scholars who dismiss it as unliterary propagandist writing belie the impact it has had on popular culture and Post World War II literature from the Beat Movement to Def Jam Poetry. Kimberly Benston calls for readers and critics to look at the literature not as ideological creed or method, but as a shifting, productive revision of the paradigm set forth in the Harlem Renaissance (3). In 1991, David Lionel Smith gave excellent advice for potential scholars of the Movement:

Finally, since the Black Aesthetic claims to reject European literary models, it requires the writers to develop new forms, new techniques, and new conventions. Therefore, the critic must be prepared to recognize, understand and assess these new literary forms and experiments. Consequently, a critic who wishes to study Black Arts Movement writing must be prepared to move beyond university training, which can entail both establishing new criteria and rejecting established ones. (10)

An extended discourse on the African-centered spirituality of the Black Arts Movement continues to reveal the complexity of the writing produced during that period and calls for new eyes to critically investigate its diverse aspects. There is a need for an extensive exploration of spirituality's significance to black agency (in poetry and fiction) and the perceived position of Black Arts writers as spiritual leaders. My answer to Smith's call has culminated in the desire to further consider exactly how BAM writers turned away from European literary models, and what effect Afrocentric spiritual beliefs had on the function, aesthetics and appearance of their writing.

NOTES

¹ See Margo Natalie Crawford “Natural Black Beauty and Black Drag”; Cherise A. Pollard “Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women’s Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement”; see also Phillip Brian Harper. “Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960’s.” *Critical Inquiry* 19.2 (1993): 234-255.

² The editors include a caveat stating that “the frustration of working thru [sic] these bullshit white people shd [sic] be obvious,” and acknowledge that, among other listed men, women writers Alicia Johnson, Carolyn Rodgers, Jayne Cortez, and Jewel Latimore (Johari Amini) should be in the collection (Jones and Neal xvi).

³ I borrow this phrase from Haki Madhubuti’s poem “Move Un-noticed to be Noticed: A Nationhood Poem” from his collection *We Walk the Way of the New World* (1970). In this stunningly vocal work, Madhubuti gives instructions to the black nation on how to navigate within Eurocentric America. Upon re-reading the poem through a womanist lens, however, I found that it can also apply to black women in terms of their liberation from male oppression. Particularly, the opening lines “move, into our own, not theirs/ into our. / they own it (for the moment)” (Lee 340), are reminiscent of women’s fights to reclaim and redefine gender roles, and to control the sexual and reproductive aspects of their bodies.

⁴ Although the “prone” statement is often quoted in reference to Stokely Carmichael, my research results in only sources that attest that the statement remains alleged. Morris Dickstein, in his review of Sarah Evans’ *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*, relates, “Earlier, in a famous *bon mot*, Stokely Carmichael had quipped that ‘the only position for women in SNCC is prone’” (993). Despite the limited scholarly notes available on this quotation, I employ the word “prone” because it accurately describes general male sensibilities toward black women during the Black Arts Movement.

⁵ See Askia Muhammed Touré’s *Juju (Magic Songs for the Black Nation)* (1970) and Jayne Cortez’s *Festivals and Funerals* (1971). Both authors write prolifically on the subject of Africa as a mythical place or Mecca for black people, but Cortez often includes references to specific tribes and countries in the continent.

⁶ Notable works by black women that stress their blackness and their individual womanhood include Mari Evans’ *I Am a Black Woman* (1970) and Sonia Sanchez’s *I’ve Been a Woman: New and Selected Poems* (1978).

⁷ Giovanni notes, “My first nationally published article was published in the now-defunct *Negro Digest* through the intercession of the late David Llorens. Either he thought I showed talent or he was being exceedingly kind to a young Fiskite [...]” (“Answer” 208).

⁸ Reverend Albert Cleage of Detroit, proponent of the Black Christian Nationalist Movement and founder of the Shrine of the Black Madonna (currently the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church), published *The Black Messiah* in 1968, postulating that Jesus was a

revolutionary Messiah sent to liberate black people. Similarly, Wallace Fard Muhammed's Nation of Islam infused a Black Nationalist doctrine into the Muslim religion.

⁹ I borrow the term "ethos of connectedness" from Judylyn Ryan's book *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women's Film and Literature* (2).

¹⁰ See David Llorens' Introduction to Carolyn Rodgers' *Songs of a Blackbird*. He approvingly states that she "lets that woman thing fly at no risk to her revolutionary identity" (7).

¹¹ *I've Been a Woman*, first published in 1978 by Black Scholar Press, and again in 1985 by Madhubuti's Third World Press, contains selected poems from four previously printed books and several new poems. I include the volume as a whole within the accepted Black Arts Movement timeframe because the majority of the book was published prior to the waning of the Movement, and also because the newer poems complement Sanchez's earlier writings concerning black women.

¹² See D.H. Melhem, "Sonia Sanchez: Will and Spirit" *MELUS* 12.3 (1985): 73-98.

¹³ Poet Sterling Brown and novelist Sherley Anne Williams both objected to the BAM denigration of the blues as an outdated musical form, and attributed this line of thought to both parochialism and literary propagandas (Williams 819-820).

¹⁴ My research has not produced a verbatim application of the concept of *nommo* to African-American poetry by Black Arts Movement theorists or poets. However, the existence of organic associations like Kalamu ya Salaam's NOMMO Literary Society, a currently active creative writing workshop in New Orleans, evinces that at least some writers had knowledge of the relationship of *nommo* to poetry.

¹⁵ See David Lionel Smith, "Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts of Black Art." *boundary 2* 15.1/2 (1986): 235-254.

¹⁶ See *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth Century American Poetry*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000.

¹⁷ Van Peebles' movie is often credited with sparking the blaxploitation genre, even though *Sweet Sweetback* was one of the first *independent*, African-American directed films to portray black males in a powerful manner. *Sweetback* was both a cop-evader and lothario, exemplifying the Black Arts vision of black male power through sexual prowess and physical aggression. Fabio's "sweetback" most likely refers to the archetype of hip black maleness which she ascribes to Ellington.

¹⁸ Some of the earliest criticism came from scholar Erskine Peters, whose 1978 article exemplifies the backlash against *for colored girls...* He postulates that Shange has done black men a disservice through the portrayal of male characters in the play such as Beau Willie Brown. Peters likens the work to reports by white anthropologists in the 1950's, claiming that the

negative aspects of black male-black female relationship are “superficial” (79). What he fails to take into account, however, is that reconstruction of individual black women, as Shange and others imagined it, predicates a growth for the community at large. His perception of Shange’s black feminist/ womanist depiction of black men and women parallels that of Africanist Clenora Hudson-Weems, who declares that the idea of an Africana feminist (read: black) is unpalatable to the black community because “African men have never had the same institutionalized power to oppress Africana women as white men have had to oppress white women” (158).

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