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Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community

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## FEELING THE SPIRIT IN THE DARK Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community

by E. Patrick Johnson

Darkness falls as the gay male subculture gets to work, late. The thick blanket of darkness is a cover, a protector of anonymity and an erotic focus: a mantle of oppression and opposition. It heightens the danger as it provides the pleasure. This tension between pleasure and danger, dream and nightmare, is a major source of its eroticism.

—Tim Edwards, *Erotics & Politics*

“Spirit in the Dark” is one of many songs recorded by the “Queen of Soul” diva, Aretha Franklin, that blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the secular—both through its lyrics and its musical composition. Fueled with the vocal melismas<sup>1</sup> and rhythmic syncopation found in gospel and blues, Franklin’s song uses the sacred notion of “spirit” as a metaphor for sexual ecstasy as she sings, “It’s like Sally Walker, sitting in her saucer. That’s how you do it. It ain’t nothing to it. Ride, Sally ride. Put your hands on your hips and cover your eyes and move with the spirit in the dark.” While some listeners might argue that the reference to spirit in this song is symbolic of the “holy” spirit, those of us who hear the double entendre know that Franklin’s use of this word is much more fluid. Indeed, she endows Sally Walker, the innocent and chaste little girl of the famous children’s nursery rhyme, with sexual agency as Franklin encourages Sally to “ride” the spirit in the dark.

“Spirit in the Dark” also highlights the dichotomy of body and soul within the black church, the belief that to be “saved” means to yield not to temptations of the flesh. Within the context of the black church, feeling the spirit in the secular/sexual sense is an act of transgression, a symptom of the “sinsick” soul. And in the most fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible, the sin of the flesh will pave a slippery road down into the fiery gates of Hell into everlasting darkness. Although this split of the spirit and flesh is continually preached in the pulpit, it is rarely practiced by the deliverer of the message and the congregants who listen. But this denial of the flesh encourages an unhealthy and unrealistic view of sexuality and the body in general. Indeed, feeling the spirit under these conditions may only happen under a shroud of darkness because the spirit and flesh never unite, never become one incarnation through the body of Christ.

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In this essay I shall focus on how African-American gays have attempted to reconcile the spirit and the flesh by moving from “place to space.” Drawing heavily upon Michel de Certeau’s formulation of place and space, Vivian M. Patraha argues that “place refers to a prescribed performance of interpretation, while space produces sites for multiple performances of interpretation, which situate/produce the spectator as historical subject” (100). In their attempt to be closer to God and to express their sexuality, black gay men transgressively unite body and soul by moving from the pre-scripted “place” of the black church into the ambiguous “space” of the gay night club. Thus, the notion of feeling the spirit in the dark engenders a celebration of the black gay body as well as a communion with the Holy Spirit. Precisely because the black gay and Christian body are highlighted in performance, the veil of darkness dividing body from soul in the “place” of the black church is lifted in the darkened “space” of the gay night club.

### Body And Soul

In her song Aretha Franklin, daughter of Reverend C.L. Franklin, embodies the blurring of sacred and secular boundaries found in many African-American expressive traditions from spirituals and gospel, to blues and folk preaching. The reasons for such blurring, however, are multiple. One reason is that African Americans’ notion of the sacred is connected to the reality of their daily lives. For instance, it is not uncommon to find African Americans who party all night on Saturday, but who never fail to miss Sunday School on Sunday morning (in some instances the same musicians who play in night clubs are those who also provide the music for the church); or, who, like Franklin, use sacred or biblical language to comment on everyday life, as is the case with phrases like, “The Lord don’t like ugly, so He must hate you,” to comment on someone’s unattractiveness rather than their sinfulness. And even more generally, the black church has always been a site of social transgression, from the days of slavery when folk preachers drew upon the signifying tradition to encode sermons about a better life in Heaven with messages of insurrection and directions for how to escape to the North, to ministers like Martin Luther King, Jr., who used the church as a site of political activism during the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, at every significant moment in African-American history, the church has been a centralizing and galvanizing force for social and political change. Thus, the black church has always served a dual role within the black community: it has served as place to worship God and a place to address the social and political needs of its constituents.

The church has been less willing to blur the secular and the sacred when it comes to sexuality, however. According to minister and cultural critic, Michael Dyson,

Sex, . . . , is a difficult subject to treat in the black church, or for that matter, in any church. This is indeed ironic. After all, the Christian faith is grounded in the Incarnation, the belief that God took on flesh to redeem human beings. That belief is constantly being trumped by Christianity’s quarrels with the body. Its needs. Its desires. Its sheer materiality. But especially its sexual identity. (80)

When the church does address sexuality, it does so by exhorting the glories of sexual expression between heterosexuals within the institution of marriage (and usually for the purpose of procreation as opposed to recreation). Single members of the congregation are expected to remain celibate until marriage. And although many heterosexual members of the church—married and single—engage in out-of-wedlock, multi-partnered, and even anonymous sex, the condemnation these members receive (if they are condemned at all) is tempered by the fact that the sex in which they engage is still *heterosexual*. In fact, a certain amount of heterosexual loose play is accepted as a normal part of the church community—even, or especially among its anointed.

Thus, African-American folklore consistently depicts preachers as lovers of women, money, cars, chicken, and liquor—in essence, as pimps. One of Daryl Dance's folktales, collected in her book, *Shukin' and Jivin'*, is a perfect example:

Say John came in and his wife hadn't cooked or nothin'. And say all at once, she jumped up. She spied a chicken out in the yard. Say she jumped up and started runnin' after the chicken. Her husband say, "What in de worl' you runnin' dem chickens like dat for?" Say, "You ain't even cooked no supper or nuttin'."

She say, "De preacher want chicken."

He say, "Fuck de Preacher!"

She say, "I done did dat, but the Preacher *still* want chicken." (55)

Such a story clearly reflects the congregation's need to ridicule an authority figure: the black preacher's historically high position within African-American communities makes him only too vulnerable to ridicule and satire. Moreover, the lore of the minister/pimp calls attention to the hypocrisy of the black preacher. Michael Dyson offers a first hand account of the minister who does not practice what he preaches. After delivering a sermon which encourages sexual propriety and condemns promiscuity, a visiting minister, along with four other clergy, including Dyson, met in the pastor's office. There the visitor asks the host pastor about a woman who was present in the congregation:

"Revrn, I need to ask you something," the visiting preacher begged the pastor.

"Who is that woman with those big breasts who was sitting on the third aisle to my left?" he eagerly inquired.

"Damn, she kept shouting and jigging so much I almost lost my concentration."

"She *is* a fine woman, now," the pastor let on.

"Well, Doc, do you think you could fix me up with her?" the visiting preacher asked with shameless lust.

"I'll see what I can do, Revrn," the pastor promised. (81–82)

Dyson is shocked by this pastor's blatant display of lust, particularly after having admonished the congregants to "stop [their] rovin' eyes":

The fact that he [the visiting pastor] could seek an affair less than an hour after he had thundered against it offended my naive, literal sense of the Christian faith. I thought immediately of how angry I'd been in the past when I heard preachers justify their moral failings, especially their sexual faults. Such ministers chided their followers with a bit of theological doggerel dressed up as a maxim: "God can hit a straight lick with a crooked stick."  
(82)

The point to be made, however, is that while the prevalence of the minister in folklore suggests that lusting preachers are not acceptable, the black church tolerates the obvious paradox of their behavior in a way that nonetheless makes heterosexuality normal. Consequently, those heterosexual church members who "yield to the flesh" are rarely, if ever, asked to leave the church.

But whether embraced by its constituents or not, the black church has always been a site of contradictions where sexuality is concerned. In fact, one might argue that the body is the one organizing site of multiple and competing signifiers within the black church service. Congregants perform the black body and inspire performance in others through the various rituals of the service. Dyson writes:

The black church, . . . , is full of beautiful, boisterous, burdened, and brilliant black bodies in various stages of praising, signifying, testifying, shouting, prancing, screaming, musing, praying, mediating, singing, whooping, hollering, prophesying, preaching, dancing, witnessing, crying, faking, marching, forgiving, damning, exorcising, lying, confessing, surrendering, and overcoming. There is a relentless procession, circulation, and movement of black bodies in the black church. . . . (88)

As we saw in Aretha Franklin's song, these black bodies in motion conjure and inspire not only a "holy" spirit, but a sensuous and sexual one as well. When congregants "feel the spirit," their bodies are flung into motion in ways that transform the sacred body into a very secular body, a body that weds the spiritual with the sexual. Within the context of the sacred "place" of the church, however, the sexual/sensual body is both invisible and foregrounded, shunned and gazed upon, denigrated and enjoyed. The black body is theologized as a "temple of the Lord," as a vessel that should be kept pure and "clean." However, when church members try to put this doctrine into practice, both in and outside the context of the church, their guilt about their carnal thoughts reinforces the false dichotomy between the spirit and the flesh.

Nowhere is this false dichotomy foregrounded more than within the traditional African-American worship service itself. The entire church service may be likened to a sexual encounter: there is flirting, petting, foreplay, orgasm, and post-coital bliss. Indeed, "the black worship experience formed the erotic body of black religious

belief, with all the rites of religious arousal that accompany sexual union" (Dyson 91). Every aspect of the black church service is centered around the preacher's message; and, at its height, a preacher's sermon may galvanize a congregation into a state of spiritual ecstasy that coalesces with the feeling one experiences during an orgasm: "It requires no large sophistication to tell that something like sexual stimulation [is] going on" (Dyson 91).

### Secular Bodies/Sacred Spaces

Commenting on the performance "place" of the black church from a queer perspective, African-American gay writers often highlight the sexual tension present in the black church worship service. Moreover, these writers expand upon the folkloric figure of the lusty minister which rests uneasily beside the minister's homophobic attitude toward gays. Thus, these writers deftly demonstrate how insidious and oppressive the place of the church is. Alternatively, African-American gay writers attempt to transgress the performance place of the black church by queering the gaze of the worshipping body.

In his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin calls attention to the sensuality and sexuality of the black worship service. In that novel, Baldwin worries the distinction between the spirit and flesh by embellishing not only the eroticism but also the homoeroticism implicit in the black church worship service. Early in the novel, for instance, Baldwin describes a typical worship service at The Temple of the Fire Baptized as seen through the eyes of John, the novel's protagonist, who, throughout the course of the novel tries to come to terms with his (homo)sexuality by reconciling it with his faith. In the following passage, the reader glimpses not only the sensuality of the black worship service, but also how the black body becomes eroticized when overcome by the Holy Ghost. Through John, we specifically see the eroticism evoked by Elisha's body, the object of John's gaze:

At one moment, head thrown back, eyes closed, sweat standing on his brow, he sat at the piano, singing and playing; and then, like a great, black cat in trouble in the jungle, he stiffened and trembled, and cried out. *Jesus, Jesus, oh Lord Jesus!* He struck on the piano one last, wild note, and threw up his hands, palms upward, stretched wide apart. The tambourines raced to fill the vacuum left by his silent piano, and his cry drew answering cries. Then he was on his feet, turning, blind, his face congested, contorted with this rage, and the muscles leaping and swelling in his long, dark neck. It seemed that he could not breathe, that his body could not contain this passion, that he would be, before their eyes, dispersed into the waiting air. His hands, rigid to the very fingertips, moved outward and back against his hips, his sightless eyes looked upward, and he began to dance. Then he closed his fists, and his head snapped downward, his sweat loosening the grease that slicked down his hair; and the rhythm of all the others quickened to match Elisha's rhythm; his thighs moved terribly against the cloth of his suit, his heels beat on the

floor, and his fists moved beside his body as though he were beating his own drum. And so, for a while, in the center of the dancers, head down, fists beating, on, on, on unbearably, until it seemed the walls of the church would fall for very sound; and then, in a moment, with a cry, head up, arms high in the air, sweat pouring from his forehead, and all his body dancing as though it would never stop. Sometimes he did not stop until he fell—until he dropped like some animal felled by a hammer—moaning, on his face. And then a great moaning filled the church. (15–16)

In this passage, Elisha's body becomes the site of both sexuality and spirituality. Consumed by the generative power of the Holy Ghost, Elisha "stiffened and trembled"; his muscles were "leaping and swelling" and his "body could not contain the passion." The passage builds into a climax, until Elisha drops, "and a great moaning filled the church." After only a paragraph break, the text moves from orgasmic language to public scorn accorded the carnal thoughts of Elisha and his girlfriend, Ella Mae Washington: "There was sin among them. One Sunday, when regular service was over, Father James had uncovered sin in the congregation of the righteous. He had uncovered Elisha and Ella Mae. They had been 'walking disorderly'" (16). Therefore, Baldwin calls attention to the irony of Elisha's sexuality, both as it manifests itself in the act of worship and as it expresses itself toward another. Ultimately, Baldwin challenges the split between the spirit and the flesh, between spirituality and sexuality, especially given that our sexuality is preached as something "God given" and integral to our humanity. Florence, the only character in the novel whose name is not derived from the Bible, remarks that "what's in you is in you, and it's got to come out" (180). Florence's words reflect the common saying in the black church that one should not try to "quench the spirit." But in the context of the novel, Florence is specifically referring to her brother Gabriel's "chasing after women and lying in the ditches, drunk" (180), which implies that "what's in you" is also sexual and that, too, must be made manifest. Baldwin's critique of religion, then, rests on the premise that the body and soul are one and neither should be denied. Moreover, Baldwin reveals through the gayness of John's gaze upon Elisha's worshipping body, that the Christian body may also be a queer body.

If the church holds a contradictory and duplicitous attitude toward sexuality with regard to its heterosexual members, then it goes without saying that the same would be true for its attitude toward its gay and lesbian members. Even though they comprise a large majority of those who hold positions in the church<sup>2</sup>—from usher to preacher—African-American gays are not afforded the same latitude in terms of expressing their sexuality (or spirituality) as their heterosexual counterparts. Though they might express "femininity"—a gender role stereotypically associated with gayness, but nonetheless tolerated by church members—African-American gay men are rarely if ever out of the closet. Such a blatant expression of one's sexuality would be an affront to the fundamentalist conventions of the church, even though this attitude embodies a double standard in terms of who can and cannot express sexual agency within the black church.

Indeed, in the “place” of the church, the heterosexual members maintain a hierarchy intent in hiding their own sins of the flesh, creating not a sacred “space”—a site that “invites multiple acts of interpretations”—but a sacred “place”—a site prescribed and “narrativized in advance.” Again, African-American gay critics and writers observe the limitations of the church performance place through personal testimonies, memoirs, poems, novels, and short stories. In particular, these writers depict a place in which heterosexual members treat gayness as an illness. As with other forms of “sinsickness,” the church’s answer to homosexuality is exorcism. For example, when Johnny Rae Rousseau, the protagonist in Larry Duplechan’s novel, *Blackbird*, comes out to his pastor, rather than affirm Johnny’s gay identity and reassure him of God’s love irrespective of sexual orientation, the minister dismisses Johnny’s confession as temptation by Satan and proceeds to lay his hands on him. Johnny tells the reader:

What Daniel did was wrinkle his one great eyebrow and assure me . . . that I was indeed not a homosexual at all, but that Satan had planted this wild notion in my mind to test the steadfastness of my Christian commitment.

“Satan will often suggest (ahem) certain ungodly desires to the minds and hearts of Christian young people,” said Daniel.

. . . . Daniel then proceeded to lay hands on me and pray for my speedy deliverance from these unnatural and ungodly desires, instructed me to pray likewise daily, assured me that of course this entire matter was strictly between the two of us, and sent me on my way. (150)

This pathologizing of gayness as “unnatural” and “ungodly” creates a hostile, oppressive, and homophobic environment for gays and lesbians—an environment that is, according to Christian doctrine, supposed to foster community and acceptance through Christ. Instead, “the homosexual dimension of eroticism remains cloaked in taboo or blanketed in theological attack. As a result, the black church, an institution that has been at the heart of black emancipation, refuses to unlock the oppressive closet for gays and lesbians” (Dyson 105).

Another example of the church condemning homosexuality as a sinsickness to be exorcised is found in Craig G. Harris’s short story, “Cut Off From Among his People,” in which the story’s narrator Jeff remembers the funeral of his lover who has died of AIDS. Homophobia pervades the service. Indeed, the minister’s eulogy insidiously equates AIDS with homosexuality, contending that the disease is a sickness of the soul for which the only cure is an exorcism of the sin of gayness. The preacher proselytizes:

“In Leviticus, Chapter 20, the Lord tell [sic] us: If a man also lie with mankind as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death;



their blood shall be upon them. There's no cause to wonder why medical science could not find a cure for this man's illness. How could medicine cure temptation? What drug can exorcise Satan from a young man's soul? The only cure is to be found in the Lord. The only cure is repentance, for Leviticus clearly tells us, ' . . . whoever shall commit them shall be cut off from among their people.'" (66)

Indeed, black gay men are "cut off from among their people" when those people—family, friends, church members—fail to provide an affirming and supportive environment in which their humanity is acknowledged, particularly during those times of bereavement. Later in the same story, the undertaker is the only member of the church to extend compassion to the mourning lover. Recalling the pain of losing his own lover to AIDS three months earlier, the undertaker elaborates on the continual dismissal of the black gay body by the church:

"It's been very difficult—living with these memories and secrets and hurt, and with no one to share them. These people won't allow themselves to understand. If it's not preached from a pulpit and kissed up to the Almighty, they don't want to know about it. So, I hold it in, and hold it in, and then I see you passing, one after the other—tearless funerals, the widowed treated like non-entities, and these 'another faggot burns in hell' sermons. My heart goes out to you brother. You got to let your love for him keep you strong." (67)

The undertaker captures well the hurt and pain inflicted by those who preach love and compassion, but whose practice of such virtues is limited to specific members of the church and the African-American community at large.

What is most insidious about the church's denouncement of homosexuality, however, is its exploitation of its gay members. As with Elisha in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, who serves as the church pianist, the church exploits the musical talents, financial savvy, and leadership abilities of gays. At the same time that it denies homosexuality as a valid form of black Christian sexuality as well as denies the homosexual his/her rightful place among the "saints," it uses the black gay body to bring others to Christ. Dyson writes:

One of the most painful scenarios of black church life is repeated Sunday after Sunday with little notice or collective outrage. A black minister will preach a sermon railing against sexual ills, especially homosexuality. At the close of the sermon, a soloist, who everybody knows is gay, will rise to perform a moving number, as the preacher extends an invitation to visitors to join the church. The soloist is, in effect, being asked to sing, and to sing, his theological death sentence. His presence at the end of such a sermon symbolizes a silent endorsement of the preacher's message. (105)

Dyson's scenario rings true for many gay men who use their musical talents in the church but who, ironically, are called to affirm a theology of hate rather than of love and acceptance. In the church performance "place," however, the gay man's complicity in his own oppression is common, for not only is a performance place "linked to a single narrative," it is a single performance of interpretation elicited by that narrative. . . . Moreover, our bodies are implicated in the task by performing the required movement" (Patraka 100). How then, does the black gay Christian affirm both his sexuality and spirituality without imitating the repression/excessive model of his fellow heterosexual brothers and sisters in Christ? Indeed, how does he go about "feeling the spirit"? One answer to these questions is the move from place to space, from the church to the club—"the liberating move that allows [them] to understand the experience of everyday life . . ." (Patraka 100).

Removed from the homophobic, guilt-ridden, and self-hating rhetoric of many black churches, the gay night club has become an alternative space in which African-American gay men can express their spirituality as well as their sexuality. By incorporating sacred traditions found in African-American culture and infusing them in the secular space of the gay night club, African-American gay men have created a self-validating environment in which they possess sexual agency on the one hand, and are possessed by the spirit on the other.

### "Hold My Mule"

It is well known throughout black gay communities that Washington, D.C., is a gathering place for black gay men during Memorial Day weekend; alternatively, Atlanta, Georgia, is the hottest spot during Labor Day weekend. On these two holidays in these two respective cities, African-American men from around the country gather to celebrate their blackness and their gayness (both cities have a high black and gay population), to meet potential life partners, to "hook up" for the weekend, to commune with one another.

\* \* \*

It's Labor Day weekend, 1995. I take a trip to Atlanta, Georgia, to visit friends, to escape from my mostly white New England environment and to return home to the South to find a refuge amongst my black queer peers. While there, my friends take me to a number of gay night clubs, some are predominately white, some are racially mixed, others predominately African-American. One of the more popular African-American clubs we visit is called "Tracks" or "The Warehouse," though it is gay only two nights a week—Friday and Saturday. We go to Tracks on Saturday, arriving there just a little past midnight. Located about a mile and half from downtown Atlanta, Tracks is indistinguishable from the other warehouses in the industrial district—indistinguishable, that is, except for the line of people that coils around the side of the building and down the block. While standing in line, we overhear the catty, yet

playful conversations of those in front and in back of us: “She [he] think she cute. Too bad she ain’t” (laughter); “Chile, I ain’t tryin’ to be standin’ in this line all night—not with these pumps on!”; “Look, Miss Thing. I ain’t got no other ID. Miss Thing at the door better not try to be shady. I’ll cut her ass.” In general, we cruise and get cruised, negotiate sexual deals. We’re all men on a mission. I know I’m home.

Inside, the club is sparsely decorated, which makes it appear even larger than its 3500 square feet. The entrance is on the second level, which overlooks the dance floor and resembles the second floor of a shopping mall. Around the edge of this level are sitting booths, dimly lit by red votives. Above each booth are pictures taken from the “Brothers” 1995 Black Gay Men’s Calendar of scantily clothed or naked black men. Some of the models are at the club taking pictures with patrons and signing the calendars. The first floor has two bars on each side of the dance floor and a raised stage at the far end of the room. On the edge of the stage, on each corner, are two huge column speakers that rise about 10 feet in the air. Colored moving lights don the ceiling along with a mirrored disco ball.

My friends and I squeeze down the staircase and descend into the sea of bodies onto the dance floor. There is barely enough room to breathe, let alone move. Every inch of the space is filled with a body—fat bodies, thin bodies, hard bodies, soft bodies, warm bodies, sweaty bodies, every body imaginable. Clearly, the body is on display: There are drag queens in skintight hotpants and platform shoes. There are “butch” men donning their black leather jackets, aligning the wall like two by fours holding the structure together. There are “queens,” dressed in tight black jeans and black chiffon blouses unbuttoned to their navels, who are constantly pursing their lips while looking over the tops of their retro “cat-eye” shades; there are older men (in this club anyone over 45) sitting on bar stools, dressed conservatively in slacks and button-up shirts sipping their scotch and sodas while looking longingly at the young bodies sauntering across the dance floor. The hip hop contingent is sprinkled throughout the club in their baggy jeans, ski caps, sneakers, and black shades, some sucking on blowpops while others sip Budweiser. And then there are those like me and my friends who are dressed in designer jeans (Calvin Klein) and tight, spandex muscle shirts, performing middle class (acting bourgeois)—as if we actually have two nickels to rub together! You can smell us coming because we sprayed and resprayed cologne behind our ankles, on the small of our backs, and, of course on the front of our chests and all around our necks. We’re beyond reproach. We manage to dance—spoon fashion—against the seemingly thousands of flying arms, legs, and butts. I dance with the same man all night—Kevin—a friend of a friend. Kevin and I don’t mean to be exclusive dance partners, it just works out that way. We dance close. Every now and then we back off from one another as far as we can and then come together again. We kiss. We bump booties. We hold on to each other for dear life as the beat of the music, the smells of Drakkar, Cool Water, Eternity, and Escape, CK-One, the sweat drenching our shirts, and the holy sexual spirit that presides works us into a shamanistic state of euphoria. Time stands still.

Around five a.m., the mood of the club shifts and there is a feeling of anticipation in the air. The music shifts to—No it couldn’t be!—what sounds like the “shout” music played in my church back home. Kevin and I stare at each other with a carnal intensity

as the driving rhythm of the music causes us to grind harder. Before long, the DJ, a three hundred pound, African-American man, dressed in a flowing white shirt, blue jeans, high-top sneakers, a thick gold chain, glittering rings on either hand, a baseball cap and diamond trimmed sunglasses, appears on the stage, and begins a roll call of different states:

"We got any L.A. in the house? Show your hands if you're from the gay mecca of D.C.! How about the northern children from Ms. New York City? Detroit! Chicago! We got any Boston children up in here! And last, but not least, let me see the children from Hotlanta!" We cheer and wave our hands in the air if our city is called. Then, intermittently dispersed throughout the music, are sound bites from gospel singer Shirley Caesar's song, "Hold My Mule": "It's just like fire!"; "Somebody say yes (yes), say yes (yes), yes (yes)"; "If you don't stop dancing!"; "You come to tell me that I dance too much!"; "I'm gonna shout right here!" While this musical interlude continues, the DJ begins to testify:

"Thank Him! For how He kept you safe over the dangerous highways and byways. Thank Him, because you closed in your right mind!

*"Somebody say yes (yes), say yes (yes), yes (yes)."*

"Look around you. Somebody that was here last year ain't here tonight! Look around you! Somebody that was dancing right next to you ain't here tonight! Look around you! Somebody's lover has passed on! Look around you! Somebody's brother, somebody's sister, somebody's cousin, somebody's uncle done gone on to the Maker. Sister Mary has passed on tonight! Brother Joe has gone on to his resting place! But Grace woke you up this morning! Grace started you on your way! Grace put food you your table! How many of you know what I'm talking about?!"

*"It's just like fire! It's just like fire! It's just like fire. Shut up in my bones."*

*"If He's been good to you, let me see you wave your hands."*

*"Somebody say yes (yes), say yes (yes), yes (yes)."*

Kevin and I, along with others, dance on to the beat of the music, waving our hands, crying, kissing, and shouting "Yes!" A drag queen appears from nowhere and begins to walk around the side of the dance floor beating a tambourine to the beat of the rhythm. The house music swells as the DJ then proceeds to sermonize in the manner of an African-American folk preacher, embodying the chant-like cadence and rhythm of the preacher's voice. He chants the old folk church song, "Ninety-nine and a Half Won't Do," to get his message across. Thus, to the rhythm of the music he sermonizes:

"22, just won't do; 33, just look at me; 44, I need some more; 55, I'm still alive; 66, I'm in the mix; 77, on my way to Heaven; 88, got my business straight; 99, I'm still climbing; 99, won't do; 99, won't do; 99, won't do."

*The DJ's preaching, along with the repetitive beat of the music, works us into a frenzy. The echoes of my Southern Baptist minister's sermons consume my thoughts . . . yield not to temptation . . . I dance on . . . something got a hold on me . . . Kevin pins me against the wall . . . it's just like fire! . . . I consume his tongue . . . "There was sin among them." . . . I feel the tears well up in my eyes . . . "It seemed that he could not breathe, that his body could not contain this passion" . . . I dance on . . . Somebody say yes (yes), say yes (yes), yes (yes) . . . A drag queen sobs silently with her hands stretched upward . . . "whoever shall commit any of these abominations, even the souls that commit them shall be cut off from among their people" . . .*

*It's just like fire! . . . Thank you Jesus! . . . We dance on . . . "and the rhythm of all the others quickened to match Elisha's rhythm" . . . You come to tell me that I dance too much! . . . I'm aroused by his touch . . . For I have touched the hem of His garment . . . "his thighs moved terribly against the cloth of his suit" . . . 99, won't do . . . "his fists moved beside his body as though he were beating his own drum" . . . my body seeks joy . . . It's just like fire! . . . "and then, in a moment, with a cry" . . . Thank Him! . . . I'm gonna shout right here . . . "head up, arms high in the air" . . . You come to tell me that I dance too much . . . If a man lie with mankind . . . My groin aches . . . "sweat pouring from his forehead, and all his body dancing as though it would never stop" . . . I weep . . . Hold my mule . . . Dancing . . . "he dropped like some animal felled by a hammer" . . . Kevin holds me up . . . Hold my mule . . . I dance too much . . . Kevin wipes my tears . . . Hold my mule . . . "moaning on his face" . . . abomination . . . Hold my mule . . . Say yes (yes), say (yes), say (yes) . . . How many of you know what I'm talking about? . . . Hold my mule . . . we feel the spirit . . . Hold my mule . . . "a great moaning filled the church" . . . Hold my mule . . .*

### Moving Toward the Light

In the event described above, body and soul coalesced—flesh and spirit were wed. In other words, feeling the spirit in the dark became a process through which the spirit was made manifest through the flesh or through an enactment of what Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa call a "theory in the flesh." They define this theory as "one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (23). The "politic born out of necessity" is that of sexual expression and affirmation, the conjoining of the physical realities of being black and gay with those of being Christian. The performance "space" of the night club makes this union possible. Indeed, ". . . this performance environment . . . [allowed] us to experience our subjectivity in unusual ways . . ." (Patraka 101), as we celebrated our spirituality and our sexuality by publicly displaying our eroticized black gay bodies. As spectators of eroticized gay bodies that are simultaneously *Christian* bodies, black gay men in the night club space both witness and become witnesses for the union of body and flesh. In turn, this witnessing forges a sense of community and belonging among the night club patrons—a sense of community denied them in the performance "place" of the black church.

In the night club space black gay men draw upon the rich vernacular of African-American folklore, a discourse that has always been used as a weapon against oppression. Therefore, Shirley Caesar's folk narrative that precedes her song becomes a metaphor for the plight of African-American gay men and their experience in the black church.

Caesar's song could be subtitled, "I Feel Like Praising Him," for those are the words of the song that are actually sung. In fact, "Hold My Mule" is the theme of the narrative Caesar tells before she sings the song. "Hold My Mule" tells the story of an 86-year-old man named "Shoutin' John," who joins a church that does not allow "dancin'." Caesar testifies:

I just wanna take time to tell you a story about a man called, "Shoutin' John." John joined a dead church. They didn't believe in shoutin'. They didn't believe in dancing and speaking in tongues. But when they opened the doors of the church, John joined that church. Well. And when John joined that church, he came in dancing. Everything! Everything got disturbed, because John was dancing all around the church. The deacons ran and sat him down, he jumped back up. They tried to hold his legs, his hands would go. When they turned the hands alose [loose], the FEET WERE GOIN' /IT'S JUST LIKE FIRE! /IT'S JUST LIKE FIRE! Shut up in my bones. Well. They did everything they could to stop old John from shoutin' and when they couldn't finally stop him, they made up in their minds, "We got to go out to John's house, y'all, for something is wrong with him. DOESN'T HE KNOW! We don't act like that in our church. DOESN'T JOHN KNOW! We've got dignitaries in our church. We're goin'. We're goin'. We're goin' to John's house." Well. When they got out there, they found this old 86-year-old man, him and an old beat up mule, plowin', plowin' in the field. They drove up, all of the deacons; they got out of their fine cars; they walked over to John. John looked around and said, "Hold, mule." He walked over to them and said, "Brethren, I know why you've come out here. You've come out here to tell me that I praise the Lord too much. You've come out here to tell me that I dance too much." One of the deacons told him, "IF YOU DON'T STOP SHOUTIN'! IF YOU DON'T STOP DANCIN'! WE GONNA PUT YOU OUT OF OUR CHURCH!" [chanting] Somebody say yes (yes), say yes (yes), wave your hand and tell God, yes. JOHN said to them, "WELL PUT ME OUT! I can't hold my peace. DID YOU SEE ALL THAT LAND YOU JUST DROVE UP OVER?" He said, "GOD GAVE ME ALL THAT LAND! But you don't want me to dance in your church. LOOK AT MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS," said, "GOD GAVE ME ALL OF MY CHILDREN! NOT ONE TIME, HAVE I BEEN TO THE COURTHOUSE. NOT ONE TIME, HAVE I HAVE I BEEN TO THE CEMETERY. BUT YOU DON'T WANT ME TO DANCE IN YOUR CHURCH." Then he said, "LOOK AT ME. I'M 86 YEARS OLD. I'M STILL ABLE, TO WALK DOWN BEHIND THAT OLD MULE. I'M STILL ABLE, TO HARVEST MY OWN CROP. BUT YOU DON'T WANT ME TO DANCE IN YOUR CHURCH. LISTEN BROTHER DEACONS, IF I CAN'T SHOUT IN YOUR CHURCH, HOLD MY MULE, I'M GONNA SHOUT RIGHT HERE!" SAY YES! SAY YES! SAY YES! OH LORD! Hold my mule. Hold my mule. Hold my mule.

Caesar follows the story of John by singing, "I feel like praising, praising Him. I feel like praising, praising Him. Praise Him in the Morning. Praise Him all night long. I feel like praising, praising Him."

John's relationship with the "dead" church is similar to African-American gay men's relationship to the church in general. Despite John's perception that the church is "dead," he decides to join, hoping that he might be able to put some "life" into it. But John soon discovers that not only is the church dead, but it is spiritless. Indeed, the members work hard to "quench" the spirit, in him and in the church in general.

The members of John's church try to constrain him, denying him freedom to express his faith in God in his own way. The church fails to practice the doctrine of "whosoever will let him come." Similarly, the black church condemns the African-American gay male's sexuality, denying him the opportunity to be out within the context of the church. But as John reminds the deacons who come to visit him, something as powerful as the spirit cannot and must not be quenched. Like the spirit, sexuality too, is "just like fire, shut up in [the] bones." But the black church fervently opposes a reconciliation of the body and soul because "the mind-body split . . . flourishes in black theologies of sexuality" (Dyson 91). If this split creates all kinds of paradoxes in the sexual expression of heterosexual Christians, it is hardly surprising that attitudes toward homosexuality would be oppressive. Ironically, the common formulaic expression, "just like fire shut up in my bones" implicitly links the spirit and the flesh, body and soul. Continuously repeated throughout house music, this phrase encourages the expression of both spirituality and sexuality, as club goers acknowledge both through their sexual dancing as well as cries of praise to God.

Moreover, if the spirit is real, it may be made manifest in or outside the church: "Where two or three are gathered in my name." Indeed, contrary to the beliefs of many churchgoers, the "House of the Lord" is not always defined as what we call a "church." The "House of the Lord" is wherever the spirit resides. As John demonstrates, he can express his faith anywhere, even in a field with a mule. Likewise, because the church cannot and will not provide an affirming environment for African-American gay men to express their sexuality as well as their spirituality, the night club becomes an alternative "sanctuary." In Hartford, Connecticut, for instance, "Sanctuary" is the name of a gay night club, publicly transgressing what that place traditionally signifies.

It is also significant that the song chosen by the DJ is entitled, "Hold My Mule," which resonates with phallic and sexual imagery. Shoutin' John's request that the deacons "hold his mule" while he shouts in the field is his way of dismissing them and standing his ground. Within black street vernacular, however, "hold" could be a euphemism for "suck," in which case John's verbal response reflects the verbal put down, "suck my dick." While John's signifying is nonsexual, it still evokes a duplicitous meaning. In the night club, the title is imbued with a duplicitous meaning as well. On the one hand, similar to how it functions within the story of John, "Hold My Mule" reflects a political stance against the oppression of the church's condemnation of homosexuality. On the other hand, the title also draws attention toward the sexual connotations of the song, in which the "mule" becomes a metaphor for the penis. The song, as an anthem in the night club, thereby celebrates sexuality and, more importantly, homosexuality by inviting an erotic focus on the body engaged in same-sex oral sex.

### From Place to Space

Although I seem to romanticize the communion between spirituality and sexuality, I am more intent upon calling attention to the transgression implicit within the

move from place to space. The “sacred” place of the church where the rhetorical discourse of the service censures and confines the body is revised within the secular space of the night club so as to liberate the body. As I’ve already described, the literal darkness of the club is also a conscious metaphor. As such it reveals rather than conceals, frees rather than captures, the sexualized body. Indeed, the bodies on the dance floor are sexualized in their movements, as couples grope each other to the beat of the music and to the sound of the preaching, as arms, legs, and hands fling in sensual and provocative motion. The space secularizes the whole notion of the “shout” or the “holy dance”: in turn, a sexualized body is offered in praise of God. The result is that the dancer affirms both the sexual and the spiritual.

Certainly the sexualized body exists within the church, even as “the black church has aimed to rid the black body of lascivious desires and to purge its erotic imagination with ‘clean’ thoughts” (Dyson 91). Thus, for example, many black churches have “nurses” who cover the legs of women who have “passed out” from the spirit, thereby ensuring that no one can see up their dresses. Such modesty and carefulness suggests the churchly knowledge of the possibility of these women’s bodies as objects of a sexual rather than “holy” gaze. Within the church as place, the performance of the body is already scripted, prescribed as a “Holy” rather than “sexual” body, “narrativized in advance, soliciting [its members] to perform the script that is organized for and given to [them]” (Patraka 100). And within the night club as space the body is provided with “a site that invites multiple acts of interpretation” (Patraka 100). Accordingly, black gays incorporate the “tools” of the black church worship service—i.e., gospel music and preaching—in the club space, but use them toward a different end. Indeed, when black gay men move black Christian discourse into the space of the dance floor, they forge alternative epistemological frames of reference. That is to say, they create new ways of understanding the linking of body and soul or sexuality and spirituality. Black gay men transform the supposedly solely secular, solely sexual, wholly sinful, utterly perverse club into a space where the identities of African American, homosexual, and Christian no longer compete.

In the same vein, the move from the church performance place to the gay night club performance space creates a sense of community that the church fails to provide. I do not wish to suggest that black gay men do not find community within the church, only that the church community does not affirm the homosexual, thereby limiting the ways in which gay men may commune. In the space of the club, however, sexuality invokes spirituality and thus community. This coming together of mind, body, and spirit is neither coerced nor enshrouded in guilt and shame. Love, desire, and spirit are all celebrated in a space that facilitates that celebration. The club provides a space where those who share same sex desire may also celebrate their knowledge of the Lord and vice versa.

Finally, the club as performance space calls into question interpretive authority and power. In this space, “interpretation itself becomes a kind of complex performance, a way of experiencing subjectivity” (Patraka 100). In the performance space of the night club, the DJ is the central figure who embodies this interpretive authority and power and who shepherds the night club goers toward subjectivity. Indeed, the DJ appropriates the role of the black preacher. He dismantles the meaning of gospel



music and black sermonic rhetoric as one “truth,” and in its place offers a truth that is constructed and named depending on the interpreter. In so doing, the DJ corroborates Elizabeth Bell’s stance that “we don’t discover truth through/in performance; rather, we invent truth in performance.” Bell maintains that this formulation of truth in/through performance is also an enactment of power. The DJ’s authorial and interpretive power is reflected not only in the way he reinterprets black Christian discourse, but also in the way in which he “moves” those who are in the club.

Similar to those preachers who step down from the pulpit in order to be closer to their members, this DJ comes down from his booth to be closer to the people on the dance floor. And like a seasoned black preacher, he takes a secular concept (driving to Atlanta to go dancing), and blurs it with a sacred one (arriving at the night club safely by the grace of God). Even his roll call is similar to the religious lore in which God calls the names of those who will enter into Heaven. The lore suggests that if you live a clean life, God will write your name on His roll to be called at judgment day. Through his roll calling then, this DJ affirms that these men, these gay men, are also children of God, a position the men themselves claim when they refer to each other as “children.”<sup>3</sup>

### Black Queer Theology

Michael Dyson calls for a “theology of queerness” in the black church. That is, a theology that would use “the raw material of black social alienation to build bridges between gay and lesbian and straight black church members” (106). Historically, this kind of bridge building has not occurred within the black church. Because of its own paradoxical relationship to the black Christian body, the black church has censured to a greater extent the black gay Christian body. The censorship of black homosexuality, along with the false separation of the secular and the sacred, of the body and soul, has made the black church less a site of comfort, affirmation, and community, and more a place where “opening the doors of the church” means opening those to the closet as well. Moreover, the homophobic, guilt-ridden, and oppressive rhetoric of the black church leads to self-hatred, low self-esteem, and in some cases, suicide, for those gay members who cannot come to terms with their sexuality within the confining place of the church. In those instances where one’s homosexuality is known, the church embraces that member only if he is willing to “exorcise” his gayness. This kind of backhanded acceptance maintains the hegemony of heterosexuality as Christ-like, as well as reinforces the notion of homosexuality as an abomination. Black theology such as this refuses to imagine that the same God who can identify with other oppressed groups—African Americans, Jews, women, etc.—can also identify with gays and lesbians. “We don’t have to stop being black to be saved. We don’t have to stop being women to be saved. We don’t have to stop being poor to be saved” (Dyson 107). So why should we have to stop being gay and lesbian?

Some members of the African-American gay community have found their way out of the homophobic, closet-producing, demonizing, dark place of the black church and into the more affirming space of the night club. Certainly, “both place and space

construct the subject as performer" (Patraka 100). But if this is the case, then it follows that "the place of performance is more likely to be rigid, more about the spectacular or the quest of the Real, whereas performance space suggests multiple crisscrossing performances, the possibility of interpretations that foreground the historicity of the individual subject" (Patraka 100). The "Real" body in the church is the virtuous, "pure," heterosexual body, while the body in the night club space is grounded as a site of performative possibilities—indeed, as a site of multiplicity and becoming—that historicizes its subjectivity in and outside the "body" of black Christian discursive practices.

Drawing upon a longstanding tradition of blurring the sacred and the secular in African-American culture, African-American gay men embed their own secular traditions—house/club music, voguing, dragging, snapping—within black sacred traditions to provide a more liberating way to express all of who they are. The result is an affirmation of their faith in God—a God who sees them as His children—and an affirmation of them as sexual agents. Like John in "Hold My Mule," they refuse to be held to the conventions of and limitations placed upon the black body in the black church. Rather, they proclaim, "I'll shout right here," in this space—this "secular" space—that I call home. In this place they enact what they already know: that one's sexuality cannot be quenched any more than one's spirituality. Indeed, they know, like Aretha, that one can "feel the spirit" in the light or the dark.

#### NOTES

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1. In musical terms, a melisma is the singing of more than one note to a syllable of a word. In black church vernacular, this practice is referred to as a "run" or "worrying the line."
2. To my knowledge, there are no statistics available on the actual number of gays in the black church, especially those who hold positions. My observation is based on my own experience in black churches in the South. Commenting on his experience in the Pentecostal church, James A. Tinney confirms my observation when he writes: "Pentecostalism is the 'earthly heaven' for sissies (and closeted homosexuals) of all types. Estimates of the percentage of Pentecostal members who are gay run as high as 70 percent" (169).
3. For example, many African-American gay men often respond, "the children are out tonight" at the sight of a large number of gay men gathered in one place. During the days of slavery, black Christians often likened themselves to the Hebrew "children" who were oppressed under the rule of Pharaoh. Thus, being called "children of God" or a "child of God" is a part of the black church vernacular. Black gay men have appropriated the term and use it affectionately to refer to other black gay men.

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