

POLYMORPHOUS EROTICISM: NEW PATHS TO SURVIVAL IN BLACK WOMEN'S WRITINGS*

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ABSTRACT

Following Audre Lorde's affirmation that black sexualities can be read as one expression of the reclamation of the despised black female body focusing on female desire and agency, sexuality is seen by contemporary African American women writers such as Sapphire and Pearl Cleage as a site where silence is disrupted, and a positive life-affirming sexuality is imagined. These writers are responding to views that historically have described black women's sexuality with metaphors of speechlessness, space or vision where black women's bodies are colonized by the hegemonic discourse on race and sex. In order to contest the historical construction of black female sexualities, and how it can be disrupted, the position of black women with AIDS in fiction is analyzed as a venue for exploring black women's agency and wholeness.

KEYWORDS: black women's sexuality, black women with AIDS, black women's agency and wholeness.

RESUMEN

Partiendo de la afirmación de la escritora afroamericana Audre Lorde de que la sexualidad de la mujer negra puede ser interpretada como una expresión de la reclamación del desdén del cuerpo negro, enfatizando el deseo y la proactividad, la sexualidad de la mujer afroamericana se refleja en las obras de autoras como Sapphire y Pearl Cleage como un lugar de interrupción del silencio, donde una sexualidad afirmativa es imaginada. Estas escritoras contemporáneas responden a interpretaciones de la sexualidad afroamericana que históricamente han descrito al cuerpo femenino negro con metáforas de silencio, espacios o visiones en los que éste ha sido colonizado por discursos hegemónicos sobre la raza y la sexualidad. A este fin, se analizará la posición de la mujer afroamericana con respecto al SIDA dentro de la literatura de ficción para explorar la proactividad, la subjetividad y la integridad de la mujer negra.

PALABRAS CLAVE: sexualidad de la mujer negra, mujer afroamericana y SIDA, proactividad, subjetividad e integridad de la mujer negra.



To imagine Black women's sexuality
As a polymorphous erotic
That does not exclude desire for men
But also does not privilege it. To
Imagine, without apology, voluptuous
Black women's sexualities (Clarke 224)

The free expression of sexuality by black women writers in the first decade of the twenty-first century has proved to be a difficult task given its appropriation by the marketplace in black popular culture in what is known as the “booty revolution.” The discourse of the 19th century created the black woman's body and her sexuality in the image of the Hottentot¹ female, a site where the black female and the prostitute converged, based on the “scientific” evidence of black women's uncontrolled sexuality under the stigmata of sexual difference and deviance. The hegemonic discourse created by white males exposed their own fears of difference in the age of colonialism, and their need to control and regulate the black female rendered as the “other.”

Moreover, black women's sexuality has been historically described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as an empty space which is at once ever-visible (exposed) and invisible. In this “void” black women's bodies are always colonized by the hegemonic discourse on race and sex. To this repressive force black women have reacted with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility (Hammonds, “Towards a Genealogy” 171). As social and cultural agents, black women writers are contesting the legacies of symbolic power in order to define the terrain of black women's sexuality. They claim black women's sexual desire by exploring pleasure instead of danger, focusing largely on the building of agency by reclaiming the body as well as subjectivity, transforming the “politics of silence” into speech and telling. Audre Lorde's essay “The Uses of the Erotic” emphasizes the need to read agency as responsibility and to define difference as growth in order to transform fears into dialogue and speech. Overcoming fear means identifying “the mockeries of separations” imposed upon black women, often accepted as their own. It also means disrupting the “paradigm of resistance” (Ryan 16) and contesting the notion that sexuality is abnormal, opening to speech and rendering desire unbound. In her biomythography *Zami* Audre Lorde reveals a fluid identity located at “the very house of difference” (197), learning that strength comes from everyday survival, accepting fear as the very rhetoric of growth. Lorde encourages both writers and critics to explore how difference is established, how it operates, and how it constitutes subjects who see and speak in the world. The goal is to develop a “politics

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¹ In her book *Venus in the Dark. Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005) Janell Hobson revisits Sara Baartman's memory and the legacy of the Venus Hottentot or Black Venus in the African Diaspora.

of articulation” that builds on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act, to theorize difference as agency, as a way of knowing and power. As Hortense Spillers points out:

We are in the incredible position of having either to create a first-order discourse on black women’s community and/or speak immediately into the void left by its absence and the next fase of meaning, that stage at which we would locate contemporary feminist discourse. (89)

This essay intends to delineate a mapping of black female desire marked by agency and empowerment through a transgressive sexuality, enhanced by black women’s spirituality and informed and enriched by a profound understanding of the erotic and creativity. This dynamic sexuality breaks the patterns of the representations of black women in the past, either as hyper-sexual and/or sexually deviant for most part of the 19th century, as silent beings who adhered to strict moral and sexual standards dictated by propriety in the 20th century, or as products of the boldness of hip-hop music videos and other manifestations of black female body currently in vogue “centered on the fragmentation and fetishization of the female body” (Mae Henderson 127).² Either in the representation through fictional characters in literature, in the lives of black women themselves, or in those reflected in the media, black women have not been able to express themselves sexually without constraints, and thus they have been denied the “liberating potential of an empowered and empowering embodied spirituality” (Weir-Soley 2).

This process of achieving sexual agency which is one of the hallmarks of black women writers in the 21st century is linked to the search for sexual wholeness, as an intrinsic part of black women’s liberatory discourses concerning spirituality and sexuality. There is a need to delineate a necessary poetics of eroticism foregrounding the search for wholeness implicit in the African American experience by focusing on the transformative power of the erotic. Contemporary black women writers proclaim the power of eroticism as sexual healing. In these works, sex is sublimated as a major vehicle for human communication. It is through sex that these women are writing themselves into subjectivity, and it is through an honest understanding of their desire that they create liberatory discourses, free from a pathological expression imprisoned in the neurotic by the imposition of the patriarchal order. Weir-Soley understands this “merger between the sexual and the spiritual [as] a political act, an act of recovery that can potentially restore the black woman’s sense of wholeness” (41).

The search for sexual wholeness implicit in the novels of contemporary black women writers provides an epistemic grounding unifying black female identity, sexual power, and spiritual agency. These aspects contribute to the development of a methodology for reading black women’s novels focusing on the achievement of a

² While this is true, studies like Robin Roberts’s *Ladies First: Women in Music Videos* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996) offer a feminist approach to hip hop music videos, thus refuting the prevailing notions of these videos as inherently misogynistic and racist.



kind of subjectivity in which sexuality and spirituality are key to identity formation based on agency. The search for wholeness both in the spirit and in the flesh provides a model of black female subjectivity whose ultimately quest is a divine search for wholeness. As Justine Tally contends:

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

Judylyn S. Ryan inserts black women's writings within a "paradigm of growth" (17) which views black women as "powerful, independent subjects" (King, cited in Ryan 16) and which is proactive, reacting in this way against the "paradigm of resistance" (Ryan 16) used in most theoretical approaches to African diaspora cultural studies. This is particularly important when the healthy black female body is negated by infection with AIDS. In Ryan's opinion, the paradigm of resistance has viewed black women as victims, as fragmented individuals marked by trauma, and lacking a sense of wholeness. One of the most salient features of the "paradigm of growth" is that it reveals "a democracy of narrative participation" as a narrative strategy in which the standard binary casting of central and marginal characters is obliterated to give way to interdependent/interconnected relationships revealing that "even individuals whose presence is temporally or socially limited have full personalities and unlimited human agency" (Ryan 18). This narrative strategy also serves another purpose, that of allowing the reader to be able to recognize her/his own human agency, "thus extending their transformative impact beyond the fictional realm to the social universe in which the work of art is designed to function" (Ryan 18). It also accomplishes the goal implicit in the search for wholeness and individual agency: stabilize identity, and strengthen social/com-munal relationships, providing black women with a departure point from which to build liberating epistemologies, recognizing their sexual and spiritual agency, demonstrating black women's "narrative engagement with an ethos and ideology of interconnectedness" (Ryan 18).

In her collection *I am your sister* (1979) Audre Lorde defines a need to start writing about black women's sexuality in ways that account for difference. She is critical about the ways in which most scholarship on black women's sexual lives has focused on the devastating history of systemic and epistemic violence, whilst the "innersexual lives of black women, how they think about themselves sexually remain a mystery" (Wekker 76). It is helpful to consider alternative lenses in order to explore the flexibility of gender constructs in our discussion of the complex issue of black women's sexualities. Wekker suggests analyzing same-sex behavior cross-culturally when she offers the example of Afro-Surinamese women's concept of "mati work" as a way to articulate a complex, flexible gender and sexual system that defines sexuality in terms of women's agency and behavior rather than as essentialized identity. In her study, as Cole and Guy-Sheftall point out, Wekker shows that Afro-Caribbean working class women "consider their sexual activity with other women pleasurable,



but they do not identify as ‘lesbian’ because ‘sexual behaviors have different meanings in various cultures’ ” (164-5).

1. BLACK SEXUAL IDENTITY IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST AIDS

As Evelyn Hammonds contends, black lesbians suffer from a triple discrimination which has gone under-analysed in studies about black women’s sexuality. The development of a complex conception of racialized sexualities requires a methodology that contests the ideological system that has defined the terrain of black women’s sexuality (“Black (W)holes” 134). Theoreticians of black female sexuality need to develop a methodology that puts emphasis on the pleasure, exploration and agency of black women, reclaims the body, and corrects that unspoken distortion of vision, where “Black women have, on the one hand, always been highly visible, and on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism” (Hammonds, “Black (W)holes” 91). Thus, instead of focusing on issues of rape, incest, or sexual abuse, black lesbian sexualities can be seen as a site where black desire is explored. They can be read as an expression of the reclamation of the despised black body, pointing out that desire and agency are key elements in the search for a theory of black women’s sexualities.

Even more, and in order to contest the historical construction of black female sexualities, and most interestingly, how it can be disrupted, the position of black women with AIDS should be analyzed because this perspective will reveal black women’s self-defined sexualities, rendering them visible. One very productive venue for exploring black women’s agency and reclaiming the voices of the oppressed has been the terrain of black women’s fiction. The appeal to visibility does not necessarily challenge the structures of power and domination, both symbolic and material that determine what can and cannot be seen. The goal would be to develop a “politics of articulation” that would be based on the question of “what makes it possible for black women to speak and act” (Hammonds, “Black (W)holes” 141). In the last decade there has been an increasing concern around black women in the HIV/AIDS epidemic which is critical because, as Hammonds states, “Black women have been made both invisible and hypervisible in the HIV/AIDS epidemic” (cited in Weekly 182). As Weekley points out, black women suffering from HIV/AIDS have been largely ignored due to their marginalization in medical and popular discourses. Moreover, they have become hypervisible in the epidemic as they have been considered the vehicles for transmission to black men and children. Thus, the construction of black women’s identity within the HIV/AIDS epidemics is quite complex and problematic, especially if we take into consideration their status as unwitting victims of black men’s unrestrained sexual behaviour. Sexually promiscuous men, especially those who have sex with both men and women, serve as “bridges” for HIV to heterosexual women, their wives. This is known as the down low (DL) behaviour which has given way nowadays to DL discourses certainly in need of critical exploration. This might be the case of Precious Jones in the novel



Push, in which Precious' own father infects her with AIDS. Sapphire's involvement with political activism and the welfare of young black women, and their search for literacy is clear in this novel, which was successfully transposed to the screen as the film *Precious* in 2009. This writer best exemplifies the specific forms of oppression black women suffer within the context of lesbian literature.³

Push represents the "ancient and unexpressed angers" which Audre Lorde claims shape the life of "every black woman in America." The telling of the lifestory of Precious Jones, a stark representative of the abused black female body, functions as a liberatory act, because it is in the act of telling that the possibilities for regeneration and healing begin. Sapphire looks into those aspects of African American realities which are too dangerous, too shameful or too terrible to confront: incest and AIDS. Sapphire's desire is to activate language to utter the unspeakable things which are too often left unspoken. This appeal to visibility becomes an answer to the legacy of silence and repression in black women's articulation of sexuality. This approach transforms the issue of identity into a dynamic force becoming "discursive and material terrains where there exists the possibility for the active production of speech, desire, and agency" (Hammonds, "Black (W)holes" 141).

Ultimately, this leads to the achievement of resilience which is rooted in strength, in spiritual wholeness, in resistance and in forgiveness. The journey of Precious Jones is her struggle not only to overcome the trauma of racism and the consequent fragmentation of the self, but also to find ways of escaping the abuse heaped upon her by her own father and mother. What Precious has to confront is an oppression that goes beyond the historical "double jeopardy" of the black woman. Precious is the victim of rape and abuse from both her parents. This experience turns even more lethal when the victim lacks the vocabulary to contextualize the violence, unconscious of her own vulnerability and exposed to the disruption in her family life.

There is a shift in values that Precious needs to account for in her new experiences with the alternative school program led by Ms. Rain. Precious looks up to the social model defended by black-nationalist Louis Farrakhan, together with the image of men he supports. As Sapphire explains in an interview with M. Marvel, Precious "accepts the teachings of Farrakhan because even if she needs a positive view of black men (...) Precious doesn't understand the ramifications of black nationalism" (28). As Lubiano points out, black nationalisms support the construction of black womanhood based on a politics of respectability that excludes LGBT people, nonconformist women, and those individuals outside the boundaries of heteronormative sexuality who become thus marginalized by black nationalistic discourses (183). Precious is in fact amazed when she learns that not only the major character of her reading class assignment, Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, is homosexual, but that her own teacher and one of her classmates are as well:

³ Although she has written several books of poetry, her best known work is her novel *Push* published in 1996.



But jus when I go to break on and go to tell class what Five Percenters 'n Farrakhan got to say about butches, Ms Rain tell me I don't like homosexuals she guess I dont't like her 'cause she one. I was shocked as shit. Then I jus' shut up. Too bad about Farrakhan. I still believe allah and stuff. I guess I still believe everything. Ms. Rain say homos not who rape me, not homos who let me sit up not learn for sixteen years, not homos who sell crack fuck Harlem. It's true. Ms Rain the one who put the chalk in my hand, make me queen of the ABCs. (81)

Precious is awakening into consciousness and accepting her personal feelings in order to create her identity, away from social narratives, paradigms, and ideologies.

Sapphire adds complexity to the issues of sexual abuse and the invisibility of women suffering from AIDS when the victim becomes the aggressor and the abuser, this being the main idea behind her most recent novel *The Kid* (2011). Abdul Jones is sexually abused by the catholic priests at the board school he attends after his mother, Precious, dies of AIDS when he is nine years old. The sexual abuse leads him to confusion about his own sexuality and when he is thirteen he starts having homosexual relationships with other kids understanding his sexuality as an exchange for money and other commodities. The novel introduces adults who are flawed, unable to sympathize with Abdul's situation and to offer any valid help so that he can improve his life. He is abandoned by his mom's true friends, especially Rita, in whom he had placed all his hopes. Another of Precious's former friends take up her identity in the welfare system after she dies, claiming that Abdul is also dead, in order to continue cashing the checks.

Inserted in an environment of abuse and fear, lacking a sense of family, and being unable to establish bonds with any kind of supportive community, it does not come as a surprise that Abdul falls into the violent ethics of survival when he is considered by the welfare system as a potential criminal. There is a direct relationship between the situation of Abdul and his behaviour as a sexual predator with the male culture of rape in US prisons. As Collins contends, "surviving in this male rape culture and avoiding victimization require at most becoming a predator and victimizing others" (239) because, as she further points out, "for many poor and working-class Black men, prison culture and street culture constitute separate sides of the same coin" (239). Even though Abdul might be disgusted with himself after raping someone else, he knows that the only way he can make sense of the suffered abuse is realizing that he is not powerless, and that he can deliver as well as receive pain. One important feature of male rape culture concerns its effects on sexual identities. In fact, Abdul does not consider himself gay because in this context of abuse masculinity is performed and constructed. For Abdul, to be a real man is to become an active participant in the sexual act; when he is with younger boys he penetrates them, not allowing himself to become a passive receiver. As Abdul learns from his great-grandmother, Toosie, he comes from a long line of males who die, just after being born or in infancy, so his legacy is survival as his own father was a failure (he died of AIDS and was a child abuser). Abdul also comes from a long line of abused women; his great-grandmother was raped, had a daughter when she was ten, then went to New York where she worked as a prostitute. Mary,



Abdul's grandma, was married to Carl, a child abuser who fathers other children and who corrupts Mary so that she abuses her own daughter, Precious. Carl also infects Precious with AIDS, and she dies as a consequence of this. The novel calls our attention to the transgenerational situation of permanent abuse and betrayal. We would like to focus on the section of the novel that looks into Precious and Abdul's family background in order to explain the genesis of abuse. Although she does not appear in *Push*, Toosie, Abdul's great-grandma, becomes the driving force behind the character of Abdul in *The Kid*. In fact, craving love is behind Tossie's character, and of Mary's thwarted relationship with Carl, Precious' desire to fit in, to belong, and also behind Abdul's expectations of becoming a respected dancer. Toosie experiences prolonged, unabated grief; she is stuck in grief, and her endurance is a redemptive tool for Abdul.

The women in the novel become the pillar for Abdul's energetic search for a true identity and agency. He explores the symbolic power of the legacy his great-grandma hands over to him in the form of a life-story. Toosie, whom Abdul pejoratively calls "slavery days" knows that for Abdul to be free he must listen to her story, which is, in turn, his-story, because on it lies the spiritual strength and the necessary tools he needs to become an artist. Toosie's story prevents Abdul from going bad, or flawed, or unacceptable because of what he does. However, at first, Abdul refuses to hear Toosie's story, that is full of vital words. Whether he likes it or not, she is giving him "the word" which he needs most after the death of his mother. Toosie and Precious have been both arrested and defeated by the past, but not totally thwarted by it, because they both remember their past and can construct a story which is a true gift for Abdul. They are the only two persons who offer unconditional love and support to the kid, but that most successfully help him to transform and to transcend, to freely become what he wants, and artist and a dancer, something his great-grandmother, "slavery days" nor his own mother, Precious, ever had a chance to do. Their stories unlock a future of possibilities for Abdul who just has to hear, to listen to their words of fire to help him unravel. Their words are powerful, they are sustaining; full of desire, pregnant with danger, eager for agency, reclaiming subjectivity: a place for the production of speech and telling, becoming part of the liberatory discourse of black women regarding expressions of spirituality and sexuality. The words of Toosie and Precious open a world of possibilities for Abdul to realize as a full human being.

Abdul's first person narration weaves together fantasy and memory. When he abuses others, he often dissociates and denies his actions to himself and sometimes sees the events as if they were dreams, as if he had only imagined them, falling, tragically, in diverse episodes of mental illness which can only find a way out through dancing: he is introduced to African dances and then goes to live with a group of dancers with whom he stages performances until his final mental breakdown. This somber ending provides some redemption when Dr. See helps Abdul to confront the vicious cycle of abuse he has total control over: what he does to others. Dr. See makes Abdul understand that his lies have prevented him from establishing a natural and wholesome relationship with his dancer lover, My Lai, the only person he has been able to trust and to honestly bond with since his mother died.



2. AIDS IN ITS RAVAGING OF THE BLACK FEMALE BODY

One aspect of gender oppression that has been overlooked by critics is the prejudice suffered by those black women with AIDS. A representative text that looks into this aspect of gender and sexual identity is Pearl Cleage's novel *What looks like crazy on an ordinary day* (1997), the story of Ava Johnson, a middle aged black woman who has just found out she is HIV positive. Ava is coping with it, learning to live with the fact that she might develop AIDS at any point in the future. As a heterosexual black woman, she needs to deal with the stereotypes about AIDS, and because she feels people in Atlanta are not ready to deal with the experience of having her around, she decides to sell her hair salon and her house, and move on in search for her own identity to San Francisco, to make a fresh start as someone who could be her "black, female, sexual, HIV-positive self" (10). She wants to move someplace where she doesn't have to "apologize for not disappearing because her presence made people nervous" (10). She feels that in Atlanta people are not ready to honestly deal with the issue of having an acquaintance who is HIV positive. Ava Johnson proactively chooses her identity on the basis of her being HIV positive, learning to define and reshape her values and her commitments and in doing so, giving texture and form to her future through the development of a liberatory discourse.

In order to prepare for her new life, and now that she is financially secure after selling her business and her house in Atlanta, Ava plans to stop in Idlewild, a small town in Michigan where she grew up. There she hopes to relax for a few days, in the company of her relative and close friend Joyce, who she feels will be the emotional cushion she needs in order to rest and to put her ideas in order before her final move to San Francisco. According to Frances D. Henderson, Ava undergoes an "invagination spiral" in a reverse migration that "enables her to claim a female-centered and empowered self" (86). Usually this process entails the character experiencing the "death of a primary caregiver, emotional, physical or sexual abuse, and/or a sustained feeling of not fitting in with her environment or the people around her" (86) all of which can be applied to Ava. The invagination spiral is characterized by the personal trials the protagonist undergoes and that are brought on by the convergence of class, gender and/or race. In the case of Ava, a return home becomes necessary in her journey for personal and cultural healing.

In Idlewild Ava becomes involved with Joyce's youth program called the *Sewing Circus* run through the local church. Meeting the young women who are part of this group, Ava realizes how much help the younger people need in order to understand how to deal with sex, domestic violence and drug addiction. In a powerful voice brimming with irony and sarcasm, Pearl Cleage focuses on the vulnerabilities of the older generation, which strongly influence the self-destructive and violent behavior of the younger ones. Cleage deals with issues of survival when she notices the physical and psychological ditches in which both the older and the younger ones are buried. The issues of drug addiction, motherhood/parenthood, child abuse and domestic violence are dealt with exhaustively in this novel because Cleage observes that there are important wounds contemporary cities and villages all across America are nursing.



Upon her arrival in Idlewild and her meeting the *Sewing Circus* group, Ava realizes immediately the oppression they suffer by the local black church and the group's leader, the reverend's wife. Ava and Joyce understand that these young folk need a real program in sexual education based on respect, understanding, and agency while the reverend and his wife insist the only possibility is abstinence. Cleage applies the paradigm of Free Womanhood which she introduces in previous works such as her collection of essays *Deals with the Devil and other Reasons to Riot* (1994), as her proposal to black women who look for a true self based on a progressive black sexual politics, claiming a Black identity based in moral, ethical values that fully accept each African American individual. Cleage's novel, considered to be part of a sub-genre of African American literature called black conduct literature (Francis 32), is a text addressed to an African-American audience that refers to a shared cultural history insisting on social activism in order to combat racist ideologies. Functioning as a site of power and agency it searches for a methodology which embraces the construction and negotiation of individual and communal black identity. In Cleage's theory of Free Womanhood women themselves are the only protection they have against violence or injustice. As Hill Collins points out, "Black youth who have come of age during the four decades following the civil rights movement not only have not seen its promise of a beloved community come to fruition, they have been deemed the problem of America (not its hope for the future)" (301). As such, black youths in Idlewild lack a communal guide which would aid them in their search for strategies for empowerment and would foster critical thinking, much needed in their ordeal against prejudice, drug addiction and violence.

Joyce writes "ten things every free woman should know" in order to give more structure to the *Sewing Circus* program after they are expelled from the church because Joyce was teaching the girls about contraceptive methods. The only way the black church was fighting unwanted pregnancy was by preaching abstinence, and Joyce and Ava agree that this is not a valid option for many of the girls. Among the ten things every free woman should know, Joyce writes self-defense or basic first aid/sex education and midwifery followed by Ava's bolder ideas such as: "don't fuck people you don't like," "bring your own birth control," "practice safe sex everytime," "if it's hurting you, it shouldn't be exciting him," or "don't fake—demonstrate" (160). The guiding principle for the exchange between Ava and the girls in the circle is empathy, because Ava openly decides to recognize the source of the oppression and is willing to identify those aspects of the abuse that she shares with them. Ava signals some of her own diverse experiences as similar and rearticulates what she thinks her experience means. Consequently, true collectivity arises, and Ava is able to help those girls in need of counseling as much as the *Sewing Circus* women aid Ava to connect with her own wishes and to reclaim the erotic within in terms of her own sense of agency and her inner creativity in life.

As she becomes involved with the youth, with their problems, with the group, Ava also untangles her own addiction to alcohol, and her own fears about AIDS. In abandoning her fears she learns to accept her situation and to open up unconditionally to love. Ava decides to become proactive with the help of Eddie, her lover—a Vietnam vet survivor. When the *Sewing Circus* sisters learn about what



Ava, Eddie and Joyce are doing, they confirm their will to remain together learning and exchanging strategies for survival, convinced that things can change in Idlewild for the better. In the end, what has started out as a fragmented community ends up being a cohesive group, all the while retaining their heterogeneous identities. They find out that the interconnected parts pull in the direction of wholeness. The *Sewing Circus* sisters replace a corrupted and malicious church group which imposes unity not by connecting the interdependent opposites, and thus, fostering dialogue and understanding, but by basing their principles on coercion, excessive power, punishment, and abuse. Because the older generation has been corrupted, the newer generations are lost. Thus, by looking backwards and understanding the past, the individual and the group gains the necessary knowledge to act in the present and to change things for the future. This is an important aspect of the search for wholeness which is called ancestral spiritualism. Cleage's novel takes a constructivist approach towards identity, which enlightens the perception of identity in terms of the search for options, and the plurality of identity based on experience and agency.

HIV positive Ava has rejected her sexual self because she is full of guilt and skepticism towards sexual involvement with men. She denies herself sexual agency, almost erasing that aspect of her personality, influenced mostly by the prejudice against AIDS she has suffered in Atlanta and because of her fears of trusting men both sexually and emotionally in the future. On the one hand, the novel debunks the idea that only homosexuals are likely to suffer from AIDS, and on the other, she exposes the vulnerability of a young woman who has lost her faith in healthy heterosexual relationships.

Ava is also able to deal with her insecurities through her relationship with Eddie. She finds in Eddie more than a lover or a partner, a soul mate. Eddie carries the wisdom of someone who has seen death and suffering in the Vietnam war, and then has witnessed crime and abuse in his own community in the US. When he learns that Ava is HIV positive, he refuses to allow this situation to become a barrier between himself and Ava, approaching her without judgment, anger, or shame. He reaches for her body without fear, concentrating on those aspects of her sexuality which are safe, questioning her about what sort of things he could do with her, until she feels totally at ease with the limitations imposed by her condition as HIV positive, such as having to use a condom or not being able to exchange any body fluids. In the darkness of his skin, Ava finds herself whispering questions such as "can I touch your heart? Your soul? Your spirit?" (141). When Eddie hears Ava's insecurities after they have made love for the first time, he explains: "I'm not planning anything and I'm not pretending anything and I'm not expecting you to do anything except love me as hard and as strong as I'm going to love you" (143). As Ava confesses, "when it comes to making love, *reciprocity is everything*" (146). Although Eddie is a fine middleage black man, it is not Cleage's intention to introduce role models in her writing. He is a man dedicated to the safety of black women and children, he is sweet and romantic. Eddie is a conscious man, who just as Cleage, is able to see the beauty of black people anywhere he goes.

Fully committed to helping Joyce with her transformative project, Ava celebrates having found a body politics grounded in the concept of "the honest



body” (Collins 290) that will enable youngsters to reclaim agency lost to oppression. Following an ethic of honesty in her relationship with Eddie, she continues to instruct the *Sewing Circus* girls how they should feel within their own bodies by learning to interrogate their own individual consciousness, where the sphere of freedom remains. Helping Joyce to build a communal nurturing association is Ava’s way of dealing with her fear of AIDS, and in this scheme, Idlewild becomes a site where she develops the skills to mediate life’s challenges through affirmation. In the end there is the possibility that Ava might infect her lover with HIV, or maybe she will not be able to escape AIDS, but rather than sinking into despair over her uncertain future, she decides to put to use the lessons she has learned through life, allowing herself to be reborn with the experiences she shares with family, friends, lover, and the *Sewing Circus* girls.

3. CONCLUSION

Following Audre Lorde’s affirmation that black sexualities can be read as one expression of the reclamation of the despised black female body focusing on female desire and agency, sexuality is seen as a site where silence is disrupted, and a positive life-affirming sexuality is imagined. To this end, Sapphire and Cleage reclaim the female body and explore the concept of sacred sexuality as a dimension of the search for wholeness in African American women’s literature, in light of the principles of the interconnectedness, interrelatedness and interdependency of everything. Lorde, Sapphire, and Cleage warn us of the dangers of separating the sexual from the spiritual, foregrounding the role of spirituality and arguing that there is a profound relationship among sexuality, spirituality, and the personal and political empowerment for women.

Both Sapphire and Cleage urge us to be aware of the costs of turning away from issues of gender in black communities, focusing on the devastating impact of the silences and shame around issues concerning HIV/AIDS. This disease has provided a window into “some of our deepest and more troubling feelings about our bodies, sexuality and gender” (Guy-Sheftall and Cole 179). Both novels encourage individuals to reclaim agency lost to oppression, promote an ethic of honesty within all relationships that involve sexual contact, and encourage discussions of gender and sexuality within African American communities. Each novel in its own way claims a black identity based on moral, ethical values that fully accept each African American individual, fostering critical thinking in their search for strategies of empowerment.

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