

CHAPTER ONE

Toward a Genealogy of Black Queer Spirituality

This project began as a search for James Baldwin's literary progeny. In my graduate studies of African American literature, Baldwin's name inevitably surfaced in any discussion of homosexuality because his debut novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953), is transitional in the canon in that it places same-sex desire squarely within black religious experience, and also because of the overt depictions of (sometimes interracial) bisexual and homosexual behaviors throughout his oeuvre. According to the lore, Baldwin, the self-proclaimed "disturber of the peace," blazed a new trail when he infused religious elements into portrayals of (homo) sexual ecstasy. Well, I wondered, who followed him? Baldwin scholarship notwithstanding, critical investigations into this specific trope are scarce. So this somewhat genealogical project grew from the following questions: Who since Baldwin has written about the ways black LGBT people think of themselves in relation to notions of the sacred, God, and the afterlife? To what ends do other fiction writers attempt to disentangle (or further delineate) the knotty dilemma of the black, sexually queer, Christian-identified subject? In what ways do black writers who identify as queer, lesbian, gay, or bisexual attend to the intersection of spirituality and same-sex eros? The first answer I found was that Baldwin is not the patriarch I believed him to be.

Richard Bruce Nugent belongs at the beginning of this genealogy for two significant reasons. First, he is important to a discussion about homoeroticism in the African American literature because his lyrical, experimental narrative, "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" (1926), is credited as the first expression of overt black male homosexuality in the canon. Second, the

1970 publication of Nugent's short story, "These Discordant Bells," in the NAACP publication, *Crisis*, connects him directly to the black queer spiritual tradition introduced by this book. The story originated within a series he called "Bible Stories," which, as a unit, appropriates the gospels of the Christian bible (narratives surrounding the birth, life, and death of Jesus) in order to imagine the homoerotic possibilities in Jesus' ministry. Because Nugent's stories briefly include a single black character, I do not analyze his work in the main chapters of this book. This makes his legacy is no less important. Thus, I take some time to expound a bit here on how he participates in the tradition.

Nugent, a painter, sketch artist, poet, short story author, dancer, and novelist, was born in 1906 into a light-skinned, or "blue-veined," socially elite African American family in Washington D.C. Although he was not secretive about his sexual affinity for men in his private life or in his writing, Nugent published poetry, artwork, and short stories under the pseudonym "Richard Bruce" to protect his family's reputation within their social circle. "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade," his best known work, was published as part of an artistic rebellion undertaken with his closest friends and collaborators at the time, which included Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman. They were the self-named "Niggerati," the young, emergent intellectual and creative voices of the 1920s who were avowedly determined to resist the conservative politics of representation, called the New Negro ideology, espoused by the well-connected older generation of intellectuals, namely W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Alain Locke.¹ Although he was among like-minded artists in the Niggerati, according to his contemporaries, Nugent stood out as the "most colorful and sensational member" (Perry, qtd in Nugent 19) of the cohort. His effeminate mannerisms and openness about same-sex attractions in his work made him a problematic representative of the race. Additionally, the themes of multiracial identity, nudity, and erotic sexuality figure prominently in his visual art and writing. These artistic choices placed him outside the New Negro ideology's narrowly defined blackness—well, these choices plus his affinity for certain European aesthetics²—and cost him publication opportunities and, for a while, his rightful place in history.³ Eventually, Thomas Wirth, Nugent's literary executor, would recuperate Nugent's legacy in published essays, and by creating a website dedicated to his life and work, and through the 2002 publication of Nugent's "lost" manuscript, *Gentleman Jigger*, a *roman à clef* based on his experiences during the Harlem Renaissance. Nugent's novel provides an

alternative narrative to Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932) and Langston Hughes' memoir, *The Big Sea* (1940), in its depiction of upper class Harlemites who "live sexually on the sharply transgressive edge of their culture" (Rampersad, "Foreword" ix). Wirth also edited *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: The Collected Works of Richard Bruce Nugent*, which was published in 2005. The sketch "Orgy Under the Cross" (Figure 1) and the remaining extant "Bible Stories" are published for the first time in it.

The short story that establishes Nugent as a contributor to the literary epistemology of black queer spirituality is the first story in the series, "Beyond Where the Star Stood Still," which provides the premise and context for subsequent stories. In it, Nugent infuses homoerotic attraction into the biblical tale of the magi, alternately known as the "three wise men" and the "three kings," which travel to bestow on the newborn Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. One of the magi, King Caspar, an Ethiopian, is the sole black character in the series. He absconds with King Herod's "most beautiful and most beloved" catamite, Carus, after the boy reveals Herod's murderous intent toward the newborn Jesus. Their relationship is the focus of the second story in the series, "The Now Discordant Song of Bells," in which King Caspar attempts to instruct the young boy in theological matters. Carus seizes the opportunity to express his homoerotic attraction and romantic desire through philosophical word-play. When King Caspar asserts, "God is love," Carus signifies by inverting the words and thus expanding the axiom's meaning to include his desires:

[Carus:] "Ah, true. Love is God."

Caspar turned his head to view the boy before saying, "Thou hast not heard me."

And Carus, desiring to see the full lips move more and reveal the great blunt teeth, argued, "but thou thyself hath said, Love is God."

And Caspar answered, "No, Carus. That God is love."

"And yet, Caspar, I can only understand that it is as I have said. *If one is the other, is not the other the one?*"

"[...] Thou art allowing thy words to use thee, Carus."

And Carus had desire to note the contrast his [white] hand would offer on Caspar's ebony one, but, sitting still and childly, continued saying, "But only that thou mayest know, Caspar, that *thou awakes God in me.*"

"I awaken God in thee?" Caspar raised himself to his elbow and gazed at the lad, for there was that in Carus' voice that he did not understand. He questioned, "Thou meanest, I awaken love?"

Carus concealed his excitement at the unconscious awakening in Caspar's voice, shown in its tone rather than in the question. And Carus replied as simply as before, "Is it not as thou art teaching me, Caspar?"

And Caspar answered, "Thou must not make little of my sayings, Carus, when I speak with seriousness to thee." Carus was pleased with the look in Caspar's eye and the unknowing entreaty in his voice. For Carus had seen like signs before and did not know that Caspar was in truth a simple man. So he was bold beneath his childly innocence as he asked, "Is it light speech to say I love thee?" And Caspar, in his earnest zeal, placed a hand over Carus' hand where it lay on the sand, and his speech was impetuous, "But see thou, Carus, the love of which thou speakest is an active thing, and that of which I teach thee is a name." (127–128, *italics added*)

Carus is not a passive student; his insistence that he "can only understand that it is as I have said" is an outright refusal to limit the interpretive possibilities of the meanings of love and God. Essentially, Carus argues for a spiritual principle, which means *the feeling of love is a supreme state of being* or that *love is the reigning emotion*. He filters the teacher's message through the lens of his lived truth and offers it back to the king as a testimony: "Where there is love, there is God." Thusly, he transforms a cornerstone theological principle into a romantic confession and an interpretation of the divine energies that connect and draw humans to each other. His irreverent inversion, "Love is God," subverts the conformist limitations of the dominant paradigm; yet, it neither rejects Casper's God nor refuses Carus's own sense of self.⁴ In this way, the exchange is a blueprint for homoerotic spirituality. Nugent's contributions to black queer spirituality can also be seen in his drawings; artifacts that are featured in *Gay Rebel* but are beyond the scope of this book.⁵

Although what I have produced in this book is, ultimately, a claim to a thematic kinship instead of an historical or genealogical analysis proper, the main chapters serve as the answers to the research questions I posed regarding LGBTQ spirituality in literature (the reasons for a limited focus on novels and short stories are stated in the Preface). Also, in the concluding chapter, I list additional texts that fit into this classification. So at this



Figure 1. Sketch, "Orgy Under the Cross," by Richard Bruce Nugent, date unknown. Used with permission of the Nugent estate.

point I must shift the emphasis from the artistic production of homoerotic spirituality to the interrogatory and interventionist discourses which constitute the critical community that presages and facilitates the work I do here. Let us now look toward a genealogy of black queer studies in religion and spirituality.

Before the appearance of *Gay Rebel*, Nugent's historic contributions were acknowledged in a brief overview of his life by Charles Michael

Smith, titled “Bruce Nugent: Bohemian of the Harlem Renaissance,” in the groundbreaking collection, edited by Joseph Beam, *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*. *In the Life* appeared in 1986 and is now a time capsule of artistic and critical voices of black men-loving men in the era of AIDS.⁶ Many of its contributors were not only responding to the absence of black representation in what was becoming a renaissance of gay male literature; some also used the opportunity to give voice to the emotional pain inflicted by black institutional ambivalence and, in many cases, those institutions’ outright refusal to engage in compassionate outreach during the crucial, deadly height of the 1980s AIDS crisis. As the decade progressed, dominant discourses about the transmission of HIV became increasingly hysterical and condemning of those people who contracted AIDS, the so-called gay disease.⁷ Beam’s *In the Life* provides testimony of the alienation many were experiencing as black gay people in a white supremacist homophobic society.

It also delivers an important intervention into African American religious discourses in a compelling essay by Pastor James Tinney, entitled “Why a Black Gay Church?” Tinney forged a black gay-inclusive church movement when he was excommunicated from the Church of God in Christ denomination after hosting a revival for gays and lesbians that was endorsing in its tone. That experience, while painful, catapulted him onto a path of restoration, not of his individual faith to his sexuality, but one that aimed to restore his idea of the role of church to its gay believers. He founded the Faith Temple, a nondenominational fundamentalist church, in Washington D.C. Faith Temple defined itself as a culturally black sanctuary for homosexual Christians based on the following separatist principles laid out by Tinney in the essay (I consider this approach a type of restorative separatism, in the vein of Alice Walker):⁸

The development of Black gay churches will make it possible for Black gay Christians, for the first time, to hear the gospel in their own language of the Spirit, respond to the gospel in their own ways, *and reinterpret the gospel in their own cultural context*—taking into account both race and sexual orientation at every step in this process. In a socio-political sense, this is called contextualization; in a psychological and existential sense, this is called authenticity; and in a biblical sense, this is called conversion. Whatever it is called, however, it refers to the full liberation of the total Black Gay Christian. (76, my italics)

Tinney argues that full liberation is made possible through reinterpretation and, throughout the essay, emphasizes the need to remain “truly and unquestionably Christian” through adherence to the essence of doctrine (77). In response to the mainstream forces that seek to silence or convert gay people into sexual conformists, Tinney advocates for a queer(ed) space in which a black+homosexual+Christian theology can be enacted “every step.” Through this process, he imagines that the gays and straights of his denomination could reunite as equals under God. Reverend Tinney embodies what it can mean to be in the life and in the spirit and, although he died from AIDS-related health complications in 1988, his gay-affirming convictions continue to take shape in many communities.⁹

In the follow-up to *In the Life*, an anthology titled *Brother to Brother: New Writing by Black Gay Men* (1991) features the classic essay by Charles Nero, “Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature.” Nero assesses the heterosexism and homophobia in the most celebrated works of the African American literary canon (notably, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, *Tar Baby*, and *The Bluest Eye*), and reveals how gay writers produce fictional works that revise, critique, or otherwise respond to normative representations of the black experience, including family life, marriage, slavery, and religion. In the section titled “Signifying on the Church,” he points out ways Larry Duplechan’s novel, *Blackbird*, signifies on Reverend Tinney’s revelation that he had undergone an exorcism before being excommunicated. Nero finds that by imaginatively expanding Tinney’s narrative, “Duplechan exposes an unholy alliance ... [in which] the church is willing to oppress its gay people to prove its worth to the middle classes” (306). Significantly, Nero’s essay and, generally, the series of black gay anthologies announce the existence of a black gay aesthetic propelled by *visibility politics*; that is, a belief in the power of literature to “render their lives visible and, therefore, valid” (290)—a politics, which, historically, has propelled much of African American cultural production.

The critical framework of this book is a fusion of theoretical and cultural perspectives and sexual discourses, namely those wrought by feminism/womanism, African American literary theory, queer theory, and lesbian/gay studies (individual texts are cited in the relevant chapters).¹⁰ However, as a study that makes a case for understanding African American religious thought and spiritual expression as part of the ongoing struggle for sociopolitical freedom and, specifically, when I assert that a certain text constructs a “liberation theology,” the arguments I make rely on a theoretical paradigm wrought from, and which is inherently

conversant with, rhetorics of Black Theology. This is an important connection to make because Black Theology is a discrete subsection of the religious studies field and one that, until recently, has not been overtly connected to discourses in lesbian/gay studies or fiction studies. It has been, however, always connected to African American literature. The earliest work in this field was guided by a political investment in proving that black American Christian religions were relevant to the struggle for racial justice in the 1960s. Its emergence represents the rejection of mainstream Civil Rights-era integration politics of the contemporary moment, an intellectual posture that sought to abandon white Christian norms as they related to biblical interpretation, the role of religion in social change, and worship practices.¹¹ Eventually, theologians and practitioners would add sexual freedom and an interrogation into the role of pleasure to the liberation agenda as well.

As part of the cultural shift to Black Power politics in the 1960s and 1970s, seminary students and religious scholars began to affirm African American folk traditions and explore the African origins of black worship services. These scholars also searched their religious history for a tradition of political commitment to freedom. They found much historical support in literary culture, such as: Bishop Richard Allen, founder of the first independent black denomination in the United States (African Methodist Episcopal) distributed abolitionist messages in his church's pamphlet; David Walker's 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* distinguishes between the pseudo-Christianity of American slavery and true Christology, which promises liberty to all believers; the claims made in the authorized biography written during her lifetime, *Harriet Tubman: Moses of Her People* (1886), that visions and prophetic messages from God were key to Tubman's success on the Underground Railroad; and the words attributed to Nat Turner in his "confession" that God led him to slay his enemies "with their own weapons" when he led the bloody uprising against white slave owners and their families. Ultimately, the proponents of Black Theology found that the struggle for political freedom has always been located in black religious expression.

Fictional literature became more relevant as the late 1970s and early 1980s marked the rising influence of the feminist movement. Black women entered seminary school in larger numbers than ever before and from them emerged Womanist Theology, an adaptation of Alice Walker's extensive definition of womanist consciousness. Their work defines a womanist liberation agenda over and against the Eurocentric, middle class focus of white feminism, as well as the male supremacist myopia of the first generation

of Black Theology. Prominent voices include Renita Weems, Kelly Brown Douglas, Cheryl Sanders, Delores Williams, and Katie Canon. Womanist theologians introduced three important strategies to black religious studies: the use of women's roles in the bible to challenge conventional views of women in ministry; the advocacy of holistic theology with an emphasis on folk culture; and the use of black women's novels as primary sources for locating theological concepts (Hopkins 156). Canon, the first ordained black female Presbyterian minister (in the United States), explains the usefulness of fictional literature for religious studies: "As creators of literature [,] black women are not formally historians, sociologists, or theologians, but the patterns and themes in their writings are reflective of historical facts, sociological realities and religious convictions that lie behind the ethos and ethics of the black community" (57). Although my goal in this book is not to pinpoint specific denominational beliefs or "realities" in literature, I do ultimately work from the premise that fiction is an important resource for locating overt and implied rhetoric regarding theological and ethical matters. My research is concerned with how these arguments are constructed around black LGBTQ humanity to challenge or critique conservative religious attitudes.

Since the 1990s, religious studies discourse has moved toward radical integrations of spirituality and sexuality and, thus, has provided useful frameworks for interpreting fiction. James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore published articles in *Black Theology: A Documentary Anthology* (1993), which reject the occlusion of sexual variability, and encourage church leadership and scholars to consider the damaging effects restrictive interpretations of human sexuality have on individuals, families, and communities.¹² Michael Eric Dyson makes the case for a "theology of eroticism" (*Race Rules* 91), which, he believes, would provide a more realistic framework for people of faith. Horace L. Griffin published *Their Own Received Them Not: African American Gays and Lesbians in Black Churches* (2007) to provide, among other insights, an historical analysis of the role stigmatized black sexuality plays in the homophobic attitudes found in contemporary congregations. Working along similar lines of thought, Kelly Brown Douglas asserts in *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1999) that an anti-homophobic sexual discourse of resistance must come from church leadership. As if in response, Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins, as co-editors, put forward essays in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (2004), which steer the conversation away from identitarian notions of sexuality so that the concern is with the role of pleasure in spiritual endeavors. They assert that to truly free the body, "a black liberation

agenda must not only involve the restructuring of socioeconomic, political, and cultural space, it must also involve an appreciation of the body and the pleasuring of the body” (Pinn and Hopkins 6). Contributors to *Loving the Body* consider issues of (Christian) faith, desire, fantasy, and sensuality through the lenses of literary studies, biblical and pastoral studies, cultural criticism, and ethics—including an essay that begins with a meditation on the ethical concerns raised by *Say Jesus and Come to Me*, the Ann Allen Shockley novel I analyze in the fourth chapter of this book.¹³

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

This is not a study of religious belief. I define *religion* as a set of beliefs regarding the existence and nature of a single or pluralistic god/creator (theology), and the perceived relationship, between that/those god(s), humanity, and the cosmos. Religion often involves traditions and narratives that delineate morality and the meaning of life for its followers. By extension, a *religious person* is one who is committed to the claims and rituals of a particular tradition. Although religion and spirituality can criss-cross and conflate in the life of an individual, one as belief and the other as practice, the two can be distinguished. Using Akasha Gloria Hull’s wording, I employ the term *spirituality* to refer to beliefs in and responsiveness to ethereal, permeating, ultimately positive, divine energies that connect all that exists (2). A *spiritual person*, then, is one who believes that he or she can access these divine energies through conscious engagement—physical, sensual, psychic, and ritual acts. Spirituality can be an individualized, malleable, and evolutionary relationship with one’s own intuition and sense of self, the cosmos, and humanity; for spiritual engagement requires faith but is not necessarily contingent on a firm understanding of a god/creator. (That is, one can be an agnostic who believes that the precise definition and knowledge of a creator is unattainable and still maintain a spiritual practice that conveys faith in divine forces.)

So, for the purposes of this study, any characters, narrators, and plots are spiritual or, as the subtitle indicates, “in the spirit” when their thoughts, actions and outcomes reveal a reliance on the power of a spiritual realm, or the supernatural. I do not use religion and spirituality interchangeably, but spiritual beliefs and organized religions function similarly for people as lenses through which one views the self and others, life and death, the physical and metaphysical, supernaturality, sacredness, and morality. So religious themes emerge, at times, because this study is concerned with

how these concepts intersect with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender experiences, and identities in African American literature.

Christian belief is overrepresented in African American fiction, relative to the diversity of religious memberships across the culture; so its presence is marked in ways other organized religions are not. Readers who seek definitive connections between indigenous African or Native American religions, for example, will not find them. However, when Ann Allen Shockley's lesbian character imagines herself a Hausa queen doing a holy dance around a campfire, for example, I investigate the ways that cultural reference enacts a queering of African heritage. In other words, I do not overlook the significance when a text overtly identifies with a particular belief system. Otherwise, my main endeavor is to describe how queer spiritualities are constructed in each individual text and identify how that construction fits into the larger literary tradition. The objectives of a religious study or theological analysis are different from what I aim to achieve in this book.

I should also take some time here to briefly address the use of "queer" and "in the life" synonymously throughout this book. There are three related but somewhat divergent iterations of "queer" in the U.S. context with genealogies and connotations that intersect: queer politics, queer theory, and queer studies. The advent of queer politics is located in late 1980s lesbian and gay activist organizations, namely ACT UP and its derivatives, such as Fed Up Queers, and Queer Nation. The goals of the early queer power movement were to draw attention to the AIDS crisis and to agitate medical, government, and social institutions to work to end the disease and to care for its victims through direct action.¹⁴ Activists committed "vigilant acts of political and cultural provocation" ("ACT UP New York") whereby they disrupted cultural institutions with acts of civil disobedience. Places such as a post office, a Catholic church service, the New York Stock Exchange, Food and Drug Administration, and the National Institutes of Health were targeted for demonstrations, which brought attention to the AIDS crisis and, often, accused the institutions of hindering progress. These activist groups represent a collective anti-normative ethos, an insurgent politics, and liberatory discourse that reclaims *queer* as a term of empowerment and collective identity that includes kink communities (such as bondage/discipline), bisexual, transgender, and intersexed populations.

For its detractors, this collectivity is its most insidious danger; despite all its positive intent, queer as a political identity can become a totalizing gesture, an effacement of the radical politics and specific concerns

of the sexual minorities and marginalized communities it claims to include.¹⁵ Nonetheless, for those invested in defamiliarizing “normal” and problematizing the status quo, queer ignites “a strident reminder of difference, perversity, and a willingness to position oneself outside of the norm” (Goldman 84). Importantly, queer politics is distinguished from the comparably more conservative, assimilationist, “we are just like you, so treat us the same as you under the law,” gay rights strategies that seek acceptance from and integration into government and social institutions through marriage rights and military service, such as those embraced by Log Cabin Republicans and the Human Rights Campaign. A queer politics insists that “we are *not* like you and we *still* deserve equal human rights and equal treatment under the law.”

After queer politics, queer theory has developed, despite pleas from some its earliest framers,¹⁶ as an academic endeavor. It has emerged as an analytics with its own (intellectual) guerilla tactics: Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, Teresa de Lauretis, and Michael Warner are among those credited with producing queer theory’s first canonical texts.¹⁷ Each of these writers generated ideas that stand “in direct contrast to the normalizing tendencies of hegemonic sexuality [which are] rooted in ideas of static, stable sexual identities and behaviors” (Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” 23). In other words, queer theory constructs itself against the overdetermination of neatly packed sexual identities and is an approach that aims to deconstruct even the norms of “straight” and “gay” because that binary, too, participates in a taxonomy that obscures the existence of a broad spectrum of human sexual behavior. Its key assumption, arguably, is that all sexuality is socially constructed and should be examined for essentialist, unnuanced or otherwise prescriptive understandings. Such a premise facilitates discourses of desire, pleasure, and sexual practice without prioritizing a concern for qualifying markers, such as “gay” and “straight.” Ultimately, then, the application of queer theory is to assume an intellectual posture that rejects or interrogates the presupposed “natural” development of established norms regarding morality and sexuality, and which works to illuminate the cultural machinations which police the boundaries of “normal.”

A third iteration, also in academia, is queer studies, which is alternately called LGBTQ studies, lesbian/gay studies, or sexuality studies. Lesbian/gay studies concerns itself with the lives, histories, and cultural production of marginalized sexual behaviors, identities, and populations, and work in this field often involves the application of the other

articulations of queer thought and praxis. Scholars in the field also analyze the ways cultural institutions are organized around the maintenance of heterosupremacy and homophobia. Historian Jonathan Katz's *The Invention of Heterosexuality* is an example of a text that denaturalizes "heterosexual" by tracing the changing attitudes and influences that transposed it from a descriptive medical term into a discrete identity, which now operates in everyday language as a signifier of gender and sexual norms. As Katz has shown, discursive structures aid and abet material structures. Such as in the way discursive boundaries around *hetero* were enforced with anti-vice laws, police raids, and cross-dressing fines. Meanwhile, desires and expressions not considered hetero were pushed further into the margins so that they would appear to be unusual or negligible aberrations. Also, Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech* explores racist, sexist, and homophobic language in institutions, such as the U.S. military's ban on verbalizing or otherwise expressing a lesbian, bisexual, or gay identity. She demonstrates that such policies promote the (il)logic of homophobia as a reasonable and "normal" perspective.

My use of "in the life" to discuss sexuality reflects my participation in and engagement with black queer studies, a critical formation in academia that bridges theorizations wrought from black studies and queer studies.¹⁸ The phrase became popular in 1970s African American vernacular which functions, semantically, similarly to the (neo)colloquial "queer." It is an umbrella term that has always been used, by participating members, to refer to a life outside of respectable employment or respectable sexuality; that is, it points to extralegal economies, such as sex work and gambling houses, or underground social activities such as gay bars and drag queen culture.¹⁹ It is the "street life" that singer Randy Crawford cautions against in her best known recording. To state, "I am in the life," in reference to sexual behavior is to say, "my gender performance, sex acts and/or desires are considered transgressive in straight culture."

While expressions of homoeroticism are my particular focus within queer- and in-the-life discourses, the phrase does not always translate to a lesbian or gay identity. Being in the life is more about *what one feels and does* and can also refer to gender nonconformity, particularly as it relates to female masculinity and male femininity.²⁰ To say that one is in the life is not necessarily a claim to a sexual identity; it is a claim to a community.

As a lesbian who came of age in the 1980s, *in the life* is a naming that is particularly close to my heart, as it was *the* circulating lesbian/gay signifier in my social networks at that time. Use of this phrase is part

of what seems to be a universal tradition among oppressed communities that erect linguistic fences through code switching as a way to speak the unspeakable within earshot of their oppressors. It is the way folks “in the know” can ask each other if someone is potentially sexually available or to simply find out if someone is “one of us” without exposing their own or the other person’s privacy to the gaze of the gender police among us. Its common usage among black people across the nation was illustrated by the emergence of *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* discussed earlier. Inspired by black lesbian feminist writing and activism, particularly the accomplishments of Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith, Joseph Beam, editor and contributor to the anthology, insisted that black gay literature could play an equally important political and cultural role—just by existing and being accessible to those who needed to see affirming reflections of themselves.²¹ He knew that the expression “in the life” would resonate with a particularly underserved audience. Ultimately, my use of it in the title of this book is intended to invoke Beam’s cultural politics and indicate my respect for his (assemblage of) groundbreaking critical and creative perspectives; to show reverence for the waymaking writer-activists and everyday theologians whose names I may never know; and to pay nostalgic homage to my lovers and friends, long lost or long found, who abide with me in life and spirit.

OVERVIEW

I make no claims to a singular or definitive black queer spiritual perspective. Rather, I propose that individual writers present their own theory of an integrated spiritual and sexual expression or experience, the prevalence of which constitutes an identifiable lineage, in the canon, of sexually inclusive and queer spiritual articulations that connect writers across generations and genres. As a literary community, these writers offer the possibility of possibilities (à la Samuel Delany). Overall, this project highlights and chronicles how their strategies of anti-homophobic resistance overlap and diverge in their depictions of blackness in the spiritual realm and, when relevant, how those depictions dovetail into broader literary concerns.

In the first two chapters, I introduce my formulation of the Gay Christian Narrative. For its congregation, the church serves as a buffer against various shades of violence members experience as racial minorities. They are reminded that God is on the side of the oppressed and that

the suffering and eventual deliverance of the Israelites is a metaphor for black strivings in the United States. Church is also a space in which cultural specificities are reinforced, valued, and celebrated. Nonetheless, it is not a romantic oasis of sameness. As Cathy Cohen persuasively argues in *The Boundaries of Blackness*, rhetorical boundaries of respectability are placed around “The Black Community,” which has led to institutional policies and baseline assumptions that alienate or suppress certain behaviors, identities, beliefs—and people. Gender and sexual nonconformists often experience this cultural gatekeeping as religious hate speech. For them, the church is a contradictory home space that half-affirms and half-indicts, as God is on the side of the racially oppressed but “hates the sin” of black gay/les/bi/trans people. Gay Christian Narratives reject and revise this hate speech and reclaim the sacredness of black queer bodies through biblical allusion, the revision of same-sex biblical narratives through a homoerotic lens, and the use of sacred songs to endorse and underwrite homoerotic encounters.

I launch the discussion in Chapter Two with a close reading of “Blessed Assurance,” Langston Hughes’ recovered tale of an effeminate teenage boy who sings a duet with his church’s minister of music who is also male. It is my contention that, as the men vocalize the poetic oath from the *Book of Ruth*, a sacred text in Jewish and Christian canons, they subvert heteronormative restrictions on gender performance by, in effect, producing a lyrical drag show.

I argue in Chapter Three that James Baldwin employs many of these strategies in *Go Tell It on the Mountain, Just Above My Head* and in the short story, “The Outing.” So, together, Chapters Two and Three make the larger argument that Gay Christian Narratives challenge the presumption that people of religious faith are inherently in tension with gay/lesbian communities. The characters, plots, dialogue, and other narrative strategies suggest that people of religious faith are *part* of gay and lesbian communities.

While Hughes and Baldwin represent the revisionist and appropriative aspects of the Gay Christian Narrative, the women writers in subsequent chapters provide a different take on the relationship between the queer subject and African American church traditions. That is not to say that these are completely separate “women’s traditions,” because there are Christian-identified characters in some of these stories, too. What writers in the Philosophies of the Spirit section do, overall, that is distinct, is prioritize individual truths, intuition, and folk/alternative traditions. That is, Christian doctrines and black church traditions are visible but

decentralized in the larger scheme of the narratives. I begin the discussion in Chapter Four with an analysis of the iterations of *soul talk*, a term coined by Akasha Gloria Hull, and acts of sermonic seduction in Shockley's *Say Jesus and Come to Me*, and Walker's *The Color Purple*. Though they are widely divergent aesthetically, they share the perspective that the erotic, intimate sensual pleasure shared between the black women characters *is* the substance of their spiritual connection with each other, and with the planet, and with the cosmos.

In Chapter Five, I argue that Birtha crafts a neo-spirit narrative in the tradition of the ex-slave spiritual autobiography, namely that of Rebecca Cox Jackson. As she relates her human-to-spirit sexual encounters, Birtha's narrator displaces the black church's authority and position as the locus of healing and spirituality with depictions of the domestic space as the intersection of life and afterlife. By the story's end, the butch/femme romance is taking place outside of the physical body. Birtha's magical realism segues into my discussion in Chapter Six of queer spirituality in other fantasy genres.

In the third section, fantasy genres provide nontheist cosmologies that deliver new possibilities for constructing, challenging, and revising previous theological arguments and spiritual aesthetics. Octavia Butler's dystopic Earthseed series, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, follows the life and mythology of a black female preacher whose life is affected by a confluence of oppressive religious, commercial, and political regimes. Butler's protagonist is a gender-passing, gun-toting survivalist with a seductive aura reminiscent of Walker and Shockley's female minister characters. Significantly, this preacher's sermonic seduction involves butch masculinity and masochistic suffering. I find that the God-talk in her ministry is precarious under scrutiny and submit evidence that the Earthseed doctrine is actually Humanism cloaked in religious language.

Chapter Seven concludes the study as it highlights further the ways sci-fi perspectives can expand current applications of the term *spirituality*. In *The Gilda Stories*, Jewelle Gomez writes counter-hegemonic scriptures in which a lesbian vampire operates as a spirit worker among humans and who is guided by an ethos of emotional reciprocity. Gomez avoids overt theological arguments; rather, she uses fantasy/futurism to generate a spiritual aesthetic based on a love ethic between humans and vampires, and between all beings and the ecological environment.