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CHAPTER THREE

Uneasy Blackness

Warrior Goddesses in the Age of Black Power

It has become a bit of a cliché to indict the Black nationalist ideologies of the 1960s and 1970s for their masculinism. As various scholars have noted, the rampant misogyny and homophobia that have come to be associated with Black nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s were only one particularly vocal discourse amid a multitude of others. To overemphasize this discourse is to ignore the way Black nationalist groups changed over time and to discredit the many Black women who were instrumental in shaping and changing their rhetoric.[1] However, even women who were instrumental to Black cultural nationalist formations tended to fall back upon a reified definition of womanhood that was both heterosexist and biologically determinist. As historian Ashley D. Farmer notes, women activists within Black nationalist organizations often "placed emphasis on gender-specific roles in the family, at work, and in political organizing endorsed an implicit heteronormative framework that denied the possibility of other sexual and gender identifications."[2] Though complicated by women's complicity, the rigid gender roles of the era did real violence to women, queer people, and gender-nonconforming people, and as such cannot and must not be swept under the rug. For instance, in Jayne Cortez's poem "Race," from her first published collection of poetry, she exhorts Black men to "slaughter" their "Faggot Queer Punk Sissy" sons for the crime of being "unable to grasp the fact / and responsibility / of manhood black."[3] Lest we forget, in a desire to reclaim the Black Arts movement from accusations of misogyny and homophobia, some of its most prominent members voiced such a toxic calcification of gender roles that a number of Black women writers willfully disavowed or distanced themselves from it. This chapter explores the work of two poets who sought to define themselves outside of and beyond the strictures on Black womanhood of the day, through a reworking of a feminized spiritual terrain left untouched by Black nationalist ideologies. Because of their distance from these ideologies, the Black nationalist themes of their work have often gone unnoticed.

Audre Lorde and Lucille Clifton are two Black poets who are seldom scripted into Black power ideologies of the 1970s and 1980s.[4] Especially in Clifton's case, this has resulted in an elision of the political importance of

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their poetic visions of Black liberation. While, according to literary historian James Smethurst, "the poetics and basic ideology of the Black Arts Movement were far from unified," the circles of literary influence comprising Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Ishmael Reed, Nikki Giovanni, and Jayne Cortez, among others, did not include these two women.[5] Though Clifton and Lorde were by no means the only Black woman poets of the 1970s to express their uneasiness with the rigid identity categories of the Black Arts movement, the spiritual bent of their intervention into the politics of the 1970s is quite unique. As Cheryl Clarke notes in her study of the women poets of the Black Arts movement, many of its most central women writers, notably Nikki Giovanni and Gwendolyn Brooks, issued searing critiques of both the authenticity politics and the sexism of the movement, as "they critiqued and paid homage to the dictates, the orthodoxies, and the enunciated desires of their black brothers and comrades."[6]

For Lorde and Clifton, Afro-diasporic spirituality becomes both escape and antidote to a restrictive Blackness from which they were always already excluded. The virulent authenticity politics of the era and the dominion they held over memories of Africa shunted both women onto spiritual paths deemed outside the movement. Lorde turned to African and diasporic pantheons of spirits for a version of revolution in which Black lesbians are the vanguard rather than the outliers. Clifton turned to an active practice of spirit communication that allowed her to emphasize the primacy and specificity of the Black woman's body as a site of spiritual encounter, even as she complicates the notion of Black feminist embodiment by presenting the Black woman's body as one transitory incarnation among many. By reinscribing both of these poets into the dominant liberation discourses of their era, I hope to illustrate that their spirituality offered a vision of Black power beyond gender roles.

Africa Unbound: The Uses of Goddesses in the Works of Audre Lorde

Though deeply invested in redefining Black American life through the deployment of an "African" worldview, many Black nationalist organizations used Africa as a blind for patriarchal desires, as in the case of Kawaidaism, the cultural nationalist philosophy that produced the holiday of Kwanzaa. Amiri Baraka, who enjoyed a short-lived but enthusiastic adherence to the doctrine, wrote in his treatise on Kawaida, "We do not believe in 'equality' of men and women. We cannot understand what devils and the devilishly influenced mean when they say equality for women. We could never be

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equals . . . nature has not provided thus. The brother says, 'Let a woman be a wo-man . . . and let a man be a ma-an. . . .' But this means that we will complement each other, that you, who I call my house, because there is no house without a man and his wife, are the single element in the universe that perfectly completes my essence."[7] Kawaidaism was developed by Maulana Karenga in 1965, and given that the founder was convicted of a brutal assault on two of his female followers in 1971, it is perhaps unsurprising that this philosophy was responsible for one of the most gender-restrictive doctrines of the era. According to historian Ashley D. Farmer, Kawaidaists "based their doctrine and social practices on an inaccurate and ahistorical model of Africa that collapsed the cultural, economic, and social differences among past and present African societies, countries, and cultures."[8] The "healthy African identities" of which Baraka speaks indeed have no referent to any culturally or historically specific example. Here, we see Baraka under a guise of traditional "African" values, parroting Karenga's unsubstantiated claim that the historical and present role of the "African woman" was to "inspire her man, educate her children, and to participate in social development."[9] What, I wonder, would Oyá, a machete-wielding female spirit of change and death and thunder, have to say about this vision of the African woman? Kawaidaism leaves this unanswered, because it ignores the countless spiritual and cultural examples of African womanhood outside of the service to a man.

For all of the Afrocentrism of the 1970s, certain hallmarks of African spiritualities across the diaspora—namely, powerful female spirits and ancestral communication—are found to be incompatible with a patriarchal American vision, and are conveniently excised from Black nationalist rhetoric of the 1970s. See, for example, the rise in popularity of orisha worship as early as 1960 with Oseijeman Adefunmi's foundation of the Yoruba Temple in Harlem.[10] His conception of Africa "grew firmly out of the context of 1960s expressions of black nationalism, which required at that time no mass exodus to the continent, but instead the mining of its cultural, religious, and psychical resources in order to rehumanize and rehistoricize blackness in North America."[11] While Adefunmi's conception of Yoruba cosmology was shaped by American patriarchalism, featuring a largely male aristocratic leadership and male-centered polygamy, today this spiritual tradition boasts thousands of adherents in the United States, many of whom are women, many of whom occupy leadership or priestess roles. Three of this tradition's most powerful and popular spirits—Yemayá, Oyá, and Ochún—are woman-identified spirits governing principles as diverse as fertility, death, caretaking, storms, eroticism, and bodies of water; the creator of the universe, Obatalá,

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is a gender-less spirit whose pronouns vary depending on context and translation. Among all New World cosmologies stemming from religions of the African continent, Yoruba has particular traction in America precisely because of the characters of its female and gender-fluid spirits. Yet despite the fact that its development in the United States was coterminous with the civil rights movement and the Black nationalism of the 1970s, and despite the fact that key public figures like Malcolm X and Amiri Baraka frequented the Harlem Yoruba Temple for ceremonies and spiritual consultation, Yoruba cosmologies are rarely considered to be Black power ideologies.[12] This has everything to do with the masculinism at the heart of mid-twentieth-century iterations of Afrocentrism. The perceived divide between the spiritual and the political of the 1970s was really a divide between an essentialized conception of masculine and feminine, with woman-centered spiritualities relegated to a feminized space of frivolity—just one more thing women were asked to put aside until after the revolution.[13]

Together, Clifton and Lorde outline a feminist religious imaginary that had its own conception of Black power. At times specifically interpolating spirits of the African diaspora, at times dealing in metaphors and imagination, Lorde and Clifton lay claim to diasporic principles that are pervasive throughout theologies of the African diaspora. Many African diaspora religions readily incorporated women into the work of revolution. And not just by laying claim to a traditionally masculine symbology of weaponry, fire, and destruction. These religions also incorporated what Clifton might deem "ordinary womanhood" into the revolutionary matrix.[14] Taking up arms is not the only way that spirits aid Black liberation. They also appreciate the beauty of a nice dress, a spoonful of honey, cradling a baby, and all the other elements of Black life that elevate existence beyond a knee-jerk reaction to oppression. Clifton and Lorde seek to heal the fractures between the spiritual and the political by using their own bodies as proof that women are at the vanguard of the spiritual work of revolution.

Audre Lorde's interest in African and Afro-diasporic culture is well documented and self-avowed. When asked, in an interview with Adrienne Rich, to account for the historical and ethnographic research behind her conceptions of the Black mother, the Amazon, and African warrior goddess figures, Lorde replied, "I'm a poet, not a historian. I've shared my knowledge, I hope. Now you go document it, if you wish."[15] Within a context of contemporary Black feminist theory, the inventive nature of Lorde's African goddesses and mythological Black mothers may seem slightly dated at best and biologically determinist at worst, relics of a bygone 1970s fetishization

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of a fictive African motherland. But what if, rather than viewing these themes as instances of quaint essentialism, we viewed them as act by which Lorde creates diasporic kinship between women?

Lorde's 1978 collection of poems, *The Black Unicorn*, is the apotheosis of her interest in African-derived cosmologies. Written in the wake of her first journey to West Africa in 1974, it is so suffused with West African spirituality that the text includes a glossary of African names and a bibliography that cites, among others, Harold Courlander's and Melville Herskovits's classic ethnographic works. In this way, Lorde deploys the kinds of strategic essentialisms typical of the time period and of the Black Arts movement, to which Audre Lorde was only marginal but with which she shared a common goal of Black liberation.[16] Lorde was often caught in the crosshairs of debates between Black liberation and gay and women's liberation movements, unable to find easy identifications within any, yet she was still invested in unifying them through the imagery of the warrior woman. As James Smethurst notes, "The Black Arts warrior is both implicitly and explicitly male—though some black women writers in the post–Black Arts era, notably Audre Lorde, pointedly introduce figures of the woman warrior and the Amazon (with its lesbian subtext) into their work—both invoking and critiquing the Black Arts movement."[17] Similarly, Cheryl Clarke argues, "In Lorde's cosmology, black women are going to have to come to terms with their Amazon (women-loving-women and warrior) past."[18] Both scholars note Lorde's queer intervention into a fundamentally heteronormative iconography.

Lorde's Afrocentricity in *The Black Unicorn* is a meditation on unbelonging, by which she works in and through her feelings of betrayal and rejection at the hands of other Black people. It is ironic that a figure who has been heralded as the Black poet par excellence actually spent much of her work critiquing and struggling against Blackness as a category. In the poem "Between Ourselves," Lorde writes,

> When you impale me
> upon your lances of narrow blackness
> before you hear my heart speak
> mourn your own borrowed blood
> your own borrowed visions.[19]

In this poem, Lorde addresses her peers who are responsible for the ossified categories of Black, revolutionary, and woman that will always exclude her. For Audre Lorde, true kinship between Black people is a thing that has been interrupted by white supremacy and has yet to come again.

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Lorde, who embodied a public persona as an out Black lesbian for most of her career as a writer, is obviously precluded from Black power ideologies invested in establishing gender norms predicated on heterosexual Black partnership. Her primary affect toward these ideologies is one of betrayal and hurt. In "Between Ourselves," she compares her sense of betrayal at the hands of other Black people to the original sin of Africans' complicity in the transatlantic slave trade, rendered as a "brother" who sold her great-grandmother into slavery:

> and whenever I try to eat
> the words
> of easy blackness as salvation
> I taste the colour
> of my grandmother's first betrayal.[20]

This calls to mind the variety of "skinfolk ain't kinfolk" proverbs across the African diaspora, including Zora Neale Hurston's original formulation and the Haitian Creole proverb "*Depi nan Ginen, nèg rayi nèg*" (Since we were in Africa, Black men have hated Black men). But here, Lorde turns this affect of mistrust into an interrogation of the notion of an "easy blackness" that seeks to unify Black people under a narrow banner without accounting for the multiplicity of sins we have been driven to enact on one another. By framing the origin myth of her great-grandmother betrayed by a "brother" (implying both a biological kinship and a generic Black manhood), Lorde highlights the historic uneasiness of Blackness and charts the need for reparative justice to heal the wounds of a centuries-long history of gendered violence against Black women.

Like New World Blackness itself, Lorde's feminism is also haunted by the specter of a lost communality between women. Throughout her work, she speaks of an ancestral memory of Black women's communalism, of a mythic time in West Africa when "we enjoyed each other in a sisterhood of work and power and play."[21] In the world of Lorde's essays, sisterhood between Black women is not a thing that exists in the present, but a thing that must be written into being to be placed like balm upon the wounds Black women inflict upon one another. In her devastating essay "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," Lorde frames the vexed relationships between Black women as a direct result of the absence of a Black woman–centered cosmology: "Do we reenact these crucifixions upon each other, the avoidance, the cruelty, the judgments, because we have not been allowed black goddesses, black heroines; because we have not been allowed to see our mothers and our selves

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in their/our own magnificence until that magnificence became part of our blood and bone?"[22] In her prose, Lorde makes clear that the answer to her rhetorical question—essentially, do we need Black goddesses to love one another?—is emphatically yes. It is through the spirit of African diaspora religions that Lorde finds an antidote to "all the . . . endless ways in which we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other."[23] Lorde's most pressing goal in her invocation of warrior goddesses is a union between seemingly disparate elements of Black womanhood. The goddesses mentioned by Lorde in her "Open Letter to Mary Daly" earn their categorization as "warrior goddesses" because they reconcile two seemingly dissonant elements: a so-called feminine imagery of flowers, fertility, and perfume with the so-called masculine work of rage and resistance. Thereby revealing, of course, that these elements are the exclusive domain of neither gender.

Though Lorde is clearly more interested and well versed in the religions and social practices of the African continent, she also has an understated interest in spirits of the Americas. It is clear from her letter to Mary Daly, in which she famously accuses white feminist theologian Mary Daly of ignoring African goddesses in Daly's 1978 text *Gyn/Ecology*, that Lorde is aware of Vodou. Providing a litany of spirits and heroines, all of whom are native to Africa, Lorde asks Mary Daly, "Where are the warrior goddesses of the Vodoun [*sic*]?"[24] Interestingly enough, this passing reference is the only reference Lorde makes to a spirit that originates in the New World. But because Lorde herself is a child of the Caribbean diaspora, born to a Grenadian mother and Barbadian father in the United States, I argue that Haitian Vodou (a revolutionary theology that created a number of new spirits to address the slavery and racism in the Americas) shares with Lorde a methodology and a set of principles that address the specific social problems of New World Blackness through a cosmological lens. Lorde's citation of Vodou goddesses is an oblique reference to Ezili, the most prominent pantheon of female spirits in Haitian Vodou. Ezili is not so much one figure as she is a set of problematics organized under one name. There are many versions of Ezili, each representing a different version of femininity: Ezili Freda, a beautiful light-skinned woman with an implacable love for luxury. Ezili Dantò, a dark-skinned single mother with a scarred face, a defender of women wronged. Lasirèn, a mermaid who lives at the bottom of the sea and imparts sacred knowledge. Following the lead of Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's iconoclastic scholarship in *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*, I view Ezili's multiple manifestations as Afro-diasporic archetypes that work through a specific facet of Black women's lived experiences.

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There is a rich tradition of feminist academic work concerning Ezili Freda. Contemporary scholars like Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, Colin Dayan, and Karen McCarthy Brown, as well as early ethnographers like Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Deren, have all theorized the reason behind Ezili Freda's demanding and luxurious femme persona. I prefer to draw from Maya Deren's version of Ezili Freda in her 1953 ethnography, *Divine Horsemen*, which to this day remains one of the most influential claims for Ezili Freda's philosophical importance. Deren argues that, in contrast to cosmologies that equate the feminine principle with maternity and motherhood, "Vodoun [*sic*] has given woman, in the figure of Erzulie [*sic*], exclusive title to that which distinguishes humans from all other forms: their capacity to conceive beyond reality, to desire beyond adequacy, to create beyond need."[25] In Deren's representation, Freda's demand for material beauty in the form of gauzy fabrics, dainty cakes, and Florida Water is not a marker of the individual spirit's selfishness, but a defining condition of humanity. In a society scarred by slavery's attempts to eradicate human emotions and aesthetics in order to reduce enslaved peoples' lives to mere survival, Freda's demand for material beauty, for things that are not necessary to survival, is a radical claim to humanity. There are striking similarities between Deren's conception of Freda and Lorde's reformulation, in "Poetry is Not a Luxury," of "I think, therefore I am" as "I feel, therefore I can be free."[26]

Deren is the first American scholar to describe what others have seen as Freda's caprices not as deficiencies or cruelties on the part of the spirit, but as philosophical tenants in themselves. Freda's sexual promiscuity, her love of perfumes and sumptuous fabrics, and her frequent bouts of uncontrollable sobbing have inevitably led to femme-phobic devaluations of her frivolity and capriciousness. But it is within these denigrated markers of femininity that Deren locates the driving force for social change. Deren describes Freda's embodied presence at ritual ceremonies as exacting. She demands of her devotees the most precise attention to detail, and inevitably bursts into tears when her exact wishes are not satisfied. These tears are not about individual details of the ceremony, but rather about her disappointment in a sordid world that will never satisfy her.[27] Her tears are a reminder to her devotees not to be complacent with the injustices of the world and to continue to dream, "to begin where reality ends and to spin it and send it forward in space, as the spider spins and sends forward its own thread."[28]

Like Ezili Freda, Lorde is a woman who cries too much, a woman whose denigrated femininity interrogates the world. In "Eye to Eye," Lorde explains that one of the ways that Black women have been damaged by patriarchy and

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racism is by internalizing the idea that softness and tears are a luxury we cannot afford: "Most of the black women I know think I cry too much, or that I'm too public about it. I've been told that crying makes me seem soft and therefore of little consequence. As if our softness has to be the price we pay for power, rather than simply the one that's paid most easily and most often."[29] In the same essay, Lorde says, "survival is the greatest gift of love. Sometimes, for Black mothers, it is the only gift possible, and tenderness gets lost."[30] Lorde depicts tenderness and softness not as impediments to survival, but as its apotheosis. When we dispense with tenderness, in Lorde's thinking, we mirror the very state of mere bodily survival that slavery sought to reduce us to. Lorde's goal is to make the world a space where survival is not the only gift possible, where Black women can live in and share their own tenderness. This is why she develops the concept of the erotic.

Lorde's concept of the erotic is capacious, nonhierarchical, and intuitive, a union of knowledge and feeling that can take many forms. As evident from her famous line, "For me, there is no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of the woman I love," the erotic can encompass the sexual but also exceeds it.[31] The erotic is all that is luxurious, all that is in excess of survival. But for Lorde, the erotic is above all a call to action: "For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence. . . . And this is a grave responsibility projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe."[32] Like Freda's tears, Lorde's emphasis on softness and joy are a demand for the world to be better. Just as Freda is, according to Deren "the loa [spirit] of things as they could be, not as they are," Lorde's erotic is a map of a world that does not yet exist but that can be fought for.[33] The battle is for our own softness in a world that seems to demand, and yet is being destroyed by, the need for dominance. The erotic, like Ezili, is a form of Black femme warfare. It is not a militancy that subsumes itself in a warlike masculinism. It is not a militancy that destroys bodies and poisons the earth. It is a militancy grounded in the antithesis of these things: beauty, pleasure, and sensuality. And the prize to be won is nothing less than our own selves and our own right to touch, feel, and commune with one another.

This is not to say that Lorde eschews more directly confrontational forms of social change. Like Ezili, she presents multiple manifestations and

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multiple emotional responses to conditions of oppression. Lorde's reclamation of bad affects under the auspices of the warrior goddess is nowhere more prominent than in her series of essays about anger: "Eye to Eye," "The Uses of Anger," and (less explicitly but, I argue, quite concerned with anger) "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." Much like "The Uses of the Erotic," Lorde's conception of anger seeks to realize a future-perfect community of Black women. In order to do this, Lorde must take a deep dive into the internecine gender struggles of the Black community of the 1970s to reclaim the denigrated figure of the angry Black woman.

A post-Moynihan reclaiming of the angry Black woman is no easy feat, but Lorde endeavors it. The Moynihan Report (*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*), that infamous 1965 document arguing that African American "matriarchal structure" of the "Negro family" was responsible for a "tangle of pathologies," had unparalleled repercussions within the Black community as Black women scrambled to show they were not castrators and Black men scrambled to show they were not castrated. Prominent Black women artists, writers, and activists, notably Alice Walker, Michele Wallace, and Ntozake Shange, became embroiled in controversy over their depiction of Black men in their work; in one article, Askia Toure compared Shange and Wallace to COINTELPRO (the Counterintelligence Program) in the harm they did to the Black community.[34] Ishmael Reed even went to the trouble of publishing an entire novel, *Reckless Eyeballing*, that was essentially a thinly veiled attack on Walker and Shange. This debate is crystallized in the controversy surrounding Robert Staples's 1979 essay "The Myth of the Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists," which prompted such an outcry when it was published in *The Black Scholar* that the journal devoted a subsequent issue to a reader's forum on "The Black Sexism Debate."[35] I will not devote much time to Staples's essay, which is poorly researched and speciously argued, but I will call attention to one statement from Staples: "At the end of the play [*for colored girls*], what I find especially unsettling, is Shange's invitation to black women to love themselves. This seems, to me, to be no less than an extension of the culture of Narcissism. She does not mention compassion for misguided black men or love of child family or community. . . . A black woman who loves only herself is incapable of loving others. What greater way to insure [sic] being alone the rest of your life than the self-centered posture so eloquently expressed in Ntozake Shange's play?"[36] There are a number of strands needing unpacking in Staples's paradoxical statement. That Black women's self-love should be so unsettling that Staples must resort to a facile bad faith reading (for in the same way that no one ever said *only* Black

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lives matter, Shange never said Black women should love *only* themselves, as Staples surely realizes) only speaks to the potential energy of Black women's self-love. What would the world look like if Black women redirected their steadfast and martyred love from their men and their children to themselves? What if Black women redirected their prodigious anger away from one another and toward the structures of the world that have caused their anger?

Lorde's response to Staples's article depicts a community in crisis, fractured by patriarchal notions of gender and family structures. Lorde's response to the essay, which was first published in *The Black Scholar* and later collected in "Sister Outsider," emphasizes the way American gender roles are rooted in white supremacy: "It is not the destiny of black america to repeat white america's mistakes. But we will, if we mistake the trappings of success in a sick society for the signs of a meaningful life. If black men continue to define 'femininity' instead of their own desires, and to do it in archaic european terms, they restrict our access to each other's energies. Freedom and future for blacks does not mean absorbing the dominant white male disease of sexism."[37]

In this essay, Lorde responds to discourses from both Black and white men that paint Black women's demands for accountability as part of a pathological unfemininity. Anger becomes an accusation by which supposed proponents of Black power ungender Black women. In Staples's original essay, he suggests that "some women do make the decisions and desertion is [the Black man's] form of masculine protest."[38] In Lorde's description of Staples, she argues that because of her anger, her decidedness, and her competency, the Black woman fails to conform to "the model of 'femininity' as set forth in this country," and that Staples, like the rest of society, views loneliness, abuse, and abandonment as her just punishment.[39] Here, Lorde's scare quotes around "femininity" bespeak an unwillingness to use the master's tools to destroy the master's house; Lorde will not make an appeal to "the model of femininity set forth in this country" if it means buying into a pseudo-Victorian ideal of bourgeois womanhood resting upon the laurels of white supremacy. Anger is the force by which Lorde seeks gender roles beyond white capitalist definitions of masculine and feminine, the innovative force that teaches us not to "accept only the designs already known, deadly and safely familiar."[40]

There is ample precedent within diasporic religions for the figure of the angry Black woman. Oyá, of Yoruba cosmologies, who dances with a horsewhip and destroys life to make it anew. Her sister spirits, Yemayá and Ochún, also have wrathful incarnations that use water to purify and destroy.

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And Ezili Dantò, the patroness of single mothers and women wronged in Haitian Vodou, who represents "the maternal anger that is called into play when a mother must defend her children," which "turned Dantò into a woman warrior during the slave revolution."[41] None of these spirits are wanton destructresses, however: in Afro-diasporic cosmologies, as in Lorde's own cosmology—"I speak hear as a woman of Color who is not bent upon destruction, but upon survival"—the spirits of death are often simultaneously the spirits of rebirth and purification.[42] I will focus on the principles represented by Ezili Dantò as the animating force behind Lorde's writing on anger and silence. Here, I draw from Karen McCarthy Brown's depiction of Dantò in *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, which offers a window into the potentially feminist valences of the spirit.

Often represented as a symbol of Haiti itself (abused and racialized, yet powerful), Dantò's image as an advocate for women wronged is full of contradictions, the first among them being that she cannot speak. As Brown notes, when Dantò possesses people, the only words she can produce are a stuttering "dey-dey-dey" sound.[43] Given Lorde's virulent opposition to silence as expressed in "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," I am aware of the irony in viewing a spirit who cannot speak as the patron saint of Lorde's uses of anger. However, Dantò's speechlessness brings up important themes of nonverbal communication, and occasions a loving act of interpretation by all worshippers present as they come together to interpret her wants and needs: "Dantò's inarticulate sounds gain meaning in a Vodou ceremony only through her body language and the interpretive efforts of the gathered community."[44] These same powers of Black women's collective interpretation are what Lorde calls for to allow women to process their anger and transform it into revolutionary sentiment. Dantò's iconic refrain in one of her praise songs—"Seven stabs of the knife, seven stabs of the sword. / Hand me that basin, I'm going to vomit blood"—speaks to the corrosive elements of unexpressed rage and to the physical manifestations of Black women's betrayals by society.[45] No one knows why she is vomiting blood, or who has stabbed her. No one knows if she has been injured or poisoned or if she suffers from some mysterious illness. What is clear is that she is being attacked from the inside and that she must rid herself of toxicity in order to keep fighting. When Dantò is vomiting blood, she is purging herself of the fears behind the silences; she is, insofar as she is capable, speaking. And it is her community of worshippers who are inspired to write a song that expresses the depth of that love and that betrayal that compels her to continue fighting for them even as she is vomiting blood. Interpreting the

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bodily language of Ezili, listening to her anger, is an example of the ways Black women can realize the collective nature of their seemingly individual angers, a collectivity that Lorde describes:

> Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say *symphony* rather than *cacophony* because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart [emphasis in original]. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters.[46]

The idea that Black women form a symphony is, at first glance, at odds with the despair of Lorde's anger essays. If Black women form a symphony, then why are we so at odds with one another, so discordant in our jealousy and despair? In Lorde's thought, the expression of anger reveals the symphony. "Anger is loaded with information and energy," says Lorde.[47] The songs that we have been playing, wrathfully, bitterly, in the dark, are revealed to be harmonies of our sister's songs. And those fallen sisters, the ones who could not express their anger, are those same sisters who in "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" eventually died of their inexpressible anger: "What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?"[48] Lorde's project is above all to encourage Black women to express their anger, to play anger like an instrument, in order to redeem that community of Black women who have fallen into the abyss between anger and language. Perhaps this symphony of anger is the foundation of a community yet to come.

In order for this community to be built, some of the anger that dispels silence must, inevitably, be used among Black women. Like Audre Lorde's essays, Ezili Dantò's backstory is filled with troubling stories of the violence Black people enact on one another. One version of Dantò's mythology holds that her face is scarred because she and Freda got in a fight over a man.[49] Another maintains that she cannot speak because her own people tore out her tongue to keep her from divulging their revolutionary secrets.[50] Some also say that her beloved child Anais, with whom she is usually depicted in visual representations, was killed during the Haitian Revolution. What do we make of these stories in which some of the trying circumstances that prompted the

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need for Dantò's heroism were precipitated by her own people rather than her enemies? What do we do when we are cast not just as the victims but as the perpetrators? According to Lorde, these inconsistencies are useful in themselves: "Often we give lip service to the idea of mutual support and connection between black women because we have not yet crossed the barriers to these possibilities. . . . And to acknowledge our dreams is to sometimes acknowledge the distance between those dreams and our present situation."[51] Part of caring for Dantò involves reckoning with a legacy of betrayal so that we can bridge the gap between our dreams of connection and our reality of violence. Dantò is a divinity, but she is also a Black woman, crucified on a cross of broken promises and intimate betrayals, spouting blood and willing to spout more blood—what is more diasporic, more heroic, than that? Despite these rumblings of betrayal, Dantò continues to fight for her serviteurs, and in so doing represents Black women's incredible capacity for loyalty and forgiveness even and especially when we have wronged one another. Those are the true uses of anger—not as an interpersonal violence, but as a way of making tangible our aspirations for redress and reconciliation.

Some Damn Body: Spirit and Embodiment in the Writings of Lucille Clifton

Like Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton was coterminous with, but not part of, the Black Arts movement. Like Lorde, Clifton was deeply ambivalent about the authenticity politics of the era. Lucille Clifton's protest of Black power gender roles is perhaps more understated than Lorde's, but ever present throughout her poetry. Clifton's poem "apology (to the panthers)," for instance, is at first glance a confession of her failure to be properly radical. She addresses the Panthers as men exclusively: "brothers i thank you for these mannish days." Odd, as Clifton must know of women Panthers, and as the label of the era as "mannish" seems to preclude her own participation. But then she tells her brothers, "i grieve my whiteful ways." This word choice of "grieve" does not carry the idea of repentance that a word like "regret" might. There is a slight indictment of the Panthers for creating the conditions of her grief, for condemning her whiteful ways to death. "Whiteful," when placed in opposition to "mannish," becomes a tenuous analogue to the unspoken "womanish." To be a revolutionary, the poem implies, is to be a man; all else is whitefulness.[52] Where do Black women fit into this 1970s dichotomy between whiteful and mannish? Painstakingly, exuberantly, Clifton's spiritual prac-

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tice carves out a space beyond the unspoken impossibility of a revolutionary Black woman.

Interviewers and critics are often fixated on asking Clifton to account for her place in the Black activism of the 1960s and 1970s, an impulse she thwarts magnificently.[53] When asked point blank what she was doing in the 1960s, with the implication being that she was absent from the freedom struggles of the decade, Clifton responds, "Well, during the 1960s I was pretty much pregnant. I have six kids, and they're six and a half years apart in age, from the oldest to the youngest."[54] In emphasizing the biological constraints preventing her from participating in visible forms of Black activism, Clifton subtly shifts the definition of radicalism beyond masculinist modes of charismatic leadership. In a cryptic poem titled "the 70s," Clifton says,

will be the days
i go unchildrened
strange women will walk
out my door and in
hiding my daughters
holding my sons
leaving me nursing on myself
again
having lost some
begun much[55]

The strange women, yet to come, are the Black nationalist ideal of womanhood. The women demanded by the ideologies of the 1970s, who will uplift and inspire sons, and hide the desires of daughters out of sight. Those strange women supplanting Clifton in her insufficient Blackness and womanness to be the perfect embodiment of the African Woman. Queenly and inspirational as a statue, and just as loving. But Clifton ultimately forgives what this rhetoric of ideal Black womanhood has cost her ("lost some"), because of the things it has set in motion ("begun much."). She acknowledges that the 1970s were a time of similar longings and divergent methodologies between Black men and women.

All this is really a question of memory. Of who gets to remember, and how. The Black cultural nationalism of Clifton's youth is so concerned with resurrecting Africa that it has forgotten the muscle memory of difference already encoded in its warring soul. In the popular poem "why some people be mad at me sometimes," Clifton says,

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they ask me to remember
but they want me to remember
their memories
and i keep on remembering
mine.[56]

This poem was Clifton's quiet but biting response to a prompt she found problematic: as poet laureate of Maryland, she was asked to write a poem to commemorating the state's 350-year colonial history.[57] While the easy interpretation of the poem would be to label these "some people" as white, I think Clifton said "some people" and not "white people" for a reason. These people who place prohibitions on her memory can also be those whose memory of Africa is an excuse to impose uniformity on the living Black community. Clifton's own memories—the words of her ancestors, reminding her of where she came from and where she is going—are lost under authenticity politics labeling Blackness as synonymous with its vociferous self-proclamation. As Kevin Quashie compellingly argues, considering the interiority of the everyday lives of Black people beyond a demand for Black people's compulsory "resistance" is a way "to restore humanity without being apolitical."[58] Similarly, Clifton's insistence upon her Blackness outside of a visible political framework seeks to counter the fact that "people have a tendency, I think, to believe that if you don't say 'black' in every other line, you must be somehow not wishing to be part of Black."[59]

Clifton's poem "africa" reads,

home
oh
home
the soul of your
variety
all of my bones
remember.[60]

She feels, in a deeply embodied way, that there is more "variety" in the African cultural reality than the Afrocentric game of telephone has conveyed to her. Rather than the knowing of unrecoverable historical details, the embodied experience of her "bones" tells her that there is something more in her history than the skeletal offering of motherhood and wifehood. Africa is often connected with memory throughout Clifton's work. It stands in for a kind of muscle memory and for all that is forgotten. In the lines "i long for

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the rains of wydah / [. . .] not just this springtime and / these wheatfields / white poets call the past," Clifton gestures toward the tropical seasonal rhythms of rainy and dry seasons rather than the winter-spring-summer-fall of temperate regions.[61] By linking her Black American body to the memory of a different climate, Clifton argues that a sense of historical dysphoria imposed by white conceptions of history is felt deeply in the Black body, even when its contours are not fully known by the mind.

In "ca'line's prayer," Clifton writes from the perspective of her great-grandmother, who was born in West Africa, possibly Benin, in 1822. This woman, Mammy Ca'line, figured prominently in Clifton's family lore as a "Dahomey woman," meant to convey a lineage of warrior-like strength and endurance running through Clifton herself. Clifton describes her father describing his grandmother: "she used to always say 'Get what you want, you from Dahomey women.' And she used to tell us about how they had a whole army of nothing but women back there and how they was the best soldiers in the world."[62] However, in "ca'line's prayer," the speaker is no Amazon taking stock of her conquests. In the poem, she is an old and thirsty woman who has spent her years "in a desert country." The first stanza is a confession of her current state ("i am dry / and black as drought"), but the second stanza forms a prayer:

> remember me from wydah
> remember the child
> running across dahomey
> black as ripe papaya
> juicy as sweet berries
> and set me in rivers of your glory
>
> Ye Ma Jah.[63]

Some might recognize here, chopped and disjointed, the name of the Yoruba spirit of the ocean, Yemayá. Syllables detached from meaning. The goddess dismembered, but dredged from the deep. Though she asks Yemayá to remember her, through this act of prayer, Ca'line is also remembering the distinct cosmology of her African youth. Ca'line's prayer is as much a prayer for water as it is for memory, because in Clifton's theology, the two are synonymous. All of her poems that speak of water's revenge are really a call to the body to remember.

Clifton's poetry of the 1970s has an eschatological framework in which water brings judgment and memory. This calls to mind Toni Morrison's

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assertion that when a river floods "it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was."[64] Humans being 60 percent water, Clifton's linkages between water and flesh memory hold a profound and bodily sense of rightness. As M. Jacqui Alexander puts it, "the body's water composition seals our aquatic affinity with the divine."[65] Clifton taps into an Afro-diasporic imaginary of water as both womb and tomb, as a force that baptizes and heals as well as drowns and destroys. In a poem called "jonah," for example,

> what i remember
> is green
> in the trees
> and the leaves
> and the smell of mango
> and yams
> and if i had a drum
> I would send to the brothers
> —Be care full of the ocean—[66]

Jonah is reimagined as a victim of the Middle Passage, remembering Africa from the bottom of the ocean. Beginning in one of the few capitalizations of Clifton's oeuvre, Jonah's twofold message to "the brothers" back in Africa is both warning and instruction. Beware the ocean. Care for the ocean. Jonah's sojourn at the end of the sea is not a death, however; if he follows the same trajectory as the biblical Jonah, he will someday survive to impart what he has learned to his brothers. As, indeed, the ancestors of Clifton's spirit writing did.

Similarly to Lorde, Clifton drew from a combination of mythological imagery to write a more capacious Blackness into being. Clifton, however, has a more global imaginary: she has more poems about Kali than any African-derived spirit, and at the pivotal moment in 1976 when she receives a spirit visitation from her ancestors, she chooses to narrate the visitation through Catholic imagery invoking the Virgin Mary and Joan of Arc. Clifton likes earth-churning goddesses. Spirits that rise from the sea—that are the sea, in fact—to enact revenge. Though her turn to spirit communication beginning in 1976 might have come as a surprise to her, her visitation as described in *Two-Headed Woman* was perhaps not sudden but conjured over time by the themes of her earlier poetry. Clifton's brand of Afrocentricity, unlike Lorde's, is based less in an invocation of African cosmology than a state of humility

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before all the details of that cosmology that have been forgotten. In Clifton's poetry, you will find no glossaries of African terms, no African warrior goddesses, no myths of matriarchal society. Instead, there are the gentle but persistent calls to an Africa remembered in shadows.

Clifton's poems written throughout the 1960s and 1970s are libations poured to ancestors remembered and unremembered, but midway through the 1970s, the ancestors answered back. In May of 1976, while sitting in her living room with two of her daughters, Lucille Clifton thought to herself, "Why not get out the Ouija board?" Or rather, "something told" her to get out the Ouija board.[67] What began as a casual evening with her daughters in which the Ouija board told one of them she would marry John Travolta quickly turned into an announcement that unsettled all who were present: that Clifton's mother, who had been dead for eighteen years, was speaking to them.[68] Clifton's mother, Thelma, died when Clifton was twenty-two years old, and Clifton had already resigned herself to the reality of her untimely passing, remarking, "It is the tradition of my race, my sex, and my family to continue with our lives. We have borne enormous deaths before. We go on."[69] However, notions around the inevitability of Black women's suffering and death were completely reversed by her mother's dramatic spiritual contact. By 1978, the spirit of Clifton's mother was a household presence spoken to almost daily by Clifton and her six children, once even saving her oldest daughter, Sidney, from falling down the stairs.[70]

Lucille Clifton is part of a long and storied tradition of clairvoyant Black American women. The trope of clairvoyant Black women, known as rootworkers, two-headed women, and hoodoo women, has existed as long as Black women have been in the Americas but saw a renaissance in the last decades of the twentieth century. This trend is glimpsed through characters like Minnie Ransom in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and Miranda Day in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), as well as in popular iterations like Whoopi Goldberg's character Oda Mae Brown in the 1990 film *Ghost*. Alice Walker, at the end of *The Color Purple* (1982), even signs off as "A.W. author and medium." However, Clifton literalizes this writerly trope and thus both diverges from and complicates the traditionally conceived definition of the Black medium, or, as she calls it, the two-headed woman. In Clifton's theory of spirit, Blackness and the Black body are decentered by the concept of reincarnation. When she asks her spirit interlocutors about her previous incarnations, she is surprised to learn that in many of them, she was not a woman at all.[71] The spirit of her mother, Thelma, who apparently having found her last incarnation as a Black woman painful, prefers to go by

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the name Greta, which belonged to one of her prior incarnations.[72] The transcendental nature of Clifton's cosmology might seem at odds with a Black feminist worldview that positions race and gender as defining factors of a person's lived experience. What is Black feminism when the Black woman's body is just one of many costumes a soul can wear, and then discard? What happens to those specificities of race and gender when a person's soul is not bound by them?

This is the first published study to make use of her vast unpublished archive of spirit writing, which is currently housed at Emory University's Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.[73] Lucille Clifton's spirit writing, while ostensibly fitting into a race- and gender-blind New Age tradition, is actually an important contribution to Black feminist theories of embodiment. The specificity of Clifton's body—fat, brown-skinned, mother—is the sweet stuff upon which spirits alight like butterflies, carrying messages for the salvation of humanity. Although the spirits admonish Clifton for her fixation on earthly matters of race and gender—"you wish to speak of / black and white . . . have we not talked of human"—she maintains a delicate balance between the idea of a raceless soul and her incarnation as a Black woman.[74] Far from being an esoteric post-racialism, Clifton's theory of spirit is made possible by her Black womanhood. It is no accident that her body and its specificities that could serve as a channel for the spirits. As the departed spirit of her own mother said to her, *"You are a natural channel."*[75] Here, the Black woman medium is a meeting place, a body already accustomed to being shared—with children, through labor, in history—without losing itself. Clifton describes her clairvoyance as a balancing act between selfhood and self-sharing in which she tries "not to abuse it, or be abused by it."[76] Alice Walker, similarly, is quick to clarify about her clairvoyance that "what I'm working on meets in me and merges with me, and that is what happens, rather than people just coming through totally as themselves with none of me in them."[77] In other words, the work of the Black woman medium is not as a tool for the spirits, but as a partner. I argue that in Clifton's writing, Black womanhood is represented as particularly fruitful ground for this kind of spiritual partnership. It is to be a lightning rod for everyone else's electrified narratives and desires, yet to remain discrete, unburned, and incandescent.

In her study *Soul Talk,* Akasha Gloria Hull identifies a trend in New Age spirituality among African American women like Clifton, arising around 1980. Unlike the often raceless ideology of mainstream New Age–isms, Hull argues that Black women's engagements with it are "socially embedded [and]

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can be used in a socially responsive way to fight societal ills."[78] This involves a melding of New Age beliefs around astrology and reincarnation with African diasporic spiritual traditions, as exemplified by Lucille Clifton's self-identification as a "two-headed woman." As Hull explains, "throughout diasporic African cultures, people such as healers, savants, and rootworkers who possess innate, intuitive insight into the invisible world are termed *two-headed*, which is to signify that they have a command of that world as well as the everyday, external one that is considered by most people to be real."[79] In an eclectic style typical of the era, Clifton's beliefs range from serious reflections on the fate of the universe to zany meditations on Black astrology (in her incomplete manuscript "Soul Signs: An Astrology for Black People," for example, she includes lists of all the astrological signs as Black movies or as soul food; for instance, Taurus: Candied Yams). Even at her most whimsical, however, Clifton recognizes that Black spirituality, including astrology, "is a product of one's history and one's circumstance and the history and circumstance of Black people is unique, especially in America."[80]

Greta/Thelma's initial spirit communications began a lifelong family practice for the Cliftons, most heavily documented throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, of communications with the spirit world. It was an endeavor that enlisted Clifton's six children to varying degrees, sometimes as automatic writers, sometimes as interpreters for non-English-speaking spirits, and sometimes even channeling the voices of spirits through their own bodies. Even Clifton's husband Fred, who is never described by her as participating in her organized efforts to talk to the spirits, had a robust meditative practice in which he was visited by a variety of spirits stemming from Eastern spiritual traditions.[81] There was a time when Clifton herself sought to publish the results of her family's endeavors, but she encountered some resistance about publishing them; an agent wanted her to write the work under a pseudonym, and publishers she approached didn't like it because it wasn't "sensationalistic" enough, ignoring Clifton's assertion that "nothing was like *The Amityville Horror*. That kind of Hollywood ghost stuff doesn't happen, that's not real."[82] In contrast, Clifton insists upon the ordinariness of her family ("We are not unusual people") and refuses to indulge in any claim of exceptionalism regarding whatever skill or circumstance might contribute to their clairvoyance.[83] Instead, Clifton tries to shift society's perception of reality by emphasizing the commonplace nature of spirits: "Our house, our home is not haunted of course, not by robe-wearing ghosts springing from dark corners and booing us during the night, it is not that. It is simply that we are able to perceive and to receive communications from the spirits of the

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dead. And it is not that there are ghosts in our house, it is simply that there are spirits in the world."[84] An ordinary family, an ordinary woman, talking with ordinary spirits. But her goals are anything but ordinary: to acknowledge the presence of spirits in the world is to acknowledge the veracity of their messages to Clifton and her family, some of which prescribe radical changes in the way that humans live their earthly lives. By making the experience of one black family universal and transcendental, Clifton seeks to change what the spirits call "the world of the Americas."

Although some of the spirits that communicated with the Clifton's family were the spirits of ordinary people whose lives were largely forgotten by the living, in 1977, Clifton put out an open call to the spirit world for celebrity spirits who would like to take part in an anthology of sorts. Twenty spirits volunteered, though some of the volunteers never made it to the interview stage.[85] She devised a questionnaire that she posed to each spirit, including questions such as "What was the experience of death like for you?" and "Would you like to clarify anything about your life for our world?" The resulting interviews were a strange, rollicking, and deeply moving compilation of voices as diverse as Lizzie Borden, Beethoven, Emily Dickinson, Bessie Smith, and Jesus of Nazareth. Clifton proves to be a sensitive and reassuring interviewer, soothing spirits who are troubled or agitated. Clyde Barrow (of *Bonnie and Clyde* fame), for example, proves to be particularly nervous and morose, so upon hearing from him that he loved to draw when he was alive, Clifton asks him to draw a picture in order to calm him down.[86] She also planned an anthology of poems by the spirits of deceased poets, but it appears to be unfinished, comprising a handful of poems by ee cummings, Emily Dickinson, and Langston Hughes. Perhaps the spirits did not see the utility in composing poetry; for, as ee cummings told her when he returned to compose a few poems, "Poetry is unnecessary here; here all is understood."[87]

These spirits, having shed their gendered and racialized bodies, have an interesting and world-weary perspective on the prejudices of humanity. Jesus of Nazareth, when asked what he looked like, replies somewhat dismissively, "Shall we deal in statistics?" but concedes to say that he had brown hair, brown eyes, and medium height. Some spirits still seem deeply traumatized by the tragic events of their lives and deaths, while others find these past sadnesses to be irrelevant. "Some spirits are reluctant to deal with our world, others a bit eager to do so," says Clifton. Clyde Barrow and Bessie Smith both confess their same-sex desires in response to the question of "Would you like to clarify anything about your life for our world?" while Billie Holiday emphatically denies her putative queerness. Beethoven, when

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asked whether it was true that he was of African descent, replies, "Yes. Yes, Grandfather, yes. Of course in the old days in my country we would never admit it. Silly." Emily Dickinson reveals that she became a recluse as the result of a traumatic rape, but will not reveal the perpetrator because "it is of no consequence." Two spirits, Isadora Duncan and Jack Cassidy, express the desire to be reincarnated as the opposite gender, while Billie Holiday does not want to be reincarnated, "Not for awhile, till things get better. I want to come back when I can go anywhere and be a Negro and nobody notices." All of these answers strip back the seemingly all important aspects of class, race, gender, and sexuality to reveal them as the changing weather of a soul's journey, not the journey in itself, and certainly not the most valued aspects of the spirits' incarnations on earth. When asked what things still attract them to our world, the spirits' answers are quite lovely: trees, autumn, children, happy families, laughter, singing, running around.[88]

However, it cannot be ignored or denied that these spirits are speaking through Black women's hands and mouths in the embodied forms of Clifton and her daughters. According to the spirits, though "all humans have the capacity to communicate," they particularly enjoy speaking to Clifton and her daughter Sidney because they are "positive, harmless people" by whom "all is done with a spirit of humility and love."[89] Echoing the Black feminist idea that Black women's unique perspective on liberation comes from the fact that they are at the bottom of the social hierarchy and thus cannot oppress others, one spirit says to Clifton, "You have no exploitive tendencies."[90] And so the spirits, identifying the household's openness to viewing bodies as something to be shared rather than controlled, enlist the bodies of the Clifton women. Beethoven, for instance, at first "attempted to speak through Sidney" but resorted to automatic writing when he proved hard to understand. Like in traditions of spirit possession across African diasporic religions, two entities temporarily share the same body, as evidenced by Clifton's description of "placing her/his hand on my lips." The "her" here represents Sidney's body; otherwise the words are attributed to "he," Beethoven.[91] This illustrates what Roberto Strongman deems as "the distinctly Afro-diasporic cultural representation of the human psyche as multiple, removable, and external to the body that functions as its receptacle."[92] In other words, the Clifton family's opening of their own bodies and psyches to the spirits without fear of loss or reprisal denotes an Afro-diasporic sensibility, even if they do not label it as such.

Sometimes, this diasporic belief in the transportability of psyches led to complicated situations within individual bodies. According to Clifton's theory of reincarnation, not all spirits of the formerly living were available for

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conversation because some of them were currently living through their next lives. Gillian, one of Clifton's daughters, "was regressed" at fourteen years old, meaning that she was brought to a state of unconsciousness in which she could experience her past lives, including one as a Nazi-era policeman named Karl who surprised the family by speaking German, a language Gillian did not speak. Her daughter Sidney's past life regression revealed Katy, a soft-spoken enslaved woman born in Nashville in 1800. In her notes on her family's past lives, Clifton reminds herself of the importance of remembering "that we are dealing with two different kinds of entities. Greta et al are dead. Karl, Katy et al are now alive again as Gillian, Sidney et al."[93] The eeriness of the voice of a former Nazi emanating from the body of a young African American girl is not included in Clifton's notes, but his inclusion in the written archive speaks to the scope of Clifton's vision. Throughout her spirit writing, Clifton takes it upon herself as a Black American woman living in the 1970s and 1980s to reckon with global atrocities and to take on the work of spiritual healing on a transnational and transhistorical scale.

Mediumistic traditions among African Americans, though indebted to theories of nineteenth-century Spiritualism first devised by white Europeans and Americans, are never divorced from the racialization of the bodies channeling the spirits. As Emily Suzanne Clark argues in her study of the Cercle Harmonique, a group of Afro-Creole spiritualists in nineteenth-century New Orleans, the spirit world can model a social harmony absent from the disequilibriums of the material world, with the spirits typically taking a progressive stance on social issues of the day. However, in Clark's example of a largely educated and affluent group of men of color, these mediums were able to use the language of the Euro-American and Christian tradition of Spiritualism to mask or elide the African influences of their practices, while their woman contemporaries, among them Marie Laveau, were the targets of repressive laws against "voodooism."[94] For women especially, the idea of a post-racial spirit world—as "the Cercle Harmonique believed death was an event that released the spirit and left the raced body on earth"—was particularly at odds with their lived experiences and their spiritual practices.[95] The New Orleans priestess Marie Laveau, a lifelong devoted Catholic and priestess of Afro-diasporic syncretic religion, is a particularly good example of the complex set of influences on Black spiritual practice.[96] Figures like Laveau are a testament to Lucille Clifton's idea that "either/or is not an African tradition. Both/and is tradition."[97] Clifton herself is a practitioner of the both/and, as Rachel Elizabeth Harding argues that she "pushes 'Christian' stories into territory more deeply aligned with indigenous/

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Afro-Atlantic meanings of religion than with Western Christian doctrine and practice."[98]

Indeed, it is impossible to talk about a Black woman's ancestral communication and embodied spirituality without considering Afro-diasporic traditions of possession. Following M. Jacqui Alexander in her characterization of "spiritual work as a kind of body praxis," a consideration of Clifton's spiritual practice as a form of Black feminism requires an attentiveness to the Black woman's body and its specificities.[99] However, incorporating the sacred into feminism requires an acknowledgment that "bodies continue to participate in the social but their raison d'être does not belong there, for ultimately we are not our bodies."[100] Clifton never called herself a Black feminist, and she adopted a very ethereal take on the human body: "The soul survives bodily death, has survived numerous bodily deaths, will survive more. There is some One in each of us greater than the personality we manifest in any life. The soul does not merely select her own society, the soul is her own society. And love is eternal, is God. Is."[101] But the fact that, following Clifton's own theory, her soul has selected this particular era in which to exist is indicative of the particular lessons that being a Black woman can teach. As Toni Cade Bambara, a contemporary of Clifton's and a fellow mystic Black writer, puts it, "This soul is having an adventure in this woman, this body, and we're hanging out, and it's being fun."[102] If a Black woman's soul is her own society, it follows that a soul, not beholden to contingent social constructs like race and gender, has the capacity to change them.

Clifton's 1980 poetry collection, *Two-Headed Woman*, is her first collection to narrate her clairvoyance.[103] It begins, however, not with the story of Clifton's spirit visitations, but with a series of oft-quoted homages to various aspects of her body: "homage to my hair," "homage to my hips," and "what the mirror said," which ends with the exhortation,

listen,
woman,
you not a noplace
anonymous
girl;
mister with his hands on you
he got his hands on
some
damn
body![104]

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This poem both reveals and interrupts the interchangeability of the Black woman's body, as evidenced by the anonymity of "somebody" and the emphatic imposition of an admonitory "damn." Clifton's emphasis on her body in a poetry collection that describes the demands of the spirits is not accidental. In addition to the "mister" of the poem, Clifton asserts the preciousness and integrity of her body in the draining work of spirit communication, although the spirits inform her "your tongue / is useful / not unique."[105] After all, it is her Black woman's body, which has struggled and strained and been found wanting in a variety of times and ways, through which these spirits choose to speak. Even when the spirits speak from a realm in which bodies do not matter, Clifton insists upon the importance of her own embodied experience in the world. Clifton does not disagree with the spirits but supplements their messages with her own body. When read together, Clifton's poetry and her spirit writing represent a woman possessed of the knowledge that race is an imaginary concept with material consequences. And the message borne by the spirits are shaped by the instrument of her body, though the message does not change, just as the same melody can be conveyed by a piano, or a trumpet, or a voice. Race may be earthly, profane, and temporary, but her raced body matters in this realm.[106]

A consideration of Clifton's spirit writing brings new life to readings of her most canonical poems. For example, one of Clifton's most famous poems, *won't you celebrate with me,* takes on special significance in light of her spirit writing. Its famous conclusion—"come celebrate / with me that everyday / something has tried to kill me / and has failed"—takes on a whole new meaning in light of her belief in the deathlessness of spirits in Black bodies.[107] On some of these days, for some Black people, the forces of death appear to prevail. But the energy that was these Black women's truncated lives continues, in Clifton's belief system: "That energy is real, just like this table. Any physicist will tell you that. We don't have to deal with metaphysics about that. So energy doesn't dissolve. Science knows that. So the energy that is those who have left their flesh is still around."[108] When one considers the trials of Clifton's mother's life—afflicted with epilepsy and a philandering husband, dead at forty-four years old—this notion of energy provides some comfort. Thelma Moore's spiritual return as Greta presents a Black woman's soul unbound by the structural misfortunes of her life, which becomes one negative experience among ample possibilities for joy and pleasure.

Though Clifton evinces a kind of optimism about the arc of history swinging toward justice for Black women as they travel on to more fortuitous incarnations, she is also realistic about the spiritual perils of living as a Black

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woman in the Americas. In an untitled poem in *Two Headed Woman*, Clifton describes how the women of her maternal line are polydactyl, born with an extra finger on each hand that is cut off in infancy, because "somebody was afraid we would learn to cast spells / and our wonders were cut off." But those doctors who chose to sever the babies' extra fingers "didn't understand / the powerful memory of ghosts."[109] In an interview, Clifton expresses sadness that her eldest daughter's fingers were severed by the doctor without consent at the time of her birth—"they had hers off by the time I came to. Isn't that awful?"[110] The ghost fingers represent the nonconsensual amputations, physical and spiritual, that Black women are subjected to as a result of being born in this society, a legacy that proves to be intergenerational: "we connect / my dead mother / my live daughter and me / through our terrible shadowy hands."[111] The magical link between mother, daughter, and Clifton does not imply an easy connection. The ghost fingers, which began as "wonders" before they were cut, have in their nonmaterial form become terrible. The ghostly memory has been marred by mutilations to the flesh, and though they are still able to cast a spell of connection between living and dead, that connection becomes a shared memory of severed possibility rather than a shared repertoire of wonders.

Because of the themes of self-possession and body positivity that run throughout her poems, Clifton has a healthy sense of ambivalence about the things the spirits ask her to do with her Black woman's body. In fact, one could say that her ambivalence is produced by her embodied presence as a Black woman. As she points out in *won't you celebrate with me*, the fact that she was "born in babylon / both nonwhite and woman" has fundamentally shaped the kind of life she has led.[112] And yet here are the spirits speaking of a life beyond and devoid of race, and she cannot help but feel the pangs in her own Black woman's body:

> father
> i am not equal to the faith required.
> i doubt.
> i have a woman's certainties;
> bodies pulled from me,
> pushed into me.
> bone flesh is what i know.[113]

Her "woman's certainties" are certainties of the body, certainties about the social roles that being a Black heterosexual mother of six have confined her to. The crisis of faith she experiences is not merely whether the spirits exist

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or that she must share her body with them, but that they do not have bodies in the gendered way she has previously experienced the sharing and opening of her own body. The spirits completely disrupt this insufficient but familiar certainty of penetration and childbirth as the definitive ways a woman can use her body.

Connecting the sexual with the spiritual, Clifton constructs the Virgin Mary as a kind of two-headed woman, negotiating her own ambivalence through this potent metaphor. The figure of the Virgin Mary is a woman holding contradiction in perfect balance, mother and virgin, Black and white, colonizing and colonized. Mary is a spiritual figure who has long since been woven into the fabric of African diaspora religions. In Haiti she is Ezili Freda/Our Lady of Sorrows and Ezili Dantò/the Madonna of Częstochowa; in Cuba she is Ochún/La Virgen del Cobre and Yemayá/La Virgen de Regla. Syncretism is the simplistic term for what is happening here. Mary and her African diasporic twin spirits walk together, conjoined like branches at the same trunk. Clifton uses the figure of the Virgin Mary to express her own ambivalence about her spirit visitation and the both/and nature of her spiritual practice. The Marian cycle of poetry detailing Clifton's visitation was originally published in *Two-Headed Woman*. These poems make up the bulk of the eponymous section of the collection, "Two-Headed Woman," bringing to the Virgin Mary connotations of both duality and spiritual power. Clifton's Mary is "shook by the / awe full affection of the saints"—the double valence of awe full/awful fully operative throughout the Marian cycle.[114] In "island mary," for instance, Clifton depicts an aged Mary perplexed by her own lack of agency:

> could i have walked away when voices
> singing in my sleep? i one old woman.
> always i seem to worrying now for
> another young girl asleep
> in the plain evening.
> what song around her ear?
> what star still choosing?[115]

Mary's conception is written as a violent imposition on a young girl, something that is not unique to Mary but happening even now, to other young women, in different ways. The social burden of proof of Mary's veracity and sanity following her immaculate conception is something Clifton relates to in her own struggle to explain her spiritual practice to others. In the poem "friends come," she describes the way her friends thought she was crazy: "ex-

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plaining to me that my mind / is the obvious assassin."[116] Even the spirits are conscious of the social ostracism that their communications may cause her; as in the case of Langston Hughes, who initially does not want to communicate with her because, as he told her, "Lucille, I do not want your friends to think you are crazy."[117] All to say that the call of the spirits is a burden as well as a gift, constituting a false choice no mortal girl could have walked away from.

The burdens of spiritual communications included a sense of responsibility for the coming catastrophes of the human world, of which Clifton is warned by a group of ethereal spirits she calls "The Ones." Unlike many of the spirits with whom Clifton is in communication, The Ones do not assume the personality of a departed human, and do not weigh in on day-to-day affairs. They speak of things of cosmic importance: the deep past of human civilization (for instance, the origins of Atlantis and demystifications of ancient Egyptian civilization) and its tenuous future. They "return to remind human beings that they are more than flesh."[118] In August and September of 1978, for instance, The Ones imparted to Clifton a series of dire warnings about the fate of the human world:

> If the world continues on its way without the *possibility* [emphasis in original] of God which is the same as saying without Light Love Truth then what does this mean? It means that perhaps a thousand years of mans life on this planet will be without Light Love Truth It is what we were saying indeed that there will be on Earth that place which human beings describe to the world of the spirits Hell Now there is yet time but not very much your generation Lucille is the beginning of the possibility and your girls generation is the middle etc.[119]

Characterized by their mythic tone and liberal use of a royal "we," the refrain of the message from The Ones was, "There are so many confusions so many potential dangers in the world of the Americas." An interesting formulation, given that the fate of the entire world, not just the Americas, seems to be in the balance. Though these spirits may seem to espouse a kind of post-racial universalism, their distinction of "the Americas" as the source of the world's dangers and confusions signals the intertwined histories of slavery, genocide, and environmental degradation that have defined the Americas since 1492. As they tell her, "America is not a country where things sounding right are taken as right," and it is this American resistance to the truth that is destroying the world. Eerily, by the spirits' generational clock, the generation born at the end of the twentieth century marks the end of the possibility of

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avoiding an earth turned to Hell. But in the loneliness of clairvoyance, the burden of saving the world falls disproportionately on Black women. The Ones emphasize their message as a bid for global salvation, exhorting Clifton that "it is also very important that ones who understand the truth not keep the truth to themselves" (August and September 1978). Despite the heaviness and impossibility of this task, Clifton still regards it as a privilege of her incarnation as a Black woman. An untitled poem in *Two-Headed Woman* reads,

> the once and future dead
> who learn they will be white men
> weep for their history. we call it
> rain.[120]

Here Clifton's theory of reincarnation collides with the limitations of the racially stratified "world of the Americas." To be born a white man, despite its material benefits, is here represented as a kind of cosmic misfortune, a sullying of the soul with all the dirty deeds of white men's history. If a soul's incarnation as a white man is cause for weeping, then it follows that a soul's incarnation as a Black woman is cause for something akin to celebration.

In the poem "if something should happen," Clifton describes the revenge water takes when its humanity and life-force are disregarded by the world of the Americas:

> if the seas of cities
> should crash against each other
> and break the chains
> and break the walls holding down the cargo
> and break the sides of the seas
> and all the waters of the earth wash together
> in a rush of breaking
> where will the captains run and
> to what harbor?[121]

In this poem, the living denizens of the city are a sea, connected with the "waters of the earth" in a unified act of purification. Clifton's apocalyptic vision and its prescient connection with rising sea levels predicts early twenty-first-century concerns with climate change, as well as the image of Black women in a world after the collapse of racial capitalism as envisioned by Afrofuturist feminists like Octavia Butler, Adrienne Maree Brown, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs. Perhaps this catastrophe is what was meant by The

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Ones who warned Clifton about the demise of the world. But as in the works of later Afrofuturists, in this poem only the "captains"—those accustomed to floating above the storms while their cargo lies below in chains—will have nowhere to run. In Clifton's eschatology, the human cargo is—miraculously—water-logged and free. The advantage to Clifton's theory of spirit is that it does not succumb to fatalism by assuming that the future is both bleak and unchangeable for the most oppressed of this world. It is "not the end of the world / of a world," and the principles represented by Black womanhood are given the possibility of reincarnation in a different world, on "a star / more distant / than eden."[122]

When women like Clifton and Lorde are excluded from patriarchal definitions of Afrocentricity or included in only ancillary or subordinate roles, they are doubly disenfranchised, deprived of both the past of Blackness and the building of its future. In the words of Oseijeman Adefunmi, the 1970s sought to address the fact that "there is no tragedy which has caused deeper personal conflict in the mind and spirit of the black American than the question of his pre-American origins. Nothing fills the average American born black with more discomfort and embarrassment than discussion about Africa. . . . Briefly stated, 'it is impossible to know where you have been.'"[123] Clifton and Lorde had their own alternative narratives of where we have been that laid the groundwork for a future where Blackness rights, rather than replicates, the wrongs of this violent world of the Americas.

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