

January 2013

Rhetorical Spirits: Spirituality as Rhetorical Device in New Age Womanist of Color Texts

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Rhetorical Spirits: Spirituality as a Rhetorical Device in
New Age Womanists of Color Texts

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:
July 3, 2013

Keywords: Black feminist, African-American, women of color, magara, nommo,

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my father, Ronald, and my mother, Gloria, for comforting, supporting, and loving me from the very beginning. Your guidance brought me into adulthood, and as I continue to grow, I look to you for wisdom and guidance to help me make the best decisions for my future. I love you.

A special acknowledgment goes to Otis. You have been my companion in times of stress and depression. We have survived many things together, and I pray for our success as we continue our lives together. Your love is reflected in all that I do, and I am thankful for having you.

To my family, but especially my wonderful brothers—Michael, Danny, and Ronnie—I adore you and love you. Your approval and support have aided me in all of my success, and as family, we win and lose together. You make me proud, and I know you are proud of me.

To my committee members Dr. Zoetewey and Dr. Jacobs, I must say thank you! Thank you for encouraging me to continue to do what *feels* right, *sounds* right, *is* right for me. Your patience, time, and support have been more than valuable to me, and I hope that this is only the beginning of our work together.

Thank you to my director Dr. Lemons. Your words, smile, courses, recommendations, red pen, have guided me through this chapter of my life. My eyes have been opened to a world that was previously hidden from me. Who I am *can* inspire what I do. You taught me this, and I am eternally grateful for that lesson. Thank you so much.

Finally, thank you to *my* Spirit for speaking, and thank you to *my* heart for listening.

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history African-American women have struggled against oppressions that have stereotyped their identities, scrutinized their character, and ultimately labeled their bodies inferior and inhuman. Despite the debilitating ideologies and barriers African-American women have been forced to operate within, they have fought against these racist, sexist, classist, homophobic environments, crafting their own “new” ethos through writing, as well as entertainment and popular culture. Although Black women remain plagued by history, the New Age of the 1980s as discussed by Akasha Gloria Hull in *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women* seemed to spark a new spirituality amongst African-American women. During this time, they acquired new spiritual practices and beliefs (meditation, chanting, Tarot readings, and following of Eastern religions and medicine), and deeper spiritual connections with their pasts (including their ancestors). These new forms of enlightenment quickly became a major part of many Black women’s public and private identities. Hull notices that these new “spiritually-inspired” practices simultaneously became integrated into African-American women writer’s, such as Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Susan L. Taylor and more, literature produced in the late 1970s and 1980s, resulting in a surge of three-dimensional writing that Hull says is political, creative, and spiritual.

Drawing from Hull’s findings, I respond to a need within African-American rhetoric(s) for more research on the use of *nommo* (the word) and *magara* (the spirit) as rhetorical figures within African-American discourse. Although *nommo* is commonly recognized as an essential part of African-American discourse, *magara* (the spiritual force within the word) has been less discussed as a rhetorical device. I believe that this has to do with the controversial nature of spirituality within our culture, especially within the academy and social politics. To recognize the importance of ‘the spirit’ within Black women’s practices, I turn to a particular way of understanding—womanist thought—which embraces the spiritualization of the everyday, as

well as African philosophy, which recognizes the inherent spiritual power of language, as background sources to my claim that African-American women use spirituality as a rhetorical device within their writing. Then, using a variation of Kenneth Burke's cluster-agon method developed by Carol A. Berthold, I analyze three 1980s womanist texts: *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Women of Color*, *Sister Outsider*, and *The Color Purple*. Through this analysis, I locate a womanist of color rhetoric during the late 1970s and 1980s New Age movement.

CHAPTER 1: ESTABLISHING BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCING KEY CONCEPTS

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, “beautiful/and tough as chestnut/stanchions against (y)our nightmare of weakness/” and of impotence.

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.

“Poetry Is Not a Luxury” from *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde

For many Black women, spirituality is a reserve of power within their everyday lives. The Spirit is a source of strength, resistance, and survival as Black women combat the daily challenges of living in a White supremacist, patriarchal, classist, heterosexist society. As discussed in the quote above by Audre Lorde, women (and all human-beings) have an ancient power living within themselves, and for many, this power remains untapped. This ancient, spiritual-force is described by Lorde throughout *Sister Outsider* as unknown, chaotic, erotic, Black and female, which makes it not only powerful, but incredibly dangerous. Although we *all* have this power, only some, particularly many Black women and women of color, are willing (required) to release this hidden “spirit.” As an African-American woman, I believe that spirituality is filtered into women of color’s ways of seeing and acting within our everyday environments, becoming a rhetorical tool for analyzing, understanding, and changing our worlds. Although this use of spirituality as a rhetorical device is not exclusive to women of color, I believe that by focusing on one of the most ignored, silenced, and omitted groups of people within society is a good place to begin to understand the mystery and power of spirituality.

Black women's writing across genres has a tradition of incorporating spirituality to influence differing audiences. Recent studies on Black women's literacy practices and rhetoric (Logan 1995, Logan 1999, Royster 2000, Stover 2003, and Richardson 2003) tend to focus on Black women writers composing within narrow frameworks. For example, in *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*, Jacqueline Jones Royster chose to focus her study on a distinct group of black women—the elites—writing in a specific genre—the essay—during a particular period—the nineteenth century. Royster's careful and deliberate framework for analysis allowed her to present multiple perspectives, or what she calls kaleidoscopic views, of African-American women as literate and socially motivating human beings. Similarly, Shirley Wilson Logan (*We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women*) and Johnnie Stover, author of *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography*, also focus on the rhetorical practices of nineteenth century black women public speakers and writers, respectively. This narrowing by Logan and Stover allowed them to present the multiple factors that contributed to and hindered black women's writing during the nineteenth century, as these women appealed to mixed audiences while simultaneously resisting oppression and debilitating stereotypes. These studies, although limited to a particular century of black women's literature, provide insight into the multiple and complex environments within which Black women use literacy, while also describing how social, cultural, and political factors influence Black women's ethos and social activism. Most importantly, within these early explorations of Black women's literacies, there is an acknowledgement of Black women's use of spirituality to appeal to various audiences, and this recognition of spirituality as a rhetorical tool is typically coupled (both explicitly and implicitly) with womanist thought.

In 1983, Alice Walker coined the term “womanist” in her collection of essays titled *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. Within her definition, Walker identifies four different, yet intersecting, descriptions of womanist:

Womanist 1. From womanish (Opposite of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.)
A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous,

audacious, courageous, or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.”

Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker)

Walker’s definition is wrapped in complexity and serves multiple purposes, including establishing a historical lineage for the term, promoting a more inclusive political stance that separates womanism from traditional notions of feminism associated with white, middle-class, heterosexual women, and introducing significant characteristics of womanist behavior. As discussed by Gwendolyn Pough in her essay “Each One, Pull One”: “Womanist Rhetoric and Black Feminist Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom,” Walker’s coinage of the term womanist was a provocative act of reclaiming, as well as activism. Pough says, “She is reclaiming a word once used to admonish young black girls for speaking up for themselves and defining a way of being that values women of color and the unique stance they bring to feminist thought” (66).

In the second definition, Walker, as Pough says, “takes back” this term for black girls, black women, and women of color as Walker transforms the phrase that critiques ambitious, overly zealous little black girls behaviors (“acting womanish”) into a term that symbolizes survival, acceptance/inclusion, power—and most importantly—love (“a woman who loves other women”). For Walker, her (re)defining of the term womanist is not a (re)placement or erasure of the original, but an addition/continuation understood by her use of the word “Also” at the beginning of definition 2. Within this second level Walker opens up her definition to include “all people.” A womanist is “committed to the survival” of *everyone*, which must be accomplished through her “emotional flexibility and strength.” This same commitment to “all people” is probably why Walker includes her distinction between womanist and feminist in definition 4. Feminism, as defined by Walker and others, like bell hooks in “Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression,” “is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all of our lives” (240). It is the ending of *all* oppressions.

A key component of Walker’s definition of womanist is in definition part 3 where she poetically identifies the major concerns, or loves, of womanists. Each “love” is embedded with multiplicity and complexity, but for the purpose of this chapter, I would like to focus on Walker’s emphasis on womanists’ “*Love* [for] the Spirit.” According to Layli Phillips, editor of *The Womanist Reader*, womanism has been used across genres, disciplines, and political, social, and cultural groups, yet there are five overarching characteristics of womanism. For the most part, womanist thought is 1) anti-oppressionist, 2) vernacular, 3) non-ideological, 4) communitarian, and 5) spiritualized (Phillips xxiv). In terms of spirituality, womanists do not separate spirituality from society, culture, or politics, instead they view all realms of life as interconnected. Womanists’ *love* for the Spirit differs from academic and ideological perspectives which oftentimes ignore spirituality. Womanists’ belief in, and use of, spirituality within their literacy practices, communication, and rhetoric make their form of thought controversial, yet potentially powerful as Black women (and other womanists of color) tap into their dark and ancient spiritual power.

The following chapters consider spirituality as a point of inquiry for understanding Black womanists' ethos, activism, and rhetoric. Although ancient, dark, and rarely publically explored, spirituality has gradually become integrated into Black women's literacy and everyday lives, making it a key component of their literature. Since spirituality is integrated into Black women's everyday lives—their politics, creativity, music, cooking, mothering, etc.—I believe exploration of spirituality as power has the potential to affect *all* people and *all* aspects of society. Throughout these chapters, I will first focus on the recent surge of spirituality within Black womanist literature during the New Age era, a time of spiritual vision for individuals and also within a variety of disciplines, like religion, science, and medicine, where there was a movement away from “old material paradigms [towards] expansive spiritually based possibilities” (Hull 23). Although the New Age meant heightened interests in spirituality for all types of people, for African-American women in particular, the late 1970s and 1980s was a crucial time period where they began to recover from decades of silencing, especially within both the Civil Rights and feminist movements. Spirituality brought with it both awareness and wholeness for these women, and with a deeper power resonating inside of them, Black women began to speak—loudly, proudly, continuously.

The plethora of spiritual literature that was the product of this New Age moment also greatly impacted Black women's ethos. Throughout history Black women have been marked as inferior, inhuman, lascivious, asexual, bitches, whores, mummies, super women, and sapphires, but the New Age inspired a new image of Black women as spiritually enlightened, whole, human, and Black/African descendants (queens) women. Chapter 2 will address the changing ethos of Black women during the 1980s into present day, and how this new ethos is deeply influenced by spirituality. Chapter 3 turns to analysis of some of the ground-breaking texts of New Age Black womanists, including *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Women of Color* edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Through cluster-agon analysis, I begin to locate the reoccurring themes, concepts, and trends within Black women's New Age literature and to better understand Black and other womanist of color's rhetoric during this socially transformative time period.

Introducing the New Age and Womanist Thought

In this critical New Age, what many African American women model is a spirituality that can help us all to learn in good time how to love our collective self and vivify the planet so that we can be part of the universe, and it, in turn, can inhabit us.

Akasha Gloria Hull, *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women*

Throughout history African-American women have struggled against oppressions that have stereotyped their identities, scrutinized their character, and ultimately labeled their bodies inferior and inhuman. African-American women have served as fighters of oppression, carving out new spaces for themselves while bridging their intersecting identities. The New Age, as discussed by Hull in *Soul Talk*, is a perfect example of how African-American women living within the debilitating barriers of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia created new strategies and spiritual spaces for resistance, survival, and love (for themselves and others). This movement for African-American women was inevitable and necessary, especially after the decades of silence and invisibility imposed on these women during both the Civil Rights movement and the first wave of the feminist movement.

African-American women's allegiance to both social movements often meant partial sacrifice of their identities as they were forced to choose between race and gender. Within the Civil Rights movement, race was the primary concern of Black nationalists. Overshadowed by sexist views and gender roles placing women as the weaker, inferior sex, Black women were advised and forced to fight for their racial rights, while simultaneously suffering under sexism. Similarly, traditional feminist movements did provide opportunities for African-American women to speak-up and act-out against sexism within society, but these feminist movements, dominated by predominately middle-class, White women, lacked understanding of racial and class politics that greatly affected Black women. The feminist movement's refusal to acknowledge how race, class, and gender influenced African-American women's everyday lives left limited room for African-American women to have a voice within these movements, as well. Towards the end of the 1970s both the Civil Rights and feminist movements began to lose steam, and there was a need for a new form of social

action. This marked the perfect time for African-American women to finally speak (and shout!), and when they began to speak, a chorus of voices rang out.

Within literature particularly, the New Age brought with it powerful African-American female voices including Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Susan L. Taylor, Audre Lorde, Octavia Butler, and many more. From the late 1970s to the 1980s and into the 1990s, African-American women began to discuss their intersecting oppressions and their plans for social action and change. One major product of the New Age that inspired a new way of thinking where race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect, as well as the intersection of spirituality, politics, and creativity, was womanist thought. As discussed by Phillips, womanism has several origins, including Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983), Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English" (1985), and Clenora Hudson-Weem's *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (1994). All three women produced their own versions of the same concept which creates spaces outside of White supremacists, patriarchal, middle-class, hetero-normative, Western ideologies. Phillips, relying primarily on the works of Walker, defines womanism as:

...a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension.
(Phillips xx)

From this definition by Phillips, along with Walker's definition from *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, it is clear that womanist thought is extremely complex as it attempts to acknowledge the voices of Black women and women of color without denying the voices of others. Womanist thought is not about shifting power structures in Black women's favor, but about balance, order, and equality for all people. Unlike Black nationalism and traditional forms of feminism, womanism does not privilege any identity over another. Instead, all people deserve equal acknowledgement, concern, and action. Finally, since Black women see their

political concerns and social action directly related to their everyday experiences, womanist thought is dominated by everyday life which includes Black women's roles as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, lovers, and—most importantly—spiritual-beings. As previously mentioned, Phillips identifies “spiritualization” as a theme of womanism, which refers to the idea that “[...] womanism openly acknowledges a spiritual/transcendental realm with which human life, living-kind, and the material world are all intertwined” (xxvi). Terms like AnaLouise Keatings “spiritual politics,” Akasha Gloria Hull’s “spiritual consciousness,” Toni Cade Bamabara’s “spiritual wisdom,” and Audre Lorde’s “dark power,” all represent this intersection of spirituality with creativity, politics, and social awareness and action.

Of course this “spiritualization of everything” has been met with criticism. Social politics (especially surrounding civil rights) and the academy do not readily embrace spirituality, and it is often confused or conflated with religion. According to Hull, this new spirituality brought upon by the New Age did involve African-American women's heightened involvement with traditional religions, like Christianity, but African-American women also began to incorporate other forms of spirituality including Tarot cards, Eastern religions and medicine, and ancestral reverence into their everyday experiences, political awareness, and social action. For these women, spirituality, unlike religion, allowed for broader and more inclusive consciousness creating a demand for various explorations (sacred/secular) of the divine (Hull 40). This embrace of spirituality provided an opportunity for African-American women to rebuild their identities and spaces internally, from within that ancient, dark, female, non-rational place that had been kept silenced for so long. This new power arising out of their words had the potential to transform their ethos, influence their social activism, and change their (and everybody else's) worlds.

Establishing Magara (Spirit) as Rhetorical Power

Scholars studying African-American rhetoric(s) have made strides to move beyond Eurocentric perspectives on history, rhetoric, and communication by creating new models for understanding African-American and Black discourses (Asante, Smitherman, Jackson II). As previously stated, attempts at focusing on African-American women exclusively have added to our understanding of Black female literacies and

rhetorical practices, but there are limited studies on how Black women's everyday practices and beliefs are integrated into their social action and ethos. I believe that wedged within the gap between womanist thought and African-American rhetoric(s) there is an abyss of knowledge about Black/African-American womanists' rhetorics. Both areas of inquiry acknowledge the importance of spirituality within African-American/Black and womanist consciousness, but neither focus on how spirituality may directly impact and influence Black women's rhetorical, discursive, and literacy practices.

The previous section acknowledged spirituality as an overarching theme in womanist thought, but to understand a Black/African-American womanist rhetoric, one must also consider how spirituality is imbedded within African-American/Black cultures and traditions. Within African-American rhetoric(s) scholarship, there has been a resurrection of ancient African texts, cultures, religions, and philosophies in an effort to reclaim histories and traditions that influence current African-American/Black practices. Concepts within African philosophy (also known as *Ntu*) are readily identified as contributors to current African-American discourse and are often mentioned as rhetorical devices within African-American rhetoric(s). These concepts include *nommo*—the generative power of the word—and *magara*—the spiritual life-force within the word. Both terms work to explain African-American traditions of communication that stemmed from African cultures where oral speaking and storytelling via *griots* (African storytellers) were primary practices for communicating, preserving history, teaching, and persuading (Banks-Wallace, 412).

Within African cultures, humans possessed the ultimate force, i.e. the word (*nommo*). As discussed by Janheinz Jahn in his book *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*, the universal force (*Ntu*) is composed of four separate, yet interconnected forces. These forces include *Muntu* (human-being), *Kintu* (thing), *Hantu* (place and time), and *Kuntu* (modality). As previously mention, *Muntu* (humans) are the most powerful of all the forces because of their inner possession of the word and their ability to use this word-power to call the other forces to action. In its entirety, *nommo* is a life-force, “a unity of spiritual-physical fluidity, giving life to everything, penetrating everything, causing everything” (Jahn 124). Within African philosophy, human origin is a double process consisting of a biological-life (*buṛima*) and a spiritual-life

(magara). All things (humans, animals, plants, etc.) have a biological-life, a body (*buzima*), but only Muntu (which includes human-beings who are alive and deceased) have a spiritual-life (*magara*) (107). Since *magara* works within the word, and physically binds it to the body, a person's ability to tap into their own spirituality and invoke the spiritual-power of their ancestors and other spirits, simultaneously strengthens both their spiritual power (*magara*) and word power (*nommo*). Within African tradition, spirituality is not only an overarching theme, but an essential characteristic of human-life.

In this sense, Afrocentric perspectives of rhetoric obviously differ from Eurocentric views. This is especially true when considering the function of "the word" and its position as either external to the rhetorician (i.e. power the rhetor uses to persuade/move others), or internal to the rhetor, (i.e. power acting within the rhetor causing action between rhetor and others). In "Toward an Afrocentric Methodology for the Critical Assessment of Rhetoric," Ronald Jackson II discusses this distinction between a European rhetor and an African-American rhetor based on their differences in methodologies. In his description of Eurocentric rhetoric, Jackson says, "The word, in the [E]urocentric tradition is often externalized. This is similar to a basic sentence with a subject, verb, and object. In the [E]urocentric enterprise, the subject is the speaker, the verb is the message, and the object is the audience. The word is held constant, so that it can be controlled" (155). Referring to Richard Wright's "The Exploration into the Power of Words," Jackson asserts that once the word is held constant, the rhetor then has the ability to ultimately predict the audience's behavior, allowing the rhetor to pick and choose what language will be most persuasive for a particular audience (155). On the other hand, the Afrocentric tradition "seeks to internalize meaning through the word, which requires meeting the audience on a deeper, more spiritual level" (155). From this perspective, the word=subject, the speaker=verb (carrier of message), and the audience=object; this fusion of body and word through "deep, spiritual-force" allows for the word to create a communal space between rhetor and audience as both parties contribute their views, syntheses, and antitheses to the discourse. Afrocentric rhetoric focuses less on using the word to predict one possible action or solution, and more on allowing the power of the word to produce multiple possibilities for social change and ways of thinking for both rhetor and audience.

'Speaking in Tongues': a Black Womanist Discursive Practice

Throughout the history of Afrocentric scholarship there has been an interest in studying the unique discourses of African descendants. Scholars like Geneva Smitherman (1977, 1986) and Molefi Asante (1971, 1972) have produced ground-breaking texts that have shifted perspectives on what constitutes rhetoric and communication within Black language. Smitherman's works have identified Black modes of discourse using linguistic methods, while Asante has fathered an entire African-centered rhetorical movement called Afrocentricity, a tradition that "intends to expand the repertoire of human perspectives on knowledge" (qtd. in Jackson 150) via African-centered perspectives. These scholars and others have broadened the parameters of rhetoric and communication, creating spaces for alternative perspectives. Recent work by Elaine Richardson (2003) on African American literacies has followed in both Smitherman and Asante's footsteps. Richardson identifies debilitating factors within the American school system that contribute to African-American students' poor performance within writing classrooms, including the limited value attributed to the knowledge African-American students bring with them into writing classrooms, especially their languages (AAVE). Other works by Richardson (2002) and other scholars do exclusively focus on Black females' literacy practices, but these studies tend to draw from agreed upon rhetorical strategies and modes of discourse within Afrocentric rhetoric. In his model for an Afrocentric methodology, Ronald Jackson II identifies eight elements that can be identified within Black/African-American discourse: rhythm, soundin', stylin', improvisation, storytelling, lyrical code, image making, and call and response. Although it is important to recognize these elements and how they work within Black women's discourse, there is limited scholarship, even within Afrocentric rhetoric, that discusses how spirituality functions as a rhetorical device.

Black womanist rhetoric is a unique take on Afrocentric rhetoric where spirituality and the power of the word are easily recognized as rhetorical devices within their discourses. Black women, especially Black womanist writers, have been recognized for their unique abilities to talk across difference because of their acceptance of—and refusal to deny—the multiplicity of their identities. As discussed by Mae G. Henderson in "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literacy Tradition," Black

women's discourses are dominated by Black women's unique subjectivity which permits them to speak across social domains using multiple voices. She terms this discursive practice 'speaking in tongues,' also known as *glossolalia*. According to Henderson, 'speaking in tongues' as a practice is associated with Black women in the Pentecostal Holiness church, where it is recognized as a sign of holiness ("Speaking in Tongues"). The term holds at least two connotations, but the most popular "emphasizes the particular, private, closed, and privileged communication between the congregant and the divinity. Inaccessible to the general congregation, this mode of communication is outside the realm of the public discourse and foreign to the known tongue of humankind" ("Speaking in Tongues"). In this sense, 'speaking in tongues' means the private exchange of words between the spiritual person and the Holy Spirit using unrecognizable, sacred language.

If 'speaking in tongues,' or glossolalia, is recognized as a discursive practice of Black women, then there is a clear relationship between Black womanists' ways of communicating and the rhetorical devices *magara* and *nommo*. Glossolalia as described by Henderson is essentially a version of *nommo-force*, where the spiritual-power within the word is only generated between the rhetor and the Spirit (or spirits). This communication is incomprehensible to others; therefore, it does not arouse others to action, instead it influences the rhetor because through this divine interaction the rhetor's spiritual (*magara*) power (and therefore *nommo*) is strengthened. According to Jahn, everyone is born with *magara*, but it is through spirituality (honor, prayer, sacrifice) that *magara* (life) is strengthened both in the individual and the spirits in which she speaks to (Jahn 111). But how can a Black womanist be a rhetorician if her discursive practices are only limited to speaking to higher powers?

Fortunately, Henderson offers a second connotation to 'speaking in tongues,' which she labels as *heteroglossia*, "the ability to speak in diverse known languages" ("Speaking in Tongues"). After postulating her history of 'speaking of tongues' within Christian scripture, Henderson ultimately proposes a "critical fiction" where Black women writers are essentially "modern day apostles, empowered by experience to speak as poets and prophets in many tongues" ("Speaking in Tongues"). With this ability, Black women are capable of invoking their inner, private spiritual (*magara*) power (knowledge) through glossolalia, and then they

communicate that knowledge to others via multiple languages (nommo). This version of ‘speaking in tongues’ explains how Black womanist writers like Audre Lorde and Alice Walker are able to claim their complex identities and then, as rhetors, speak about oppression in a way that extends their concerns across conflicting identities. For example, Lorde’s call (quoted in the introduction) for women to reclaim their ancient power does not negate her desire for Black people and lesbians to do the same. The strength of her word-power is so strong that it resonates with readers, whether they are women, or not. Lorde says women specifically, but her language—her tongue—can be heard by all, resulting in more than just women being moved by her dark (magara) power.

This unique combination of word, spirit, and domain/space, makes Black women’s text an interesting, and complex, site for studying Black womanist rhetoric. As described above, Black womanists’ rhetoric(s) are rooted in two separate traditions: womanist thought and Afrocentric rhetorical traditions. When evaluated separately, both points of inquiry provide insight into Black womanists’ literacy and rhetorical practices, but there is still a gap. By looking at Black women as both rhetoricians and womanists at the same time, there is possible insight into their discursive practices. These practices inevitably are reflected in Black womanists’ literacy practices and provide insight into a Black womanist rhetoric.

CHAPTER 2: STEREOTYPES, CONTROLLING IMAGES, AND BLACK WOMEN'S ETHOS

...No matter how backward and negative mainstream view and image of Black people, I feel compelled to reshape the image and to explore our many positive angles because I love my own people. Perhaps this is because I have been blessed with spiritual African eyes at a time when most Africans have had their eyes poked out...So, like most ghetto girls who haven't yet been turned into money-hungry heartless bitches by a godless money centered world, I have a problem: I love hard. Maybe too hard. Or maybe it's too hard for a people without structure—structure in the sense of knowing what African womanhood is. What does it mean? What is it supposed to do to you and for you?

-Sister Souljah (qtd. in. "To Protect and Serve: African American Female Literacies")

I grew-up in an all-White town. I went to a predominately White school, and most of my friends were White throughout my childhood. As a little girl, most of the images I saw of Black people, especially Black women, came from my relationships with my immediate and extended family, as well as representations of Black women on television. The women in my family are all unique, but each shares the quality of a sharp mind and even sharper tongue. They are fighters with reputations for having low tolerance for disrespect, inequality, and ignorance, and they are known for "turning out" when necessary. Some have voices that are calm and sweet, while others seem to boom, striking the air like thunder. They all laugh hard, joke, and tell stories. Some women cook, and some don't, but all of us eat no matter who's cooking. Each woman has their own style, their own skin-color, their own smile, their own hair texture, and their own picture of perfection. With all their differences, I see these women as mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, friends, confidants, lovers, caregivers, providers, warriors, and survivors. They were (and still are) the images of Black women that I saw when I closed my eyes.

Unfortunately, the media rarely sees what I see, or show similar experiences of what I have had with Black women. American culture and society has rarely placed a stamp of approval on Black women, contributing to the negative images of Black women that blast across television screens every day. At the same time I was learning about what it meant to be a Black woman from family, popular culture was showing me something different. Mostly through music, I remember seeing Black women who were sassy, finger-popping, neck-rolling, ‘no disrespect,’ rebel girls like TLC, Escape, Aaliyah, and Queen Latifah. They wore androgynous clothing, typically opting for baggy jeans and Timberland boots, rather than short skirts and high heels. Although tough, these women were also powerful as they used their music to advocate for positive treatment of Black women and Black female pride, while using their public images to address social issues like HIV/AIDS, poverty, and domestic violence.

On the other hand, while Queen Latifah’s lyrics “U.N.I.T.Y., you gotta let them know, you ain’t a bitch or a hoe” rang in my headphones, I simultaneously saw images of Black women in skimpy clothing, bent over and gyrating to fast pace, hard beat, sexually explicit, misogynic rap music by artists like Uncle Luke, 2 Live Crew, and Sir Mix A lot. As a child, I became confused by what I saw at home versus what was on my TV. Were Black women warriors and queens, or hoochies and bitches?

As an adolescent and young adult, I began to develop my own identity as a Black woman, always cautious about how my actions placed me on either side of the warrior-queen/hoochie-bitch dichotomy. Up until that time in my life, race and gender were my primary identifiers, with heterosexuality being the only recognized sexuality to me at the time. As I grew older and my life became more expensive, I also recognized the role class (socioeconomic status) played in my identity and my future. This realization brought to light other images of Black women that I had previously ignored. Although the saying “you can be what you want to be” was the anthem of my youth, from my experience with others and the images within society, I only saw Black women as one or more of the following images: teen mom, single mother, video girl/ vixen, “wife,” or professional woman.

Through my eyes, Black women who were teen moms were more than likely to also be single mothers. They had the potential to be strong figures in their children’s lives, but would probably struggle

financially, falling into a life of poverty. They may receive support from their families—perhaps their mother and/or the father of their child—but the help would be minimal and definitely not enough to allow them to balance their old dreams with her new responsibilities. On the other hand, just as young Black males my age may have seen playing sports or becoming a rapper as the only alternative to selling drugs and going to prison, becoming a video girl/vixen seemed like an alternative route for Black females. Posing in magazines, dancing in videos, and becoming the object of a man’s sexual desires seemed to offer Black women financial mobility, as well as possible opportunities to reach their actual goals of becoming actresses, models, entertainers, and most importantly, financially secure. The video girl image seemed to come with great sacrifice and unpredictable outcomes, but for those willing to take the risk, it definitely meant for an interesting life. A similar image, the “wife” image, was also depicted as an alternative to poverty. She was a beautiful Black woman who intentionally elicits wealthy men to heighten her socioeconomic status. She is most commonly associated with the “gold-digger” image, but with the increased attention on Black women as wives of athletes, doctors, and other professional men—see reality shows like *Basketball Wives*, *Married to Medicine*, and *Real Housewives*—the term “wife” may be most appropriate for this image at this moment in time. With their new wealth, some “wives” may have to sacrifice their own professional goals and personal aspirations for more traditional female gender roles that conflict with their identities as Black women. The final image is the professional Black woman, an educated, independent and successful woman. Despite these qualities, her assertiveness and power makes her less attractive than other women to men, especially Black men who see her financial security and independence as emasculating. Ultimately, the professional Black woman was a model image in many ways, but her likelihood of being unmarried, childless, and lonely still made her less than ideal.

Perhaps, there are nuggets of reality buried deep within some images of Black women, but they could not possibly be accurate reflections of Black women’s realities. And yet, they still exist, influencing society’s thoughts and treatment of Black women while simultaneously destroying Black women’s ethos. As both public figures and everyday people, Black women have to cope with stereotypes and controlling images that label them as inferior, as inhuman, as others. The weakness of these images is their obsession with labeling

Black women's bodies. Naming what one sees on the outside, as opposed to what one knows from experience, make controlling images fragile to more authentic depictions of Black women. When given the opportunity to speak their own realities, most Black women's versions of these images are much different because they refer not to what they see, but what they know. Instead of viewing Black women from the outside (as objects), there should be more attention on who Black women are within themselves (as subjects). Not everyone is blessed with "spiritual African eyes" like Sister Souljah that allow them to see the truths/souls of Black women, but everyone has the ability to "love hard." Loving hard requires reevaluation of these controlling images, and redefining Black women from within. Loving hard means paying attention to the affects these controlling images have on Black women's everyday lives and experiences. Loving hard means building new structures for redefining Black womanhood when the current structures are inadequate, or do not exist.

This chapter examines primary controlling images, their histories, functions, and continuing existence within U.S. society. It also puts into question how these images may influence Black women's *ethos* (credibility, authority, and moral character) and how Black women resist these images by crafting their own definitions of ethos. Finally, it offers spirituality as a new structure for redefining Black women's images and ethos. By focusing on how spirituality functions as a rhetorical device with Black women's everyday lives, one can understand how they become subjects with their own identities, histories, and definitions of self.

Binary Thinking and the Function of Black Female Images

In *Reflections on Science and Gender* Evelyn Fox Keller combines feminist and social studies of science theory to create a feminist perspective on science, a gender/science system that examines the conceptual and social dichotomies (public/private, masculine/feminine, objective/subjective, power/love), associations, disjunctions, and ideologies that inform constructions of society, including men and women and nature and science (8). This evaluation of binary thinking allowed her to re-conceptualize women's relationship with science, while attempting to explain the masculinization of science and the exclusion of women from the field. Patricia Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* uses this same concept of binary thinking, where people,

things, and ideas are categorized according to their difference from one another (77), to explain the objectification of Black women as the “Others” within society. Within binary thought, oppositional terms are paired. To understand what something is, one refers to what it is not, i.e. its opposite. In this sense, Collins, like Keller, argues that one side of the binary will always be labeled inferior, or other. She says, “Objectification is central to this process of oppositional difference. In binary thinking, one element is objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled” (77-78). Objectifying one side of a binary—male/female, White/Black, rich/poor, science/nature, reason/emotion—is a strategic power-move that will always place the objectified into a subordinate position (78).

Black feminist thought and womanist thought recognize how intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality influence Black women’s experiences, including excessive objectification which leads to subordination. By referring to binary thinking, one can see how simply identifying as a Black woman easily labels that woman as inferior since both Black and female are recognized as the lesser counterparts to White and male in a White supremacist, patriarchal society. Include socioeconomic status, sexuality, age, disabilities, and Black women’s plunge into otherness continues. Collins says, “African-American women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of these binaries converge, and this placement has been central to [Black women’s] subordination” (79). As society’s “Others,” Black women have been depicted as the ultimate objects that are only defined by their relationships with actual subjects (qtd. in Collins 78). Although binary thinking provides a system to explain why Black women are constantly on the bottom of social hierarchies, controlling images provide visuals and reasoning for Black women’s oppression, making them responsible for their own ill treatment.

Understanding stereotypes and controlling images of Black women is essential to understanding a Black womanist rhetoric(s), especially because these images may influence Black women’s credibility, authority, and perceived character—*ethos*. Many images of Black women have a long history, originating prior to the Atlantic-slave trade into the slavery era and continuing into present day. As these stereotypes and images became embedded into society and culture, contemporary versions and offspring of accepted images like mammy, matriarch, jezebel, and sapphire further contribute to the decimation of Black women’s ethos.

Collins' chapter "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images" identifies and traces three primary images of U.S. Black women: mammy, matriarch, and jezebel. Collins describes the mammy figure as follows:

The first controlling image applied to U.S. Black women is the mammy—the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behavior. (Collins 80)

According to Collins, mammy is hard-working and has complete devotion to her White family, nurtures and cares for her White children, and accepts her role as the ultimate subordinate to the White male (80). Her acceptance of her subordination is what makes her a "good" Black woman, and therefore, the ideal Black woman. On the other hand, Collins situates the matriarch figure as the "bad" Black mother who works away from home like the mammy figure, but challenges racial and gender roles:

As overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands. These men, understandably, either deserted their partners or refused to marry the mothers of their children. From the dominant group's perspective, the matriarch represented a failed mammy, a negative stigma to be applied to African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant. (Collins 83)

Images like the matriarch have been, and continue to be, detrimental to African-American women's moral character. As the heads of households these women were responsible for the well-being of their children. With limited access to higher wages and the absence of financial support from male partners, Black women were more prone to poverty. By the 1960s, the significance of extended families within Black communities had evaporated and more single Black mothers were raising their children alone. Labeled as the cause of their children's poor school performance (and future poverty), destroyers of the Black family unit, and challengers to "true" womanhood, the matriarch and her "bad," disobedient behavior became the cause of everything wrong with American society, especially Black communities.

The final image addressed by Collins—the jezebel—refers to Black women as sexually aggressive, lascivious, wenches and wet nurses. According to Collins the function of this image was to “relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women” (89). Again, Black women are to blame for their mistreatment, and their label as “Other” within a binary system gives them limited abilities to resist oppression. Although the jezebel image more obviously focuses on Black women’s sexuality, Collins links all three images to contributing messages about Black women’s sexuality, fertility, and social class (92). Since these images of Black womanhood are defined by “true” White womanhood, which values characteristics including piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, it is impossible for Black women with their intersecting race, gender, class, and sexuality identities/issues/oppressions to ever meet such standards. Mammy, matriarch, and jezebel remain controlling images because they have no counterparts that represent Black women as human subjects. Unfortunately, as the next section will discuss, these primary images are still present within contemporary society and have evolved into modern versions, hybrids, and off-spring that continue to undermine Black women’s ethos.

New Age and New Images of Black Women

For Black women and Black communities, the late 1970s and 1980s marked the beginning of a huge transition within U.S. society. With the expansion of social welfare and additional government assistance, such as Social Security, unemployment compensation, voting rights, affirmative action, access to federal loans and scholarships for higher education, and minimum wage, African Americans were finally gaining access to basic economic and political protections and rights (Collins 86). From one perspective, the 1980s should have been an operative time for Black people, allowing them to acquire better jobs, become financially secure, and attain better education for themselves and their children. Although some African-Americans did benefit from these much needed citizenship rights, the 1980s also brought with it increased globalization and deindustrialization processes including a decrease in manufacturing and agricultural jobs, job export, and de-

skilling of jobs. Unfortunately, this transition to *cheaper*, cheap labor left many Blacks, especially Black men, without jobs (Collins 86-87).

As inner-city ghettos became populated by African-Americans, poverty struck Black communities hard. Most Black working-class women became sole financial providers of their households; the tradition of Black female domestic work had not died, allowing Black women to find domestic jobs easily, despite the low wages. Black males had greater difficulty finding employment, and many Black men turned to selling drugs as a way to make a living. By 1982, President Reagan launched a “war on drugs” in response to the increased amounts of crack cocaine on inner-city streets. Although the War on Drugs may have been in response to the sudden increase of crack cocaine on Black streets, according to Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, the President announced the drug war “*before* crack became an issue in the media or a crisis in poor black neighborhoods” (5 my emphasis). Alexander’s claims about the spread of crack cocaine in cities like Los Angeles occurring years after the drug war was declared, follows with conspiracy theories that suggest that “the War on Drugs was part of a genocidal plan by the government to destroy black people in the United States” (Alexander 5). Although I do not wish to debate the causes of rapid increases of cocaine in Black neighborhoods, it is important to consider how media portrayals of Black women (and men) in the 1980s were products of increased poverty in Black communities.

Racial stereotypes that emerged out of the War on Drugs era, included “crack dealer,” “crack whore,” and “crack babies.” These interconnected stereotypes worked together to paint a picture of the “crack epidemic” that was taking place in 1980s and 1990s inner-cities. Black men who could not find legitimate, well-paying jobs began selling drugs, primarily crack cocaine (crack dealers). The consumers of these drugs included poor Black women, who became so addicted to the drug that they would sell their bodies for money to purchase cocaine, or would receive the drug as compensation for sexual acts. As a modern version of the jezebel image, the crack whore image represented the Black woman with not only an insatiable appetite for sex, but also for consuming drugs. To continue the stereotypical myth, the results of her addictions to both sex and drugs included pregnancy, which ultimately led to “crack babies,” infants who supposedly have been so exposed to crack as fetuses that they are addicted to the substance and more prone

to disabilities. Decades later, Alexander and others describe these racial stereotypes and myths as a part of a political media campaign to illicit legislative and public support for the “War on Drugs” and the new penal system that would eventually incarcerate an astonishing amount of black and brown men (Alexander 5), while simultaneously creating new controlling images of poor minority male and female bodies.

Another image of Black women that came out of this era of extreme poverty within Black communities was the welfare mother. As a variation of both the matriarch and the mammy images, Collins describes the welfare mother image as an unaggressive “bad mother,” who’s accessibility is seen as a problem. She is “content [at sitting] around and [collecting] welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring” (87). Proliferation of this image in the 1980s was coupled with republican administration that cut funding for social welfare programs that supported those in poverty. Collins says, “With high levels of Black poverty, welfare state policies supporting poor Black mothers and their children [had] become increasingly expensive” (87). Instead of taking responsibility for financial cuts to assistance programs, controlling images like the welfare mother were produced, which again “stigmatizes [the poor Black mother] as the cause of her own poverty” (87). If the welfare mother image was not enough to demoralize the image of Black mothers, the Reagan administration and the President’s continuous references to a “Chicago welfare queen” transformed the welfare mother image into something even more degrading. The welfare queen, a variation of the welfare mother, represented a single, unmarried mother who abused tax-supported welfare funds and was content about her and her children being a financial liability to the state. The welfare queen became a tasteless image of Black women, while also a disgrace to American society.

Just as previous eras had images of the “good” Black woman coupled with the “bad” Black woman, the 1980s continued in this tradition. As a counterpart to the welfare queen, images of the “Black lady” also were prevalent during this time (Lubiano 1992 qtd. in. Collins). Black ladies represented middle class, hardworking, educated, high-achieving Black women. Collins considers this image as not necessarily negative, but in relation to primary controlling images like the mammy who strives to outwork everyone else, and the matriarch whose excessive work is emasculating to men (89). Collins notes that despite not being associated with welfare and public assistance, the Black lady’s success is attributed to antidiscrimination and affirmative

action programs that allowed her to gain access to education and higher paying employment; it is assumed that her success is a result of this additional assistance. In this case, despite their achievements and success, Black ladies become modern mummies that threaten Black heterosexual relationships, and who used affirmative action for social and economic mobility.

These images of Black women represent just some of the controlling images working against Black women's ethos in the 1980s. These images focused on Black women's external identities, and their primary function was to make Black women the cause of their own oppression and destruction. It is unimaginable how these images were, and continue to be, detrimental to African American women's self-worth and self-esteem, but it is clear that because of the prevalence of these images of Black women within U.S. society, Black women's ethos has been negatively affected in many ways.

To combat this impact on Black women's ethos, women in the 1980s New Age era began to adamantly use their talents—especially writing and public speaking—to address these controlling images and offer alternatives to controlling Black female images. These alternative versions allowed Black women to define themselves as individual subjects, rather than objects that can only be defined by those in power. The next section discusses Black women's history of resistance strategies, and their development of new standards of ethos prior to and during the New Age. As a new alternative to controlling images, I situate the use of spirituality as a rhetorical strategy used by Black women, and other women of color, to re-craft both public and private images of their bodies, as well as a rhetorical device to promote visibility, survival, and personal and political improvement.

Black Women and Their Alter-Ethos

The U.S. functions under Western conceptions of ethos which oftentimes borrows from the works of Aristotle and other Greek philosophers and rhetoricians. Ethos, according to Aristotle, includes an arguer having “good sense, good moral character, and good will” (*Rhetoric* 1378c9); these three characteristics along with inclusion of proof, according to Aristotle, will inspire the audience to trust the arguer (*Rhetoric* 1378c15). Ultimately, trust depends on whether or not the audience is willing to believe what the speaker is saying, and

that willingness to accept the speaker's argument, is dependent on the speaker's character. In many cases, a speaker's character may precede them, causing the speaker to have to adjust their argument to first reestablish their ethos, or reframe it within a particular context, and then use their new ethos to move and persuade an audience. This is the case for African American women, especially Black and other womanist of color speakers and writers addressing oppression to an audience outside of their "home communities" (Royster 65).

One major problem with Black women "speaking out" is that they have to overcome a negative ethos that dates back to slavery. As seen within the previously discussed controlling images of Black women, in many ways Black women's bodies have been simplified, objectified, and marked inferior in an effort to provide reasoning for Black women's poor treatment within U.S. society. To complicate this issue, as discussed by Coretta Pittman in "Black Women Writers and the Trouble with Ethos: Harriet Jacobs, Billy Holiday, and Sister Souljah," Western conceptions of ethos do not account for the complex identities and experiences of Black women; they do not recognize how race, class, gender, and sexuality influence Black women's abilities to make choices that could positively affect their ethos. Many Black women have opted for survival over "goodness" according to societal standards, and because of this, they create new spaces where their audiences can judge their characters, will, and sense according to different standards.

Scholars studying Black women, their literature, and their rhetoric have identified storytelling/narration, as a primary tool for Black women to re-craft their ethos by recognizing the context in which a Black woman is situated (Royster 2000, Richardson 2002, Pittman 2007, and Atwater 2009). Speaking on Black women's reputation for having negative ethos in *Traces of a Stream*, Royster says, "In such scenarios, African American women are called upon to define themselves against stereotypes and other negative expectations, and thereby to shift the ground of rhetorical engagement by means of their abilities to invent themselves and create their own sense of character, agency, authority and power" (65). Referring to Sharon Crowley (1994), Royster argues that Black women's ethos should be viewed as both "situated" and "invented" because typically the power and relational gap between Black female writer and audience is so large that effective communication can be impossible without first filling that gap (64). To do so, Black women use narration to provide a context for understanding their experiences, while also creating alternative

standards for evaluating Black women's ethos. In her article, Pittman (2007) illustrates how storytelling and narration function as ways to redefine Black women's ethos by closely examining Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and the autobiographies of Billie Holiday (*Lady Sings the Blues*) and Sister Souljah's *No Disrespect*. In her reading, Pittman addresses how all three women, although from different eras, "resist, adopt, and adapt" dominant codes of womanhood to create standards of ethos that acknowledge Black women's experiences. Pittman says, "Jacobs, Holiday, and Souljah defined a respectable ethos within their narrative relative to the way they and other black women navigated the social cultural terrain in racist and hostile environments" (51). This resulted in them creating "new forms of virtue that attested to the following characteristics: difference, strength, resilience, wittiness, astuteness, toughness, fortitude, and street smarts" (51). By using storytelling, and other strategies like double talk/code-switching, indirection, and silence (Richardson 2002), these Black women and other Black women created spaces for redefining their ethos.

Another strategy that I believe compliments storytelling/narration is Black women's use of spirituality as a way to redefine their ethos. Within Black women's text and images, spirituality functions as a survival strategy, providing an outlet during times of extreme duress, pain, abuse, and fear, while also crafting alternative ethos for Black women. For example, fictional characters like Janie from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker's Celie from *The Color Purple* share their experiences of love and loss to those most willing to listen. For Janie, this meant retelling her life-story to an old friend, Pheoby, while she soaked "the tiredness" out her feet in an old wash pan. While Celie, who had few confidants, wrote letters to God and her sister Nettie explaining the confusion, complexity, and pains of her life to the only two beings she felt actually cared for her. Both Hurston and Walker create Black females with flawed characters according to White societal standards, but what makes these characters unique is how their use of "the word" to communicate their stories relies on spiritual connectedness. Celie's relationship with God was open, as she readily addresses Him in her diary entries, but her relationship with God was like a friendship, someone she shares her inner thoughts and feelings with. Through Celie's words we read her spirit, and we become acquainted with her virtues, her beliefs, and her character. Although Janie does not directly address God, she

does seem to have a distinct relationship with nature, including the sky, bodies of water, blooming trees, fish, etc. Many descriptions of her life, what she did, and who she was with, refers to nature and how it mirrors her own changing life. This connection with nature is a reflection of Janie's unique spirituality; it also functions as a glimpse into Janie's moral character, good will, and good sense.

In my opinion, spirituality is a reoccurring theme within literature by Black women, and it is not limited to the fictional characters of Black women authors. Embedded within Black women's text, especially during the New Age, is a call for spirituality whether as a means for survival, a means of communication, or as a way to redefine Black women's ethos. Unfortunately, although there have been several studies on Black women's literacy, many of these studies only skim over how spirituality functions as a rhetorical device within Black women's texts—fiction and non-fiction. As discussed by Hull in *Soul Talk*, Black women in the late 1970s and 1980s began to develop a new spirituality that combined their spiritualities with their political concerns, social action, and creative abilities. Examining Black women's texts during this time period may provide insight into how spirituality functioned as a way to reshape Black women's identities and images, reframe their ethos according to new standards, as well as provide a foundation to a Black womanist rhetoric.

CHAPTER 3: IDENTIFYING A WOMANIST OF COLOR RHETORIC

The 1980s marked a time of transformation within American culture, especially for African American women struggling with the old and new controlling images, while simultaneously in search of new methods for contributing to social change after the shortcomings of both the civil rights and feminist movements. This “disheartening” time was balanced with new spiritual visions, new strategies for “being and seeing that sought to foster not just ameliorative measures but foundational change” (Hull 23). According to Hull, these new spiritual visions emerged out of various fields—medicine, science, religion—with each discipline creating their own strategies for developing more expansive, spiritually-based possibilities for their research and areas of study (23). Ranging from quantum physics to personal use by individuals, the New Age was a time of spiritual awareness within all levels of knowledge-making, but Hull notices that on the surface this “third revolution” was both colorblind and non-gender specific (23).

Far from a utopian era free from race, class, gender, sexuality, and other differences, Hull argues that the New Age (late 1970s to 1980s) was the beginning of a major transition for African American women primarily because the surge of spiritual connectedness, whether via Eastern religions and medicine, Tarot card readings, ancestral reverence, and/or new interpretations of holy texts, allowed Black women to connect their everyday spirituality with their political activism and creative abilities. This interconnection between spirituality, politics, and creativity is especially seen within the works of African American artists/writers within this time period. Within literature by women of color, the late 1970s to 1980s produced a significant amount of womanist texts with spiritual underpinnings. Writing (poetry, prose, speeches, fiction, etc.) was a tool used by Black womanist writers to redefine their identities within and outside of American culture, as well as address the concerns and issues surrounding Black women’s politics, especially the inherent racism

within traditional feminist movements and the sexism and homophobia within Black communities. For Black womanist activists/writers the “political was personal” and speaking/writing was an opportunity to break silences and use their word power (nommo) laced with spirituality (magara) to fight for social change for all people.

This chapter analyzes three primary womanist texts written during the New Age: *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), *The Color Purple* (1982), and *Sister Outsider* (1984). All three texts are significant because they provide insight into Black womanist thought, and they are examples of how Black women and other women of color’s oppression and politics are embedded within their everyday lives in a White supremacist, patriarchal, sexist, classist, homophobic, hetero-normative, ageist, etc. society.

Introduction to Womanist Texts and Cluster-Agon Analysis

This Bridge Called My Back (1981) is an anthology edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. Written by various women of color, this collection of prose, poetry, and streams of thought, address major issues women of color had (have) with traditional white, heterosexual, middle-class feminist movements, their relationships with sexist men within their own communities, and their relationships with each other as radical women of color, while also advocating for new ways to bridge differences and unite as one cohesive group with one goal: equality for us all. Similarly, Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* (1984) explores the unique position of women, and how their love for each other is one of the most powerful forces available to them. Through her various essays and speeches, Lorde addresses issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia amongst woman-identified women (feminists/lesbians/women who love other women), while also addressing how these issues limit women’s progress and movement towards social change. She also identifies her personal experiences, frustrations, and anger with specific groups of people, particularly white women and Black men, and discusses ways for women, especially Black women, to use their inner power to speak-up and speak-out against oppression. To show the extent of Black womanist New Age literature, this chapter also analyzes *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, a novel narrated by a Black woman named Celie. *The Color Purple* is an example of Black women writers redefining Black women’s ethos and how Black women’s moral character, actions,

and beliefs must be evaluated under different standards. The complexities of Celie's life and the lives of the other Black women that she forges relationships with, do not match the virtues of white womanhood (piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity); therefore, Walker uses this text to form new standards of Black womanhood creating characters that are willful, wise, spiritual fighters.

The purpose of analyzing these texts is to begin to identify the motives behind the increase of texts produced by Black and other womanists of color during the New Age. Spirituality functions as a rhetorical appeal within all these texts, but I wish to discover how spirituality contributes to these women's rhetoric during this very specific time period.

To do so, my analysis draws from a variation of Kenneth Burke's cluster-agon analysis developed by Carol A. Berthold in her article titled "Kenneth Burke's Cluster-Agon Method: Its Development and an Application." According to Berthold this method developed by Burke in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, "[offered] an objective way of determining relationships between a speaker's main concerns, as well as a new perspective to rhetorical critics who [desired] to discover more about the motives and characters of speakers" (302). By addressing the limitations of Burke's work, primarily its lack of specific details, and drawing from the continuations of the method developed by William Rueckert, Berthold both expands and clarifies this method of analysis so that it can be applied to actual rhetorical actions. By examining the speeches of President John F. Kennedy, Berthold identifies detailed steps to cluster-agon analysis while also advancing the theoretical method to a useable method for rhetorical critics in search of new perspectives (309). Since its publication in 1976, Berthold's article has been referenced continuously for decades, and has become an invaluable source for understanding Burke's cluster-agon method. It has been cited by scholars within various fields of study, but it has been particularly useful for researchers within communications studies, speech, English, and rhetoric. Although less prevalent within some fields of study, womanist thought is not foreign to cluster-agon analysis. In fact, Janice D. Hamlet used this method in her article "Assessing Womanist Thought: The Rhetoric of Susan L. Taylor." Within her research, Hamlet uses cluster analysis to identify the rhetorical motives of Susan L. Taylor, journalist, women's activist, and former editor of *Essence* magazine.

According to Berthold, cluster-agon analysis could be “employed as a precise method of discovering key term relationships in the rhetoric of a social movement”(309). I believe that by using her method to analyze three very different New Age womanist texts, I can more fully understand how spirituality functioned within New Age womanist literature and possibly gain insight into a Black/woman of color womanist rhetoric. My analysis exclusively draws from the steps identified by Berthold (1976) to identify key terms and associations within the texts.

Identifying Key Terms within New Age Womanist Texts

Cluster-agon analysis begins with identifying key terms and themes within texts; the importance of a term depends on its frequency and intensity of use within the texts (Berthold 303). Through this selection of key terms, one term/theme will most-likely be used more frequently or with greater intensity than the other terms. This very important term is often called the “god term,” and it holds the ultimate power within texts especially because all other terms (also known as “good terms”) are compared to, ranked according to, and/or in relation to this term (Berthold 303).

In my analysis, I identified key terms and themes in each individual text, and then located reoccurring themes that were present in at least two or more of the texts. For example, all three texts—*This Bridge Called My Back*, *Sister Outsider*, and *The Color Purple*—discussed the theme of woman-bonding, women relationships, and/or lesbianism. *This Bridge Called My Back* was a direct response to the blatant racism within traditional, white feminist movements of the 1970s, addressing the lack of acknowledgement of how race influences women of color’s politics and everyday lives. It showcased individual experiences about the ignorance of white feminists and provided insight on how to fix, or at least begin to change, racism between women of color and white feminists, as well as the relationships amongst different women of color. Similarly, *Sister Outsider* also discusses the racism and classicism within white feminist movements, as well as institutions like the academy. She advocates for women to form bonds through similarities, while strengthening understanding through discussion of women’s differences. Most importantly, Lorde speaks on the power of lesbian/woman-identified women relationships and how women, especially those that are a part of the Black

community, need to move past homophobia and heterosexism if they are to form more effective, sisterly bonds. Walker's *The Color Purple* acts as an example of this womanly love Lorde is suggesting. The protagonist Celie identifies exclusively with women. From her deep, enduring love for her lost sister Nettie, to her admiration for strong, fighting women like Sophia, to her erotic and freeing love-affair with Shug, Celie's entire understanding of what it means to love, be loved, and survive doing it, relies on her relationships with other women.

From my close examination, I located five reoccurring terms within the texts. The first term that I identified within the texts was *spirituality*. Synonyms and terms associated with spirituality included the Spirit, God, the erotic, faith, ancient dark power, ancestry and nature, looking within/power from within, and knowledge. Another term was *woman-bonding*, which I am equating with other similar terms like lesbianism, woman relationships, homosexuality, and woman-identified women. *Art/Writing* was another key term within these texts; other words associated with this term were poetry, sewing, and creativity. The final theme I identified was *survival* which included terms like fight, stay alive, revolt, and change. These four key terms/themes represented the foundation of my cluster analysis of New Age womanist texts.

After reviewing the frequency and intensity of how each term was being used within each text, I identified spirituality as the "god term" within the texts. In considering how frequently references to spirituality occurred in these texts, in my opinion spirituality played a significant role in all of the texts individually. For example, *This Bridge Called My Back* includes two entire sections—"Speaking in Tongues: The Third World Woman Writer" and "El Mundo Zurdo: The Vision"—which address the need to bridge difference through deep dialogue, speaking in tongues across difference, redefining one's self from within, and being a witness to and testifying against each other's oppressions. These two sections emphasize truth and change requiring more than surface-level understanding, while suggesting that faith, the Spirit, and looking within their present selves and their past selves (ancestors/nature) are the primary ways to continue to survive their current situations and hopefully positively alter their futures.

On the other hand, Lorde's use of spirituality as a theme is less frequent within *Sister Outsider*, but when it is used the intensity is overwhelming and inspiring. Lorde uses several phrases or words for

spirituality in her texts, such as “dark, ancient power,” “the black mother within us all,” and “the erotic.” According to Lorde, the Spirit is dark, ancient, unknown, mysterious, female, and therefore, incredibly dangerous, which is why we have *all* been taught to suppress it. To open her essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” Lorde says, “There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (53). For Lorde, the Spirit is knowledge, and the erotic is that non-rational, vulnerable, chaotic piece of the Spirit that, once tapped, can be a space for understanding, uniting, and making a better world for us all. It is recognition of the “other” within us all, which is a major message of *Sister Outsider*.

Throughout *The Color Purple* readers are witnesses to Celie’s struggles with religion versus spirituality. For the first half of the novel, Celie writes diary entrees/letters exclusively to God. Within these letters she shares her most intimate experiences, including her very first letter to God which discusses how she was repeatedly raped by her step-father, Pa, and bore two children who were quickly removed (she assumed killed) from her life. She shares her thoughts about how she sees herself and other women, and she addresses her own abuse by men, while testifying on the abuses of other women. She writes diligently to this “God” (big, old, tall, gray-bearded, white, with bluish-gray eyes) who she learned to worship in church, but about half-way through the novel (after she starts receiving letters from her sister Nettie), Celie stops writing and believing in “God.” Instead, she begins writing all her letters directly to Nettie and she starts to see “God” as a spiritual, black “It,” who is a free-flowing force that works inside of a person. In her first letter to Nettie, Celie quotes Shug on what God is, she says, “The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometime it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don’t know what you looking for” (202). Celie’s relationship with God changes as she grows and develops her own voice until eventually she sees God as deeply integrated into everything. Her final letter begins, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (292).

From the frequency and intensity of the use of spirituality as a theme/term within all three 1980s womanist of color texts, I think it is appropriate to argue that it is the primary (“god”) key term for my cluster-agon analysis. The next section of this chapter will address the connections between spirituality and the other identified key terms. Discussing these associations will further prove the significance of spirituality within these texts while showing its unique relationship with other concepts.

“What Goes with What”: Discussing Associations between Key Terms

Associations between words can be recognized through the use of conjunctions to connect two terms, cause-effect relationships, imagery, indirect mutual relationships, or any other method for combining terms (Berthold 303). For my own analysis, I found that many of the associations between terms combined multiple terms/themes via imagery and indirect mutual relationships. Also, many of the themes shared relationships with each other on a conceptual level, which required drawing connections between terms that may not be situated in the same sentence, on the same page, or in the same chapter. Berthold says that “context” is essential to making connections between key terms, and for me as critic, it was important to recognize the interconnectedness of womanist thought. Although I was able to identify a key term as a “god term” it did not mean that the term was in isolation to all the other key terms. Womanist thought stresses the idea that everything is connected; therefore, there cannot be a “true” hierarchy of terms. Instead, everything and every term are connected, and the most significant associations tended to include more than two key terms.

For instance, Hull’s argument in *Soul Talk* that 1980s African American texts combined their spirituality with their political views and activism and creative abilities supports my identification of spirituality, art, and survival as key terms within these three texts. In many instances within these texts, references to spirituality/the Spirit, particularly the concept of redefining one’s identity from within one’s self, discovery of self, and internal power, are often associated with other key terms, especially art (writing) and survival. For example, in Gloria Anzaldúa’s essay from *This Bridge Called My Back* titled “Speaking in Tongues:

A Letter To 3rd World Women Writers,” Anzaldúa gives a lengthy explanation of why she, as a woman of color lesbian, must write. She says:

Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive...I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, and you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy...To show that I can and that I will write, never mind their abominations to the contrary. (Anzaldúa 169)

In this quote, one can see the close approximation “the spirit” has with other terms like “revolt” and “alive,” which is associated with the key term survival. This connection between the spirit, writing, and survival/power puts into perspective the significance of the spiritual force (*magara*) within the word (writing/language) and how it has the power to affect social change, which is what these women need to survive. For Anzaldúa and many other womanist of color writers, writing serves a political purpose, and it must be remembered that for these women the political is personal. Therefore, when they write, they are not writing just for themselves, but for others as well (“To become more intimate with myself and you”). Their words come from within themselves/their spirits, and it manifests itself in the form of creativity—art (writing).

For Lorde, it is a very specific type of writing—poetry—that allows her to embrace her inner spirit while also inspiring social change and spaces for survival. In her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury” from *Sister Outsider*, Lorde says:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made in language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. (Lorde 37)

For Lorde, our true spirits lie in the “dark place within” and out of this space are our deepest feelings and emotions which inspire poetry. This quote describes poetry—art—as something that *must* be done in order to survive. It is not merely a gift, a talent, or a luxury, but *a tool* that can be used for social change and political

action. Here, again, one can see how the spiritual-force within the word is recognized as a source of power that can be used for survival and action. Spirituality, in this sense, is also equated with knowledge-making, which makes spirituality not only an internal transformation, but a process for producing new perspectives for viewing people and our world.

Although less obvious textually, a similar connection can be seen in *The Color Purple*. Both Celie and Nettie use writing as a tool for survival and as a way to stay connected to each other “in spirit.” They write letters to each other even though neither sister is sure if the other will ever receive the letters because neither sister is sure that the other is even alive. Their writing is a tool against the sexist oppression that keeps them separated, and the power of Nettie’s words to Celie (and vice versa) is what inspired Celie to finally “fight” the men (Mr.____, Pa, and God) in her life. *The Color Purple* also represents one of the best examples of how spirituality is associated with the key terms art, survival, and also woman-bonding. To explain, every woman relationship Celie has is solidified in her letters, and her most important woman-relationship—Nettie—exists through written language/letters, as opposed to actual physical experience. Celie’s ability to endure abuse, and eventually move towards healthier, relationships, is influenced by language and her ritual of communicating to her sister through writing. Also, after leaving Mr.____, Celie used her sewing talents—her art (she claimed that she could make pants for anyone)—to start her own pants-making business, which led to her financial stability and survival as an independent, Black, lesbian woman.

Another association consists of spirituality’s connection with the key term of woman-bonding/lesbianism. Lorde’s description of the erotic as spiritual, rather than only sensual and sexual/pornographic, provides insight into how spirituality can be associated with woman-bonding relationships. Lorde says, “When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the *life-force of women*; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55 my emphasis). Here spirituality is directly linked to art, yet indirectly linked to woman-relationships, particularly lesbianism. Since Lorde, openly discusses her own lesbian relationship with her lover Frances throughout *Sister Outsider*, advocates for woman-identified women (women openly loving other women), and recognizes and addresses the sexual

connotations that come with the terms “erotic” and “lesbian,” one can argue that there is an indirect association between this erotic interpretation of spirituality and woman-relationships within *Sister Outsider*. As Anzaldúa says in *This Bridge Called My Back*, “The lesbian of color is not only invisible, she doesn’t exist... We speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane... Because white eyes do not want to know us, they do not bother to learn our language, the language which reflects us, our culture, our spirit” (165). Spirituality has its link to lesbianism and woman-relationships, especially when referring to how womanists of color are viewed by other women, and how the additional layer of “otherness” via lesbianism requires a deeper language for communicating across differences.

Opposing Terms: Spirituality and Its Relationship with Fear

To complete my analysis, I considered the oppositional terms within the texts in order to recognize the conflict occurring within these texts, and possibly influencing these womanists’ rhetoric. Berthold says that conducting an agon analysis allows for the critic to gain a better understanding of the drama, or competing perspectives, that may be occurring within a rhetor’s text (303). Essentially, an agon analysis is completed in the same way as the cluster analysis, but instead it focuses on the terms that oppose the key “good” terms. Although I identified five “bad” terms within my agon analysis—fear, silence, guilt, danger, and anger—this section will primarily focus on the “devil term” fear, the way it is used within the three texts, and its connections to the “god term,” spirituality.

Similar to how I identified spirituality as the “god term,” the intensity and frequency of the term “fear”, along with its direct connections with spirituality, made it the most significant “bad term” in all of these texts. Synonyms associated with fear included afraid and scared. While examining the multiple times these writers referred to fear, I located three specific ways fear was discussed in their writing: 1) the oppressor’s fears; 2) the fears of the oppressed; and 3) overcoming fear.

Within each of these texts, the writers address fear from the perspective of those that are in power. They discuss issues that they believe privileged groups—white, middle class feminists, white men, Black men, etc.—may fear; these things are assumed to be causes of their need to oppress, objectify, and subordinate

women of color. In both *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Sister Outsider*, a direct connection between the key terms fear and guilt can be seen, especially when discussing relationships between White and Black women. In the opening to the section titled “And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures of Us With You” in *This Bridge*, discussing the issues of racism within traditional feminist movements, Anzaldúa says:

Rather than using the privilege they [white women feminists] have to crumble the institutions that house the source of their own oppression—sexism, along with racism—they oftentimes deny their privilege in the form of “downward mobility,” or keep it intact in the form of guilt. Guilt is not a feeling. It is an intellectual mask to a feeling. Fear is a feeling—fear of losing one’s power, fear of being accused, fear of a loss of status, control, knowledge. Fear is real. (62)

Although Anzaldúa is directly addressing white women feminists in this quote, her message could be applied to any privileged group that uses their place of power only to serve themselves. By considering the proximity of the two terms guilt and fear to each other, as well as how the author is correcting the misconception of guilt and fear being synonyms, one can see the significance of fear as a key term. Since fear, unlike guilt, has been acknowledged by Anzaldúa as an actual emotion, it is understandable why someone in a position of power may feel incredibly vulnerable when asked to use their power to help others. This allows the author to empathize with the reasoning behind the fear, while still arguing that fear is unacceptable.

At the same time, the way both fear and guilt are being discussed is also in association with the previously identified “good” term woman-bonding. Up until this point, woman-bonding has been associated with relationships primarily between women of color. The inclusion of fear expands the key term of woman-bonding to include dialogue amongst a variety of people (male, female, Black, white, lesbian, etc.). In the case of the oppressor’s fears, fear is to be embraced, while as Lorde says, “guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve none of our futures” (124).

Closely examining the male characters Mr.____ and Harpo in *The Color Purple* also reveals instances of fear from a perspective of male privilege and power, while also revealing tensions between Black men and women. Both male characters fear being depicted as feminine, weak, and emasculated. For example,

Mr._____ physically, verbally, and sexually abuses Celie throughout their marriage to compensate for his feeble attempts to win his father's approval of his youth relationship with Shug. Despite running away together and having three children with Shug, Mr._____ is described by both his father and Shug as "weak." Similarly, Harpo has a deep love for his wife Sophia, and unlike his father, he fights for his desires to be with her, but his patriarchal views on gender roles leads him to fear being seen as emasculated by his physically strong and assertive wife. When Sophia refused to be beaten by Harpo, his fears of emasculation became a reality. Both Mr._____ and Harpo suffered from times of guilt (for Mr._____ after Celie left him and for Harpo when Sophia went to jail), but both recovered from guilt by addressing their internal fears of women and subsequently creating new bonds under new standards of evaluating appropriate male and female behavior.

Fear is also a term used to refer to internalized oppression, or the inner fears that have developed within victims of oppression. Key terms that arise out of this type of fear are silence and danger. Lorde has several phrases that show the relationships between fear and silence. For example, "And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (42), and "For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us" (44). In both of these quotes, one can observe how speaking, especially for women of color who have been ignored and silenced for so long, can be incredibly scary and possibly dangerous. Speaking requires allowing those unspoken words within to be released, and what those words will be, and the consequences of those words, are unknown which makes them (and the people that speak/write them) dangerous. However dangerous, Lorde and others like Anzaldúa who says, "Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing" (169), argue that silence is not the answer for any victim of oppression. Through this use of fear, connections between fear and spirituality can begin to be drawn. Silence, the fear of silence, and the fear of what comes when silence is broken, are all associated with the power that derives from the individual. To combat silence, one must speak, and to speak one must look within for the word, the power, the spirit. Again, the word is depicted as having the power to affect all forms of change on the outside, while becoming essentially deadly for the individual that remains silent for too long.

A direct relationship between fear and spirituality can be seen when these womanist of color writers are attempting to overcome their fears. Several examples of fear and silence are scattered throughout each of these texts. For example, in *Sister Outsider* Lorde says, “And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable to not be afraid, learning to put fear into perspective gave me great strength” (41), or “The truest direction comes from inside. I give the most strength to my children by being willing to look within myself, and by being honest about what I find there...In this way they begin to learn to look beyond their own fears” (72), and also, “It’s [grammar] like fear: once you put your hand on it, you can use it or push it away” (95). In these quotes, fear mixes with spirituality taking on the descriptions of something that comes from within the individual. In this sense, fear—like spirituality—becomes a source of power for overcoming hardships/pain/silence/oppression.

One final indirect relationship between fear and spirituality comes from their mutual relationship with anger. All three texts situate anger as somewhere in between fear and spirituality, with anger being associated with Black and other women of color’s silence (both by force and by choice), their abuse by men and women in positions of power, and their frustrations with each other and so-called allies. Both *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Sister Outsider* address women of color’s anger with racism, sexism, and homophobia from White women, men of color, and other women of color, respectively. When Lorde says, “My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing also” (124), she is speaking to the unproductivity of fear when associated with anger, and how anger can be used as arsenal “against those oppressions, personal or institutional, which brought that anger into being” (127).

Lorde says that anger must be focused, but how? I argue that it is through spirituality. Black and other womanist of color used their texts to focus their anger by first recognizing that anger, fear, and spiritual power are all united, and they are all a part of the same deep, dark, hidden continuum that lives within us all.

Rhetorical Spirits: Towards a Black Womanist Rhetoric

Black and other women of color womanists writing and speaking during the late 1970s and 1980s were in a state of both recovery and revival. With a history of physical, mental, and emotional lashes on their

backs from a history of bondage, oppression, and internal abuse, spirituality functioned as one of the few rhetorical devices that had the potential to positively advance Black women's (and other women of color's) everyday lives. Perhaps it was the gradual decline of social movements like the civil rights and traditional feminist movements that made them feel like their voices could finally be heard. Maybe it was the sudden surge of New Age literature and spiritually-inspired perspectives that called Black and other women of color to begin defining and expressing themselves from within. Whatever the reason, women of color began to speak, and when they spoke, they addressed a variety of audiences through their arts which combined their personal experiences with their political views and goals.

In considering the time period during which these women were writing, it is not a surprise that spirituality dominates amongst the key terms identified in the texts *This Bridge Called My Back*, *Sister Outsider*, and *The Color Purple*. The 1980s marked a rise in all forms of spirituality in various fields of study, so it is not unusual that literature by Black women followed in a similar pattern. What is interesting is how Black and other women of color womanists were addressing spirituality in their texts, and the associations it had with other terms like women relationships/sexuality, art (especially writing), survival/change, and fear. From my analysis, it can be seen that these terms hold significant meaning to these rhetors and their movement towards social change, all-inclusive civil rights, and peace. For them, spirituality required completeness/wholeness, which for many of them also meant extreme vulnerability as they addressed their experiences with oppression, their internalized oppression, and instances of being oppressors. For many of them, looking within themselves was the only option for survival, especially within a world which projected negative images of their bodies that perpetuated stereotypes that have haunted their mothers and foremothers (and continue to haunt their daughters) for generations. Spirituality meant addressing their own fears, and requiring those that wished to coalesce with them to do the same because fear has the power to inspire change in everyone's world, not just within the lives of women of color.

If there is to be a Black/woman of color womanist rhetoric, it must begin with the spirit. When examining New Age women of color womanist texts, spirituality has to be a priority, but recognizing how spirituality relates to other concepts reveals the motives and intentions of these writers as they survived

oppression and advocated for social change. For me, a womanist rhetoric is understood as the recognition of the life-force (magara) within us all, but what is interesting about this spiritual-force is that it lies dormant within our bodies until we open our mouths to speak (release the word). Silence kills life, and fear is only a source of power for those willing to overcome it. Those that want to survive must speak (use their word power) without fear of the consequences. Black and other womanists of color writing during the New Age were on the verge of dying, but their ancient, dark, female spirits saved them as they spoke, giving voice to their inner desires/needs.

Studying those that have been silenced is beneficial to us all, especially in a world dominated by difference. Although the world has changed since the 1980s, we are not free from racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ageism, ableism, and every other kind of oppression that keeps us separated as people. Our environment is in danger, and our futures and the lives of future generations are uncertain as global warming and conservation of natural resources become primary international concerns. War continues to add to economic stagnation and tension between countries, while contributing to thousands of deaths of men, women, and children every year. There are few answers to solving these problems, but I believe that the womanist of color writing during the 1980s understood that developing new ways of thinking—new perspectives/knowledge for approaching the extensive social, political, environmental, cultural issues that seem to be never-ending. In her essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Lorde encourages women to be the developers of this new knowledge, bridging the differences that prevent us from moving towards effective action:

The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and anew patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us. The old patterns, no matter how cleverly arranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recrimination, lamentation, and suspicion. For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions

which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. (Lorde 123)

To destroy power structures, we must use new tools/knowledge that is inspired by a force greater than patriarchy, greater than White supremacy, greater than sexism, greater than racism, homophobia, and classism. Literature by womanist of color during the 1980s recognized this power came from within themselves, the place they had been brainwashed to believe was irrelevant and inferior. If these women's voices could combat centuries of physical, mental, emotional, and psychological abuse, than what else does spirituality have the power to do for us all?

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