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The Spirit of Friendship: Girlfriends in Contemporary African American Literature

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The Spirit of Friendship: Girlfriends in Contemporary African American Literature

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
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Dedication

Colossians 3:23 “Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.”

Lord, thank you. Thank you for your grace. Thank you for your son, and thank you for your Holy Spirit. This is your dissertation. I pray that your will be done through this work. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Abstract

The Spirit of Friendship: Girlfriends in Contemporary African American Literature examines spiritual subjectivities that inspire girlfriends in three contemporary novels to journey towards actualization. It examines the girlfriend bond as a space where the Divine Spirit can flourish and assist girlfriends as they seek to become actualized. This project raises epistemological questions as it suggests that within the girlfriend dynamic, knowledge that is traditionally subjugated is formed and refined. Finally, girlfriend epistemology is considered in light of Black Girl Magic, a contemporary social and cultural movement among Black women.

Preface

Some of the most important lessons I have learned have not come from my formal education; rather they come from my two late grandmothers, Martha Jean and Maxine. For the most part, my grandmothers' lessons rely on the *Bible* as a credible source and represent alternative ways of knowing. This type of knowledge is discredited in some academic conversations, yet in my mind, biblically inspired knowledge, knowledge learned through formal education, and knowledge learned on one's personal sojourn to actualization are all equally valid.

Neither one of my grandmothers were college educated, yet many of their sentiments reflect what I have come to know as Black feminism. One of Grandma Jean's lessons, "Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" alludes to the scripture, Matthew 6:3 and warns against bragging when giving to the needy. In addition to the biblical mandate, Grandma Jean believed the verse called for discretion when discussing financial matters even among people with whom one has a close relationship. She believed a woman should be wise in her financial dealings, which would ultimately help her attain economic security. In a way, my grandmother's sentiments are akin to Toni Morrison's declaration that female freedom means economic freedom as well (*Sula* xiii).

Grandma Maxine's lessons are also biblically inspired. She emphatically declared, "Most of your life you're going to be alone: you better like yourself; you better love yourself." She would often accompany that lesson with a reference to the scripture, Psalm 121:1-2, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord." Psalm 121 shows God as the ultimate companion. Though my grandmother introduced me to a biblical notion that sees God as friend, it was ultimately a lesson I had to learn on my own. I was reared in the Christian tradition;

however, I did not come to know God as friend until I was a young adult. As a child, I knew God as the God of my grandparents and parents. When I came to know God for myself, it was first and foremost a knowledge of God as friend. As a result, my understanding of God as friend has guided my readings of the novels in this project.

In many ways the impetus for this dissertation project began over ten years ago when I—like many other female students at my small HBCU¹—went in search of sisterhood. My older sister and I joined the sorority during the same semester, and we were one of two sets of biological sisters on the line. Even though we have what I would consider a close friendship, my sister and I were both in search of our place in a legacy of educated Black women leaders. I was excited to be a part of such an esteemed legacy; however, I was not prepared for the whirlwind joining a sorority would entail. The details of my experience are not as important as the consciousness I began to develop as a result of what I used to describe as a very negative experience. I developed a budding spiritual consciousness during the first two years of membership in my sorority. That consciousness has continued to grow and has lent a particular sentiment to my intellectual and social pursuits. In retrospect it has become clear to me that I went in search of sisterhood, but instead my experiences led me to a more nuanced understanding of friendship, more specifically an understanding of God as friend. In this project, I briefly discuss sisterhood's role in my coming to know God as friend; however, this is not a perspective that will be covered extensively. Instead, my primary goal is to situate my analysis of girlfriends in contemporary African American literature within Black feminist and womanist legacies that acknowledge a spiritual consciousness among girlfriends.

The content in this dissertation, was in part, developed using the autocritographical method, introduced in Michael Awkward's memoir, *Scenes of Instruction*. Awkward credits the term "autocritography" to Henry Louis Gates who initially used it to describe a collection of critical

¹ Historically Black College and University

essays written by Houston Baker (7). *Scenes of Instruction* is framed around academic commencement ceremonies, “emotionally charged occasions that allow[ed] [Awkward] to examine [his] intellectual development” (Awkward 1). Autocritography uses the autobiography as a critical mode of inquiry and leads to analysis that centers themes, voices, and writings that might otherwise end up relegated to the margins. Focusing on friendship in contemporary African American literature is my attempt to center relationships Toni Morrison described as often “discredited” (*The Art of Fiction* n.p.). There is not an overwhelming use of the autocritographical in this project; however, this method was instrumental in developing the ideas addressed in this project. The autocritographical method continues to be instrumental as I think beyond the scope of the themes and texts addressed in this dissertation.

For me, developing autocritographical work requires the presence of a community. The inability to develop my ideas in the presence of a community (e.g. the classmates I had in courses such as Literature by Women of Color and Black Feminisms) contributed to feelings of isolation while writing the dissertation. After I completed my coursework I did not have many opportunities to explore my ideas within an academic community. Writing and researching through this isolation was a challenge for me; however friendship with God and friendship with my girlfriends sustained me. To that end, the parameters of my study are impacted by the triad nature of friendship I experienced while writing the dissertation (i.e. the friendship between God, Dominique—one of my closest girlfriends, and myself). Initially I planned to include many texts, specifically texts that featured the interactions of many girlfriends (e.g. *The Women of Brewster Place*, *For Colored Girls, Waiting to Exhale* etc.); however, I noticed both within fiction and within my lived experiences that the dynamics are different when there are more than two girlfriends present. Additionally, I point to a biblical scripture to further support my decision to focus on dyad girlfriends. Ecclesiastes 4:12 states, “A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and

conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.” I view girlfriend one, girlfriend two, and the Holy Spirit as the three who make up this triumvirate bond mentioned in Ecclesiastes. That is not to say that the Spirit of God cannot be manifested among many girlfriends, it is simply not my intent to fully develop this perspective in this project. However, considering the emergence of what I view as a God-centered black girl magic movement, I do think it is important to examine the ways in which the Spirit of God manifests between dyad girlfriends as well as among multiple girlfriends. Popular culture examples are locations where this notion can be explored. I briefly address this perspective in the conclusion and plan to further develop these ideas in a future project.

Introduction

“Friendship is the place in which a great majority of us have our first glimpse of redemptive love and caring community” (hooks *All About Love* 134).

When Sisterhood Begets Friendship

From the vantage point of ten years later, I have been able to see the ways in which joining a sorority has contributed to my understanding of friendship. The summer after I was initiated into Delta Sigma Theta, I worked as a tutor/counselor for a TRIO program at one of the universities in my hometown. My colleagues at the summer program included three other undergraduate women who were students at the university. I was the only counselor who came from another school. One of my summer colleagues was a member of my sorority, and upon our first meeting I wrongly assumed camaraderie would ensue. There are various forms and criteria for friendship, and in “Who are the Sisters? Difference, Feminism, and Friendship,” Felly Nkweto Simmonds notes friendships cannot be built solely on a shared experience of womanhood. According to Simmonds, it is more important to ask, “How do we translate this shared experience?” (26) Simmonds’ point speaks to a shared consciousness that exists among friends as they translate their experiences of womanhood. Furthermore, Simmonds explains the need to separately discuss characteristics of friendship and sisterhood. She writes, “If we are lucky, the two can be negotiated in tandem. But for most of us...our so-called ‘sisters’ cannot be our friends” (26). Simmonds believes sisterhood alone is not an adequate basis for friendship because of certain qualities—“altruism, vulnerability, and self-sacrifice”—women typically associate with friendship, which are not always present within sisterhood (23).

Though a friendship did not manifest with my sorority sister that summer, I began a friendship with God. One of the other young women I worked with that summer lived her life in such a way that God's grace and love shone through. I was attracted to her presence and the fact that she lived her life bold, free, forgiven, and abounding in love. More specifically, I was attracted to that which she declared as her Source. Her presence as a self-assured young woman—unashamed to live and walk in her truth—coupled with the fierceness of her conviction, called me out of an illusion of sisterhood and conflated friendship. That summer, I began a friendship with God and have been able to share the love that abounds in that friendship with other girlfriends for more than a decade. The following entry from my personal journal gives brief insight into my budding spiritual consciousness. *June 29, 2006 A lot of things have happened since yesterday. Last night I had a deep conversation with The Lord...After we talked I felt so much better, and I feel that I am ready to grow spiritually.*

In the historical account, *In Search of Sisterhood: Delta Sigma Theta and the Challenge of the Black Sorority Movement*, Paula Giddings defines our sorority in sociological terms likening it to a social movement organization. According to Giddings, the primary focus within a social movement organization is to transform the individual (6). For me, transformation meant getting to know God as friend as opposed to the racist and patriarchal dictator many other Black women initially encounter (Celie's initial view of God is an appropriate example). Giddings refers to correspondence written by our third national secretary who maintained the organization had "made friendship an art...by means of its comprehensive oaths and obligations" (186). The *Bible* heavily influences our oaths and obligations. Giddings reports that the sorority is considered the "beloved organization" of many members (10). Similarly, I consider Delta my "beloved organization" primarily because it led me to a friendship my beloved Savior. When reviewing the organization's doctrine, I am pointed to God and instructed in the art of friendship. Even though all sisters have access to the teachings, sisterhood does not automatically beget the type of girlfriend relationship I examine in this project.

My own experiences with sisterhood demonstrate this point. The organization is established on Christian principles; however, it was not until a sister rejected me that I began to seek God as friend. Since then I have learned first-hand what it looks like to know God intimately.

I do not mean to overstate my experience with friendship within the context of sisterhood. In fact some of my most inspiring girlfriend relationships have been with women who are not affiliated with the organization. Instead, I aim to acknowledge my organization and its role in my learning the art of cultivating friendships where the Spirit of God manifests. What follows is a personal example from one of my girlfriends; it captures the knowledge that has led me to place girlfriend relationships at the center of my theorizing. I have known Dominique since we were in middle school; however, we did not become girlfriends until college. Last November, she sent me the following audio message,

Hey girl, so I'm sitting in my hotel room this morning, getting all extra emotional and grateful, and thanking the Lord that I'm able to be here and accomplish the goals that I set out to do, and I started thinking about you...there is so much of what I do or what I've done that I wouldn't have had the strength to do or the courage to do or the motivation or the inspiration to do if you didn't have a place in my life....and I wanted to let you know that you are appreciated, you are celebrated, you are thought about...There is so much that you do to inspire my decisions and my actions...There are certain ways that I am that you inspire just by being the person that you are...just by me knowing that I have you, and that I have this foundation in you, and I have this backbone in you, so to speak...When I fall I know that I'll never fall too hard because I know that you'll sit right there on the ground with me and to have a friend like that, to have somebody you know without a doubt will be there for you and will sit on the ground with you in the dirt, just as she's there to praise you in the light is something that I will never be able to truly have the words to thank you for...because it's just not something that is common. And in my own personal journey

and in my own personal growth with family and with upbringing and all of that it's not something that was a norm in my life; it's not something that I grew up having, so I think because it's not my norm...I appreciate it so much more because I know what it's like to not have it. I know what it's like to circle through life by yourself, wondering who supports you, wondering who is there for you, wondering who will be there for you when it's maybe not so pretty to be there for you...

Dominique's message is indicative of a spiritual consciousness that we share within our girlfriend bond and is comparable to bell hooks' description of a "deep abiding friendship" (*Communion* 207). hooks describes these types of friendships as sites "where many women know lasting love...as independent women, especially single women, practicing the art of loving...we often cherish anew the friendships...that allow us to dwell in love, to know true love in relationship to others" (hooks, *Communion* 207). For Dominique and me, the art of loving, like the art of friendship is rooted in camaraderie with God. Our girlfriend bond parallels aspects of the fictitious girlfriend relationships in the novels I examine. For example, Dominique expresses the sorrow of circling through life "wondering who supports you, wondering who is there for you." The circling Dominique mentions is reminiscent of Nel's circles of sorrow in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, but instead of suppressing the desire for a friend like Nel does, Dominique acknowledges the importance of friendship as we circle through life together. Furthermore, Dominique's message speaks to hooks' points regarding the importance of friendship when families of origin fail to provide us with the "care, respect, knowledge, and all-around nurturance of our growth" (*All About Love* 133). Ours is a friendship that provides the aforementioned qualities and is a place where we know and experience redemptive love.

As a subject who both values girlfriend relationships and desires to theorize about them, I recognize Andrea Canaan's definition of girlfriend as an accurate description of the nature of the girlfriend bond. According to Canaan, a girlfriend is

The kind of woman you can be a girl with . . . a woman you giggle with one minute and can be dead serious [with] the next . . . the kind of friend you usually tell all to and when you forget to tell her some secret that you have been holding and casually mention it to her, you are surprised you hadn't told her...the kind of friend you can go out with and it's not always dutch . . . the kind of woman who always honors what is private and vulnerable for you. (302)

The simplest definition of a girlfriend, “the kind of woman you can be a girl with” is likened to Dominique’s initial greeting in the above message, and is also reminiscent of Nel’s declaration that she and Sula were “girls together” (Morrison 174). Though girlfriends from all walks of life are likely to relate to Cnaan’s definition, one of the primary objectives in this dissertation is to contribute to contemporary discussions of Black women’s friendship and highlight aspects that point to a spiritual subjectivity and consciousness among fictitious portrayals of girlfriends.

Girlfriends are present in various cultures across the African diaspora. Two women who share a loving friendship are sometimes viewed as lesbians in the West; however, in other cultures, the platonic nature of friendship is honored. Alison Donnell notes, “Caribbean writers do not adopt the [terms]—queer, homosexual, gay, lesbian—in order to name this experience or desire” of loving and having an intimate connection with a person of the same gender (184). Similarly, Antonia MacDonald-Smythe challenges the equation of same sex friendship with homosexuality. In a chapter titled, “Macocotte: An Exploration of Same-Sex Friendship in Selected Caribbean Novels,” Antonia MacDonald-Smythe acknowledges these non-sexual connections and asserts, “Social constructedness and the cultural specificit[ies] render inadequate the label ‘lesbian,’ which is so commonly deployed in discussions of same-sex friendships in Western societies” (227). Yes, two women who are in love with one another may choose to have sexual relations, but for many women,

love and the feelings of intimacy that develop from friendships are far more powerful than connections based solely off of one's sexuality.

bell hooks makes similar points with her notion of “romantic friendship,” which suggests women can have intimate relationships that do not include sexual attraction. A romantic friendship is a phrase hooks uses to explain the intimate non-sexual connection women have with other women.² They are “a threat to patriarchy and heterosexism because they fundamentally challenge assumptions that being sexual with someone is essential to all meaningful, lasting, intimate bonds” (hooks *Communion* 210). According to hooks, friendships promote sharing between women and are accepted because they help form sustainable communities (*Communion* 210). These friendships imitate the kinship networks that were present in pre-slavery African societies (MacDonald-Smythe 225-26). Thus, Black female bonding represents an intimate connection that is displayed in various spaces within our cultures and lives.

This study acknowledges the ways in which Black feminist theory and womanist theory enhance discussions of friendship in contemporary African American literature. I engage works by Barbara Christian, The Combahee River Collective, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Alice Walker. Additionally, there are other feminist and womanist scholars whose work is equally significant to the trajectory of this project. In my research I have uncovered scholarly works on women's sexual and non-sexual relationships; however I have not come across a study completely devoted to the spiritual essence of Black women's friendship.

Exploring Girlfriends' Spiritual Subjectivity and Spiritual Consciousness

Friendship is a social relationship in which a person actively decides to love, care for, and be involved with another person. Female friendship among Black women has been given less attention in the scope of literary scholarship when compared to discussions of sisterhood. In fact, Toni

² Romantic friendships have other names in different cultures. Macocotte and Mati relationships have the same premise as romantic friendships and have a French creole (Macocotte) and Surinamese (Mati) etymology.

Morrison asserts, women's friendships have been "discredited relationship[s]" (*The Art of Fiction* n.p.). It seems a real oversight to ignore relationships that can be integral to a woman's well-being and survival. Therefore this dissertation explores the characteristics of friendship in three contemporary novels by African American women: *Sula* (1973), *The Color Purple* (1982), and *Sugar* (2000). I believe carefully examining women's friendships will yield more systematic discussions of spirituality and enhance critical literary discussions of girlfriends.

When it comes to describing that which is spiritual within Black women's friendships, I privilege Biblical connotations because of my own identity politics and because the authors I examine have acknowledged Christian origins (whether or not they currently identify as such). There are a few uses of the word "spirit" throughout this work. First, this work considers the spirit as a "dynamic force that can be increased, renewed, and/or diminished" (*Bible Study Tools* n.p.). A person's spirit interacts with another's spirit and the divine Spirit. In various instances, the female friends in this study help revitalize each other's spirit. Second, there are places where spirit refers to the essence of a thing, as is the case for the title of this body of work: *The Spirit of Friendship*. Finally, this study recognizes God's spirit (i.e. the Holy Spirit or Spirit for short) as divine. I understand the characters are fictional; however, I believe "fiction might alert us to certain truths about human nature" (Le Poidevin 188). For this reason, I use these definitions of spirit to help illuminate certain truths about the art of friendship.

Though not a cornerstone of this project, the notion of a spiritual friendship is important to the analysis. Aelred of Rievaulx, a twelfth century abbot, believed as far as human relationships are concerned, there is, "...nothing more sacred...nothing more useful...nothing more difficult...nothing more sweet...and nothing more profitable" (73) than spiritual friendship. Friends who know each other in this way experience the "mingling of spirits and the purification of all things in the Spirit of God" (Aelred 76). Aelred offers a broad perspective on the characteristics of

spiritual friendship; however, a general framework is not particularly effective when one seeks to analyze the idiosyncrasies of a specific group. In *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship*, Mary E. Hunt maintains, “Theological literature on the topic of friendship...[is] rooted in patriarchal worldviews that systematically pass over the particular experiences of women. Using them as starting points only reinforces what needs to be replaced...” (2). As does Hunt’s declaration, this dissertation refuses to merely insert women’s experiences in existing patriarchal models of friendship and concerns itself with the spiritual essence of Black women’s friendship specifically.

This dissertation offers a conceptual analysis of girlfriends in contemporary African American literature and uses Kevin Quashie’s notion of girlfriend subjectivity as a mode of inquiry. In *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory*, Quashie defines the term girlfriend as a “Black feminist idiom of subjecthood...where the politics of self and difference are evaluated through cultural landscapes and ethical sensibilities relevant to Black women” (1). Girlfriend subjectivity suggests language spoken by Black women subjects—who are situated in contentious social spheres that have historically ignored them and their power—has influenced and been influenced by contemporary notions of identity. It alludes to an internal source of power that is fluid and cultivated among Black women. Moreover, girlfriend subjectivity acknowledges,

The many ways the discourses of white supremacy and patriarchy presume to overdetermine all considerations of Black selfhood as either an intercommunal tension (with whiteness) or an intracommunal tussle (between men and women). Here, then, lies a key divergence: the aesthetic of the girlfriend subject obsesses neither on white masculinity nor heteronormativity, but instead centers a Black female subject and her permutations, a model of subjectivity that operates from her sometimes plural and always volatile self-center. (Quashie 17)

Girlfriend subjectivity does not claim a singular way in which girlfriends interact; however, it does maintain girlfriends are committed to exploring our lives and experiences as Black women with minimal emphasis on white supremacist and patriarchal ideologies. By privileging girlfriends in their novels, the authors in this dissertation contribute to a body of work that considers Black women and our relationships with each other.

In this dissertation I extend Quashie's notion of friendship as the basis of subjectivity to a more nuanced exploration of the spiritual subjectivity that comes from friendship. Though Quashie's work is more concerned with larger discussions of subjectivity, there are aspects of his work that initiate a conversation on spiritual subjectivity. He writes, "The liminal, the self-centered, the self-created: these are bodies of divinity and this practice [of self-love] is one of spiritual subjectivity" (Quashie 79). Quashie mentions the "spiritual ambulation" girlfriends engage in which ultimately leads one to find "[G]od in oneself" (79). Spiritual ambulation alludes to the coalition between God and oneself in which the distance between self and the divine other is almost nonexistent (Quashie 86). Girlfriends assist with the "dissolution of differentiation" in that they allow the girlfriend subject to "see her own [divine] self" (Quashie 86). Quashie's mention of God, spiritual subjectivity, and spiritual ambulation is reminiscent of womanist perceptions of God. For example, Layli Maparyan's *The Womanist Idea* description of God is a fitting comparison. According to Maparyan, the intent is to "imagine a world in which we no longer [separate] ourselves from God or Divinity; that is, a world in which we [are] simply suffused by it" (247). Finding God in oneself and refusing to separate ourselves from the Divine impacts spiritual subjectivity.

Discussions of black subjectivity are often met with accusations of essentialism because identity is a politic that has a "direct relationship to power and resources, societal and otherwise" (Quashie 2). Quashie's work primarily analyzes the relational aspects of selfhood in *Sula*, *The Color Purple*, and other Black feminist narratives. Similar to identity, I believe the spiritual is a politic that

grants access to power (i.e. divine power). I analyze the spiritual consciousness present within fictitious girlfriend relationships and extend Quashie's work by introducing the concept "girlfriend epistemology," which seeks to shine light on forms of knowledge that is oftentimes discredited by Western thought (e.g. folklore, erotic knowledge, magic, sentiment, scriptural, etc.).

In this dissertation the ethereal and that which is spiritual are closely related; however, I use ethereal to describe characteristics that make up the heavenly realm, whereas spiritual is more closely associated with a relationship with God. According to Houston Baker, manifestations of culture (e.g. arts and artifacts) are often defined in ethereal terms (1). Culture itself is not "the supernatural ethos that surrounds these things... [rather] the history of the people is the culture" (Baker 1-2). Our history (i.e. Black American women) is one that has maintained a thriving connection to the spirit (e.g. Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens"). That which is spiritual is defined in conjunction with or in opposition to the religious.³ Additionally, the spiritual seems to be more closely associated with a relationship with God. Though *Sula* mentions God a few times in the novel, none of the characters demonstrate a consistent relationship with God, thus I believe "ethereal" is more appropriate when analyzing the nature of the friendship in the novel. Contrastingly, I believe "spiritual" is more fitting for the analysis of *The Color Purple* and *Sugar* because protagonists in both novels acknowledge a personal relationship with God. For example, Celie addresses most of her letters to God, and even though her relationship with God is strained, she eventually seeks reconciliation with the Divine. In *Sugar* Pearl's relationship with God is noted from the very beginning as God did not grant her request to die because he had work for her to do (McFadden 7).

³ e.g. Alice Walker's admission that *The Color Purple* is "theological work examining [her] journey from the religious back to the spiritual" (n.p.).

In 1974, a year after *Sula* was published, the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black feminists, began meeting in an effort to define a Black feminist politic. According to the Collective, Black women are valuable and our liberation is necessary because of the human need to seek actualization (212). While articulating a Black feminist politic, the Collective acknowledges sexism and racism as realities that have hindered our ability to “look more deeply into our own experiences” in order that we may “share and grow our consciousness” (212). I believe friendships are sites where Black women begin to cultivate the consciousness needed to inspire liberation. In varying forms, the authors in this study use fiction to demonstrate friendship as an important component in the manifestation of a Black feminist/womanist consciousness.

The consciousness that is present among the friends in this study acknowledges both reason and emotion. Barbara Christian’s “The Race for Theory” helps explain this presence in the selected works. Christian writes, “In literature I sensed the possibility of the integration of feeling/knowledge, rather than the split between the abstract and the emotional in which Western philosophy inevitably indulged” (352). Though she does not label this integration of feeling and knowing, Patricia Hill Collins’ description of a Black feminist epistemology appears to extend Christian’s ideas. Collins writes,

In producing the specialized knowledge of U.S. Black feminist thought, Black women intellectuals often encounter two distinct epistemologies: one representing elite White male interests and the other expressing Black feminist concerns. Whereas many variations of these epistemologies exist, it is possible to distill some of their distinguishing features that transcend differences among paradigms within them. Epistemological choices about whom to trust, what to believe, and why something is true are not benign academic issues. Instead, these concerns tap the fundamental question of which versions of truth will prevail. (270-71)

The truths of subjugated people rarely dominate academic discourses. Similarly, topics that oppose traditional teachings of reason are pushed to the margins as well. Theories that engage the spirit are not given much credence in academia, and when these frameworks are expressed through the lens of the oppressed, the erasure is even more evident.

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins describes attempts to exclude Black women's perspectives in various settings. She also notes the importance of friendship when it comes to resisting such exclusion. Collins writes, "In the comfort of daily conversations...African American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist. Black women's fiction . . . is one important location where Black women's friendships are taken seriously" (113). Collins mentions specific friendship characteristics within Black women's fiction. For example, friendship provides a safe space that is instrumental in helping Black women construct individual and collective voices (Collins 112). Furthermore, she intimates friendship is important considering the ways in which it supports and renews (Collins 114). My research acknowledges Collins' statements as true and examines the presence of a Black feminist consciousness within the friendships depicted in *Sula*, *The Color Purple*, and *Sugar*.

Literary portrayals of friendship by African American women are important locations of Black feminist and spiritual consciousness. Collins writes, "Traditionally, the suppression of Black women's ideas within white-male-controlled social institutions led African American women to use...literature...[as an] important location for constructing a Black feminist consciousness" ("Black Feminist Epistemology" 269-70). This consciousness is political in nature and notes a shared awareness of the ways in which sexual identity and racial identity combine to make Black women's political struggle unique (Combahee River Collective 212). Additionally, a Black feminist consciousness places an emphasis on the spiritual. Collins highlights the significance of biblical

principles in African American lives, noting the teachings are selected for their applicability to lived experiences and “become symbolic representations of a whole wealth of experience. Bible tales are often told for the wisdom they express about everyday life” (“Black Feminist Epistemology” 277). Though it has Biblical undertones, spirituality in this dissertation is not solely religious. Rather, it is woven into the everyday existence of the women in the texts and their friends. When thinking specifically about Black women’s relationship to the Gospel, Johnnetta B. Cole asserts, “The Black woman has been forced to be the least among us, but she also symbolizes the best that is in each of us...[therefore] the Black woman, as the least among us, is a symbol of Jesus Christ”—the second part of the trinity (153). Thus, Black women are in a unique position to experience spiritual friendships since according to Cole, we symbolize the Son and have historically commented on our possession of an intimate relationship with the Spirit.⁴

Like Black feminism, womanism recognizes a shared awareness among Black women; however, the latter provides more nuanced language to discuss the emotional and spiritual aspects that are present. In the highly acclaimed collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Alice Walker defines a “womanist,” and some aspects of the definition are particularly relevant when analyzing literary portrayals of friendship. Walker defines a womanist as,

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength...[A woman who] Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.* (xi)

⁴ See William Andrews’ *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* and Deborah Gray White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*

Though it is not speaking directly of friendship, the term womanist is useful for helping frame the discussion in this study. The friends in *Sula*, *The Color Purple*, and *Sugar* embody womanist ideals, which inspire emotional and spiritual healing—a necessary step in the journey to actualization. Examining friendship in light of womanist definitions enriches the analysis of these women-centered relationships.

In many academic discourses there is a split between the political and the spiritual, however, studies that privilege Black women's experiences acknowledge the interplay of both. Audre Lorde's definition of the erotic helps reconcile the dichotomy between the political and the spiritual and is an important contribution to Black feminist and womanist scholarship. Though it is often associated with the sexual, the erotic is also a descriptor of platonic social bonds and is useful in explaining, "knowledge [that is] deeply born" (Lorde 56). The erotic as the "nurturer of all of our deepest knowledge" contributes to our awareness of the function of oppressive ideologies such as racism and sexism (Lorde 56). Lorde maintains,

Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe. (57)

When a woman internalizes oppressive ideologies spiritual and intellectual barriers are a likely result. I believe when erotic knowledge is cultivated—particularly when it is cultivated in the presence of one's girlfriend—there is a paradigm shift. When women are inspired by erotic knowledge the personal transformation that results has political implications as we become empowered to challenge the status quo. The fictitious portrayals of friendship examined in this study demonstrate

an erotic awareness that influence the characters' transformations and speak to larger discussions of Black women's knowledge production and validation.

An erotic awareness among the girlfriends in this study ultimately drives the friends toward intellectual and spiritual freedom. As mentioned in the introduction to *Sister Outsider*, Lorde's work is "central to the development of contemporary feminist theory... [and] is at the cutting edge of consciousness" (8). Erotic knowledge is empowering; thus, in a patriarchal society, women are taught to "separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex...it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical" (Lorde 55-56). Despite the fact that the erotic has been perverted, it continues to have an impact on women's ability to navigate traditionally oppressive spaces. Recognizing and examining the erotic gives women access to power that allows us to transform harmful mindsets, share and grow our consciousness, and improve our worlds. The fictional portrayals of friendship examined in this study demonstrate a consciousness in which the erotic serves as the bridge between womanism and Black feminism. Considering the magnitude of the erotic's power, I believe it is most effectively cultivated in the presence of one's girlfriend.

Camaraderie among Black women flourishes in spite of the power structures that seek to alienate them, and research shows the practice has been present for many generations. In antebellum America, the institution of slavery sanctioned physical and sexual abuse for enslaved Black women. Moreover, life on the plantation was also psychologically taxing for enslaved women. As Deborah Gray White mentions in *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, "We know enough about antebellum bondage to appreciate that most female slaves had to rely on themselves for protection..." (16). Enslaved women created methods to spread valuable information including hiding places, healing remedies, code names, and other resources that demonstrated their belief in solidarity (Dunaway 208). Black women have a long tradition of bonding, which has been a source

of psychic and emotional support and a source of vital survival information as well (Bethel 176). In the Introduction to *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, William Andrews likens the black spiritual autobiography to the fugitive slave narrative in that acquiring spiritual knowledge led to an awakening within. Spiritual and intellectual awakening sometimes happen in isolation; however, as the title—*Sisters of the Spirit*—suggests, one's spiritual awareness requires another's presence. Thus, a woman's friend plays a role in cultivating this consciousness.

Reading and writing were outlawed for the enslaved, yet despite the oppressive social milieu of the eighteenth century, there are records of some exceptional examples in which formerly enslaved women were able to develop and sustain friendships. Records show written correspondence between Phillis Wheatley, the first published African American woman poet, and a woman named Obour Tanner. Tanner was a servant to a family in Newport, Rhode Island, and according to the Massachusetts Historical Society, Wheatley and Tanner corresponded for a number of years and shared an interest in evangelical Protestantism (n.p.). When they were not engaged in religious musings, Wheatley and Tanner kept each other abreast of events that were taking place in their lives. In addition to discussing family dynamics and health, Wheatley also shared information regarding the publication of her book, *Poems on Various Subjects* (Massachusetts Historical Society).

Wheatley and Tanner are not the only Black women who were able to establish and maintain a friendship during the antebellum period of American history. Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus, two freeborn Black women exchanged letters during the mid-nineteenth century. In her collection, *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut 1854-1868*, Farah Griffin presents Brown and Primus's letters which highlight their friendship and show the women relying on each other during the racial upheaval of the mid

1800s. Though the letters were written more than a century ago, they speak to the importance and legacy of Black women's friendships.⁵

This study considers literary portrayals of Black girlfriends, because as Collins notes, "Black women [fiction] writers have led the way in recognizing the importance of Black women's relationships with one another" ("The Power of Self-Definition" 114). In a 1993 interview, Toni Morrison discusses the impetus that led her to write the novel, *Sula*. Morrison states,

When I was writing *Sula*, I was under the impression that for a large part of the female population a woman friend was considered a secondary relationship . . . Women, your own friends, were always secondary relationships when the man was not there . . . To have heterosexual women who are friends, who are talking only about themselves to each other, seemed to me a very radical thing when *Sula* was published . . . but it is hardly radical now. (*The Art of Fiction* n.p.)

Morrison has hypothesized that literature about Black women's friendships "[would] be overdone...and run amok" (*The Art of Fiction* n.p.). While I agree that a friendship among heterosexual women is not a radical literary subject anymore, I do not think that literary portrayals of these relationships have become trite. Moreover, there is certainly a space for critical attention to be given to such works. My study recognizes the need for a more nuanced approach when examining Black women's friendship, and so I analyze the ways in which the spirit shapes characters' awareness and the role friendship plays in refining that awareness.

This dissertation spans four decades, and each chapter examines the literary portrayals of Black girlfriends in light of womanism and Black feminist theory. I begin each chapter with a review of the relevant literature on the novels. Next, I employ a narrative analysis and consider specific scenes where the spirit of friendship is evident as girlfriends help each other through difficult and

⁵ I acknowledge the dynamics of Wheatley's and Tanner's friendship and Brown's and Primus' friendship would have greatly differed from other Black enslaved women during the majority of the population were not able to read or write.

adverse situations. The girlfriends experience a deeper level of friendship as illustrated by physical, emotional, and spiritual renewal.

In “‘Something Else To Be’: Examining the Spirit of Friendship in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*,” I explore themes of girlfriend subjectivity present in Nel’s and Sula’s friendship as they share and grow their consciousness in the midst of a racist and patriarchal society. In addition I present Nel’s and Sula’s friendship as particular to Black women as indicated by an African presence in *Sula*. When scholars discuss the African presence in *Sula* they acknowledge the displacement of binary ideologies. This displacement speaks to Lorde’s notion of the erotic, which declares the dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is false (56). Next, I examine friendship scenes that demonstrate an ethereal presence; a presence I believe is influenced by the erotic. Finally, I suggest *Sula* is the first contemporary novel that demonstrates girlfriend epistemology—a concept that explores the ways in which the ethereal influence girlfriends’ knowledge formation—I discuss girlfriend epistemology in the dissertation conclusion and intend on fully developing the idea in future work.

“Lovers and Friends of the Spirit: A Critical Examination of Celie and Shug’s bond in *The Color Purple*” explores the question, “Why doesn’t Celie perish in the wilderness?” and suggests the ethereal nature of her friendship with Shug is the primary reason. As a result of the friendship, Celie recognizes the divinity that resides within her. In addition to Biblical (spiritual) influences, Lorde’s erotic is also explored in this chapter. This chapter acknowledges the lesbian theme as the primary way Celie’s and Shug’s relationship has been viewed by scholars, while inviting readers to consider the nuances involved in the relationship, details that are characteristic of girlfriend subjectivity. Because of the emotional and spiritual knowledge that is explored among the girlfriends, the conclusion discusses *The Color Purple* as reflecting the themes of girlfriend epistemology.

Chapter three examines friendship in Bernice McFadden's debut novel, *Sugar*. When it comes to popular culture that focuses on Black women, McFadden's work is appreciated for its relevancy. However, there is a need to engage McFadden's work from a more scholarly perspective. Thus, one of the purposes of this chapter is to initiate a much-needed discussion of McFadden's work and her novel *Sugar*. "Befriending a 'Whore': Girlfriends in Bernice McFadden's *Sugar*" analyzes themes of girlfriend subjectivity while noting the manner in which Lorde's erotic manifests in what Bethany Jacobs calls the "Erotic Mother" (111). Like other girlfriends discussed in this dissertation, Pearl and Sugar experience a shared and expanded subjectivity that facilitates healing of pain and trauma.

In *The Color Purple* and in *Sugar* the friends grow closer as they help each other face various obstacles in their personal lives. Each woman is vulnerable in some way, and it is only through the friendship that she is able to face her past secrets and disappointments. For these women and the girlfriends in the entire dissertation, "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of difference" (Lorde 56). This sharing is an important part of the epistemological make up of the characters in this study and is indicative of a Black feminist consciousness as well.

The conclusion explores my notion of girlfriend epistemology, which I see as being influenced by a plethora of academic and cultural sites relevant to girlfriends' knowledge production. Girlfriend epistemology illuminates knowledge that is cultivated among girlfriends, particularly the knowledge that is often discredited. Similar to Quashie's admission that identity is a politic with a direct relationship to power, girlfriend epistemology holds knowledge is a politic that has a direct relationship to power as well. When discredited forms of knowledge (folklore, erotic knowledge, magic, sentiment, scriptural knowledge, etc) are studied and removed from concerns of essentialist

accusations concrete manifestations of girlfriend epistemology results. For example, Black girl magic and the virtual platform #BlackGirlMagic are cultural idioms among Black women that point to particular ways of knowing among Black women. Thus, the conclusion examines popular culture examples as indicative of a God-centered Black girl magic movement where there is a sharing of knowledge between girlfriends and more importantly a manifestation of the which is spiritual. My project connects two disciplines (African American literature and Women's and Gender Studies) to show that girlfriends, as illustrated in fictional texts, love, support, and inspire each other through sharing knowledge.

“Something Else To Be”: Examining the Spirit of Friendship in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*

“She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman.” (Morrison, *Sula* 121)⁶

The friendship depicted in *Sula* is a hush harbor in which both girlfriends can begin their journey to self-actualization. It is a formative novel with regards to women’s friendship because it features two “heterosexual women friends [talking] only about themselves to each other” at a time when same-sex friendships were viewed as secondary to heterosexual relationships (Morrison, “The Art of Fiction” n.p.). Black women’s friendships exist in a patriarchal and racist society, and *Sula* shows reaching autonomy within these oppressive ideologies is difficult. Because of society’s oppressive constructs it is difficult, if not impossible, for the Black female subject to journey towards autonomy in isolation. Nel’s and Sula’s friendship recognizes a shared social standing for the Black female subject and provides each friend a space where she can begin to “create something else to be” (Morrison, *Sula* 52). I take Nel’s and Sula’s creating something else to be as spiritual because they are inspired to develop alternatives to the lives they are living. I view the Spirit as a source of inspiration and creativity. Their journeys include an early recognition and acceptance of the transformative power of the ethereal. Thus, this chapter explores the spiritual nature of Sula’s and Nel’s friendship and the girlfriends’ willingness to cultivate their own consciousness in the midst of a racist and patriarchal society.

Early on, Nel and Sula create an alternate way of being, one that counters the ways their families and society view them. As a child, Sula overhears her mother telling a friend that she loves

⁶ I have not explored how or if this declaration applies to a lesbian relationship. Barbara Smith and other scholars have explored the lesbian overtones of Nel’s and Sula’s relationship, but I will be looking at the bond as a friendship relationship.

her daughter Sula, but she does not like her (Morrison, *Sula* 57). Meanwhile, Nel's mother attempts to break her spirit by "rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had" (Morrison, *Sula* 83). As young girls, and perhaps more in their youth than any other time in their lives, the friendship is a haven. As Morrison notes, "In the safe harbor of each other's company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perception of things" (*Sula* 55). Nel could show the enthusiasm that her mother tried so hard to calm (Morrison, *Sula* 18). And Sula finally had someone who loved and *liked* her. As Sula and Nel grow older, society's recognition of marital and familial unions as the most important relationships leave little room for the women to consider their own perception of things. Nel's and Sula's friendship space becomes a sanctuary in which each girl could explore something else to be. Their explorations are spiritual and are not relegated to a religious framework only. There is an ethereal presence that influences Nel and Sula's friendship, and I attribute this spiritual quality to an awareness of the erotic.

When embraced, the erotic gives women access to their spiritual power. In "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Lorde locates women's power in, "a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises" (36). She continues, "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" (Lorde 37). Lorde goes on to name this deep power the "erotic" and maintains that few women ever tap into its full potential. More specifically, she believes the innate spiritual power is stifled because of various oppressions (racism, sexism, classism, etc.). In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde writes, "The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is false...for the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared" (56). Lorde's definition of the erotic is important to my study because it acknowledges the spiritual in a larger context, one that coalesces with the political.

Additionally, the erotic is useful for a discussion of Nel's and Sula's friendship because it includes an/other and intimates that in order to be empowered by erotic knowledge, one must share it.

***Sula*: Affirming Blackness and Black Womanhood**

"I always thought of Sula as quintessentially black, metaphysically black...And dangerously female." (Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 153)

The scholarly work that has been done on *Sula* is extensive. In 1997, Gay Wilentz noted, "*Sula* has been read in numerous ways—for example, as part of an African American women's literary tradition, as a psychoanalytic discourse, as a poststructuralist narrative and as a lesbian novel" (134).⁷ Twenty years later, Wilentz's comment is even more apt as there have been more contributions to the above categories. The scholarship on *Sula* is wide-ranging; however, not all of the work is particularly relevant to my project, which is to analyze *Sula* from a culturally specific lens while paying particular attention to the ethereal characteristics of Nel's and Sula's friendship.

Though some critics view *Sula* as a tale of an unwonted friendship, it is essentially a story of two Black women who struggle to reconcile the need for a close bond and societal expectations of same-sex friendship. When examining Nel and Sula's bond, a number of scholars analyze friendship from a universal approach and fail to highlight culturally relevant aspects of their bond.⁸ I believe a culturally relevant analysis of the novel considers Morrison's admitted politics of identity and Morrison's comments on the novel. In a conversation with Claudia Tate, Morrison reveals, "Even when I'm talking about universal concepts, I try to see how people such as myself would look at these universal concepts, how they would respond to them" (168). Rather than view the friendship in universal terms, I have found it more useful to ground my reading in scholarship that is more culturally connected to Black women. My review of *Sula* criticism is by no means exhaustive; instead

⁷ Some examples include Deborah E. McDowell's, " 'The Self and the Other' Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female Text," Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, and Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism."

⁸ Some examples include Elizabeth Abel's "(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women," Anna Shannon's " 'We Was Girls Together': A Study of Toni Morrison's *Sula*," Michele Pessoni's, "She was Laughing at their God: Discovering the Goddess Within *Sula*," and Cassandra Fetters', "The Continual Search for Sisterhood: Narcissism, Projection, and Intersubjective Disruptions in Toni Morrison's *Sula*."

it is an analysis of works that help illuminate the discussion of Sula as “metaphysically black” and “dangerously female.” I also note the impact this characterization has on the spirit of friendship in the novel. In this way, I am able to gain a fuller perspective of those “aspects of Afro-American culture” that inform Morrison’s work (Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken 162).

In “The Other Dancer As Self: Girlfriend Selfhood in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,” Quashie examines Morrison and Walker’s use of an “otherness” discourse to represent the dynamic relationship between one woman and her girlfriend (187-88). According to Quashie, subjects are “layered and complicated, and more often than not, critical theories fail to interrogate these complexities and ignore the need for politically relevant analysis that engages those layers” (“The Other Dancer As Self” 189). Considering Morrison’s noted sensibilities as a writer are “highly political *and* passionately aesthetic” girlfriend subjectivity appears as an appropriate theoretical lens for *Sula* (*Sula* xiii). My analysis shows how the erotic, which bridges the binaries of the political and the spiritual, influences Nel and Sula’s friendship and begins a lineage of contemporary novels that demonstrate Quashie’s girlfriend subjectivity.

In his monograph, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory*, Quashie further develops his notion of girlfriend subjectivity. According to Quashie, “Girlfriend subjectivity is a critical icon through which Black women artists reconsider and reframe self and then memory and language—these canonical conceits of cultural theory” (*Black Women* 2). In their reframing, Black women “...sustain both a political ethos and a fantastical surrender” (Quashie, *Black Women* 14). Quashie’s work places a great emphasis on the political values that make a woman consider another woman her girlfriend, but he also acknowledges spiritual aspects of subjectivity as well. Many girlfriend subjects are “...meditative, engaged in an articulate spiritual ambulation” (*Black Women* 79). When it comes to *Sula* I am primarily concerned with the spiritual ambulation present in Nel’s and Sula’s

friendship, which I submit is greatly influenced by the erotic. Furthermore, I am interested in the ways in which the ethereal influences knowledge-formation and actualization.

Claude Pruitt demonstrates an understanding of the cultural aesthetic of which *Sula* is a part. According to Pruitt, *Sula* seeks to reclaim black women's place in "black culture and American history" (127). This reclamation includes, but is not limited to, an understanding and use of African knowledge and archetypes (Pruitt 119). Other scholars such as Jennifer Henton also note the cultural background of which Morrison's *Sula* is a part. A culturally relevant analysis understands there is a particular consciousness that shapes modes of receiving and transmitting knowledge. Thus, "*Sula* awakens Western epistemology from its nightmare of blackness, always dreaming that the African diaspora is a problem to be solved—in need of benevolence—instead of an insight into the human condition" (Henton 111). This insight includes an exploration of those paradoxical characteristics that exist within humanity.

According to Pruitt and Henton, *Sula* is rooted in an African worldview and dovetails the metaphysical blackness Morrison mentions in the section's epigraph. Furthermore, awareness of an alternative reality—one that displaces binaries—is characteristic of an African worldview. When it comes to *Sula* an African-based reading explores "...a cosmology that displaces binary oppositions such as reality/fantasy, science/magic, and good/evil" (Wilentz 127). Wilentz's point is illustrated in Sula's query of Nel, "How you know...who was good? How you know it was you?...Maybe it was me" (Morrison, *Sula* 146). Sula's questions reveal an awareness of an alternative reality, one that acknowledges life as a paradox and understands that distinctions drawn between binaries are often faulty—specifically the distinction between good and evil. Eva further reinforces this notion when she accuses Nel of killing Chicken Little; she intimates Nel watching Sula throw the boy in the water was tantamount to Nel actually throwing him in the water herself. The false binary between good and evil is further examined when Nel ponders, "Why didn't I feel bad when it happened? How

come it felt so good to see [Chicken Little] fall?” (Morrison, *Sula* 170). The binary is collapsed because until this point in the narrative, readers have come to view Nel as the character of superior moral consciousness; however, her musings further illustrate the collapse of the good/bad binary.

Morrison describes Sula as dangerously female, and like metaphysical blackness, this characteristic can also be explored in light of an Afro-centric approach that displaces binaries. Morrison’s explanation of the two strands of black womanhood supports this notion. In an interview with Bill Moyer, she states, “...I happen to think that [the two strands of black womanhood] need each other...the New World black woman needs a little of the Old World black woman in her, and the other way around. I don’t think that they are completely fulfilled without the other” (Morrison, “On Love and Writing” n.p). The integration of the old world Black woman and the new world Black woman speaks to a larger selfhood that is evident in *Sula*, one that Karen Stein and Kevin Quashie note in their articles. According to Stein, “[The] hero and the villain change roles, as [Nel and Sula’s] relationship grows into a larger selfhood” (146). And Quashie maintains that within girlfriend subjectivity, “...Black women ... surrender to (un)becoming as a process, a thing that is itself and its opposite” (*Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory* 14). Sula’s query to Nel regarding which of the two is “good” alludes to a larger selfhood, one that is both positive and negative (Morrison 146). Furthermore, Eva reinforces the notion of a larger selfhood when she says there is no difference between Nel and Sula (Morrison 168).

In addition to metaphysical blackness and female subjectivity, spirituality is another universal theme in *Sula* that can be read from an African perspective. According to Karla F.C. Holloway, “[Sula] becomes the embodiment of African spirituality...Sula, a woman of the African earth who has claimed the body and the spirit of that essential unity, and who has dared to live an expression of that unity in a culture whose survival threatens African values, is the ‘starting point’ of female imagination” (69). Holloway’s observation speaks to Sula’s declaration that she would “make

herself” instead of being “settled” in the way that Eva wanted and was customary for women in the Bottom (Morrison, *Sula* 92). Sula fully intends on creating who it is she will be in the world; this awareness represents an “essential Africanness (undiluted) that [is] difficult to sustain in a Western world” an awareness that ultimately “disconnects Sula from the women around her” (Holloway 72). According to Holloway, *Sula* shows “...what results when a spiritually empty civilization like the West is responsible for the evolution of a culture” (74). In other words, when Western ideologies—which are often spiritually defunct—are responsible for the evolution of marginalized cultures, those communities often end in ruin (e.g. The Bottom).

Displaced binaries in *Sula* are further explored with Morrison’s recognition of a God who accounts for various forms of suffering and evil (*Sula* 118). Alexander Allen notes, “In Morrison’s fictional world...God possesses a fourth face...that seems so inexplicable in the face of a religious tradition that preaches the omnipotence of a benevolent God” (293). The residents of the Bottom understand, “The presence of evil [and suffering] was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, and triumphed over” (Morrison, *Sula* 118). I believe Morrison introduces a fourth face of God to show the importance of communing one with the other in order to lighten the burden that comes with suffering and hardship. This point is demonstrated in Nel and Sula’s friendship when they are young girls. With their initial meeting, “...they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be” (Morrison, *Sula* 52). The girls realizing that they are neither white nor male and their avowal to invent an alternative reality in light of that information demonstrates the importance of an/other in the journey to actualization. Society’s recognition of marital and familial unions as the most important relationships leave little room for women to create alternative realities once they grow older. Sula and Nel possess both virtues and vices; however, aside from their friendship, there is not

a space for the friends to unpack the qualities that would allow them to triumph over oppressive societal expectations.⁹

Kimberly Idol's "Contemplating the Void: How Narrative Overcomes Anonymity in Toni Morrison's *Sula*" continues the conversation of the novel as a Black woman's epic introduced by Karen Stein. There is no mention of spirituality or divinity in Stein's essay, and Idol's work makes those connections. While she begins her essay with a more universal approach, ultimately Idol acknowledges, "*Sula* [as] a love song to a culture that wants its place in the larger history of mankind known...[Sula] is a holy and wholly sensuous creature, [that] strengthens this connection to the larger cultural lineage and a history of divine females..."(Idol 65-66). Sula possess a "metaphysically black and dangerously female" nature, which she attempts to manage while transferring the power of that nature to the people in the Bottom and more specifically to her friend, Nel. However, for the most part, her attempts are futile;

...[Sula] values herself as a citizen of the world at large, including the natural world and its forces...Her sin is rebelliousness, but, because she has developed an understanding of her connection to much greater forces than those that control the people in her hometown, she can find success in a broader community... [She] represents a human connection with the notion of [God] and destiny. She seeks knowledge and grapples with its consequences...Morrison describes Sula as a floating, drifting spirit...[yet] her last thoughts are of the friendship that helped make her whole. (Idol 51-52)

Knowledge of and a connection with the ethereal sets Sula apart from other members of the Bottom, but as noted earlier, the fourth face of God is not meant to be experienced in isolation. A

⁹ Black women in early to mid 20th century were relegated to domestic roles and expected to maintain other people's households as well as their own. They were rarely afforded the opportunity to talk "only about themselves to each other" (Morrison, "The Art of Fiction" n.p.).

relationship with an/other is vital. Though the friendship changes in nature, Nel and Sula's relationship remains the "deepest attachment and most profound influence on both of their lives" (Stein 147). Idol acknowledges the importance of Nel and Sula's friendship in facilitating wholeness. Her observation speaks to the expanded notion of selfhood noted in Stein's and Quashie's work.

The social climate in which Morrison wrote *Sula* is one that considered it a "problem" to be a "Negro" writer (Morrison, *Sula* xii). Faced with the possibility of not being taken seriously as an author, Morrison endeavored to remain true to her "own sensibilities" (Morrison, *Sula* xxiii). Morrison's sensibilities reflect the culture that informs her work, a culture that is rooted in an African perspective. In "African Tradition in Toni Morrison's *Sula*," Vashti Crutcher Lewis writes, "The reason *Sula* is too complex to be classified is because Toni Morrison writes from an African point of view—an African aesthetic" (91). Lewis continues, "Knowing the Africaness of the major character's name...places a demand on the critic to search for a blueprint for the novel based upon an African world-view—a blueprint that is sorely needed for African-American fiction as people of African descent wrestle with problems of identity..." (91). Lewis' article was published in 1987; three decades later a number of critical theories and frameworks have been introduced to examine African American fiction including critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and womanist theory. However, when it comes to *Sula* and other works that privilege black female friendships, Quashie's girlfriend subjectivity appears to address Lewis' call for a blueprint. *Sula* seeks to have Black women's culture—which has African roots, collapses binaries, and is sensitive to the spiritual—acknowledged in contemporary cultural discussions. In the following section I will explore this idea and offer a closer look at Sula's relationship to the ethereal and its impact on her friendship with Nel.

***Sula* and the Spiritual Nature of Girlfriend Subjectivity**

In 1993, Toni Morrison predicted literary portrayals of female friendship would, “be overdone and as usual run amok” (“The Art of Fiction”). It has been more than forty years since *Sula* was first published, and while there are several novels that feature Black women’s friendship, the critical examination of these relationships is not entirely on par. More specifically, there is not a study of the spiritual facets of friendship between Black women. When explaining the characteristics of girlfriend subjectivity, Quashie cites several examples from *Sula* and even alludes to an ethereal quality present in their bond noting, “The subjectivities [Sula and Nel] bring to each other both sustain and supersede the identity margins their bodies are framed by” (*Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory* 20). I am interested in that which transcends the identity markers that frame the women’s subjectivities, and in my work I pay attention to the spiritual essence that makes it possible “...for a Black female subject to bring more of herself into consideration...” (Quashie 18).

In this section I address the question: How does the ethereal influence friendship in *Sula*? I believe the answer lies with the erotic, which is rarely associated with the non-sexual, has been misnamed by most men, and is typically used against women (Lorde 54). I believe the erotic is the element that allows Nel and Sula to supersede identity margins as it unites the girlfriends in such a way that they are able to experience one another not only materially but spiritually as well. *Sula* breaks down binaries and offers an alternative concept of reality, which according to some scholars is indicative of an African perspective.¹⁰ *Sula*’s displacement of binaries reveals the power of erotic knowledge, knowledge that is displayed in the novel’s primary relationship, the friendship between Nel and Sula.

¹⁰ Vashti Lewis, “African Tradition in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*,” Karla F.C. Holloway’s *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Bi-Racial and Bi-Cultural Reading of the novels of Toni Morrison*, Claude Pruitt’s “Circling Meaning in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*,” (2011) and Gay Wilentz’s “An African-Based Reading of *Sula*.”

In *Sula* the erotic influences Nel and Sula's dream-like connection before they meet. Morrison describes their meeting as being birthed out of each of the girls' dream for a comrade similar to herself:

Long before Edna Finch's Mellow House opened, even before they marched through the chocolate halls of Garfield Primary School out onto the playground and stood facing each other through the ropes of the one vacant swing...they had already made each other's acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams. They were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream. (51)

The ethereal influences Nel and Sula's knowledge of an/other whose subjectivity is intimately tied to her own. It is as if the girls' spirits meet in their daydreams long before their physical bodies interact. Though Morrison does not use the phrase spiritual friendship when describing Nel and Sula's camaraderie, the "technicolored visions" and the manner in which she explains the girls' desire for a friend is indicative of "nature itself impressing upon the human soul a desire for friendship" (Aelred 61). As Katherine Bassard notes, the private interactions of the spirits allow African American women to experience "a conferral of personhood denied by larger constructions of African American and female subjectivity. For it is within this divine dialogue that a black woman's subjectivity is produced even as her agency is acknowledged and affirmed" (3). Even though Nel and Sula are young girls when they meet, they are already keenly aware of the double oppression they face—"being neither white nor male"(Morrison 52). As a result, the friendship is a source of spiritual sustenance and empowerment for them both. This connection demonstrates the spiritual nature of girlfriend subjectivity, which is informed by the erotic.

The ethereal nature of Nel and Sula's childhood friendship is present in other instances. For example, the two holes scene demonstrates Nel and Sula's expanded selfhood as well as the spiritual nature of their friendship.¹¹ The scene takes place during the summer of their twelfth year, a time when they are on the brink of womanhood and are becoming "skittish, frightened and bold—all at the same time" (Morrison 56). Furthermore, there is a "mercury mood" that lingers in the atmosphere as the girls wander about the Bottom "...looking for mischief...[and] contemplat[ing] the wildness that had come upon them so suddenly" (Morrison 56-58). The mercury mood suggests there is a need to "realign with synchronicity and the Divine" (Beckler n.p.). Thus, I read the two holes scene as symbolic of the young girls' desire to unearth their womanly power, a power that comes as a result of erotic knowledge. Nel initiates the discovery:

[She] found a thick twig and with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one too. When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began tearing up rooted grass to make a bare spot of earth...soon each had a hole the size of a cup...Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same. When the depression was the size of a small dishpan, Nel's twig broke. With a gesture of disgust she threw the pieces into the hole they had made. Sula threw hers in too...Each then looked around for more debris to throw in the hole: paper, bits of glass, butts of cigarettes, until all of the small defiling things they could find were collected there. Carefully they replaced the soil and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass. (Morrison 58-59)

One cannot uncover the power of the erotic in solitude, and this scene is symbolic of Nel and Sula's attempt to uncover it in the presence of a girlfriend. They each use their twig to dig into the earth

¹¹ Scholars such as Marianne Hirsh offer a lesbian reading of this scene, and while I believe it is a useful reading, I choose to focus on the scene as further support for an expanded selfhood and the spiritual nature of friendship.

and together they make one hole. As Lorde notes, the erotic is that which is "...deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, *being shared*" (emphasis added 56). As Nel and Sula seek to uncover their place of power (i.e. the erotic) the two holes eventually become one and indicate an expanded selfhood that reaches the core of their womanly power and includes both friends. As Lorde notes, "Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve...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" (37). The girls tear up rooted grass in an attempt to dismantle internalized oppressive ideologies that have taken root. It is an attempt to get back to the self, to strip away those things that have made them "skittish" and "frightened."

Though brief, there are moments in Nel and Sula's adult friendship that demonstrate a spiritual connection indicative of girlfriend subjectivity. When Sula returns to the Bottom, Nel is excited about her friend's homecoming. She compares Sula's return to having a cataract removed and getting the use of an old eye back (Morrison 95). She thinks fondly of her friend as she meditates on her recent arrival,

Her old friend had come home. Sula. Who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle, and a little raunchy. Sula, whose past she had lived through and with whom the present was a constant sharing of perceptions. Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself. Was there anyone else before whom she could never be foolish? In whose view inadequacy was mere idiosyncrasy, a character trait rather than a deficiency? . . . Sula never competed; she simply helped others define themselves. (Morrison 95)

Nel holds Sula in high regard, and it is clear that her friendship with Sula is one that is emboldened. She welcomes her friend's return to the Bottom and acknowledges the fluidity of identity that had been present in her friendship with Sula. Nel's realization that Sula is—in a sense—another version

of herself represents an extraordinary level of intimacy that was present in their friendship. Nel realizes her self-awareness and her awareness of the world are heightened in the presence of her friend. In the space of “constant sharing of perceptions,” the women contribute to a consciousness that Black women know and experience, which, according to Patricia Hill Collins, is primarily explored in literature (114).

Prior to Sula and Jude’s infidelity, Nel’s and Sula’s friendship is described in a charmed manner. This spiritual connection is birthed out of the erotic, which is characterized as, “The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, [which] forms a bridge between the sharers . . . and lessens the threat of difference” (Lorde 56). When Sula returns, Nel’s quality of life improves, and she appears to be more joyful. The scene is described as magical:

Nel alone noticed the peculiar quality of the May that followed the leaving of the birds. It had a sheen, a glimmering of green, rain-soaked Saturday nights...of lemon-yellow afternoons bright with iced drinks and splashes of daffodils...Even her own body was not immune to the magic. She would sit on the floor to sew as she had done as a girl, fold her legs up under her or do a little dance that fitted some tune in her head...Although it was she alone who saw this magic, she did not wonder at it. She knew it was all due to Sula’s return to the Bottom. (Morrison 94-5)

It is easy to view Nel’s reaction to Sula’s return as blissful, considering the reaction of the rest of the community. Sula’s return is “accompanied by a plague of robins,” and words such as evil, sinner, and anger are used to describe her return (Morrison 89-90). The atmosphere in the community when Sula returns foreshadows her future status of pariah.

The erotic, when honored and recognized as a source of empowerment, facilitates wholeness. Sula appears to have embraced the erotic. However, because of her embrace, “She is a blamed figure, but remains a powerful woman who flies away into wholeness, which suggests she is

necessary to the Bottom and not just as the villain her people imagine her to be” (Idol 52). Idol continues and places Sula in the lineage of divine females (66). Sula creates her life on her own terms, which is an act of resistance, an act that is also a part of a larger spiritual and intellectual liberation struggle for other women, specifically her friend, Nel. Through her connection to the erotic, Sula primarily seeks to empower her friend Nel; however, other characters such as Shadrack and Ajax are drawn to this characteristic in her as well. The fact that some male characters are able to recognize this quality in Sula indicates that the erotic, though it lies on a female plane, is recognizable and accessible to men as well.¹²

The erotic is useful in acknowledging metaphorical binaries as well. For example, it is plausible that something valuable can grow from the small defiling things Nel and Sula plant in the previously noted scene. I examine this notion in light of the novel’s two references to overripe green things. After Nel witnesses Sula and Jude’s affair, mud shifts and there is a smell of overripe green things; almost thirty years later, the smell of overripe green things re-emerges as Nel admits that it is her friend, Sula whom she has been missing (Morrison, *Sula* 108, 174). According to Lorde, “As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas” (37). These daring ideas can be transformative, if we do not fear what they reveal. In the moment of the adultery Nel has an inkling that it is her friend whom she most wishes to reconcile with, but she cannot bring herself to admit this as it represents an alternative reality, one that places a greater emphasis on female friendship than heterosexual marriage. In the moment of the adultery, Nel stands there, “...seeing it and smiling, because maybe there was some explanation, something important that [she] did not know about that would have made it all right. [She] waited for Sula to look up at me any minute and say [something]...comfortable and firm” (Morrison, *Sula* 105). *Sula* presents marriage as an

¹² It is plausible to develop Shadrack and Ajax’s relationship to the erotic alongside their relationship to Sula; however, in this essay I am concerned with female friendship and working through how the erotic informs Nel and Sula’s friendship.

institution that yields minimal to no benefits for women; however, friendship provides a sense of permanency and a means for women to uncover their own power. It is a radical notion that Nel would seek reconciliation with Sula after her adulterous act with Jude. It does not align with what society deems an appropriate response, so the erotic knowledge cultivated within their friendship manifests as the gray ball, which Nel suppresses for decades.

Sula and Jude's affair cements Sula's position as the outsider in the community, but more importantly it leads to the deterioration of the friendship. After witnessing her friend and her husband involved in an adulterous encounter, Nel's spirit is broken; she "hunched down in the small bright room [and she] waited. Waited for the oldest cry. A scream not for others...but a deeply personal cry for one's own pain. A loud strident: 'Why me?' She waited...But it did not come" (Morrison 108). As Nel tries to process her emotions, she longs for Sula's guidance "as though they were still friends and talked things over" (Morrison 110). Nel is unable to come to grips with the adultery, and it is more difficult because the person in whom she would normally confide is one of the culprits.

Since Nel does not have her friend to commiserate with, she turns her thoughts to Jesus as she laments the loss of her spouse and her position as wife. Nel bemoans the nonexistent sexual fate that awaits her now that Jude has left. She questions her lot in life:

For now her thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them...And what am I supposed to do with these old thighs now, just walk up and down these rooms? What good are they Jesus? They will never give me the peace I need to get from sunup to sundown, what good are they, are you trying to tell me that I am going to have to go all the way through these days all the way...with never nobody settling down between my legs...O my sweet Jesus what kind of cross is that? (Morrison 111)

Nel's admission speaks to the need to express one's sexuality, a need that often goes unacknowledged for Black women especially if the sexual release is not done within the institution of marriage. Furthermore, the abovementioned excerpt is noteworthy because it illustrates the important role that Jesus plays in Black women's lives. The ability to transcend negative life circumstances through spiritual interactions is critical to Black women's well being. And according to JoAnne Banks-Wallace and Lennette Parks, "Black women's spirituality is rooted in a very personal relationship with a higher power and strengthened through interactions with others" (39). Since Nel has lost her girlfriend, she complains to Jesus who is the epitome of a friend. And as Jacqueline Grant notes in *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, "For Christian Black women in the past, Jesus was their central frame of reference. They identified with Jesus because they believed that Jesus identified with them" (212). However the identification with Jesus does not seem to be enough for Nel, as she declares her situation, "...was too much. To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about it" was unbearable for her (Morrison 110). Nel is unable to come to terms with her new position as a jilted wife because she needs her friend to help process the loss. In this excerpt, Nel attempts to substitute Jesus for Sula, and while Jesus is a constant companion, Nel ultimately finds he is not enough.

Even though a woman's sexual needs are important, Sula seems to suggest that a woman's bond with her friend is more significant. Nel and Sula's conversation prior to the latter's death supports this assertion. Nel asks Sula for an explanation for her indiscretion, and Sula responds,

It matters, Nel, but only to you. Not to anybody else. Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don't get nothing for it... [Nel responds,] 'We were friends.' [Sula comments,] 'Oh, yes. Good friends.' [Nel replies,] 'And you didn't love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away.' [Sula exclaims,] 'What you mean take him away? I didn't kill him, I

just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?

(Morrison 145)

Though both women know women's sexual desires are just as strong as men's, Nel finds Sula's behavior unfathomable because it goes against the social code of women's conduct, and it ignores the societal boundaries of friendship. Because of the adultery, Nel breaks her friendship with Sula, and as Aelred notes, "The necessity of breaking off an intimacy is painful and unpleasant business, [but this can] be avoided by careful testing of acquaintances before admitting them to intimacy" (27). The problem is that Nel and Sula, like many friends, formed bonds before both parties reached maturation. In the earlier phases of life, it is not likely that one will test one's friend before admitting her into an intimate space. Aelred also concludes that, "Friendship, as a virtue, is eternal" (33), which explains why there seems to be a sort of reconciliation between Nel and Sula at the novel's end, even after death.

Though Nel and Sula's friendship suffers a rift after the adultery, each woman thinks of her friend after the offense. Their thoughts illustrate the necessity of the friendship. After she sleeps with Jude, Sula thinks about Nel and describes her as, "...the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her...Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits" (Morrison 120). Like Sula, Nel thinks of her friend after the affair as well. Nel recalled Sula saying, "The real hell of Hell is that it is forever." However, after the affair, Nel concluded, "Sula was wrong. Hell ain't things lasting forever. Hell is change" (Morrison 108). One key difference in Nel and Sula's recollections is that Nel does not want to remember her friend because she is upset with her. She thinks, "Why even in hate here I am thinking of what Sula said" (Morrison 108). According to these recollections, each woman has made a contribution to the other's subjectivity

and ultimately their actualization. A spiritual connection that points to a Black feminist consciousness drives their bond—a bond that exists despite offense.

Nel, like other Black women, was taught to devalue the presence of the erotic in her life, and as a result, the friendship suffers. According to Lorde, the erotic is the “personification of love in all its aspects—born of chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony... [It is] an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and the use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55). The gray ball of fur with the string that follows Nel after Sula and Jude’s adultery symbolizes the erotic life force that is always present but out of her reach because she refuses to acknowledge it. The terrible part was “the effort it took not to look” at the gray ball (Morrison 109). However, Nel cannot bring herself to acknowledge, “what feels right” to her and mend her friendship. Lorde says, “Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, ‘It feels right to me,’ acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding” (56). Nel refuses to acknowledge what feels right to her because it goes against the community’s response to an unforgettable act: adultery committed by one’s best friend. The gray ball symbolizes her need to become empowered enough to acknowledge the chaos in her friendship so that she can reclaim her bond with Sula and the erotic knowledge that sustains that bond.

At the novel’s end, Nel embraces the erotic and is in the presence of a spiritual force. In regards to Spirit, Wade-Gayles says, “Like the wind, it cannot be seen, and yet, like the wind, it is surely there, and we bear witness to its presence, its power. We cannot hold it in our hands and put it on a scale, but we feel the weight, the force, of its influence in our lives” (2). As Nel leaves the cemetery, she thinks about the past and quietly whispers Sula’s name (Morrison 174). After which, “Leaves stirred; mud shifted. . . [and] A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in

the breeze” (Morrison 174). Then Nel declares, “ ‘All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.’ And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. ‘We was girls together,’ she said as though trying to explain something. ‘O Lord, Sula,’ she cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl!’” (Morrison 174). Nel’s declaration is birthed out of a spiritual recognition, and though “We cannot hear [the spirit]...we hear ourselves speaking and singing and testifying because it moves, inspires, and directs us to do so” (Wade-Gayles 2). In addition, Nel’s admission that it is her friend whom she had been missing illustrates her disregard of erotic knowledge for almost three decades.

Black women are discouraged from acknowledging the erotic unless it is in service to men. Lorde writes,

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. (54)

When Nel cries out for her friend, she begins the process of reclaiming her erotic power. If she had forgiven Sula’s indiscretion decades before, the community would have scorned her. But Nel’s mourning her lost friendship at the end of the text suggests reconciliation would have been the most authentic response to Sula’s adultery. It appears that forgiveness would have been a decision informed by her “deepest and nonrational knowledge” (Lorde 54), but there is a connection present at the end of Nel’s revelation that seems to reconcile the bond between the two women.

Even if Nel and Sula fail on a “practical level” as Abel indicates (429), on a spiritual level they are more successful as illustrated by two of the most poignant scenes of the text: Sula’s deathbed and Nel’s visit to the cemetery. In the former scene, Sula is in a state of “weary anticipation” and as she dies, her last thoughts are, “It didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel” (Morrison

149). And in the latter scene, Nel's eye "twitched and burned" as she realizes that it was Sula whom she had been missing for the past three decades (Morrison 174). Nel seems to remember the days when they "were two throats...one eye...and had no price" (Morrison 147). Though it happens when it is seemingly too late, Nel honors the connection she has with her friend, one that indicates an erotic connection akin to the initial bond they experience as childhood friends.

Conclusion: *Sula* and the Call for Girlfriend Epistemology

The ethereal influences friendship and actualization, but it also informs knowledge production and validation as well. In *Sula's* Foreword, Morrison says an operating question for her and other daring women in the late sixties/early seventies was, "What would you be doing or thinking if there was no gaze or hand to stop you?" (*Sula* xv). In *Sula*, the girlfriends answer the question by creating something else to be. Nel's and Sula's creation results in knowledge that those not involved in the process might not understand. Nel's reaction to Sula's return is a fitting example of an ethereal knowledge shared between girlfriends: "Nel alone noticed the peculiar quality of the May that followed the leaving of the birds...Although it was she alone who saw this magic, she did not wonder at it. She *knew* (emphasis added) it was all due to Sula's return to the Bottom" (Morrison 95). Another poignant example is the knowledge both girlfriends share regarding the inability of a lover to be a comrade for a woman.¹³ These examples point to a shared awareness between the girlfriends, one that exists despite various iterations of time and space.

Traditional Western epistemology is unwilling to acknowledge Black women's brilliance. Consequently, our friendships are sites that affirm our knowledge and our truths. Morrison's epigraph for *Sula*, "Nobody knew my rose of the world but me...I had too much glory. They don't want glory like that in nobody's heart" is apropos for the discussion of girlfriend epistemology. The

¹³ In her musings, Sula recognizes a lover could never be a comrade for a woman (Morrison 121), and in the last scene of the novel Nel seems to have the same knowledge as she declares, "We was girls together,'...as though explaining something" (Morrison 174).

epigraph gets at the heart of an epistemological position that is present among Black women but not acknowledged in dominant philosophical thought. According to Henton, "...Western epistemology claim[s] its own expertise at the expense of other epistemologies (especially those of minority populations, who seem visible only as problems)" (107). Girlfriend epistemology provides a framework to validate knowledge that is produced and affirmed in the presence of a girlfriend.¹⁴ It is similar to Black feminist epistemology in that it "...challenge[s] all certified knowledge and open[s] up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth" (Collins 290). Girlfriend epistemology extends the discussion of Black feminist epistemologies by addressing the ways in which the ethereal (e.g. the erotic) influences knowledge formation. I liken erotic knowledge to other forms of discredited knowledge by Western standards (e.g. folklore, magic, sentiment), and believe paying attention to and using our erotic knowledge is empowering, but as Lorde notes it must be shared (56). Finally, girlfriend epistemology notes the ways in which friendship inspires intellectual and spiritual liberation; a part of this liberation includes the freedom to experience and share deep feelings, whether the feeling is joy, sorrow, or any other sentiment. Friends who embrace the erotic inspire liberation, which is a necessary step in self-actualization. In the presence of her girlfriend, a woman can begin to recognize her own glory and increase its splendor.

¹⁴ Girlfriend epistemology is an idea that I will explore in future work because just like the spirit influences girlfriends' subjectivities, I believe the spirit also influences girlfriends' knowledge and knowledge production processes.

Lovers and Friends of the Spirit: A Critical Examination of Celie and Shug's bond in *The Color Purple*

"...all the young women—our mothers and grandmothers, *ourselves*—have not perished in the wilderness. And if we ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we black American women are." Alice Walker "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens"

At its core, *The Color Purple* is the story of a young woman who—despite mental, physical, and sexual abuse—embarks on a difficult journey of self-discovery and spiritual renewal. Friendship plays a major role in that journey. Before Celie begins her narrative, readers encounter her stepfather's words; Alphonso commands her to tell no one but God about the sexual assault he commits against her (Walker 1). Celie does as she is told, and she initially addresses her letters to God. As a result of the terrible experiences she has with men—more specifically when she finds out Mr. ___ has been hiding Nettie's letters—Celie's view of God transforms to that of a patriarchal tyrant, and her friendship with the supreme ancestor is compromised. Celie's bond with other women in the novel, and in particular her bond with Shug Avery, aids in her spiritual healing and reconciliation with God. Shug is also the conduit that facilitates Celie's positive self-transformation. Unlike her contemporaries, Shug does not adhere to conventional social and gender expectations. She brings forth an exemplary depiction of one's relationship to the divine, nature, and others, which facilitates Celie's spiritual awakening and helps her gain a greater sense of self.

Celie's relationship with God is one example of how spirituality manifests in the novel; however, her relationship with the characters alludes to a spiritual presence as well. Celie's friendship with Shug is the most obvious example as there are many passages that describe their bond in a spiritual manner. Walker's take on the novel reinforces the importance of that which is spiritual. In

the novel's preface, she maintains, "Whatever else *The Color Purple* has been taken for during the years since its publication, it remains for me the theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual that I spent much of my adult life, prior to writing it, seeking to avoid" (Walker i). Typically religion is characterized by a strict adherence to doctrine, whereas spirituality is more transcendental. My analysis builds upon Walker's admission and explores the ways in which Celie's friendship with Shug helps her reach self-actualization and spiritual autonomy. As a result of her friendship, Celie's spiritual consciousness is raised in a way that the bureaucratic nature of religion does not allow.

I propose a re-examination of Celie and Shug's relationship. In this approach, I submit that Celie is more concerned with friendship, and that when one considers her contentment with having no romantic partner at the end of the novel, one sees she has replaced sexual desire with spiritual renewal. In the end, she even considers Albert¹⁵ a comrade; noting that instead of marrying him again in flesh and in spirit, she would rather be his friend (Walker 288). Ultimately, Celie places a heavier emphasis on her relationship with God, and her friendship with the divine is restored. It is important to acknowledge the role Shug's friendship plays in the reconciliation; not only does it initiate Celie's spiritual sojourn, it awakens her sexuality and catapults her journey to self-actualization as well. In this reading, Celie and Shug's bond is viewed as a spiritual friendship, and Kevin Quashie's "girlfriend subjectivity" frames the discussion.

One of the goals of my work is to analyze Celie and Shug's friendship as a bond that is unique to Black women, so, I use Kevin Quashie's girlfriend subjectivity, a discursive post-structuralist framework, that calls for a "useful essentialism" when examining Black women's works

(6). Girlfriend subjectivity acknowledges

¹⁵ I use Albert intentionally here and other places throughout the essay. When Celie returns to Georgia—after living with Shug in Tennessee—the dynamics of her relationship with Mr. ___ change, and she starts calling him Albert. I acknowledge the change here and in other places throughout the chapter.

...the many ways the discourses of white supremacy and patriarchy presume to overdetermine all considerations of Black selfhood as either an intercommunal tension (with whiteness) or an intracommunal tussle (between men and women). Here, then, lies a key divergence: the aesthetic of the girlfriend subject obsesses neither on white masculinity nor heteronormativity, but instead centers a Black female subject and her permutations, a model of subjectivity that operates from her sometimes plural and always volatile self-center. (Quashie 17)

Girlfriend subjectivity does not claim a singular way in which girlfriends interact; however, it does maintain that girlfriends are committed to exploring their lives and experiences as Black women with minimal emphasis on white supremacist and patriarchal ideologies.¹⁶ In addition, many girlfriend subjects engage in a “spiritual ambulation”(Quashie 79), which alludes to an internal source of power that is fluid and cultivated in the presence of one’s girlfriend. I liken this power to Audre Lorde’s use of the term erotic and examine Celie and Shug’s friendship as being influenced by its power.

This chapter’s epigraph suggests Black women in America have maintained an awareness of our spiritual power, which is the reason we have not perished in the wilderness of oppression. When one considers the toll slavery had on Black people’s minds, a thriving mental connection to the Spirit is magnificent. The mind, according to Hull, “is the instrument that can be used to knowingly and deliberately contact our own soul-spirit and the larger realm of soul-spirits of which that is a part. In that region is contained all knowledge, all creativity” (125). Thus, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and the process she underwent to create it, is but one example of the transformative and

¹⁶In the Foreword to *Sula*, Morrison discusses the daring nature of the women in the late sixties. Morrison writes, “Daring especially, because in the late sixties, with so many dead, detained, or silenced, there could be no turning back simply because there was no ‘back’ back there. Cut adrift, so to speak, we found it possible to think up things...use what was known and tried and investigate what was not. Write a play, form a theatre company, design clothes, write fiction unencumbered by other peoples expectations. Nobody was minding us, so we minded ourselves” (xiv-xv). I believe Morrison’s thoughts are a fitting illustration that demonstrate the essence of the girlfriend subjectivity.

creative power of the spirit. So why doesn't Celie perish in the wilderness of sexual assault, physical violence, and mental abuse? I believe—and this chapter will explain—Celie thrives because of her spiritual friendship with Shug Avery, which helps her realize who she is: “a radiant expression...of the quite distant divine” (Walker *The Color Purple* x).

Reading the Lesbian Theme through Girlfriend Subjectivity, the Erotic, and Womanism

Girlfriend subjectivity alludes to the erotic, which I believe is an integral aspect of Black female subjectivity. Furthermore, I believe in order for a woman to recognize and be transformed by the power of erotic knowledge she must journey towards autonomy in the presence of her girlfriend. According to Lorde, the erotic's power is “rooted in our unexpressed or unrecognized feelings” (53). Thus, if one does not have an/other with whom she can reveal the unspeakable or the unthinkable she will be ill equipped to recognize and harness the power that is within her. Referring to the sensual element of the erotic, Tracy L. Bealer believes *The Color Purple* “conceptually affirms the power of erotic pleasure . . . by making Celie's acquisition of the truth...dependent upon her reclamation of her sexuality” (34). While Bealer's analysis is cogent, she and other scholars miss the fact that the erotic—aside from its sensual association—is a source of internal power. bell hooks also disregards the power of the erotic in her analysis. hooks' primary argument is that lesbianism in the novel loses its radical implication because Shug and Celie's relationship does not “threaten male-female bonding” (457). Moreover, Celie and Shug's relationship is not radical because it does not create an awareness of oppressive forces nor does it recognize the way those forces might be transformed (hooks 465). I agree with hooks' claim that the lesbian theme is not radical, but a womanist reading of the theme dispels her declaration that there is no recognition of the ways in which oppressive forces might be transformed. This section offers a womanist reading of the lesbian theme and at the end focuses on the ways girlfriend subjectivity and the erotic enhance the discussion.

In “‘Dear Everything’: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* as Womanist Utopia,” Keith Byerman reads the novel as representative of a utopia based on a womanist ideology. He focuses on four themes in his discussion of Walker’s womanist utopia; however, his analysis of male-female relationships and gender roles is the most relevant to my work. Byerman writes,

The utopia could not fully develop until women found alternatives to masculine control. For Walker, this means the discovery of female bonding and the joining together of women for mutual nurture. In *The Color Purple* this has both sexual and social connotations...what is crucial here is not the homosexual encounter so much as the rejection of sex as a form of control. This is made clear by the end when actual intercourse becomes irrelevant in the context of the shared love and respect of all characters. (181)

Byerman offers relevant analysis acknowledging the reclamation of power Celie and Shug’s relationship represents; however, he fails to name the power present in the women’s relationships and loosely refers to it as female bonding and female nurturing. As Lorde explains, “The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial... For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information...” (54). According to Lorde, men are the obvious perpetrators in misnaming and misusing the erotic; however, women sometimes fail to recognize the presence and power of the erotic too. hooks underestimates the power of the erotic when she writes, Walker is “Unable to reconcile sexuality and power, [thus she] replaces the longing for sexual pleasure with an erotic metaphysic” (460). hooks’ says Walker is unable to reconcile sexuality and power, but I think the evolution of Celie’s sexuality indicates reconciliation in that she recognizes she has the freedom to decide when and with whom she will express her sexuality. According to

Toni Morrison, “Female freedom always means sexual freedom” (*Sula* xiii), thus I believe the freedom Celie experiences points to the reconciliation of sexuality and power.

Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos’ essay, “ ‘As Purple to Lavender’: Alice Walker’s Womanist Representation of Lesbianism” explains the ways in which womanism informs content and form in *The Color Purple*. Women play a major role in Celie’s liberation, which according to Fraile Marcos shows, “*The Color Purple* as an exercise in the practice and effect of womanism” (121). Furthermore, she maintains the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug is the only “healthy sexual relationship” in the novel and is “Celie’s way out towards fulfillment and happiness” (Fraile Marcos 125, 115). Among other definitions, Walker defines a womanist as one who “*Loves the Spirit*” (*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* xii) and in her essay, Fraile-Marcos pays attention to the presence of the Spirit and notes the presence of the erotic as well. She writes, “Shug’s most important contribution to Celie’s self-realization is love, both sexual and spiritual”(Fraile-Marcos 125). Moreover, she describes Celie’s relationship with Shug as one that links both eroticism and religion. Although she mentions both the spirit and the erotic nature of Celie and Shug’s relationship, Fraile Marcos’ primary intent is to explain how womanism influences content and form. Thus, she does not fully explore the link between the erotic and the religious nor does she engage Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic.” I view this is an opportunity to contribute to the scholarship on *The Color Purple*, and in the next section I introduce Mary E. Hunt’s feminist friendship theology and engage Lorde’s erotic to explore the connection between the erotic and the religious and to enhance womanist discussions of Celie and Shug’s friendship.

In addition to Fraile-Marcos’ work, which was published at the turn of the twenty-first century, contemporary scholarship on *The Color Purple* continues to flesh out notions of subjectivity and identity that were introduced in earlier analyses. In “We Need a Hero: African American Female Bildungsroman and Celie’s Journey to Heroic Female Selfhood in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,”

Brenda Smith describes Celie's subjectivity as empowered and empowering. According to Smith, "heroic female selfhood" is a subjectivity in which, "the female protagonist achieves heroic status when she discovers or creates a 'community of equals'"(6). As does Quashie, in girlfriend subjectivity, Smith recognizes that for Black women the journey to positive selfhood is not a friendless undertaking. Celie's friendship with Shug "helps her confront, challenge and transform the stereotypical myths of female selfhood and ultimately integrate the outer and inner aspects of her self" (Smith 9). Integrating the outer and inner aspect of oneself is not easy feat. In fact, Quashie comments, "...there is a greater tussle between what is interior and what is not, a sense of how the interior is already exteriorized and what that means..." (6). Since the erotic is misnamed and misused as that which is pornographic (Lorde 54), it provides a fitting example of an interior aspect being exteriorized, yet it is not vulnerable to exteriority. In other words when oppressive ideologies attempt to corrupt or distort the erotic as a source of power, its power is still discoverable; the erotic is still capable of facilitating autonomy though it is exteriorized and misnamed. Shug's introducing Celie to a more healthy form of sexuality helps her embody heroic female selfhood and integrate the outer and inner aspects of herself. As a result, Celie perceives herself as a sexual subject rather than a sexual object and begins her journey to heroic selfhood (Smith 10).

Womanist readings of *The Color Purple* vary; however, scholars such as Margaret Kamitsuka believe these readings ignore the lesbian theme by framing Shug's and Celie's relationship within the realm of friendship or sisterhood (57, 58). Sexuality is an important theme in the novel; however, as Patricia Abrams notes focusing solely on the lesbian theme is a misreading that ignores Celie's loneliness, which is ultimately "a gift for readers as it helps reveal something to them of their own selves" (Walker qtd in Abrams 32). By the novel's end Celie's friendship with Shug—which includes sexual expression—helps her transcend the loneliness Abrams mentions, helps her reconcile her relationship to the divine, and helps her begin her journey to self-actualization.

A number of early articles on *The Color Purple* focus on Celie and Shug's lesbian relationship. According to Wendy Wall the lesbian theme depicts "phallic power [as] a transferable quality that may be acquired and abandoned at will...power [that] can be redirected" (88). Molly Hite views the lesbian theme as a "reconstitution of society" in which Celie removes patriarchal control over her body (266). Similarly, Linda Abbandonato maintains Celie's sexual orientation subverts the masculine cultural narrative of desire (1109). In contrast to Wall, Hite, and Abbandonato, Phillip Royster dismisses the lesbian theme; he does not see Celie as a willing subject who knowingly loves and enjoys being held by Shug, rather he sees her solely as a "victim of father-figure abusiveness" (368). While these readings have made great contributions to the body of scholarship, it has only been since the turn of the 21st century that critics have begun to rigorously explore the womanist nuances that exist in Celie and Shug's bond.¹⁷

Quashie's girlfriend subjectivity is a framework we can use to offer something new to the body of criticism while simultaneously examining early analyses of Celie and Shug's relationship. According to Quashie, girlfriend subjectivity is, "a self-centered expression of Black female relationality that is [political and] suggests...a subjectivity that Black women hardly know...something under-engaged or maybe even new" (5). I believe Black women know this subjectivity but rarely acknowledge it because its source (i.e. the erotic) is "dark, ancient, [and] deep" (Lorde 37). Furthermore, it is not new in the way Quashie suggests though it is surely "under-engaged." Girlfriend subjectivity, which is heavily influenced by formative works on Black female selfhood, provides language through which Celie and Shug's spiritual friendship can be examined.

¹⁷ Margaret Kamitsuka's 2003 essay, "Reading the Raced and Sexed Body in *The Color Purple*: Repatterning White Feminist and Womanist Theological Hermeneutics" notes some of the ways in which sexuality is overlooked in womanist theological readings of the novel (45). Thus, it has been relatively recent that womanist scholars have started to examine the intersections of sexuality with other aspects of womanism.

Experiencing Friendship, Discovering the Erotic, and Knowing God

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fail; God will help her at the break of day.” Psalm 46: 4-6

Prior to befriending Shug, Celie initially recognizes God as a friend. When Mr. ___ removes Nettie from his home, Celie tells her sister not to worry because as “long as [she] can spell G-o-d [she] got somebody along” (Walker 18). Celie continues to rely on God as she plows Mr. ___’s field and rears his children. Though her relationship with God is eventually strained, in the beginning God is Celie’s “an/other.” Girlfriend subjectivity suggests “*everyone* is other, that every subject comes to identity via a process of being (and loving) an/other... This process of selfhood operates from a negative or a deficit position—that of being (considered) ‘an other’—such that the deficit is neutralized or at least made normative”(Quashie 31). Initially God is Celie’s “an/other”; however, her initial view of the supreme deity is that of a patriarchal tyrant. Thus, her deficit is not neutralized or made normative until Shug becomes her “an/other” while simultaneously helping her supplant the patriarchal view of God. After Celie befriends Shug, the former develops a more intimate relationship with God, one that is characterized by love and liberation. Celie also comes to embody this section’s epigraph: “God is within her, she will not fail.” Furthermore, when she discovers the erotic, she discovers the “river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.” Most people view heaven as an abstract place that is to come; however, in Luke 17:21, Jesus tells the Pharisees that the “Kingdom of God is already among you.” I connect this scripture to Ecclesiastes 3:11, which states God has “set eternity in the human heart.” I believe Shug’s friendship facilitates Celie’s discovery of the erotic in which she finds God’s dwelling place and is able to manifest heaven on earth.¹⁸

¹⁸ I use Christian references because of my politics of location; however, I think this notion can prove true for people of various spiritual beliefs: (i.e. when one taps into the erotic, one can manifest heaven, paradise, eternity, utopia, or whatever term one wishes to use for that place of serenity).

Theologians have carefully considered the role of the divine in friendship research; however, according to Hunt's *Fierce Tenderness*, women's experiences have not been prevalent in those discussions.¹⁹ Hunt refuses to fall into the temptation of inserting women's experiences into existing models of friendship, and in her discussion she maintains, "women experience friendship as a plural experience including other human beings, ourselves, and the divine" (Hunt 10). Quashie's girlfriend subjectivity describes the experience as it is among Black women and notes that the girlfriend idiom leads to an investigation of selfhood that is "spiritual, fluctuating, and multiple as well as singular" (13). *The Color Purple* is an example of this relational trinity. When Celie befriends Sofia the triad nature of friendship begins to take form and unfolds in a revelatory manner. After she tells Harpo to beat Sofia, Celie has trouble sleeping for at least a month (Walker 37, 39). One day "a little voice" convicts her and she realizes she has sinned against Sofia's spirit (Walker 39). The discomfort Celie experiences after instructing Harpo to hit Sofia has physical consequences, which result in her inability to sleep. Furthermore, she sleeps "like a baby" (Walker 39) after she apologizes to Sofia. Celie's bond with Sofia is revelatory in that it "reinforces...the fundamental goodness of creation and the simultaneous need for divine-human cooperation" (Hunt 79-80). Celie's position as a girlfriend subject is intimately connected to Sophia in a liminal space that has material ramifications that result in her inability to sleep. Celie's revelation demonstrates the connection between oneself, others, and the divine.

Celie's friendship with Sofia illustrates the triumvirate nature of friendship, but her relationship with Shug epitomizes the bond between humans and the divine. Even in the beginning it seems Celie is spiritually drawn to Shug, and the bond appears to be more than a dyadic relationship. She asks her stepmother for the photo of Shug Avery that slips from Mr. ___'s wallet as he visits with Alphonso, and she stares at the photo "all night long" and dreams of Shug (Walker 6).

¹⁹ Ancient Greek philosophers have commented on the subject of friendship from a primarily masculine perspective (e.g. Aristotle, Plato, Epicurus etc.)

Celie has a strong desire to see Shug and invokes the assistance of the divine. Celie laments, “Lord, I wants to go [see Shug] so bad. Not to dance. Not to drink. Not to play card. Not even to hear Shug Avery sing. I just be thankful to lay eyes on her” (Walker 26). Celie’s initial interest in Shug seems to be fueled by a third component, one that is spiritual and fuels her desire to connect with Shug.

In Western ideologies, Quashie’s metaphors for selfhood (e.g. to be loved, to be held, to remember) are usually only portrayed within a sexual relationship. According to Quashie and Walker, when looking at the experiences of Black women, these metaphors extend beyond the sexual and into the platonic as well. It is accurate for scholars to analyze Celie and Shug’s bond as a lesbian relationship; however, it is an incomplete approach because it fails to account for “inexpressible affinities” which Quashie’s girlfriend subjectivity seeks to engage (4). Moreover, Walker maintains,

The word ‘lesbian’ may not, in any case, be suitable (or comfortable) for black women, who surely would have begun their woman-bonding earlier than Sappho’s residency on the Isle of Lesbos...At any rate, the word they chose would have to be both spiritual and concrete and it would have to be organic, characteristic, not simply applied. A word that said more than that they choose women over men...Naming our own experience after our own fashion (as well as rejecting whatever does not seem to suit) is the least we can do—and in this society may well be our only tangible sign of personal freedom. (82 *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*)

Naming our experiences is tantamount to declaring our intellectual, spiritual, and sexual freedom, and I believe a girlfriend relationship facilitates this freedom in a way that a relationship focused solely on sexuality does not.

A number of scholars cite Trudier Harris, who in her essay, “On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes, and Silence” writes, “the lesbian relationship in the book represents the height of silly

romanticism” (157). Harris makes it clear that the primary focus of her critique is “the war between form and content” (156); however, she believes Celie and Shug’s relationship “reads like a schoolgirl fairy tale” (160). Scholars who affirm the lesbian relationship take issue with Harris’ analysis. Linda Abbandonato describes Harris’ view as “hostile” and accuses her of “missing the radical political implications of the shift from vagina to clitoris that the lesbian relationship involves” (1112). Christopher Lewis believes Harris disregards “black lesbian shamelessness...and betrays an interest in the promotion and circulation of heteronormative propriety” (168). Though Abbandonato and Lewis take issue with Harris’ analysis, her description of Celie’s and Shug’s relationship as reminiscent of a schoolgirl bond alludes to the metaphors Quashie mentions as a part of girlfriend subjectivity.

Typically bonds among girls are not as mature as those among women; perhaps this is the reason Harris likens Celie and Shug’s bond to that of schoolgirls. Furthermore, if the girlfriend relationship is the place where the “self becomes and is undone” then that would require a great amount of vulnerability and intimacy (Quashie 1). By the time girls become women, few are willing to be vulnerable in the presence of others. Thus when we see Celie and Shug behave in a manner typically associated with schoolgirls, it is foreign; it is a subjectivity “we hardly know” (Quashie 5). The “little button scene” is a fitting example. Since Celie has never enjoyed intercourse, Shug redefines Celie as a virgin and explains to her the feelings associated with orgasmic relief. She says, “right down there...is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git hotter and hotter and then it melt...Here take this mirror and go look at yourself down there, I bet you never seen it, have you?” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 78). Celie admits that she has not, and the two women take off like “two little prankish girls” towards Celie’s room; Shug guards the door as Celie explores her anatomy (Walker, *The Color Purple* 79). This scene demonstrates the playfulness and awareness of the body that is a part of girlfriend subjectivity (Quashie 180). Furthermore, it

speaks to a “school girl” bond Celie is finally able to have considering her adolescent development is stunted in various ways.

Celie and Shug’s bond is inspirational and displaces the patriarchal power Mr.____ possesses. When Celie tells Shug Mr.____ abuses her, Shug vows not to leave Celie until she knows, “Albert won’t even think about beating [her]” (Walker 76). Shug’s defense of Celie shocks Mr.____ and reveals the theo-politics at play within their friendship. According to Hunt, “Theo-politics [refer to] the fact that theology does not exist in a vacuum...the theo-political reason why women’s friendships have not been taken seriously as a source of inspiration hinges on the word, ‘power’” (60). Mr.____ recognizes the power of Shug and Celie’s bond towards the end of the novel when he admits their friendship “bothered the *hell* out of [him] (emphasis mine)” (Walker 275). Mr.____’s admission shows the transforming power of the women’s bond. It seems that contemplating the women’s friendship removed any hellish inclinations Mr.____ possessed. As Hunt notes, “Friendship takes the power away from an external authority and relies on committed bonds to prevail” (76). Once Shug defends Celie, the power dynamics within Mr.____ and Celie’s relationship slowly begin to change. The power shift is later catapulted with Celie’s invocation of a higher Spirit. She warns Mr.____, “...Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble...Until you do right by me...everything you even dream about will fail...every lick you hit me, you will suffer twice...anything you do to me, already done to you” (Walker 209). Celie describes an out-of-body experience in which she does not consciously identify with the force that curses Mr.____. The revelation seems to have “come to [her] from the trees...When [she] opened [her] mouth...the air rushed in and shaped the words” (Walker 209). Celie ends the revelation by stating, “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook...But I’m here” (Walker 210). Quashie reads the scene as a pivotal moment in which Celie identifies as “everything through which salvation is possible...Celie speaks a prophecy through the dirt, much like the biblical God speaking through the burning bush”

(Quashie 85). In this scene Celie is thoroughly connected to the power of the erotic—the place where the Most High dwells. She is emboldened as she speaks to Mr.____ and again epitomizes the section’s epigraph: “God is within her; She will not fail.” With the help of the Spirit and the support of her friend, Celie severs ties with Mr.____’s patriarchal authority. She rebukes the power Mr.____ has over her life, and Shug comes into agreement with her declaration by saying, “Amen” as if Celie had been praying or speaking in tongues (Walker 210). Shug’s agreement with Celie represents solidarity that is experienced within girlfriend subjectivity. And in the presence of one’s girlfriend the social expectation of Black women to be selfless is removed and “a kind of self-centeredness” appears (Quashie 16).

Celie and Shug’s friendship epitomizes the divine/human bond, but it is important to note the relationship starts off on a problematic note. When Mr.____ brings Shug home for Celie to nurse back to health, Celie is filled with joy and recalls the partnership she has with God. When Celie meets the frail and sickly Shug, she wants to shout, “Come on in. With God help, Celie going to make you well” (Walker 45). However, Shug’s perception of Celie is not as friendly. She cackles and says, “You sure *is* ugly” (Walker 46). The initial interaction between the women is a reminder that “structural enemyhood”—the result of social structures that systematically create and perpetuate inequality, injustice, oppression and/or poverty—can make it difficult for women to form friendships (Hunt 92). In Celie and Shug’s case, the institution of marriage is the social structure that creates the potential enemyhood for the women. Shug later admits the reason she initially treats Celie like a servant is because Celie is married to Albert (Walker 124). Her admission demonstrates structural conflict because initially Shug is determined to mistreat any woman who is married to Albert. She also mistreats his first wife, Annie Julia. However, her eventual friendship with Celie shows that it is possible for structural enemies to form friendships despite barriers. Shug demonstrates this notion when she takes up for Celie and tells Albert, “...you been mistreating

somebody I love. So as far as you concern, I'm gone"(Walker 275). Shug's friendship works to displace the physical power that Mr.____ wields over Celie. This transformation is possible because Shug and Celie's bond allow them to become change agents as they navigate intersecting oppressions.

Though they experience moments of sexual pleasure, Celie and Shug's bond goes beyond the sphere of sexual expression and reflects experiences where the spiritual and erotic knowledge coalesce. When it comes to being transmitters of knowledge, Black women aim to speak for themselves and refuse to remain "passive as knowledge is manipulated within prevailing knowledge validation processes" (Collins 285). Celie and Shug's bond demonstrate Patricia Hill Collins' statement. For example, Celie's description of sleeping with Shug is likened to a sacred experience. She declares, "Me and Shug sound asleep. Her back to me, my arms around her waist... It feel[s] like heaven is what it feel[s] like, not like sleeping with Mr.____at all" (Walker 116). As a religious mediator, lying with Shug creates a holy space for Celie. Celie's reflection is one of emotion and personal expressiveness, characteristics that are shunned in hegemonic epistemologies but acknowledged among Black women's wisdom (Collins 282). Celie's declaration that lying with Shug feels like heaven also alludes to Lorde's belief that the spiritual and the erotic are not conflicting. According to Lorde, when the two are separate, we reduce the "spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing" (56). Thus Celie's declaration unifies the spiritual and the erotic thereby reinforcing Shug's statement that "God love[s] all them feelings" (Walker 197).

As Katherine Clay Bassard notes, Black women negotiate religion and knowledge by "appropriating and transforming" that which is expressed by white hegemony (21). This negotiation is exemplified in the passages where Shug offers her view of God. As a religious mediator, Shug explains:

Just because I don't harass it like some peoples us know don't mean I ain't got religion...Us worry bout God a lot. But once us feel loved by God, us do the best us can to please him with what us like...I never did [find God in church]. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me...[the] big and old and tall and graybearded and white [God]...[is] the one in the white folks' white bible...I believe God is everything...Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it. (Walker 193-97)

Shug's musings help to cement her role as a religious mediator. The emphasis she places on personal experiences of the divine is a fundamental aspect of religious and knowledge-based discourses particular to girlfriends. In fact, Quashie notes, "This view of divinity institutes God as a trope of girlfriend revelation, and Celie's achievement of subjecthood is the realization of the God in her self" (85). In an attempt to counter Celie's initial hegemonic interpretation of God, Shug encourages her friend to experience God for herself and embrace a personal knowledge of and relationship with the supreme deity.

Girlfriend subjectivity suggests there is a merging of the sacred and the secular. There is a euphoric bliss that exists among girlfriends that is described as a "devotion that is selffull rather than selfless...abundance rather than lack. A reverie"(Quashie 96). Celie and Shug sacramentalize their bond by attending to one another's needs. According to Hunt, "To sacramentalize is to pay attention...[and] is a secular as well as religious right" (117-18). Moreover, sacraments are "concrete experiences with food and touch, dance and drink, prayer and silence, affirmation and music"(Hunt 117). This idea is present in the manner in which Celie and Shug express their friendship. For example, when Celie moves to Memphis with Shug she comments, "Us eat and eat, and drink a little sweet wine and beer too. Then Shug and me go fall out in her room to listen to music till all that

food have a chance to settle...Us lay with our arms around each other” (Walker 213). Celie’s description is reminiscent of the holy experience she mentions in which sleeping with Shug is described as feeling like heaven. It also is indicative of a moment where the friends are completely focused on themselves and each other, an abundant moment in which they are “selffull.” In that vein, this scene demonstrates Lorde’s point that the erotic connection is a self-connection in which one recognizes “one’s capacity for joy”(56). Ultimately, Celie and Shug create sacred moments among the secular, and those moments make their bond stronger.

When friends publically express the everyday love experiences they share, they make their bond sacred (Hunt 116). Celie is excited to see Shug perform at Harpo’s juke joint; however, Shug’s declaration that she named a song after her is what really makes the night special to Celie. Shug says, “...this song I’m bout to sing is call Miss Celie’s song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick” (Walker 74). The moment is special to Celie because it is the first time somebody made something and named it after her (Walker 74). According to Hunt, “...all friendships need some kind of public expression to give them reality” (117). Every aspect of friendship does not have to be declared publicly; however, “lifting to public expression an everyday reality like friendship invests it with meaning” (Hunt 138). Shug’s naming a song in honor of Celie and performing it in front of an audience at Harpo’s makes the bond sacred and moves the friendship to the public sphere.

Celie’s knowledge of God grows as a result of her friendship with Shug. Initially she thinks of God in human terms and like most Western theologies, she attributes a male gender to the divine. In fact, when she finds out Mr.____ has been hiding Nettie’s letters, she comments, “What God do for me? . . . the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other men I know. Trifling, forgetful, and lowdown” (Walker 193). Celie’s construction of God is that of an oppressive patriarchal dictator. It is no wonder that she has reached her breaking point with this depiction of the Supreme Being. Fortunately for Celie, Shug is able to help her reconcile her

relationship with God. Shug explains that man has thwarted Celie's perception of God. She tells Celie, "Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost...Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock" (Walker 198). Shug encourages Celie to disconnect her conventional notion of God as man and develop a relationship with God not as a social construction but as an intimate expression of the world around her. At the novel's closing, Celie seems to internalized Shug's advice. In a conversation with Harpo and Sophia, Celie admits, "I smoke [reefer] when I want to make love. [However,] lately I feel like me and God make love just fine anyhow. Whether I smoke reefer or not" (Walker 223). This admission implies Celie has replaced her desire for carnal pleasure with a desire to be more intimate with God, whom she now views as, "stars, trees, sky, peoples, Everything" as indicated in her last letter (Walker 291). Her admission is an "engagement of liminality...a practice [that is] synonymous with finding god in oneself, a self divinity that is a key aesthetic principle in the African Diaspora. Self-divinity personalizes the relationship between a girlfriend self and her god" (Quashie 83). Celie's friendship with Shug facilitates her spiritual renewal and reflects Black women's wisdom, which is out of consonance with traditional Western theology.

My purpose is not to deny the erotic expressions of Celie and Shug's bond; rather, I seek to examine their friendship irrespective of sexuality. As Hunt notes, the most obvious assumption of her work is that women's friendships include "physical and sometimes genital expression" (3), and in similar fashion, my work operates under this assumption as well. Concerning this literary portrayal of friendship, I recognize there is a different logic expressed in their bond, one that reflects girlfriend subjectivity and is fueled by womanism. Succinctly put, womanist logic is "moral, emotional, communal, [and] mystical" (Maparyan 41).

It is my belief that scholars have overlooked the non-sexual implications of Celie and Shug's bond, which are influenced by the power of the erotic. Moreover, Walker exchanges "the longing

for sexual pleasure with an erotic metaphysic...[which results in a] convergence of erotic and mystical experience” (hooks 458). This is illustrated at the novel’s closing when Celie is seemingly content with having no sexual interactions with Shug. She has undergone a complete spiritual renewal that has allowed her to know herself and the divine more fully. Gloria Wade-Gayles believes, black women “... imaged ourselves as a people imbued with spiritual power, a belief we retained from African culture...we appropriated the religion they gave us, invested it with the Spirit, and transformed it into a force that kept our humanity intact” (6). *The Color Purple* is a literary example of the appropriation Wade-Gayles mentions. The novel is a poignant depiction of Black female bonding that results in the triumph of humanity and the indomitable nature of the Spirit.

Conclusion: *The Color Purple* and the Call for Girlfriend Epistemology

Considering the amount of time Black people were enslaved in America, a flourishing mental connection to the Spirit is brilliant. Though she was born free, Rebecca Jackson could neither read nor write; however, after her spiritual conversion, she was taught to read and write by the spirit within her (Walker, *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens* 73). In 1830, more than one hundred years before the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts²⁰ were discovered, Jackson began journaling about her spiritual beliefs. Her writings would later be included in *Gifts of Power*, a biographical collection edited by Jean McMahon Humez. Jackson believed the spirit of Christ is manifested through one’s mind and serves as a source of personal power, which inspires radical change in the inward and outward conditions of one’s life (Walker, *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens* 78). This spiritual awareness has become further engrained in Black women’s epistemological makeup despite the fact that “for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read and write” (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* 234). Walker quotes Jean Toomer, who in the

²⁰ The Nag Hammadi Gnostic Gospels were discovered in 1945 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. The texts date back as early as the second century and place a greater emphasis on the intellectual revelation of Jesus’ message rather than his crucifixion and resurrection. The texts reveal an early strand of Christianity and maintain that only through the intervention of wisdom can biblical mysteries be revealed (Biblical Archaeology Society Staff n.p.).

early 1920's "discovered a curious thing: black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so *unconscious*, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held" ("In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" 231). Walker and other scholars suggest that perhaps Toomer's observations were unsuitable for a group of women who were very much aware of the spirituality they possessed.

In the beginning Celie's life is characterized by abuse and hard work, and she does not fight back when Mr. ___ mistreats her. She admits she does not "know how to fight...all [she] knows how to do is stay alive" (Walker 18). As a result, she fixes her eyes on that which is eternal and declares, "This life soon be over...Heaven last all ways" (Walker 42). The tension that exists between what Celie desires—to fight back—and that for which she settles—to fix her eyes on heaven—illustrates, "...the struggle for empowerment, agency, and subjectivity...[which] is evident in black women's negotiations with prevailing *religious* discourses" (Bassard 21). Before she realizes she is an expression of the divine, Celie views Heaven as far away and unattainable in this life. Celie's attempt to reconcile her temporal needs to feel safe and secure with her spiritual longings for paradise leave her in a state of confusion and discontent, which her friendship with Shug helps her to resolve.

Hegemonic ways of knowing devalue emotional life and spiritual knowledge. Hence, the role of girlfriend epistemology is similar to Black feminist epistemology in that it seeks to highlight "standards for assessing truths that are widely accepted among African American women" (Collins 274). In her analysis, Collins sometimes refers to Black feminist epistemology as Black women's wisdom and explains, "living life as Black women requires wisdom...[and] has been essential to U. S. Black women's survival" (275). Considering the fact that Sofia is nearly beaten to death when she curses and fights with the mayor (Walker 87), one may deduce Celie's response to a similar situation would be different, for she knows physically fighting against oppression is not wise if she wishes to save her life. Instead, she relies on Biblical principles as she navigates life's hardships, a characteristic that is inherent in Black women's wisdom. As Collins notes, Biblical ideologies are "selected for

their applicability to the lived experiences” of Black women (277). Celie’s belief that “Heaven lasts all ways” (Walker 42) is an allusion to the book of Revelation that describes a new heaven that will exist after all things have passed away. Celie’s declaration also gives credence to Collins observation about the relevance of Biblical thought in Black women’s lives. She does not engage in physical altercations, but the spiritual power she eventually holds over Mr.____ and the spiritual contentment she displays at the end of the novel further support Celie’s characterization as wise. Both are greatly influenced by her friendship with the divine, whom she comes to know more intimately through her friendship with Shug.

Prior to meeting Shug and discovering the power of the erotic, Celie fails to realize that she can experience the joys of heaven at present rather than living in anticipation of heaven’s future rewards. Not only does Celie and Shug’s bond validate the self-other-divine order of friendship, it also shows Celie and Shug as participants in a knowledge-making system particular to girlfriends, one that privileges “what is simple and lived”(Quashie 10). Collins maintains, “lived experience is a criterion of meaning” in Black feminist epistemology (275). And in regards to friendship, Hunt notes, “[it] is not just [an] ephemeral experience that cannot be analyzed...[it] is a real experience that cannot be negated” (10, 80). Because of these assertions, an epistemological claim for Celie and Shug’s friendship (i.e. girlfriend epistemology) is warranted. Though information revealed in an epistemological analysis is contextualized in time, place, and genre, certain claims must be made lest Black women’s experiences of friendship remain marginally studied.

Befriending a “Whore”: Girlfriends in Bernice McFadden’s *Sugar*

“I know, from literary history, that writing disappears unless there is a response to it. Because I write about writers who are now writing, I hope to help ensure that their tradition has continuity and survives.” Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory”

Situating Bernice McFadden’s Work among Black Women’s Intellectual Legacies

Bernice McFadden’s novels have been more revered in the popular sphere than in the academic. Though there are a number of book reviews that provide brief critical analysis of McFadden’s novels, there is an absence of peer-reviewed studies of her work. In the address, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Toni Morrison discusses issues of canonization that I believe are worth considering when thinking of the dearth of scholarly work that exists on McFadden’s novels. Morrison notes concerns of race and the quality of form—which includes provocative portrayals of love—as issues in canonization. When thinking about the politics of canonization, it is clear to me that though McFadden’s work has not yet reached traditional canonization (i.e. white and male-centered), she has rightfully claimed her space among Black women’s intellectual legacies.

For me, situating McFadden’s work among its predecessors means addressing it in light of what Morrison has written on canonization. According to Morrison, It is in the interest of the “professional critical community to have [a canon]” (Morrison 128). Moreover, “Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range of criticism...is the clash of cultures” (132). In the clash of cultures that is canon debate, my job as a scholar is to show that McFadden’s work is “already legitimized by [her] own cultural sources and predecessors” (Morrison 162). When it comes to writing I believe McFadden shares a

sensibility akin to Morrison's. According to Morrison, her practice of language is deliberate as she seeks to highlight aspects of African American culture that informs her work (162). Furthermore, she has much respect for critics "for whom the study of Afro-American literature is...the serious study of art forms" (Morrison 162). One of the goals of this paper is to initiate "a serious study" of McFadden's *Sugar*, as I believe her work rings true to the culture from which it is created.

Race is an aspect of the politics of canonization. According to Morrison, canonization is "severe...because the claims for attention come from that segment of scholarly and artistic labor in which the mention of 'race' is either inevitable or elaborately, painstakingly masked; and if all ramifications that the term demands are taken seriously, the bases of Western civilization will require rethinking"(125-26). When it comes to canonization, the issue of race is contemporarily relevant as demonstrated in Bernice McFadden's comment in a *Crisis* interview. When asked if the contemporary Black woman writer still needs to resist disappearance and invisibility, McFadden responds, "Absolutely! Works by many brilliant writers are being ignored by mainstream publishers who...[shy away from] books that educate, celebrate and uplift the [African American community]. I believe that the new lynch rope is printed, bound and shelved"(McFadden, *The Crisis*, 30). McFadden's comment suggests it is not a lack of quality that prevents these works from being noticed by mainstream publishers; rather, it is race that plays a factor in the politics of canonization.

Discussions of quality of form are inherently a part of conversations of canonization. Morrison writes, "the definition of quality is itself the subject of much rage and is seldom universally agreed upon by everyone at all times" (125). She continues the discussion of quality by offering her satisfaction of Greek tragedies as an example. Morrison feels "intellectually at home [with Greek tragedy]... [It] makes available these varieties of provocative love because *it* is masterly—not because the civilization that is its referent [is] flawless or superior to all others" (125). Morrison's point that the form's mastery and its ability to make readers feel intellectually at home speaks to the

quality by which a work should be considered for canonization. When it comes to McFadden's work, mastery of form is indicated in the reviews. For example, Cayce Hagseth's review "Sugar and Spice and Everything Nice" addresses reasons *Sugar* should be the subject of critical inquiry. Hagseth writes, "McFadden's debut novel *Sugar* portrays a realistic balance of good and evil in its characterization and its authentic thematic substance" (1). Hagseth maintains the novel "acquaint[s] [readers] with the undiscovered grounds of congeniality and friendship" (1). He continues, "The story forms this incredible friendship between two women, yet it creates systematic problems by allowing these two to be friends. There is internal meaning in every word on the page as McFadden lures [readers] into this relationship" (2). The art of friendship and the internal meaning *Sugar* portrays may be undiscovered grounds for Hagseth and other readers; however, upon my initial read of the novel, I felt "intellectually at home" and desired to analyze the girlfriend portrayal, which I see as mirroring other examples of girlfriend relationships (e.g. Sula and Nel and Shug and Celie). In the next section I examine the spiritual nature of Pearl's and Sugar's friendship and suggest women who experience God as friend are able to display love and congeniality to one's girlfriend. Before I move forward with that discussion, I will further explain McFadden's mastery of form which is evident and legitimized by her literary foremothers and other cultural sources.

Initially published in 1983, the *Home Girls* anthology addresses the kind of black feminist work that was taking place prior to rigorous critical conversations surrounding some of our most noted authors. For example, Toni Morrison had not yet earned her most prestigious awards, yet author Renita Weems eloquently explains what Morrison's work means to Black women. In "Artists Without Art Form: A Look at One Black Woman's World of Unrevered Black Women" Weems writes,

Over the years the Black woman novelist has not been taken seriously. 'Shallow,' 'emotional,' 'unstructured,' 'reactionary,' 'just too painful' are just some of the

criticisms made of her work. That she is a woman makes her work marginal. That she is Black makes it minor. That she is both makes it alien. But these criticisms have not stopped the flow of her ink. The Black woman writer has insisted on portraying the tragic and the fortunate of her lot. And in so doing she answers the question... 'Who Will Revere the Black Woman?' The Black woman artist will revere the Black woman. For it is her duty to record and capture with song, clay, strings, dance, and in this case, ink, the joys and pains of Black womanhood. And the person who is sane, secure and sensitive enough to revere her art is the same person who will revere her life...[Morrison] tells us about the private sorrow and the brief joy of the women in our neighborhoods whom we have always wondered about—the strong and the weak ones in their most sane and insane moments, the selfish and the selfless ones in their creative and mundane tasks. (Weems 94)

McFadden's writing evokes a similar response as she too is committed to shining light on the unrevered Black woman. Though Morrison has praised McFadden's work for being "...searing and expertly imagined," as a Black woman novelist McFadden's work is still at risk of being pushed to the margins. It is necessary for Black women scholars to revere the works of Black women writers, lest we run the risk of our texts disappearing.

According to Morrison, portrayals of provocative love demonstrate quality in form (125). The love between Pearl and Sugar is a radical portrayal of redemptive love that is evident within the girlfriend bond. Hagseth's comment speaks to the redemptive love evident in Pearl's and Sugar's friendship:

People named Sugar the moment they laid eyes on her. 'Slut. Whore. Bitch' Pearl named her differently. She named her with *love* (emphasis added) as she saw the features of her deceased daughter in Sugar's face...In spite of Sugar's shameful

career, Pearl becomes friends with [Sugar] and ignores rumors of her history and lifestyle that are brought to her door day in and day out by the locals. They form a friendship that is stronger than the differences between them, and even then there is compromise in those. Pearl finds her wild side as Sugar finds her religious side. Both benefit from the lifestyle of the other, which builds...[their] friendship ” (2).

Pearl's love for Sugar is redemptive in that she frees her friend from the weight of the derogatory names of the community by refusing to see her friend in such negative and harmful light. Though Sugar engages in sexual activity that leads to the community's negative naming, Pearl refuses to assign the disparaging names to her friend. The girlfriends seem to have embraced a love ethic as described by bell hooks. hooks writes, “A love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well” (*All About Love* 87). A love ethic embraces a vision where “we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else” (hooks, *All About Love* 88). Pearl and Sugar are intimately connected. For example, their stories intertwine before their friendship even begins (e.g. the train scene in which Pearl mistakes Sugar for her recently murdered daughter, Jude). hooks writes, “We can collectively regain our faith in the transformative power of love by cultivating courage, the strength to stand up for what we believe in, to be accountable both in word and deed” (*All About Love* 92). This describes Pearl and Sugar's love for each other; Pearl is willing to defend her friend in the presence of neighborhood gossips. Moreover, both Sugar and Pearl are accountable to each other and the friendship by engaging in love acts such as gardening, baking, and reclaiming sensuality. Pearl moves against the fear of being also harshly judged and ridiculed for befriending Sugar and into a space of love and acceptance, which is ultimately a space that helps each woman grow.

Morrison and hooks speak to the rich intellectual legacies of Black women; however, there is still a need for scholars to examine new writers such as McFadden who are contributing to the

legacy. According to hooks the purpose of Black women's intellectual legacies is not "simply to resurrect forgotten traditions but to establish meaningful links between past and present to create a living foundation—a continuum of ideas and scholarship" (*Remember Rapture* 54). McFadden reminds us of this responsibility noting, "Legacies are delicate things. They must be tended to as one would tend an orchid so that it will continue to flourish and provide beautiful blooms" (*Glorious* 238). When thinking of the intellectual legacies of Black women artists, McFadden's reference to the orchid is fitting considering Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in which she honors the knowledge and creativity of our foremothers who planted "the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see" (Walker 240). The seeds from which today's intellectual legacies sprang were planted generations ago, and Morrison, hooks, Walker, McFadden and a host of other Black women scholars and artists know the importance of working to ensure passionate blooms. Like nurturing orchids, tending to Black women's intellectual legacies can be challenging.

McFadden contributes to Black women's intellectual legacies by possessing a writer's sensibility that speaks to Black women both inside and outside of the academy.²¹ *Sugar* blurs the line between literary and popular fiction, and it should be acknowledged and celebrated in the academy the way it is in Black women's popular culture. Grammy-award winning singer and songwriter, Alicia Keys revealed, "My favorite book in 2003...was *Sugar*...it's a great book. I love it. It's deep" (n.p.). And Issa Rae, writer and creator of the hit HBO series, "Insecure," lists *Sugar* as one of her "pop culture inspirations." Rae comments, "I love how her main protagonist is a dark-skinned black woman...[McFadden] has a great voice and a way of telling stories that feels so raw, so real, and she uses a lot of research" (Rae, *Entertainment Weekly*, n.p.). Keys, Rae, and other culturally relevant sources have recognized McFadden's excellence. Novelist Akosua Busia writes, "Bernice L. McFadden goes to the heart of her characters, challenging one to empathize and reevaluate

²¹ Bernice McFadden has written ten novels; six under her birth name and four under a pseudonym (Geneva Holliday)

conscious and unconscious judgments upon fellow human beings” (McFadden, *Sugar*, n.p.). And theblacklibrary.com celebrates McFadden’s language, and describes it as possessing “an almost spiritual grace.” Other popular sources have acknowledged McFadden’s contribution as a literary artist; however, academia’s reception is absent.

Sugar and other McFadden novels compel readers to evaluate questions of morality. In an interview with *Looking at Lit Blog*, McFadden maintains, “I hope that readers will tap into their empathy and use that emotion to better themselves, which will in turn better the world” (McFadden, *Looking at Lit Blog*, n.p.). Though McFadden is responding to a particular line in *Gathering Waters*, I believe that intent to move readers toward a more empathetic outlook is reflected in *Sugar* as well and is felt by academic and non-academic audiences alike. When asked about major issues facing African American women authors in contemporary book publishing, McFadden declares, “If we are not reviewed in periodicals other than those that focus on the African American community—our stories will disappear. If we are not made available to other readers around the world in and out of the African diaspora—our stories will disappear” (McFadden qtd in Ulen 30). The goal of this chapter is to initiate a much-needed academic conversation about *Sugar*. As I reflect on Barbara Christian’s query, “For whom are we doing what we are doing when we do literary criticism?” my answer becomes clear; I do it for girlfriends—both inside and outside of the academy.

Girlfriend Selfhood and a Love that Heals

The friendship in Bernice McFadden’s debut novel provides a space for the two central characters to begin the inner journey towards healing and the revelation of her own glory. The journey is a motif in Black women’s fiction during which a woman endeavors to discover more of who she is. It is a transformation in one’s awareness. Sula and Nel in Toni Morrison’s 1973 novel, Celie and Shug in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and Sugar and Pearl in Bernice McFadden’s *Sugar* all go on individual journeys towards a fuller selfhood. *Sugar* aligns with this legacy of fictional

girlfriends as McFadden presents each woman as a journeying subject who—through acts of love—surrenders to that which is perceived to be her opposite.

In this analysis I use Kevin Quashie's girlfriend subjectivity framework, a discourse that examines the nature of a Black woman's relationship with her girlfriend. According to Quashie, girlfriend subjectivity considers Black women "who surrender to (un)becoming as a process, a thing that is itself and its opposite"(14). Sugar is described as "Dark, loud and full of energy and song," and though her traits greatly differ from Pearl's, McFadden does not suggest these qualities make Sugar unworthy of love and friendship (218). When it comes to Sugar, essential questions surrounding friendship are raised: "Who said [Sugar] had to be demure, low-key, with an un-painted face and a Christian clean soul? Does that make a good human being, a good and decent friend?" (McFadden 218). The questions appear near the end of the novel; however, from the onset Pearl's actions dispel the belief that only modest women deserve love and friendship.

The presence of a girlfriend's love does not mean the journey to selfhood is uncomplicated. Sugar's past is filled with pain, hatred, and unsettled anger. One of the earliest sources of pain comes when five-year old Sugar talks to Caroline, another five-year old, who causes Sugar to realize, "She didn't have a 'mamma'" (McFadden 33). Caroline's mother chastises her for "...fraternize[ing] with those type of people," and Sugar internalizes her contempt (McFadden 33). More than two decades later, the recollection of the event causes a 30 year-old Sugar's face to become "...wet with tears" (McFadden 33). This incident leads to Sugar's desire for a mother figure and ultimately "an/other" (Quashie 25). According to Quashie,

The struggle of girlfriend selfhood is to 'capture the I in I,' to achieve radical self-possession...[which] is propelled by the political imperative toward repair: of making otherness a viable location of identity...This repair is not a reversal but is literally a *re-pair*, a re-joining of the severed self with its other; the seeing recognition of a

girlfriend who has been othered but who is truly one's an/other...The re-pair is not a clean healing but an attempt to engage an oscillating relationship between a self and its other. (Quashie 41)

Embedded in the discussion of girlfriend subjectivity is the merger of that which is political and that which is spiritual. Re-pair is political in that it is tied to a girlfriend's identity, and identity is a politic related to power and resources. Moreover, re-pair is spiritual in that it acknowledges the vacillating engagement between a self and its other. Since it is not the goal of girlfriend subjectivity to fully engage the spiritual, I use Audre Lorde's erotic and other discussions of spirituality to examine Sugar and Pearl's friendship.

Lorde's erotic bridges spiritual and political binaries, and in *Sugar* it manifests in what Bethany Jacobs terms, the "Erotic Mother" (111). Unlike Sugar, Pearl ultimately achieves a fuller subjectivity as a result of their friendship. Pearl transforms from a stereotypical mammy figure to an Erotic Mother, who is able to "privilege her own needs and capacities" (Jacobs 111). According to Jacobs, Lorde introduces the essence of the Erotic Mother in her biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. The Erotic Mother "...is a resource to herself, able to draw on her own creative 'life force' for substance and joy in an oppressive world"(Jacobs 110). The power of Lorde's "erotic" is rooted in motherhood, which embraces "nurturance, tenderness, and creativity," while resisting "conscriptio[n] to gender binaries, biological processes, or labor demands" (Jacobs 110-11). The roots of the erotic are steeped in acts associated with motherhood, but it does not necessitate one's position as a biological mother. Though she does not birth any children, Sugar has access to the erotic because it emerges from the act of mothering, and according to Jacobs, society places maternal expectations on all women (110). Sugar is aware of the power of the erotic; however, mere awareness does not prove enough to lead her into a full transformation. Conversely, she does facilitate Pearl's transformation into an Erotic Mother.

Jacobs' Erotic Mother is related to Toni C. King and S. Alease Ferguson's notion of the "Motherline." According to King and Ferguson, the Motherline includes, "allomothers [sic] ...who helped mother us by developing our characters, providing us with emotional support...[and] play[ing] a role in our mothering" (xii). This exchange of information is not passive, and the stories mothers and "allomothers" share help women achieve psychic connections to generations of feminine wisdom (King and Ferguson 1-2). The Motherline is reminiscent of Lorde's description of the erotic as that which is "strongest and richest within each of us, being shared" (56). As an infant, Sugar's mother abandons her, and the Lacey women take her into their home; however, they do not have the capacity to fully connect Sugar to the Motherline because they are burdened with their family's licentious history. As a child Sugar hears stories of two generations of Lacey family debauchery. She also experiences it firsthand. Thus, Sugar is in a vulnerable position and has limited access to the Motherline.

Oftentimes a woman's first "other" is her mother. And when the mother-daughter bond is positive, a mother is a powerful example of how to love and be loved. Lorde explains the importance of mothers to Black women noting, "If we can learn to give ourselves the recognition and acceptance that we have come to expect only from our mommas, Black women will be able to see each other much more clearly and deal with each other much more directly" ("Eye to Eye" 159). But what does one make of a Black woman who has never had a mama? What does one make of a woman like Sugar? Her skin crawls when the Laceys speak of their love for her. Sugar ponders, "What did the Laceys know of love?" (McFadden 120). Through the use of dramatic irony, McFadden presents Pearl as Sugar's "other" and stepmother who gives Sugar access to the Motherline and offers her unconditional love. However, Sugar's life shows even when an/other is present and one has access to the Motherline, self-actualization does not always come to fruition.

King and Ferguson substantiate this point, noting women who “stand to create self-actualized lives” or “lay claim to their own liberation” are not always victorious (xi).

Spirituality is a notable influence in the creative works and writing processes of a number of Black women.²² Girlfriend subjectivity acknowledges the spiritual aspect of a Black woman’s standpoint and comments on its absence in dominant discourses. More specifically, it speaks to the ways in which the spiritual informs Black women’s body politics. Restoring the honor of our physical bodies is necessary and “articulating a Black female selfhood that encompasses nonphysical permutations” is also important (Quashie 79). When asked if she believes in ancestral spirits, McFadden comments, “Yes, I consider myself a very spiritual person and...[I] believe that all of my books have been the product of a visit from a spirit or multiple spirits. I see myself as a viaduct of sorts” (Ulen 30). McFadden even infuses her fiction with spiritual ideals; she writes, “Listen, if you choose to believe nothing else that transpires here, believe this: your body does not have a soul; your soul has a body, and souls never ever die” (McFadden, *Gathering of Waters*, 16). This declaration alludes to the spirit in Black women’s body politics and is justified within the girlfriend subjectivity framework. Generally speaking, Black women are absent from power structures that control how our bodies are “imagined, marked, and controlled” (Quashie 79). By acknowledging and providing a space for the spirit, girlfriend subjectivity “exposes and complicates the binaries that constitute a socially accepted notion” of how we experience our bodies (Quashie 79). McFadden’s reflections on her writing process and the excerpt from *Gathering Waters* are examples of the spiritual aspect of girlfriend subjectivity. Furthermore, the comments speak to the spiritual element of Black women’s body politics, which has been widely ignored in mainstream poststructuralism.

²² In *Soul Talk*, Gloria Akasha Hull maintains that in the 1980s Black women writers began to engage spiritually on a deeper and more profound level (24). In my opinion that legacy has continued throughout the past three decades.

In *Sugar* the spiritual is also a part of the religious as well.²³ Though she is an avid believer and churchgoer, Pearl is spiritually depleted in the beginning. Her soul and spirit “departed [the] world the moment she touched the cold bruised brow of her [dead] child” (McFadden 7). When she befriends Sugar she seems to come alive again. Paradoxically, Sugar—the most notorious sinner in Bigelow—helps to revive Pearl’s spirit. Motivated by her own considerations of morality and friendship Pearl surmises, “There was nothing in the Bible that said you shouldn’t dye your hair. There were no words that said, Thou shalt not befriend a whore. No, [she] knew the Bible from cover to cover, and those shalt not’s did not exist” (McFadden 139). After Sugar gives Pearl a makeover, the latter feels beautiful and more sensual. As a result she begins to internalize the power of the erotic and engages in a “spiritual ambulation”²⁴ towards her own fullness.

Pearl’s and Sugar’s friendship demonstrates the enigma of Quashie’s girlfriend selfhood. According to Quashie, girlfriend selfhood makes “otherness a viable location of identity” and is “a political imperative toward repair” (14, 40). Before each woman can reach a fuller selfhood she must work through past memories of pain and trauma. Jude’s murder is Pearl’s primary source of mental strife, so once she unpacks the agony of her loss, she is able to receive love from her friend and enter into a fuller selfhood. On the other hand, Sugar experiences decades of sexual, physical, and mental abuse, which impede her journey to actualization. Pearl’s and Sugar’s commitment to love and empathy guides the women towards growth in moments of stagnation.

At first glance Pearl and Sugar could not be more dissimilar. More than two decades separate them in age, one is monogamous, the other is described as a “whore,” and one is a devout Christian, while the other “grieves on the inside” at the thought of attending church (McFadden 142). The inception and growth of Pearl and Sugar’s friendship show McFadden’s epigraph is apropos:

²³ I define spiritual as that which is transcendental, while I define religious as that which is doctrinal.

²⁴ According to Quashie, an aspect of girlfriend subjectivity includes “a spiritual ambulation” that moves the Black female subject towards “a graceful awareness of [her] fullness” (79).

“There’s a little bit of hooker in every woman. A little bit of hooker and a little bit of God” (Miles qtd. in McFadden n.p.). This point is reinforced in Sugar’s declaration that the only difference between she and Pearl was the latter, “...began her whoring life in front of a congregation, dressed white and with God’s blessing” (McFadden 134). Sugar’s comment alludes to the righteous and unrighteous aspects of a woman’s identity, which can be examined through Quashie’s girlfriend subjectivity. Girlfriend subjectivity posits love as an integral component of identity and also notes the fluid nature of subjectivity (Quashie 41). Consequently, girlfriend subjectivity humanizes the radical other (i.e. non-righteous hooker) because her subjectivity is intimately tied to the righteous woman with a “Christian clean soul.”

Overcoming emotional burdens and psychic trauma is a part of the journey to a fuller selfhood, and in *Sugar*, McFadden develops the role one’s girlfriend plays in the journey. The novel opens with the traumatizing statement, “Jude was dead” (McFadden 1). Jude’s murder is sexually and racially charged, and long after the burial, Pearl carries the pain of the loss. Pearl’s initial way of coping with Jude’s absence is to pray for her own death, but God does not grant her request. He has “work for her to do” (McFadden 7). Fifteen years after Jude’s death, Pearl befriends Sugar, and thus, her work begins. God has prepared Pearl “for such a time as this”²⁵ in which she offers love, mercy, and companionship to the community’s outcast. In addition to developing a friendship with Sugar, Pearl also labors to arrive at a new level of selfhood. Contrastingly, Sugar seems to have been “born with both feet turned backward...every step placed her one step closer to where she’d been instead of where she was trying to get”(McFadden 26). Sugar spends years internalizing negative emotions, so by the time she experiences genuine care and love from a girlfriend it does not prove enough to assist her as she journeys towards self-actualization. In *Sugar*, McFadden celebrates friendship;

²⁵ Since spirituality also refers to the religious in *Sugar*, I tie applicable Biblical scriptures to analysis. Furthermore, Pearl is described as Reverend Foster’s favorite parishioner and the perfect person to bring Sugar into the fold (McFadden 17). Thus, the reference to Esther 4:14c—“Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?”—is warranted.

however, she does not present an idealistic perspective in which affirmation from a friend inevitably yields personal transformation.

Once cultivated, Pearl and Sugar's friendship provides a space for each woman to begin to eliminate toxic ideals that have grown in her psyche. Love is the conduit by which this cultivation takes place. The attentive and patient nature of love is illustrated in the seemingly mundane acts the women undertake. Pearl attempts to befriend Sugar by bringing her a homemade sweet potato pie, but she accidentally drops the plate on the first visit. And on the second attempt, Sugar—annoyed at Pearl's intrusion into her home—slaps the pie out of Pearl's hand causing it to land on Pearl's head. After Sugar's initial irritation subsides, both women erupt in side-aching laughter, and thus the seed of friendship is planted. Since Sugar is never able to enjoy Pearl's pies, the two bake one together, which is “the maiden voyage to their friendship” (McFadden 60). According to Quashie, love is a Black feminist cultural idiom in the same manner as the word girlfriend; love is “a wordless work, our greatest intimacy...where the thrill and tumble of subjectivity most readily resides” (172). Much of the beginning of Pearl and Sugar's friendship is characterized by the “wordless work” of love. Though they spend a lot of time together and quickly become a part of each other's lives, “A lot was absent from their conversations despite the friendship that was growing between them. Some things can't be broached so soon. Some things must be left unsaid for a while” (McFadden 61). Initially conversations regarding both women's pasts were omitted as they opted for more neutral discussions and diversions such as going to town together. They also tend Sugar's garden, which lay dormant but comes to life after receiving a little love and attention. The physical garden metaphorically represents the garden that is within Sugar and Pearl—their souls, which also need a little love and attention.

When Pearl and Sugar begin to share more about their pasts, the sharing creates a space for their memories—good, bad, and indifferent—to live. According to Quashie, the ability “to

remember” is a key element of girlfriend selfhood (*Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory* 1). Furthermore, McFadden’s declaration that she writes to “breathe life back into memory” is a nod to the role memory plays in healing and in girlfriend selfhood (n.p. website). The freedom and encouragement to remember their pasts help both Pearl and Sugar in their healing process. A short while after Jude’s death, Pearl and Sugar’s paths cross; both have painful memories associated with the scene. While at the train station awaiting Joe’s nephew and his wife, “Pearl saw her. Saw Jude...[and] raced through the station toward the young woman [screaming] her dead daughter’s name as she went, “Jude! Juuuudeeee!!!!” (McFadden 39). Sugar’s memory of the same day is less vivid but is still indicative of the physical and emotional trauma she has endured. By the time she leaves Short Junction, she had spent three years in Lacey home debauchery, so on the day in which Pearl’s and her stories collide, she had merely, “...picked up and left with the next man that said, ‘Sugar, girl, you somethin’ else! You something special!’” (McFadden 63). Sugar had heard the stories about Jude’s murder, but because of small-town folk’s affinity of stretching a story into a tale, she did not believe the whole story. However, Sugar did believe Jude’s death “was a sign that her departure was right on time” (McFadden 63). The memories associated with the train scene are full of pain and trauma, which are in need of healing. Pearl, because her daughter had recently been murdered and Sugar, because she had had her virginity stolen from her and had spent three years working in the Laceys’ brothel. When trauma and pain are not healed the memories associated with events become embodied dangers. Pearl’s and Sugar’s friendship initiates the healing process and helps reconcile the longing for a daughter (Pearl), mother (Sugar), and friend (both).

Sugar and Pearl’s psyches are plagued with decades of pain and anger, but once the mental scars start to heal, each woman is able to freely give and receive love from her girlfriend. The love that characterizes Sugar and Pearl’s bond begins humbly and develops into an undeniable force in the face of criticizing townspeople. And though the effects of anger and pain are not fully

ameliorated in the novel, navigating life's snares appears to be more sufferable with the love and companionship of one's girlfriend.

Pearl's and Sugar's friendship promotes healing by being a source of spiritual, personal, and familial love. Prior to Sugar's arrival and the development of their friendship, Pearl's memory of Jude is dominated by what happened to Jude rather than remembering and honoring Jude's life. In fact Pearl had removed Jude's pictures from the family's photo albums and primarily discussed the "hideous, aching loss" of her only daughter (McFadden 167). Sugar encourages Pearl to honor Jude's life by discussing who she was rather than solely focusing on her murder and the pain that ensued because of it; "Sugar wanted to hear [more] about the daughter that took so much of Pearl with her when she died" (McFadden 167). To Pearl's declaration that she has already told Sugar about Jude, Sugar responds, "You told me about what *happened* to her, not *about* her" (McFadden 167, emphasis added). This moment is important because Sugar provides a space for Pearl to remember Jude and to release the anger and pain Jude's murder caused her. Quashie points to love as the antidote to healing mental dissensions, and describes it as "psychic" something "to be 'done' ... [Love] exist[s] only in process, only as unfolding" (*Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory* 171). Sugar's friendship gives Pearl space to discard the strife that has plagued her mind, which speaks to Quashie's description of love as psychic as it helps Pearl heal the mental scars of her loss.

Like Pearl, Sugar also has to work through the pain and anger she has internalized over the years. However, Sugar's pain seems more deeply rooted. When Sugar is 12 years old a man sexually assaults her, and "after he was done riding her, [he] sat on the edge of the bed, his face in his hands, and wept out his guilt. Guilty— 'cause he was laying with someone else besides his wife. Guilty— 'cause he was paying out money he was supposed to use to buy food for his family. Guilty —'cause the smell of Sugar reminded him of his own twelve-year old daughter" (McFadden 34). McFadden uses the word, "guilt" to describe the man's response; however, the characteristics Lorde gives for

hate are also applicable because the man possesses an attitude of mind characterized by ill will and destruction (“Eye to Eye” 152). In that moment the nameless man destroys Sugar’s innocence, and she becomes a part of the licentiousness of the Lacey home. According to Lorde, Black women grow up “metabolizing hatred like a daily bread,” which means, “eventually every human interaction becomes tainted with the negative passion and intensity of its by-products—anger and cruelty” (“Eye to Eye” 152). For the next three years Sugar metabolizes the guilt and hatred of other men, and even when she attempts to leave that life in Short Junction, she finds herself working in a St. Louis brothel.

Though Lorde does not list it, I believe self-pity is a by-product of metabolized guilt and hatred as well. McFadden describes the “self-pity [that would] slip into [Sugar’s] soul as she reminisced on her life” (26). The self-pity that makes its way into Sugar’s soul is merely an internal byproduct of the hatred she has absorbed throughout her adolescence and young adulthood. Recognizing she has never had any “good times,” Mary, the woman in charge of the brothel, asks Sugar, “Why you act like you hate everybody?” (McFadden 66) To which Sugar responds, “First of all I don’t hate everybody. I don’t even hate anybody” (McFadden 66). According to Sugar she does not hate anyone; however, her actions and demeanor suggest otherwise. Mary notices the effects of Sugar’s metabolized hatred and encourages Sugar to create a life with some good times; however, Sugar must first work through the pain and anger she has internalized.

Though Sugar considers Mary a friend, the level of intimacy she eventually develops with Pearl does not characterize their bond. She initially tries to fight the urge to connect with Pearl. One night Sugar awakens from a dream loudly declaring, “ ‘I don’t need you!’...They were bitter words...The words stayed with her, echoing in her mind...They were inside her head, living in her soul, and now she was holding them in, trapping them there for good by holding her hands over her ears” (McFadden 59). Not only is Sugar refusing to acknowledge a connection she internally longs

for, her initial refusal to acquiesce also speaks to the devastating by-products of metabolizing hatred. As her bond with Pearl grows, it becomes more difficult for Sugar to digest the truth about her past and the harsh life she has lived without the love of a mamma or a friend (McFadden 63). According to Lorde, “We are African women and we know, in our blood’s telling, the tenderness with which our foremothers held each other. It is that connection which we are seeking” (152). This seeking is evident in Sugar as well. Since Sugar’s mother gives her up before “the cord had stiffened and fallen off” (McFadden 26), she experiences a longing for a maternal figure for most of her life. Sugar’s longing is evident in her childhood interaction with Caroline, in the conversation she has with Mary prior to returning to Arkansas²⁶, and in her sorrowful questioning of the Laceys regarding her mother’s departure.²⁷

In some ways, Pearl’s friendship helps Sugar reconcile the pain associated with her growing up without a mother. For example, stories about Jude’s growing up are etched in Pearl’s memory, and through her re-telling they become a part of Sugar’s memory as well. When Pearl shows Sugar Jude’s photos and mementoes, Sugar muses, “If someone had brought [the] pictures to her and said, ‘Here you are in the life you can’t recall,’ she would have believed every word of it and ignored the slight differences that remained between Jude and herself...[Besides,] the smile was the same; sure and solid. Sugar knew that smile, it was her own” (McFadden 169). Sugar’s willingness to claim Jude’s memories as her own is indicative of her attempt to re-imagine a past unlike the one she experienced, which was filled with pain.

After Pearl shares her memories of Jude with Sugar, the two become psychically connected, and Jude begins to inhabit Sugar’s dreams. Sugar misinterprets the encounters as the jealous spirit of

²⁶ When Mary gives Sugar the telegram from the Lacey’s that explains her mother had returned, “Mary was grinning from ear to ear” because she believes no matter how long it has been one always needs one’s mama (McFadden 105). On the other hand, “Sugar didn’t know what she was feeling...Was it happiness? Anger? Sadness?” (McFadden 106).

²⁷The Laceys refrain from telling Sugar the full story of her mother’s madness for fear of causing her too much pain and grief; they did not recognize Sugar had been grieving the loss of her mother for her entire life (McFadden 124).

a deceased daughter, but it is more likely that Jude's presence serves as a warning and foreshadows more violent expressions Sugar has yet to encounter. In Sugar's dreams,

[Jude] spoke to her from those black and white still lifes, pleaded with her to go away from Bigelow before a tear would fall from one almond-shaped eye and roll down the glossy photo finish...finally falling off the rippled white border and into the vast darkness of Sugar's dream. She woke with that very same tear in her own eye and wiped it quickly away. Why was Jude coming to her, asking her to leave? Was it jealousy?...It could be jealousy. A jealous spirit looking in from the great beyond. Pulling back the layers of time and space and seeing that her mother's pain had finally lifted. Sugar supposed that Jude's spirit felt threatened. If the pain had lessened and become a distant memory that brushed against your thoughts every blue moon, then a memory of a child taken could walk in pains' retreating footsteps. (McFadden 187)

Jude's spirit is not jealous of the friendship between Sugar and Pearl rather; she is admonishing Sugar to leave Bigelow because she recognizes that society views Black women as last on the social ladder. Jude's murder is indicative of this notion. Her attack "had *white man* written all over it. (That was only half-truth). But no one would say it above a whisper. It was 1940. It was Bigelow, Arkansas. It was a black [girl] child. Need any more be said? No one cared except the people who carried the same skin color...Look at what *they* did to her" (McFadden 4 emphasis added). Though readers later find out Lappy is the culprit in Jude's murder, "they" in the accusatory, "Look at what they did to her" indicts the entire social system of mid 20th century America, one in which a Black girl child counts for nothing "except to her mama" (Lorde 158). The underlying assumption that Black women counted for less than nothing is further illustrated 15 years later when Lappy attempts to have Sugar meet the same fate as Jude. Jude's presence in Sugar's dream represents an

“indisputable *memory*,” which is a valuable attribute of Black women’s identity (Quashie, *Love Project* 152). When thinking of the indisputable memory of the Black woman’s position as “the least of these,” one should consider the fact that Lappy escapes punishment for Jude’s murder and his attempted murder of Sugar. The lack of punishment and accountability for Lappy reveals a social milieu that disregards Black women.

Jude and Sugar are forced to relinquish autonomy over their bodies, and though she is not forced, Pearl too has relinquished autonomy over her mind and her body as well. According to Seth, Sugar woke something up in Pearl because after Jude died, she “went inside of herself” (McFadden 162). Her friendship with Sugar helps Pearl liberate her mind from the pain associated with her daughter’s murder. She is finally able to mentally heal from “the vision of [Jude’s] mutilated body, [which she kept] buried deep in a section of her mind reserved for horrible things that scared and frightened her” (McFadden 40). Discussing Jude’s life and honoring her memory strengthens the connection Pearl has with Jude, and she contemplatively begins to speak to her deceased daughter (McFadden 194).

In addition to her mental reclamation, Pearl is also able to reclaim her body and her sexuality as a result of her friendship with Sugar. An aspect of Pearl’s empowerment is related to the body politics of nakedness, which she unearths in a conversation with Sugar. When Pearl asks Sugar if she is ashamed to take her clothes off “for everyone and anyone” (McFadden 132), Sugar responds by telling Pearl “I feel free when I aint got no clothes on” (McFadden 132). “How does being naked make you feel free?” Pearl inquires (McFadden 132). Sugar is unable to offer Pearl an explanation, but when Pearl later disrobes in the privacy of her bedroom and begins to re-familiarize herself with her body she is able to understand the freedom that accompanies one’s nakedness;

Pearl moved to close the window, and in doing so, exposed herself to the night...The night air moved seductively across her naked body. It was tantalizing and

invigorating... It felt so good, so right, so free. Suddenly, she understood. This sudden empathy she felt for Sugar sent her reeling back from the open window... What was she if she was able to take part in, understand and even enjoy an act that was clearly amoral? Had her acceptance of Sugar made her susceptible to her low-down traits? Was being a whore like having a flu—could you catch it like the diseases that hid and floated invisible in the air? A shaken, unsure laugh bounced off the walls. ‘I’m being so stupid,’ Pearl said aloud. (McFadden 140)

Pearl’s thoughts are indicative of a number of dos and don’ts associated with women who identify as God-fearing Christians. Church, families, and society present sexuality, which in Pearl’s case includes nakedness by default, as something that is profane. According to Sophia Nelson’s *Black Woman Redefined*, “The cruelest bondage you can put a woman in is to tell her that spirit is enough when she resides in a fleshly body” (146). In this scene Pearl begins to reconcile her spiritual beliefs and her need for sensual expression. Her empowerment is fueled by the compassion she feels for her friend, and she begins to embrace an aspect of her identity that has been buried.

Pearl’s reclamation of her body and sexuality are likened to her reclamation of the erotic power. Like memory, the erotic while also “large and spiritual is also immediate and embodied” (Jacobs 117). For Pearl, not only does Sugar represent the embodied memory of her sweet Jude, she also represents an embodiment of the erotic as well. Sugar is an erotic figure; her presence causes old lovers to “once again feel the fires of passion and desire take root and remain tangled in each other’s arms” (McFadden 176). Pearl is not immune to the effects of Sugar’s presence. In fact as a result of her friendship, she comes to embrace her sexuality and sensuality so fully that she has sex with her husband for the first time in 15 years:

After a moment, she flicked the light switch off and walked stark naked from the bathroom to her bedroom. In the gloomy gray morning light of the bedroom, Joe lay

on his side. His mind was slowly being pulled into the darkness of slumber and he barely heard Pearl enter the room. He would marvel later at the absence of the swishing sound that usually accompanied Pearl's entrance and the giggle that replaced it. He would enjoy recalling how Pearl climbed in beside him and pressed herself hard against his back, her legs thrown across his own, her breath, heavy with lust, against his neck. He would lick his lips in retrospect on the exact moment her lips brushed against the nape of his shoulder while her hand found the slant opening in his boxer shorts. He would not know that at the exact moment he realized his wife was naked against him and demanding in hushed, heavy tones that he fuck her...while she expertly guided his organ up and down between the soft palm and fingers of her hand. (McFadden 176-77)

This scene illustrates Pearl as an erotic mother figure, and one must acknowledge Sugar's influence on Pearl's emergence as such. The week Joe visits his family in Florida, Sugar and Pearl spend even more time together and their friendship continues to blossom. During that week, Pearl teaches Sugar how to bake and Sugar uses a large ripe cucumber to teach Pearl the technique of giving hand and head. Though Pearl "wriggle[s] her nose in disgust," she never takes her eyes off of the cucumber, and Sugar sees that Pearl has "finally allowed curiosity and possibility to couple" (McFadden 167). Thus, the erotic essence that Sugar possesses contributes to the revival of the sensual aspects of Pearl's identity. As illustrated in the above scene, Pearl transforms "from a repository of power, love, and labor for others into a powerful and generative resource for the self" (Jacobs 114). She is able to initiate sexual intercourse with her husband, which she had never had the confidence to do. This revelation leads to a dramatic transformation in her embodied experience and in her marriage as well.

The friendship helps Pearl embrace the erotic, and at the same time it helps Sugar begin to appreciate the seemingly small wonders of life. Sugar begins to notice the beauty of nature, and one afternoon she comments, “ ‘Ain’t it beautiful, Miss Pearl, . . . Just sky and land for miles, umph!’ . . . She was beginning to notice quite a few things. Not only notice but appreciate them in a way she never dreamed possible” (McFadden 128). Pearl’s friendship helps Sugar gain a renewed awareness and appreciation of life. Prior to meeting Pearl, “Sugar had never in her life taken the time to adore a tree or dote on a splendid blade of grass, but her growing friendship with Pearl was changing that. Mornings found a trick from the previous night dressing in the background of her room and Sugar eager to get him gone so she could watch the dawn break alone” (McFadden 166). As a result of her friendship with Pearl, Sugar starts to give more attention to everyday occurrences, which empowers her as her awareness grows and she is brought into contact with beauty and the order of nature. Though Sugar has a growing awareness and appreciation for the seemingly small things of life and though she begins to open up to the possibility of receiving love from her girlfriend, she still struggles to heal and view herself as a worthy subject.

Sugar does not see the fullness of her subjectivity; however, Pearl is committed to acknowledging Sugar’s otherness as intimately connected to her own selfhood. For example, she refuses to participate when other women gossip about Sugar, and she makes the bold declaration that the *Bible* does not proclaim, “thou shalt not befriend a whore” (McFadden 139). In these instances Pearl allows intellectual virtues (i.e. wisdom and understanding) to shape her moral life instead of adhering to the socially acceptable response of publically condemning Sugar. On the day of Jude’s burial, Pearl asks God to allow her to die (McFadden 7); however, God spared her life, and her survival ultimately bred a desire to live a more actualized life. Her friendship with Sugar assists with the manifestation of that desire. Furthermore, Sugar’s friendship re-teaches Pearl a lesson that transforms her relationship with God. She admits to Sugar, “I love you for helping me trust [God]

again” (McFadden 169). Sugar, not used to experiencing love, responds, “You think you love me because I remind you of Jude” (McFadden 169). To which, Pearl responds, “That may have been so in the beginning, but now I love you for you, now who you remind me of” (McFadden 169). Pearl sees through Sugar’s fragments of pain and anger and into her heart, into the place where the Divine dwells within each of us and inspires us to journey towards actualization.

Sugar begins the journey to self-transformation, which is initiated through her friendship; however, ultimately she falls back into the state of self-pity because of the guilt and anger she has metabolized. After she has begun to heal from Lappy’s assault, Sugar thanks Pearl and tells her, “I’m better now, not good as new, but I ain’t never been new, just borrowed, lent and given like secondhand things usually are. I am who I am, Miss Pearl, can’t no amount of soap and water change that” (McFadden 217). The community’s reaction to Sugar’s attack further illustrates her status as a castoff. Word had gotten around about her attack and the church congregation thinks, “Who was Sugar? Certainly not a Jude. She belonged to no one and nowhere. A whore” (McFadden 222). Unlike Pearl, the congregation fails to identify Sugar’s otherness as a viable location of identity. Though the congregation’s hatred is not as vile as Lappy’s, it still contributes to the disdain Sugar has metabolized. Sugar gets up in front of the congregation and declares her truth, which ultimately allows her to release the decades of pain and anger that littered her psyche. As Sugar prepares to leave Bigelow,

A quiet peace had settled over [her]. A peace she had never known in all her years. Even as she walked past the sad staring eyes of Joe and Pearl, the good-riddance looks from the Bigelow women and the forlorn glances of the Bigelow men, she was not fazed. Her hurt had been replaced with tranquility. The anger that had laid heavy in her heart for so many years was no longer present in her mind and soul. It had

dissolved with each step she took toward the pulpit and each word she spoke to those who cared for her. (McFadden 223)

Sugar's truth was that the only people in Bigelow who had been nice to her and treated her with dignity and respect were Pearl and John. Though our journeys to actualization do "not require anyone to be a primary resource to another," Sugar's friendship with Pearl suggests the discovery and honoring of girlfriend selfhood helps keep us from releasing our angers upon each other and ourselves (Jacobs 124). If there is no sustained commitment to cultivating one's friendship, one risks succumbing to the power of anger because as Lorde mentions anger is a powerful fuel.

Girlfriend selfhood affirms the "I" in each woman's identity and alludes to the collective power of Black womanhood. Pearl and Sugar develop a friendship based on love and compassion as each girlfriend strives to recognize herself and her other as a subject worthy of a loving and impassioned life. "Love is patient...kind...[and] does not dishonor others,"²⁸ and since it is a part of Pearl's and Sugar's identities, the girlfriends are able to acknowledge each other as a viable location of identity. As Quashie notes, "...Black woman loving Black woman is serious business, dangerous, rigorous, and necessary business" (28). When girlfriends love each other in this way, the journey to self-fulfillment is more bearable. Friendship in *Sugar* does not bring about an idealistic conclusion; however, both Pearl and Sugar experience moments where their bond offers healing for past traumas. According to Quashie, "...subjectivity is ultimately about change, fragmentation, and unsettling" (*Black Women* 176). Thus, the friendship helps Sugar and Pearl experience the revolutionary power of love as they both attempt to move past their most vulnerable places and acknowledge the pain they each have felt.

McFadden does not romanticize Pearl and Sugar's bond. In fact, *Kirkus Review* describes McFadden's treatment of friendship as "...gritty but heartwarming" (McFadden *Sugar* n.p.). Pearl

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:4-5

and Sugar both experience devastating loss. The former is violated and has her virginal innocence stolen, while the latter loses a daughter to a similar and more heart-wrenching fate. The heartwarming aspect comes from the women's endeavor to love themselves and each other in spite of the trauma and pain. In *Sugar*, McFadden honors friendship while capturing the successes and failures that accompany healing past wounds and entering into a space of love and self-actualization.

Girlfriend Epistemology: An Affirmation of our Intellectual Legacies

“You have no idea what your legacy will be. Your legacy is what you do everyday. Your legacy is every life you have touched, every person whose life was moved or not, every person you’ve harmed or helped. That is your legacy.” Maya Angelou

“Womanist Definition: ...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.’” Alice Walker

Intellectual Artistry

I met *Sula*, *The Color Purple*, and *Sugar* with immediacy; the language, settings, conflict, and characters all felt familiar. I was intellectually at home (to borrow Morrison’s phrase). Because their actions were not foreign to me,²⁹ I was especially drawn to the ethereal tone that characterizes a number of scenes in each novel, and in the previous chapters I have analyzed these scenes in light of Kevin Quashie’s girlfriend subjectivity. However, I do think many of those scenes also warrant an epistemological reading as well. For Black women, the acquisition of knowledge has historically been linked to spiritual freedom (Andrews 1). I believe the ethereal essence of girlfriend relationships is a result of the spiritual freedom that ensues when acquiring and refining knowledge in the presence of one’s girlfriend. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce central concepts related to girlfriend epistemology, to note scenes from *Sula*, *The Color Purple*, and *Sugar* where girlfriend epistemology could be useful in bringing forth additional insight, and to examine the cultural outcomes of girlfriend epistemology, which I see being manifested in the #BlackGirlMagic social and virtual movements.

Girlfriend epistemology acknowledges power structures birthed from the United States’ dark past, which contemporarily seek to inhibit the formation of epistemologies of Black people in

²⁹ i.e. In many ways I see myself, my girlfriends, and other women I love in the characters in these novels.

general and Black women specifically. The “Lost Cause” literary and intellectual movement is a fitting example of a group of people using their social and political power to spread racist rhetoric and knowledge more than one hundred years after the North won the Civil War. The irony in the name “Lost Cause” is this, though the Confederate lost the physical war, until recently they have been winning the intellectual war regarding which version of history would prevail among popular memory and intelligence. Herein lies one of the major objectives of girlfriend epistemology: to thoughtfully and accurately examine knowledge produced and refined among girlfriends in order to provide a counter-narrative that moves the discredited knowledge of girlfriends (e.g. sentiment, magic, scriptural, etc) from the margins to the center of an epistemological analysis.

Angelou’s sentiments regarding the uncertainty of one’s legacy is true; however, when we as scholars, build upon information from scholarly foremothers, we see that the commitment to Black women’s intellectual legacies surpasses the vain desire to dwell on one’s personal legacy. In the essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Walker describes her mother as “radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator” as she works in her flowers (241). Moreover, Walker’s mother is “involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty” (241). My interest and research on friendship is akin to Walker’s description of completing work the soul craves. I am aware that there can be a spiritual force influencing friendship (both personally and in fictitious portrayals), and I have made the conscious decision to pursue the intellectual work of explaining the beauty within such bonds. A Black woman artist creates in a system that does not necessarily value that which she believes is significant, and as Walker notes, plenty of Black women were driven to the point of insanity because their talents were unused, unwanted, and unappreciated (233). Despite the lack of enthused reception, Black women artists create and join forces with other like-minded artists hoping for a satisfying spiritual release with someone who knows and appreciates the value of their artistry (Walker 233).

For me, friendship, more specifically thinking and writing about friendship is an art, and I believe all artistry regarding Black women deserves to be examined. In the chapter, “Divine Inspiration: Writing and Spirituality,” hooks discusses the role the spirit has in the act of writing. She notes that most academics refer to the unexplained inspiring force as a muse; however, for hooks the force that compels us to write beyond ourselves is the work of the spirit (126). hooks states, “Initially, even though I prayed for divine guidance about my work, I was not really wholeheartedly willing to follow a path that was not in tune with my desires” (126). I can relate to hooks’ sentiments. Being open to the Spirit’s nudging in scholarly work is not easy, especially when one has been conditioned to maintain a certain academic distance from one’s work. No matter how much I practice closing the gap between the spirit and the academy it never gets easy. For me, thinking and writing about friendship in this way has been a labor of love. In many ways this project is the work of a community of Black women with whom I’ve had girlfriend relationships. This dissertation is inspired by some of my past experiences and how those experiences helped me recognize the Spirit of God as it manifests in friendship. Though I believe people from all walks of life will be able to resonate with analysis in this dissertation, one of the primary objectives in this project has been to highlight the occurrence among Black women.

The womanist definition that describes women as traditionally capable is one of the touchstones from which girlfriend epistemology emerges. Girlfriend epistemology defines traditionally capable girlfriends as girlfriends who *know* they are gifted and intentionally use that knowledge to inspire liberation for other girlfriends. From Harriet Tubman to Mary McLeod Bethune to Sadie T.M. Alexander and countless others, Black women in America have been liberating people from physical, intellectual, and spiritual bondage for over a century, which is not a passive feat. Audre Lorde notes the perils associated with seeking this type of liberation as “women so empowered are dangerous” (55). Girlfriend epistemology recognizes Black women’s legacy of

leading each other out of the wilderness and into our metaphorical Canada. This liberation comes through sharing our knowledge, our stories, our gifts, and our brilliance. Friendships are sites where this type of intellectual activity flourishes.

Girlfriend epistemology acknowledges the erotic and the spiritual component of acquiring knowledge. Walker believes one of the things African Americans have retained of our African heritage is the belief that everything is inhabited by the spirit, which “encourages knowledge perceived intuitively” (252). The erotic as a source of power helps girlfriends connect with one another and also helps us tap into intuitive knowledge. Within public spaces the erotic is perverted and its true nature is unacknowledged, so a lot of people miss out on the opportunity to see the ways in which our relationships and interactions with each other can be transformed. Discussions of the erotic are a part of the intellectual legacies of Black women, and the erotic, when embraced, can be used as a catalyst to transform friendships. According to Collins, “within capitalist marketplace relations, this erotic power is so often sexualized that not only is it routinely misunderstood, but the strength of deeply felt love is even feared” (163). A deeply felt love sustains girlfriends as they embrace the possibility of being free from obstacles that seek to impede knowledge. While it is true that meaningful friendships are not limited to Black women, girlfriend epistemology privileges Black women’s bonds and seeks to validate the knowledge and knowledge processes that make up our truths. If one of the girlfriends is not Black and/or does not identify as woman, there must be an honoring and understood commitment to the intellectual legacies of Black women.

Because I identify as a Christian woman, there is a privileging of biblical principles when it comes to my explanation of Black women’s knowledge as an empowering negotiation of intellectual virtues and vices. According to W. Jay Wood, “Intellectual virtues...include character traits such as wisdom, prudence, foresight, understanding, discernment, truthfulness, and studiousness among others,” while intellectual vices include traits such as “folly, obtuseness, gullibility, dishonesty, willful

naiveté and vicious curiosity, to name a few” (16). When it comes to girlfriend epistemology, Wood’s description of virtues is particularly apt. Wood maintains,

Virtues are well-anchored, abiding dispositions that persons acquire through their own voluntary actions and that enable them to reliably *think* (emphasis added), feel, and act in ways that contribute to their fulfillment and sometimes to the fulfillment of those with whom they interact. They allow us to negotiate gracefully and successfully the tasks of life as they arise, and to overcome obstacles in the path of accomplishments. (43)

Wood’s description of virtues helps inform girlfriend epistemology. Girlfriend epistemology recognizes intuitive knowledge girlfriends; however, it maintains that knowledge has to be uncovered through one’s “voluntary actions.”³⁰

While works for and by black women are often read from relevant lenses (e.g. Black feminist theory and/or womanist theory), girlfriend epistemology explores the ways in which Black women’s friendships have produced knowledge that has helped us survive and thrive in the wilderness.³¹

There is a legacy of Black women, who despite struggling to have their brilliance recognized, have refused to give up the work their souls crave and who have developed intellectual virtues such as wisdom, discernment, and studiousness among others. Girlfriend epistemology celebrates and looks to these women both inside and outside of the academy for lessons on how to navigate restrictive and oppressive spaces. The work of girlfriend epistemology is to examine the role friendship plays in knowledge formation, which includes navigating intellectual virtues and vices.

³⁰ The notion that intuitive knowledge has to be uncovered is demonstrated in the biblical command, “Seek and you will find.”

³¹ In “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Alice Walker writes, “But this is not the end of the story, for all the young women—our mothers and grandmothers, *ourselves*—have not perished in the wilderness. And if we ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will *know* (emphasis added) beyond all efforts to erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we black American women are” (235).

I consider girlfriend epistemology a theory of spirit and flesh, spirit because it recognizes the presence and power of the ethereal and flesh because it takes into considerations the material realities of our lives. According to Cherie Moraga, a theory of the flesh happens when our physical realities “...fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience...We are interested in pursuing a society that uses flesh and blood experiences to concretize a vision that can begin to heal our ‘wounded knee’” (Moraga 23). It is not uncommon for us to seek refuge in the company of our closest girlfriends; thus, it is a fitting space for girlfriends to “concretize a vision that can begin to heal our ‘wounded knee.’” Within our friendships we form and refine knowledge. Interactions with friends allow us to expose our intellectual virtues and vices as we seek to liberate ourselves from intellectual, spiritual, and sometimes physical bondage.

Sula, *The Color Purple*, and *Sugar* display an awareness in which girlfriends oscillate between the knower and learner position while sharing their struggles as well as pearls of wisdom. Whether sharing intellectual virtues or vices, the sharing of perceptions is essential in making meaning and is characteristic of girlfriend epistemology. Nel’s musings upon Sula’s return speak to the oscillating position of girlfriends as knower and learner. Nel ponders Sula’s return, “[Sula] with whom the present was a constant sharing of perceptions. Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself. Was there anyone else before whom she could never be foolish? In whose view inadequacy was mere idiosyncrasy, a character trait rather than a deficiency? Anyone who left behind that aura of fun and complicity?” (Morrison 95). Sula’s musings also attest to the importance of the girlfriend relationship when considering edification, “Whenever she introduced her private thoughts into their rubbings or goings [men] hooded their eyes. They taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave nothing but money. She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman” (Morrison

121). Within the friendship space, Nel and Sula share “idiosyncrasies” and “private thoughts.” As a result, they come to know things that others seemingly do not know. For example, Sula and Nel had “always seen through” other women; “They both knew those women were not jealous of other women; that they were only afraid of losing their jobs. Afraid their husbands would discover that no uniqueness lay between their legs” (Morrison 119). Contrary to their contemporaries, Nel’s and Sula’s knowledge of sexual relationships decenters men and speaks to girlfriend epistemology because the knowledge they possess has been uncovered in the presence of a girlfriend.³²

Celie’s and Shug’s exchange regarding the image of God is a fitting example of girlfriends sharing knowledge. Celie admits, “Us talk and talk bout God, but I’m still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn...not the color purple...Nothing” (198). Shug responds, “You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a’tall. Man corrupt everything...He on your box of grits, in your head, all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain’t” (Walker 198). Shug supplants Celie’s view of God as man by pointing to her own knowledge of who God is. As a result of this exchange, Celie strives to replace the patriarchal image she has of God with a more contemplative image; however, she admits, it is “hard work” (198) embracing this new way of thinking about God. The letter that begins, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” is a fitting example of the way in which Celie’s perception of God has been transformed as a result of sharing spiritual perceptions with her girlfriend (Walker 291). These examples speak to girlfriend epistemology in that Shug’s spiritual knowledge decenters man, and when she shares that knowledge with her friend Celie, Celie begins to know God more intimately.

³² Nel has knowledge that decenters men in sexual relationship; however, she also knows “how to behave as the wronged wife” (Morrison 120). For 28 years, Nel’s behavior is in alignment with the latter knowledge.

Similar to girlfriends noted above, Pearl and Sugar share knowledge that decenters patriarchal understandings of sensuality. In regards to sensual knowledge, the conversation they have surrounding Sugar's sexuality is revealing, Pearl asks, "Sugar, don't it make you feel ashamed when you take off your clothes for everyone and anyone?" Sugar responds, "I feel free when I aint got no clothes on" (McFadden 132). Later Pearl disrobes and began to re-familiarize herself with her body, "It felt so good, so right, so free. Suddenly, she understood [Sugar]" (McFadden 140). When Sugar visits Pearl the next day, "A glint of newfound knowledge lingered in her dark eyes. Sugar recognized it, she'd seen it in her own eyes sometime ago" (McFadden 141). The knowledge, which has been shared among girlfriends, allows Pearl to acknowledge herself as a sensual subject instead of as the object of a man's desire. Like other forms of discredited knowledge (e.g. folklore, magic, sentiment) girlfriend epistemology also recognize the viability of sensual knowledge, and according to Barbara Christian, "sensuality is intelligence...[it] is language that makes sense" (357).

Girlfriend epistemology is important because it endeavors to explore the manner in which Black women acquire and maintain knowledge as we journey to actualization with our girlfriends. According to Wood, our communities and the causes to which we are dedicated influence our intellectual character; ultimately these considerations allow people to "discuss traditional epistemological topics such as the structure of knowledge, justification, and even skepticism in ways that bear centrally on what kinds of persons we are and are becoming" (8). In the presence of our girlfriends we are encouraged to do the work to dispel intellectual vices that may have taken root, and we learn and refine transformative knowledge that empowers us on our journeys. Thus, girlfriend epistemology contributes to the discussion of Black women's intellectual legacies and is a cultural model where Black women validate the role friendship plays in knowledge formation and ultimately our lives.

Girlfriend Epistemology and Black Girl Magic

“I wrote. Spent lots of time near the water. Heard Oshun’s laughter twinkling like bells, urging me to recapture the feminine and discover the fierceness of a black girl’s magic.” (Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* 93).

The magic in Black girl magic is an inter-generational appreciation, acceptance, and recognition of our cultivated brilliance. Media outlets such as CNN, BBC, and PBS are paying attention to the representations of Black girl magic. In a PBS segment titled, “Brief But Spectacular,” poet, Mahogany L. Browne explains the paradox from which Black girl magic is cultivated:

You ain’t supposed to want no dream that big/ You ain’t supposed to dream at all/
You ain’t supposed to do nothing but carry
babies...weaves...felons...confusion...silence...but never an opinion/ You ain’t
supposed to have nothing to say unless it’s a joke/Cause/ You ain’t supposed to love
yourself Black girl/You ain’t supposed to find nothing worth saying in all that
brown/ You ain’t supposed to know that Nina Beyonce Tina Cecily Shonda Rhimes
shine shin shine.../ You ain’t supposed to love your mind/You ain’t supposed to
love/ You ain’t supposed to be loved up on...[but] You are a Black girl worth
remembering/ And you are a threat knowing yourself/ You are a threat loving
yourself/ You are a threat loving your kin.../You black girl magic/ You black girl
fly/ You black girl brilliance.../You black girl shine. (n.p.)

Black girl magic is not restricted to any particular age, sexual preference, class, or any other category that would seek to divide us. It is theory as well as practice and is a part of Black women’s culture. It seems to represent the notion of theory in the flesh, introduced in the groundbreaking feminist anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*. Theory in the flesh “requires something more than personal experiences to gain a philosophy or point of view from any specific event. It is the quality of our response to the event and our capacity to enter into the lives of others that help us to make their

lives and experiences our own” (Emma Goldman quoted in *This Bridge Called My Back*). The quality of our response includes a highly visible celebration of each other’s accomplishments, both virtually (e.g. #Blackgirlmagic) and in the flesh (e.g. Tarji Henson’s response to Viola Davis winning the 2015 Emmy for outstanding lead actress in a drama series). Melissa Harris Perry explanation of “fictive kinship ties” is useful in explaining the notion of theory in the flesh. Since families were separated through the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Black people relied on “fictive kinship ties” (Perry 102). According to Perry, fictive kinship “makes the accomplishments of African Americans relevant to unrelated black individuals” (102). When Black women love our minds, each other, and ourselves we provide a counter narrative to the way the world defines us, but more importantly we redefine the way in which we see ourselves.

Girlfriend epistemology contributes to a body of critical work that validates knowledge associated with Black women’s culture. One of the purposes of examining black girl magic in light of girlfriend epistemology is to further examine how our intellectual virtues and vices are negotiated in public spaces and in our everyday lives. In the Introduction to *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, Jacqueline Bobo addresses critics who misunderstand black women’s experiences and the significance of our cultural work. Bobo maintains black women’s creative traditions are a form of activism because they bring a “different understanding of black women’s lives and culture [while] seeking to eradicate the harmful and pervasive images haunting [our] history” (5). From literature, dance, art and other forms of culture, Black women and the scholars who study our works have sought to examine the politics of Black womanhood. Girlfriend epistemology contributes to the discussion by examining Black women’s friendships and suggests girlfriends’ willingness to share knowledge is a necessary counter to living in antagonistic environments. Moreover, this sharing is useful when seeking to become an actualized person in general. Girlfriend epistemology is an

approach that is applicable not only to literary works but also when examining other aspects of Black women's culture.

The phrase "Black Girl Magic" has been used on virtual platforms to name the ethereal quality of Black women's knowledge. Joan Morgan suggests the Yoruba goddess, Oshun (goddess of beauty, prosperity, love, order, and fertility), encourages the discovery of a black girl's magic. Similarly, Lorde notes that the magic is something that must be pursued. Lorde's comments offer additional insight regarding the conditions in which our magic is best realized. Lorde writes, "The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized...That distillation of experience...births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding" (Lorde 36). In the presence of one's girlfriend, the purification of experience (i.e. negotiating intellectual virtues and vices) takes place in a space where the quality of light begets the brilliance we manifest. Black girl magic is demonstrated in a variety of contexts and represents a particular way of knowing that gives Black women access to a fuller representation of who we are. In a 2016 online article for *Elle*, Ashley Ford explains the "magic" in black girl magic, "is about *knowing* (emphasis added) something that others don't know or refuse to see" (n.p.). Girlfriend epistemology then, is a philosophical approach that substantiates Black women's knowledge and is useful when explaining that which appears to be magic.

In 2000 Morgan alluded to the mystery of black girl magic in her collection, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*; however it has only been within recent years that the concept has evolved into a social awareness movement that is extremely popular within Black women's spaces. In 2013, CaShawn Thompson used her virtual platform (on Twitter) and declared, "Black Girls Are

Magic.” She has since been credited as the woman who popularized the #BlackGirlMagic³³ movement among social media. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Thompson revealed, “I say ‘magic’ because it’s something that people don’t always understand...Sometimes our accomplishments might seem to come out of thin air, because a lot of times, the only people supporting us are other black women” (n.p.). Thompson points to her own circle of friends as early supporters of her #BlackGirlMagic platform. Various cultural and media outlets have made reference to the concept, and in an article for *Huffington Post*, Julee Wilson defines #BlackGirlMagic as

a term used to illustrate the universal awesomeness of Black women. It’s about celebrating anything we deem particularly dope, inspiring, or mind-blowing about ourselves. For example, it’s Serena Williams looking like the queen that she is on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and Misty Copeland becoming the first Black female dancer to be named principle ballerina at the American Ballet Theater...it’s Marilyn Mosby, the state’s attorney in Baltimore getting her boss on by taking charge and seeking justice in the Freddie Gray case, it’s Michelle Obama, enough said...Black girl magic is also the awesomeness we sprinkle on the world, every single day...it’s most definitely getting that degree. It’s also accomplishing our dreams and being recognized for them. It’s friendship, sisterhood, motherhood, and so much more...it’s just us brown girls living our best lives. Period...this is an opportunity for Black women to stand in our dopeness. (n.p.)

Black girl magic speaks to Black women’s experiences of surviving and thriving in a society where our presence and our culture are oftentimes ignored or treated as inferior. Black women have had to

³³ The hashtag #BlackGirlMagic is used intentionally here and other places in this work to distinguish the virtual platform for black girl magic versus the notion of the concept itself.

look to the legacy of our foremothers as well as to the love and support of each other as we have blazed new trails. When one thinks of the magic in black girl magic, it really is, in its most basic form, acknowledging our giftedness and making a decision to show the world the reason we did not perish in the wilderness. That which appears as magic to the untrained eye is fueled by countless hours of work, attention, and passion for one's artistry, gift, and/or talent. Academic, professional, and pop culture examples abound; however, behind every story worthy of the black girl magic hashtag, is a woman who has coupled knowledge with passion, passion with action, and action with a commitment to liberate herself from intellectual bondage while also developing and sustaining friendships, relationships, and communities.

Since 2013 a few journalists have weighed in on the significance of black girl magic within popular culture; however, not all critics embrace the concept. In a 2016 online article for *Elle*, Linda Chavers likens black girl magic to the strong black woman archetype and believes it “suggests we are, again, something other than *human*...Saying we're superhuman is just as bad as saying we're animals, because it implies that we are organically different, that we don't feel just as much as any other human being” (n.p.). Chavers' argument certainly raises important questions within the historical context, but it is important to note the nuance in the language. The movement has evolved from “Black Girls Are Magic” to “Black Girl Magic.” Removing the verb from the phrase makes it more about the works black women do instead of suggesting black women are superhuman. As noted in her response to Chavers, Ashley Ford believes, #BlackGirlMagic, “has never been about being in possession of superhuman mental or emotional strength...it's about claiming or reclaiming what others have refused to see”(n.p.). Ford's revelations speak to girlfriend epistemology because it recognizes there is certain knowledge that black women help each other to cultivate, particularly in the face of fading hope. Yes, we live in a world where Black women are often seen as “strong Black women.” And yes, many of us find it difficult to be vulnerable and embrace our emotions since the

traditionally capable part of our nature sometimes overshadows the need for love and support. However, #BlackGirlMagic shows that those are just some aspects of who we are. #BlackGirlMagic celebrates our perseverance as we use our knowledge to become the best version of ourselves. It demonstrates the power of the “deep love” Collins describes which typically “remains circumscribed in biological motherhood, biological sisterhood, sorority ties, and other similar socially approved relationships” (184). #BlackGirlMagic is an example of expanding the range of Black women’s loving relationships as we tap into new possibilities for empowerment.

In 2016, Solange Knowles, the younger sister of pop culture icon, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter released her third studio album, *A Seat at the Table*, which serves as an appropriate body of work to frame the discussion of black girl magic as it manifests within popular culture and its relationship to girlfriend epistemology. The impetus for Knowles’ latest album was a conversation between two white male music critics who warned her “not to bite the hand the feeds her” (*Huffington Post*). Their comments were in response to Knowles’s refusal to come on their podcast to defend a comment she made about R&B singer, Brandy Norwood. Knowles revealed to *Huffington Post* that she did not feel the need to have a debate on something in which she is culturally immersed. The critics’ comments speak to the consumer culture, which is inherently a part of popular culture. The issue lies in the fact that though black girl magic is consumed by the masses, there is a distinct standpoint, a distinct epistemology out of which it manifests. In an interlude titled, “I Got So Much Magic, You Can Have It” Knowles harmonizes with Kelly Roland and Nia Andrews. The trio sing “You did it from the get-go, get-go...They not gonna get it from the get-go, get-go, get-go”(n.p.). This interlude and Knowles’ entire project speaks to girlfriend epistemology in that it points to knowledge that Black women have possessed from the “get-go,” knowledge that others have not understood. In a song titled “Weary” Knowles sings, “I’m gon’ look for my glory, yeah (I’ll be back like real

soon)”(n.p.). Similar to Lorde’s admission that magic has to be pursued (36), Knowles also highlights the voluntary action that accompanies the acquisition of such knowledge.

As empowering as it is, the ethereal nature of black girl magic is subject to threats of obscurity (e.g. such as the comments made by the two critics previously noted); however, the true nature of the concept cannot be subdued. The phrase represents excellence in mind, character, and action and is an expression that deeply resonates with a lot of Black women. Clover Hope maintains, black girl magic “ ritualize[s] black female brilliance in three words” (n.p.). Thus, girlfriend epistemology seeks to initiate a critical discussion of the concept and its applications. Girlfriend epistemology acknowledges the intellectual virtues present in Black girl magic, more specifically, the wisdom Black women have passed down for generations, the studiousness with which contemporary Black women display in our chosen fields, and the discernment we use to inspire us along various courses of action.

Future Considerations of Girlfriend Epistemology

This study does not consider girlfriend relationships involving three or more girlfriends; however, novels such as *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Better Than I Know Myself* were originally under consideration for inclusion. The latter is an *Essence* bestseller, and is written by two girlfriends. Preparing to draw connections between girlfriend portrayals where there are only two girlfriends versus those where three or more girlfriends are present show varying dynamics, which are larger than the intended scope of this project. Though I have not devoted considerable time analyzing these dynamics, I noticed that generally speaking there seems to be an inability for a character to have a deep abiding girlfriend relationship with more than one character in the novel. A characteristic of this type of friendship includes the ability and willingness to show redemptive love. Within the works that portray three or more girlfriends there seems to be a pair who is closer to

each other than to the other girlfriends. For this reason, I think considerations of sisterhood may be useful as girlfriend bonds and sisterhood bonds are not mutually exclusive.

In addition to noting the varying dynamics among multiple girlfriends, future work could also consider the ways in which sexuality factors into discussion of girlfriend epistemology. An example from *The Women of Brewster Place* speaks to the intellectual and emotional distance some women feel, which prevents them from offering love to lesbian women. Mattie Michael is willing to give her friend Etta Mae Johnson redemptive love when she has sex with a preacher, but she and other characters are unable/unwilling to give love to the two lesbian women, Lorraine and Theresa. When considering how lesbian women “get that way,” Mattie began to think “deeply” (Naylor 141). Mattie ponders, “I’ve loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man. And there been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did... Maybe it’s not so different” (Naylor 141). Unfortunately, Mattie and her friend Etta do not think further on the intellectual distance and the narrative continues. Mattie’s musings point to areas of girlfriend epistemology that can be further developed (i.e. How do we situate lesbian and other sexualities within discussions of girlfriend’s knowledge production?). This is especially important because Audre Lorde’s—a Black lesbian feminist—work is essential to the formulation of girlfriend epistemology. It would be a grave oversight to not engage issues of sexual identity in the discussion.

Ultimately, girlfriend epistemology is committed to shedding light on those truths that can transform girlfriend relationships. Supported by literary and other culturally relevant examples, girlfriend epistemology sees black women’s knowledge as valuable, insightful, and inspiring. This knowledge may appear to be unconventional to others; however, for girlfriends it is supremely important as it informs our lives and our work.

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