

SPIRITUAL LIVES:
EMBODIED SPIRITUAL PRACTICE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN'S LITERATURE AND FILM

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Abstract

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In this dissertation I will construct a lineage of black women's spiritual narratives that moves from Zilpha Elaw's more traditional spiritual narrative, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw* (1846), to Amanda Smith's *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith* (1893) and Nancy Prince's *The Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (1853), both of which push the boundaries of the genre. I will focus on how these narratives illustrate the intersection of the black female body, itinerancy and spirituality. I will conclude with an analysis of Julie Dash's 1992 film *Daughters of the Dust*, which, I argue, can be read as a communal spiritual narrative that revisits and radically revises the spiritual narrative form. Like the nineteenth-century narratives that come before it, Dash's film similarly focuses on the spiritual practices of black women. My dissertation, which takes as its central premise the notion that theology is central to the study of literature, is shaped by the work of literary scholar Joycelyn Moody, who claims that we cannot marginalize the spiritual aspects of spiritual narratives and womanist theologian Delores Williams, who argues for the significance of black women's theological experience. Moreover, building on Katherine McKittrick's theorizing of the black female body and space, I argue that black women's embodied (itinerant) spiritual practices are oppositional performances that resist the violent and violating spaces and geographies of the slave trade, colonization and the marketplace. Not only do black women resist these violent forms of circulation that define

the black female body as monstrous and enslaved, but, through their spiritual practice, they also create alternative spaces and geographies that re-vision black women as sacred and free.

Although my dissertation considers the full range of black women's embodied spiritual practices, including preaching, singing, prophesying and itinerancy, my analysis emphasizes itinerancy in order to highlight the significance of free black women's movements across socially constructed boundaries and spaces that are shaped by race, gender and class, as well as black women's circum-Atlantic passages as preachers, missionaries and tourists. My particular interest in black women's travel abroad is fueled by a dearth of scholarship that considers black women's spiritual itinerancy throughout the Atlantic world in relationship to the West's imperial mission. Situating their movement against the backdrop of nineteenth-century itinerant culture in which black women's bodies frequently circulated as sources of physical, sexual and reproductive labor, as well as objects of entertainment and spectacle, I assert it is through black women's transgressive movement and passages, their spiritual itinerancy, that black women resist violently enforced geographies of the slave trade, colonization, and imperialism, as well as the violence of socially constructed spaces, such as the pulpit, the courthouse, the auction block, the slave ship and the marketplace.

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legacy. Living out their faith actively in the world, my parents have taught me the value of leading a faith-filled life and have invested in me the spiritual resources necessary to sustain hope in the midst of despair. Because of this spiritual legacy and investment, I have the privilege of resting in the unending grace and steadfast love of God, undeserved yet freely given. God's unreserved love and grace has sustained me throughout my journey and for this I am eternally grateful.

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Introduction

Spiritual Lives: Embodied Spiritual Practice in African American Women's Literature and Film

Most literary scholarship that focuses on black women's spiritual narratives, such as Joanne Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography* (1989) and Francis Smith Foster's *Written by Herself* (1993), ignores or marginalizes the religious experience of these women writers. Even scholars like Carla Peterson, "*Doers of the Word*" (1995), and Katherine Clay Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations* (1999), who do consider some spiritual aspects of these narratives, still marginalize theology compared with their much larger concern with rhetorical devices and the writers' political activism, and cultural practices. While their claiming these narratives as literary texts is an important and necessary step as we continue to argue for the significance of these works to the American and African American literary canons, we must remember that these texts are indeed religious texts—meaning that theology is the primary shaping force for writers of spiritual narratives.

Because theology is the seminal force of black women's spiritual narratives, it must also be central to our scholarship on these texts, rather than peripheral as it is in most scholars' work. Hence, I agree wholeheartedly with literary scholar Joycelyn Moody's claim that "to overlook, to 'read around' the spiritual dimensions present in these books is to neglect an essential and vital aspect of them.... Any person who values literature should read spiritual texts *as* spiritual texts because we should not disparage or

diminish the full complexity of any text” (xi-xii). Indeed, this is precisely my intention—to read black women’s spiritual narratives as spiritual texts.

When using the terms spiritual, theology or theological aspects (I use the terms interchangeably), I am fundamentally concerned with who and what God is, how God acts in the world, and who we are in relationship to God. Moreover, my understanding of theology is profoundly shaped by womanist theology, particularly the scholarship of Delores Williams, whose theological recovery of the biblical figure Hagar (an Egyptian slave girl) informs my own literary recovery of Hagar’s narrative as a model for reading the spiritual narratives of black women spiritual itinerants. For womanist scholars, theology is not just a critical reflection on the self and one’s relationship to God but it is also a critical reflection outward onto the world and its injustices (Moody 17). Hence, theology is not concerned solely with the spirit, but with the body as well and particularly with what happens to that body in a world shaped by race, class, and gender oppression. In fact, this is precisely how Zilpha Elaw, Amanda Smith and Nancy Prince use theology in their narratives—as a critical framework and lens through which to view the world. Theology shapes not only their perspectives but also their practices—how they act and especially how and even where they move in the world. Because theology permeates all aspects of the text, taking the sacred seriously (meaning tending to the theological and spiritual aspects of the text) is absolutely necessary for any cogent literary analysis of black women’s spiritual narratives.

Although womanist scholars, such as Katie Cannon, Delores Williams and Joan Martin, do take the sacred seriously in their scholarship on African American literature, much of their scholarship excludes black women’s spiritual narratives and, as a result,

silences the spiritual legacy of black women evident in these texts. In an effort to fill this critical void in the fields of American and African American Literature, as well as, Religious Studies, my own dissertation centers around the embodied spiritual practices of black women. I claim black women's spiritual practice as embodied in order to emphasize the link between black women's spiritual lives and their material reality. Specifically, I assert that the bodies these women inhabit, bodies marked by race, gender, class, and the violent forces of slavery and colonization, shape their spiritual practice. Furthermore, I argue, in opposition to the classification of black women in the nineteenth-century as spectacle, as foreign and as monstrous,¹ these narratives illustrate black women's continual assertion of their raced, classed and gendered bodies as sanctified or holy through the embodied spiritual acts of preaching, singing, prophesying and itinerancy.

Although my dissertation considers the full range of black women's embodied spiritual practices, my analysis, building on Katherine McKittrick's theorizing of the black female body and space, emphasizes itinerancy in order to highlight the significance of free black women's movements across boundaries and spaces shaped by race, class, and gender, as well as their circum-Atlantic travel as preachers, missionaries and tourists. I have borrowed the term "circum-Atlantic" from Joseph Roach's text *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, in which he defines the circum-Atlantic world as "a vortex in which commodities and cultural practices changed hands many times. The most revolutionary commodity in this economy was human flesh....The concept of a circum-Atlantic world (as opposed to a transatlantic one) insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of

the culture of modernity” (4). I have chosen this term because it invokes, like Paul Gilroy’s “black Atlantic,” the violent itinerancies of slavery and colonization, which haunt all of the spiritual narratives included in my thesis. Moreover, I find this term particularly useful, even more so than Gilroy’s “black Atlantic,” because the word itself invokes a sense of circulation, movement—especially movement that is non-linear, which is important for describing the non-linear travel routes that Amanda Berry Smith, Nancy Prince and Julie Dash’s narratives depict.

Although just one of several forms of black women’s spiritual practice, I emphasize itinerancy because it is through black women’s transgressive movements and passages, their spiritual itinerancy, that black women resist violently enforced geographies of the slave trade, colonization and imperialism, as well as the violence of socially constructed spaces, such as the pulpit, the courthouse, the auction block, the slave ship and the marketplace. My thinking about space as socially constructed has been shaped largely by Katherine McKittrick’s work *Demonic Grounds*, in which she claims that it is the constructed nature of space that enables possibilities for re-imagining the spaces black women inhabit. Hence, not only do black women resist the violating spaces and geographies that define the black female body as monstrous and enslaved, but, through their spiritual practice, they also create alternative spaces and geographies that re-vision black women as sacred and free.

This study contains five chapters. In Chapter One, “‘Where have you come from, and where are you going?’: Hagar’s Spiritual Journey,” I begin with an analysis of the biblical narrative of Hagar, an Egyptian slave woman. Using womanist theology as my primary framework of interpretation, I posit Hagar as an itinerant figure and spiritual

foremother of Elaw, Smith, and Prince whose spiritual journey provides a model of embodied spiritual practice that informs the lives of these later black women spiritual itinerants.

Chapter Two, “Sacred Vision: Zilpha Elaw’s *Memoirs*,” argues that Elaw appropriates the dominant trope of the black female body as exotic spectacle in order to revision her “differently marked” body as a vessel of divine knowledge and as the source of an alternative vision that enables her to critique the narrow and failed vision of her white audiences in America and England. Moreover, her Atlantic passage, literally reverses/re-routes the slave trade and colonization by claiming the black female body not as cargo to be exchanged but as a sacred vessel called by God to save the British people.

Focusing on Amanda Smith’s travels as missionary and tourist throughout Europe, India and Africa, Chapter Three, “Conflicted Journeys: Critiquing Colonial Travel in Amanda Smith’s *An Autobiography*,” explores whether tourism and missionary travel can ever function outside of or in opposition to the larger system of imperial domination that these itinerant practices are so often caught up in. Through this study, I demonstrate that Smith’s itinerant spiritual practices as tourist and missionary enable her to shift from spectacle, one who is objectified by the gaze of her white audiences, to spectator, one who sees and who is free to interpret what she sees. Although tourist and missionary travel are firmly entrenched in Western imperial privilege and power, I assert that Smith, engaging in an itinerant spiritual practice, appropriates colonial travel and missionary discourse in order to undermine and critique imperial practices, hierarchies, and values in America and abroad.

In Chapter Four, “Shifting Locations: *The Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*,” I critique the narrow positioning of Prince’s text as either a travel narrative or an autobiography that has led to a failure to consider the spiritual trajectory of her narrative. In order to move beyond the limitations of such generic categorizations and to counter the elision of the sacred in Prince’s text, my analysis focuses on her employing of a resistant spiritual practice that exposes and critiques race, class, and gender oppression. Moreover, I assert that we cannot begin to understand Prince’s tenuous self-representation and the shifting of her text between autobiography, travelogue and spiritual narrative, unless we take seriously this spiritual practice, rooted in both an African cosmological perspective and in Christianity.

Finally, in my concluding chapter, “Revisiting the Spiritual Narrative in Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*,” I turn to a twentieth-century film—arguing that *Daughters* radically revises the spiritual narrative form in its attention to the spiritual experience(s) of an entire community, rather than an individual, and in its expansion beyond the Western Christian tradition. Ultimately, I argue that by keeping the spiritual (itinerant) practices of black women at the center of her film, Dash argues for the sacredness of black female bodies and posits alternative spiritual geographies (including Islam and African traditional spirituality) that refuse to privilege patriarchal, Western, and Christian itineraries.

Comparative in approach, my project seeks to open dialogue and make connections across centuries, across genres and media, across fields of study and even across oceans. It is my hope that my work, which takes seriously the theological experiences of black women and their international travel within an imperial context, will

greatly contribute to the field of literary scholarship that continues to marginalize religious experience and, as a result, fails to adequately consider how that experience has transformed nineteenth-century black women into traveling subjects throughout an increasingly colonized world.

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Chapter One

“Where have you come from, and where are you going?": Hagar's Spiritual Journey

Demonstrating my commitment to taking the sacred seriously, I begin my dissertation with a biblical text that tells the story of an Egyptian slave girl named Hagar (Gen 16: 1-16, Gen 21:8-21). Hagar's narrative offers a model of black women's transgressive spiritual itinerant practice that stands in opposition to the enforced circulation of black women's bodies for physical and sexual labor. Furthermore, womanist theologian Delores Williams claims in her seminal work *Sister in the Wilderness* that Hagar's narrative is a significant cultural and spiritual resource for the black community and forms the foundation of a womanist theological framework. As an enslaved Egyptian woman, who is also a victim of rape and forced reproductive surrogacy, Hagar speaks to black women's particular experiences of sexual violence during slavery and after emancipation. Williams positions Hagar as a symbol not only of black women's struggles for liberation, but also as a theological model whose spiritual practice and encounters with God engender real possibilities for survival, resistance, and agency. Finally, Hagar's narrative functions, in many ways, as an alternative to the Exodus story—the dominant narrative of black people's spiritual legacy within black theology.²

Albert Raboteau, a prominent African American religious historian, asserts the centrality of the Exodus myth to African American Christianity, arguing that “[n]o single symbol captures more clearly the distinctiveness of Afro-American Christianity than the symbol of Exodus” (9). He further claims, “[b]y appropriating the story of Exodus as

their own story, black Christians articulated their own sense of peoplehood. Exodus symbolized their common history and common destiny” (13). However, the Exodus story alone cannot tell the whole story of black people’s spiritual experience and legacy because it privileges black male experience—relegating the particularities of black women’s spiritual lives to the margins. Williams, for example, states,

[A] masculine indication of person and masculine models of victimization dominate the language and thought of black liberation theology....[B]lack women have been left out of black liberation theology and its understanding of historical agency. The black experience and theological tasks described therein (as well as the view of history) presuppose and perpetuate black androcentrism. (158)

Certainly black men and women in America shared a common history of oppression during slavery; nevertheless, as Williams’ critique suggests, black theology’s sole focus on the Exodus myth wrongly suggests that black men and women’s experience of oppression is the same. The particularities of race, sex, and class oppression that black women experience are invisible in the Exodus narrative.

While Exodus may have been the central communal myth, Williams claims it was not the only biblical narrative that black people appropriated:

For over a hundred years, the community had appropriated the Bible in such a way that black women’s experience figured just as eminently as black men’s in the community’s memory, in its self-understanding and its understanding of God’s relation to its life.... This tradition emphasized female activity and de-emphasized male authority. It lifted up from the

Bible the story of [Hagar] a female slave of African descent who was forced to be a surrogate mother, reproducing a child by her slave master because the slave master's wife was barren. (1-2)

Hagar's narrative positions the lived experience of black women, both their material reality as physical and sexual labor and their spiritual reality as God's people, at the center. Moreover, Hagar's narrative reveals that God speaks to and leads not only black men, as black theology's privileging of the exodus narrative suggests, but black women as well. Hence, without Hagar's narrative we cannot fully grasp the complexity of the spiritual life of the black community and its relationship to God. In addition, if we are to understand black women's religious experience and how it shapes their resistance to multiple forms of oppression, we cannot relegate Hagar's narrative to the margins.

Although womanist theology has strongly shaped my thinking about Hagar, in this chapter I also employ the scholarship of Jewish feminist theologian Savina Teubal, whose exegetical work on the biblical text of Hagar will help expand my own reading of the text. Particularly useful is her critique of how Hagar and her narrative have been marginalized to serve the patriarchal needs of Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities. Like Delores Williams, Teubal makes a similar argument for the reclamation of Hagar. However, unlike Williams', whose womanist critique focuses specifically on Hagar's relevance to black Christian women, Teubal asserts the necessity of reclaiming Hagar as an important spiritual model for women across the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith traditions. Specifically for Teubal, Hagar must be reclaimed from patriarchal attempts to erase her important role in multiple faith traditions and to marginalize female spiritual experience:

The matriarch Hagar, like her biblical counterpart Sarah, played a significant role in the genesis of Hebrew culture. Yet she has been doomed to remain in contemporary consciousness as simply an adjunct to the patriarch Abraham. According to the biblical text Hagar was Sarah's handmaid, but most references describe her as Abraham's concubine. In Muslim tradition, Hagar is the mother of the Arabs, yet the matriarch Hagar is never mentioned by name in the Qur'an, the Holy Book of Islam. She is represented simply as the wife of the patriarch Abraham and the mother of Ishmael, from whom the Arab peoples trace their descent.

(Preface xiv)

A central part of Teubal's argument in *Ancient Sisterhood* calls into question the patriarchal focus of the biblical text on Abraham rather than on the relationship between the two women, Sarah and Hagar. I agree with Teubal's feminist criticism of the patriarchal renderings of Hagar's narrative in the book of Genesis and her critique is quite useful for my own analysis of this biblical text. Moreover, though I find her dual project of reclaiming both Sarah and Hagar from patriarchal marginalization to be noteworthy and interesting, my own use of Teubal's work focuses specifically on her analysis of Hagar rather than Sarah.³

In opposition to the patriarchal and racist renderings of Hagar's story, in this chapter I will locate and analyze the places where I see a resistance to such oppressive readings of Hagar's narrative.⁴ Although Williams' and Teubal's exegetical work on Hagar is useful and certainly informs my own thinking about Hagar, my own analysis of Hagar's encounter(s) with God will explore the possibilities of reading Hagar as an

itinerant figure, a wanderer, whose journeying, much like that of nineteenth-century black women itinerants, is sometimes a method of escape, a form of exile, or a call by God to move. Moreover, looking closely at the positioning of Hagar's narrative within the larger dominant biblical account of Sarah and Abraham and her tenuous position within their household, I will also present Hagar as a disruptive and unruly figure—one whose body, marked as alien and foreign, enables Sarah and Abraham's performance of dominant notions of gender, class and social tradition, while disrupting such categories as well. Specifically, I assert that these aspects of Hagar's spirituality—her itinerancy and unruliness—form the foundation of a black female embodied spiritual practice that we continue to see at work in the later nineteenth-century spiritual narratives of Zilpha Elaw, Amanda Smith, and Nancy Prince. Furthermore, this embodied spiritual practice functions as a strategy for resisting the social, economic and spiritual marginalization that black women are subject to. Moving from Hagar's disruptive and itinerant spiritual practice in the bible to the spiritual narratives of black women in the nineteenth- and twentieth- centuries, I will show the continuities between these later texts and Hagar's narrative in order to claim Hagar as a spiritual foremother of these later black women spiritual itinerants.

Not only is Hagar important to womanist and feminist theological scholars, like Williams and Teubal, but she is also a key figure in nineteenth-century American literature and visual art. According to Janet Gabler-Hover, there exists an entire tradition of Hagar novels written by white southern women, who appropriate the biblical figure Hagar in order to facilitate their own proto-feminist critique of patriarchal Victorian values that narrowly circumscribe white women's lives.⁵ Paradoxically, Hagar was

culturally identified as black because of her Egyptian (i.e. African) heritage, while at the same time artistically represented as white by nineteenth-century visual artists⁶—giving her a racial uncertainty that functions as a useful rhetorical device that white southern women could exploit in their novels. Specifically, Gabler-Hover asserts,

A study of Hagar novels reveals that the women who wrote them were deliberately playing on the cultural recognition of Hagar’s blackness. Indeed, Hagar’s ethnic complexity—Is she white? Is she black?—provided a tantalizing opportunity for southern women under the thumb of a restrictive patriarchy to reimagine themselves in richer and more admirable identities through their black Hagar heroines. Why Hagar? She was, in her blackness, imagined to have a sexuality outside the permissible boundaries of femininity. In the Hagar works in this study, Hagar’s freer sexuality—her passion—is presented as integral to other freeing and empowering qualities. (8-9)

Hagar’s blackness, then, marks her as oversexed or as Saidiya Hartman asserts “always willing” (539). Yet by erasing Hagar’s blackness, what Gabler-Hover refers to as the “whitewashing” of Hagar, visual artists also remove her illicit sexuality and, therefore, the symbolic freedom that white women could access (10). Moreover, Gabler-Hover claims, “the graphic illustrations revealed the motive for white women writers to deploy Hagar as their model. In doing so, they constructed a feminist resistance to the desexualisation of Hagar by Western artists, a resistance to the patriarchal repression of women’s sexuality visible in Hagar art” (10). Although white southern women adopt Hagar because of her racial ambiguity—her signification as possibly white or black—

Gabler-Hover explains that these women “instigate in their texts an ultimate disavowal of their white heroines’ ethnic ambiguity once empowerment ha[s] been achieved” (23). So although white southern women imagine themselves as black through their Hagar heroines in order to move beyond the limits of white femininity, they ultimately retreat back into the security of whiteness at the end of their novels. Their eventual disavowal of Hagar’s blackness facilitates the maintenance of and illustrates white women’s continued complicity with the white power structure.

Nevertheless, invoking the racially ambiguous Hagar figure was a dangerous move for white southern women. Hagar’s potential blackness identified her as possessing sexual desire beyond the bounds of the Victorian ideal of true womanhood, leading to her representation in white women’s novels as the “fallen woman” (Gabler-Hover 141). Therefore, as Gabler-Hover explains, “it was risky for white feminists to activate, even temporarily, a sexualized Hagar in their portrayal of ‘white’ Hagar heroines; patriarchally invested Victorian women readers, as well as male readers, deplored the inscription of women’s sexuality” (23). If this invocation of illicit sexuality was risky for genteel white women, imagine how risky it would have been for black women writers to do so. This may help explain the curious absence of Hagar from the nineteenth-century canon of African American women’s literature, particularly black women’s spiritual narratives. Zilpha Elaw, Amanda Smith, and Nancy Prince do not explicitly mention Hagar as a model for their own spiritual practice. When they do reference female biblical figures to justify their own spiritual roles as itinerant preachers and spiritual leaders, they invoke much “safer” women, such as Deborah, Mary or Miriam. Hagar’s silence in these texts,

however, makes more sense when we consider her appropriation and representation in white women's texts as the "fallen woman."

Given the difficulty black women had in representing themselves to the larger white society and, in this case, specifically to their white readership, it is perhaps not surprising that they do not explicitly invoke Hagar. According to Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "[b]eing Black and female is characterized by the private being made public, which subverts conventional notions about the need to hide and render invisible women's sexuality and private parts. There is nothing sacred about Black women's bodies in other words. They are not off-limits, untouchable, or unseeable" (18). Unlike white women, who find the hiding of their bodies to be narrowly constricting, black women in contrast suffer from the violence/violation of exposure. The frequent circulation of black female bodies throughout the nineteenth-century made this overexposure of black women's bodies increasingly apparent and illustrates the terror that all black women in the nineteenth-century faced, especially those like Elaw, Smith, and Prince, whose itinerant practices placed them before white audiences and the violating gaze that could reduce the black woman to something shameful and monstrous.

Keeping this context in mind, it's understandable that black women spiritual itinerants, already placing their bodies on display before white audiences as preachers, did not wish to invoke Hagar's cultural legacy in America as "fallen," sexually impure and racially tainted. Black women were even more unlikely to explicitly invoke Hagar in their narratives because in addition to white women writers' racist appropriation of the Hagar figure, proslavery supporters also used Hagar as evidence of the inferiority of black people, thereby justifying slavery as an institution. For example, J. Lee Greene,

arguing for the significance of biblical myth to the construction of America as a nation, claims that one such central myth is

the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael, the story of the origin of God's chosen people and the consequent exclusion of the first-born, illegitimate son (Ishmael) from his father's (Abraham's) house and thus from the privileges attendant to the House of Abraham. The slavocracy, its defenders, and its detractors frequently used the Abrahamic paradigm as a structural model to explain analogically the position of the mulatto (and of blacks in general) in southern society. (84)

Notably, Greene excises Hagar from the Genesis narrative by referring to the biblical myth as the "Abrahamic paradigm." My own womanist recovery of the text constructs a Hagaric paradigm in which Hagar, rather than the patriarch or illegitimate son, becomes the focus of analysis. Although Greene leaves Hagar out of his analysis, his argument does further illustrate the difficulty black women would have referencing a myth that they knew "served as a major source for the proslavery imperative to exclude African Americans from America's white power base" (Gabler-Hover 7).

Although the historical context makes it clear just how risky it would have been for black women to specifically reference Hagar in their narratives, her omission from their texts is still striking. After all, it is curious that the sole enslaved African woman in the bible is missing from African American women's spiritual narratives. As Williams asserts, Hagar was an important figure for the black Christian community (1-2). Hence, these Christian women, who knew the bible well, would certainly have been familiar with Hagar's story. Moreover, even if they do not invoke Hagar explicitly in their texts, Hagar,

as I argue their narratives make clear, certainly informs their disruptive itinerant practice. Indeed the continuities between Hagar's narrative, the particularities of her experience, and those of Elaw, Smith and Prince suggest that Hagar functions as a kind of absent presence in their narratives—we can see her in the text even if she is not explicitly mentioned. As a result, part of my project in this dissertation is to rescue Hagar from this history of misappropriation and misrepresentation within the American cultural and political landscape that led to her absence from black women's spiritual narratives. This recovery effort has two steps: (1) reclaim Hagar's erased blackness by situating her narrative and experiences within the context of African American history in the nineteenth-century; (2) resist Hagar's silencing by doing what Elaw, Smith and Prince were politically unable to do—claim Hagar as a spiritual foremother by positing Hagar's narrative as a model of embodied spiritual practice that these women inherit as part of their spiritual legacy.

Hagar the Wanderer: Itinerancy in Hagar's narrative

Throughout the nineteenth-century, black women's bodies circulated as property via the Atlantic slave trade, the internal slave trade within America, and the slave trade in the West Indies, as well as sources of entertainment and scientific curiosity. Against this backdrop of coerced and oppressive movement, I define black women's itinerancy as a transgressive act. I first began to think about itinerancy as a transgressive practice after reading Timothy Hall's *Contested Boundaries*, in which he defines itinerancy in early America as "the intentional transgression of various types of boundaries with which colonists attempted to order the eighteenth-century world" (72). Furthermore, he asserts, "[i]tinerancy made possible a world radically open to the free operation of God's Spirit, which could operate unhindered by human boundaries of space, time, custom, class, race, or gender through those who disseminated the gospel freely to all in every place" (72). Although Hall is solely concerned with Anglo-Americans during the First Great Awakening (1730-1760), his definition of itinerancy as the transgression of social boundaries (race, class, and gender) is particularly useful for my own thinking about black women's itinerant practices in the nineteenth-century. However, as I explained earlier, I define itinerancy as meaning more than just 'preaching on the move.'

Building on Katherine McKittrick's theorizing of space and geography, I expand the term itinerancy to include all black women's movements, not just itinerant preaching, across socially defined boundaries and spaces (shaped by race, class, and gender) as transgressive. Believing such boundaries and spaces to be constructed, McKittrick asserts, "we produce space, we produce its meanings, and we work very hard to make geography what it is.... Concealment, marginalization, boundaries are important social

processes... [that] nam[e] and organiz[e] where racial-sexual differentiation occurs” (xi-xii). Moreover, McKittrick states that

[E]conomic, ideological, social, and political processes...see and position the racial-sexual body within what seem like predetermined, or appropriate, places and assume that this arrangement is commonsensical.... [T]he placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries, in turn suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place. (xv)

Although these spaces and boundaries masquerade as “predetermined,” fixed, and settled, they are, as she argues above, produced. Furthermore, because the location of black female bodies marks social boundaries, their bodily practices (i.e. transgressive acts) also have the potential to disrupt those boundaries, making visible their nature as socially constructed and thereby undermining their power. More specifically, black women’s movements outside of their “predetermined,” “appropriate” places illustrate that these boundaries are not fixed or stable, thereby disrupting supposedly “natural” identifications of the black female body as monstrous and alien.

Like black women’s spiritual narratives, one of the most important characteristics of Hagar is her itinerancy and the frequency of movement between various places and spaces within her narrative. Although her narrative is a spiritual narrative, one that focuses on her experiences and relationship with God, Hagar’s narrative also reveals the complexity of movements that black women have practiced and been subjected to. Moreover, Hagar’s narrative is clearly linked to the same history of coerced movement that shaped the lives and experiences of black women in the nineteenth-century.

According to the biblical text of Genesis, Hagar is an “Egyptian maidservant,” a “slave-girl” belonging to Sarah and Abraham. The text suggests that Hagar has been brought, or as Delores Williams asserts, stolen, from her native land of Egypt in order to become a domestic laborer in Sarah and Abraham’s home. Hence, as an African slave, Hagar’s initial movement from Egypt into an Israelite household is coerced and parallels the capture and transportation of black women from Africa to America—the Middle Passage, as well as the internal slave trade in America and the slave trade between Africa and the West Indies.

Not only does Hagar’s status as an enslaved African parallel that of many black women in nineteenth-century America, but the exploitation of her bodily labor, physical and sexual (Hagar is both handmaid and concubine), mirrors the experiences of both enslaved and free black women in America. Furthermore, enslaved women were subject to white women, whose role in the home was to uphold slavery, and white men, who possessed and exercised the absolute power to use black women as “mistresses, whores, or breeders” (Giddings 43). The Hagar narrative illustrates a similar power hierarchy at work in Sarah and Abraham’s home. Hagar finds herself subjected to the absolute power both Sarah and Abraham have over her body. For example, the text states, “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children.⁷ She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, ‘You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her....He went into Hagar and she conceived’” (Gen 16:1-2, 4). Like slaveowners in nineteenth-century America, Sarah and Abraham use Hagar’s body not only as a source of bodily labor within the domestic space but also as a sexual and reproductive surrogate. Significantly,

although Abraham is the patriarch, Sarah is the instigator of Hagar's rape, illustrating that similar to the southern slavocracy, wives in slaveowning families were, as Giddings asserts, essential to upholding slavery.

Yet, despite Hagar's status as enslaved and as property within Sarah and Abraham's home, Hagar engages in a transgressive itinerant practice. Throughout this section, I use the terms "itinerant practice" and "itinerancy" interchangeably to refer to Hagar's physical movement. However, I find the term "practice" useful as times for emphasizing Hagar's agency—her action or performance. The first example of Hagar's itinerant practice occurs when she runs away to the desert—escaping this abusive and oppressive domestic space. After discovering that she has conceived a child, Hagar begins to treat her mistress with "contempt" (16:4). Although the text is not explicit about what Hagar does to Sarah, the word contempt, which also means disobedience, suggests that whatever Hagar does undermines Sarah's authority. According to the text, in response "Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she [Hagar] ran away from her" into the wilderness (Gen 16:6-7). Hagar's itinerant practice, her decision to leave one place (the domestic space of Sarah and Abraham) and move to another (the wilderness) reflects Hagar's resistance to Sarah's abuse and continued oppression. Not only does Hagar's itinerant practice enable her to resist the oppression of the domestic space, but Hagar's running away is also transgressive both because it illustrates a refusal to do the bodily labor required of her within the domestic space and because it threatens Sarah and Abraham's attempts to produce an heir through her. Specifically, Hagar's itinerancy, her physical movement into the wilderness with her unborn child places her own claim to her child's life over that of her masters'.

It is here in the wilderness where God finds Hagar and asks her the question, “Where have you come from, and where are you going?” This narrative, which has already proven to be so much about movement—both coerced and transgressive—once again, in this moment, illustrates the significance of itinerancy. Indeed, God’s question marks Hagar as an itinerant figure—someone who has journeyed from one place and who will continue to travel to some other place. In fact, it is Hagar’s journey that God is most concerned with. Significantly, God does not ask Hagar *who* she is but rather *where* she has been. Nevertheless, I would argue that the “who” is tied to the “where.” If we want to know who Hagar is, we must find out where she has been. In short, identity is tied to place. Katherine McKittrick argues this when she states, “who we see is tied up with where we see” (xvi). For McKittrick, black women’s identity is inextricably linked to the spaces/places their bodies inhabit. Hence, just as Hagar’s location within the domestic space of Sarah and Abraham’s home marks her as enslaved sexual object, so too does black women’s location in white domestic space mark them as enslaved and as sexual objects.

Hagar’s narrative not only parallels the experiences of enslaved women, whose location within white domestic space exposed them to the continual sexual advances of their slavemasters and mistresses, but also parallels the experiences of free black women in the North like Zilpha Elaw, Amanda Smith, and Nancy Prince, who are exploited for their bodily labor, as well as enslaved women, who are exploited for both.⁸ In fact, all three women devote significant portions of their narratives to discussing their experiences as exploited domestic workers in white homes. And in each case, these experiences illustrate such labor to be underpaid (subsistence wages) and detrimental to their health—

the work literally breaks down their bodies. Fortunately for Elaw, Smith, and Prince, itinerant preaching becomes a way out of such oppressive labor.

Hagar also manages to escape from this oppressive domestic space into the desert. Here in the desert or wilderness Hagar has her first encounter with God. After Hagar explains her reasons for running away, God commands her to return to Sarah, claiming, “You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery” (Gen 16:11). Hagar obeys God’s command and returns to Sarah and Abraham. Like Elaw, Smith, and Prince, Hagar is called by God to move. Moreover, her willingness to go where God leads is another example of Hagar’s itinerant practice. At first, God’s direction may seem unjust. The consequences of God’s instruction, however, suggest an ultimate concern with Hagar and her son’s survival. She is, after all, pregnant and alone in the desert without food or water. Moreover, Hagar’s return leads to the healthy birth of her son Ishmael and eventual freedom, another echo in American slavery, from Abraham and Sarah’s household; that freedom comes in the form of exile—another important type of movement within this narrative. In addition, because of God’s command, Ishmael is born in Abraham’s household rather than in the desert—a significant occurrence that legitimizes Ishmael’s birth by proving that he is Abraham’s heir. Hence, God is not just concerned with Hagar’s immediate survival but with her long term survival. As Elsa Tamez states, “Hagar simply must wait a little longer, because Ishmael must be born in the house of Abraham to prove that he is the first-born... This will guarantee him participation in the history of salvation and will give him rights of inheritance in the house of Abraham” (qtd. in Williams 14). Yet after Hagar’s return, Sarah attempts to deny Hagar and Ishmael access to this inheritance. Because God gives

Sarah a child of her own, Hagar's presence, her body and that of her son, are no longer useful in the household.⁹ In fact their bodies threaten Sarah's power and authority within the domestic space. Recognizing the threat Hagar and Ishmael pose to her son's inheritance, she demands of her husband, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac" (Gen 21:10). Abraham sends Hagar and her son away with just some bread and a "skin of water," after which "she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba" (Gen 21:14).

During her wandering in the wilderness, Hagar experiences her second encounter with God. After she runs out of water, Hagar, fearing that Ishmael will die, cries out for help. In response, "the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink" (Gen 21:17-19). So again we see that because Hagar is willing to follow God's journey for her, she not only escapes the oppressive conditions of Sarah and Abraham's household, but she also survives and has provision for the future. Despite Sarah's attempts to disinherit Hagar and Ishmael, God offers them a promise that echoes the promise given to Abraham—a hope and a future for themselves and for future generations to come.

Once again, Hagar's shift in location, her itinerancy, and her child enable a shift in identity from slave to an independent woman and mother. Similarly Teubal argues, "This strange directive that Hagar should hold her hand on her son seems to mean that

from now on Hagar should take command of him (her matrilineal prerogative), the implication being that her future and her son's are now in her own hands, not in Sarah's" (168). Furthermore, Teubal later asserts, "Hagar emerges from her initial experience as a dependent human being, whose vocation was to serve the needs of others, to the establishment of herself as an independent person, the mother of a people" (176).

Although Teubal's remarks focus on Hagar's change in status from dependence to independence, I would like to think of Hagar's transformation in terms of a shift in location from the violent and violating domestic space of Sarah and Abraham's household to the freedom found in the wilderness. As Delores Williams asserts, it is in the wilderness where

Hagar and African-American women (with their children) meet God...in the midst of trouble and what appears to be impending death and destruction...a near-destruction situation in which God gives personal direction...and thereby helps [them] make a way out of what [they] thought was no way.... For both Hagar and the African-American women, the wilderness experience meant standing utterly alone, in the midst of serious trouble, with only God's support to rely on.... Thus we can speak of Hagar and many African-American women as sisters in the wilderness struggling for life, and by the help of their God coming to terms with situations that have destructive potential. (108-09)

Significantly, Williams' statement defines the wilderness as not just a physical place (the literal desert that Hagar found herself in with her son Ishmael), but also a spiritual space of struggle where black women, like Hagar, may find themselves. Certainly, this

understanding of the wilderness has its roots in traditional definitions of the term as “an inhabitable place” and “belonging to the present world or life” (OED). This religious understanding of the term wilderness posits our life on earth as one of spiritual struggle that prepares us for the next life in heaven. While this traditional religious definition of the wilderness emphasizes this place as a spiritual struggle, Williams’ words suggest that this spiritual space is very much connected and inextricably linked to black women’s material reality and physical needs to ensure life and survival.

Certainly Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* finds herself in the wilderness—a place of spiritual and material struggle as Williams defines it. Like Hagar, Baby Suggs is an enslaved woman, who eventually is freed. In both cases it is their sons who enable their freedom; however, Baby Suggs’ son, Halle, buys her freedom by hiring himself out as a laborer, while Ishmael’s birth threatens Isaac’s (Sarah’s son) inheritance so much that they are both exiled from the household. Moreover, both Hagar and Baby Suggs are sexually exploited—Hagar is forced to be a reproductive surrogate for Abraham and Sarah, while Baby Suggs “coupl[es] with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child...only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did” (Morrison 23). Baby Suggs’ experience illustrates the lack of control enslaved women could exercise over their children. Just as Baby Suggs’ children could be bartered and traded as valuable commodities in the marketplace, so too does Hagar have no control over Ishmael’s future while in Abraham and Sarah’s household. Like Baby Suggs’ own children, Ishmael would belong to his masters, rather than to his mother.

Furthermore, *Beloved* also reveals the significance of the wilderness experience to African American spirituality—proving the wilderness to be not just a place of struggle but also a place of transformation and healing. For example, Baby Suggs’ preaching in the Clearing functions as a kind of wilderness experience for the entire black community. According to the text, the Clearing is “a wide-open place cut deep in the woods,” where Baby Suggs, “an unchurched [itinerant] preacher” (like Elaw, Smith and Prince) would take the black community in Cincinnati, Ohio, for healing:

In the silence...Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.... She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. “Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps and laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh... They despise it.... *You got to love it, you!*”(87-88)

Like Hagar, these men, women and children experience spiritual transformation in this space that enables them to feel valued not as property but as God’s people. The epitaph at the novel’s opening further illustrates this: “I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved” (Romans 9:25). In this verse, the apostle Paul references a verse from the Old Testament (Hosea) in order to posit that the Gentiles, not just the Israelites, are God’s people. This is significant because blood lineage is no longer the requirement for consideration as God’s chosen. I believe Morrison chose this verse as her epitaph in order to suggest, as Pauline Hopkins does in her novel *Of One Blood*, that although white Christians in America excluded people of

African descent from the Christian community because of their race, God looks beyond blood and lineage when choosing his people. Hagar's narrative makes a similar argument, as God considers her as one of God's own by offering her a promise like that given to Sarah—to be the mother of a nation. Hence, as Morrison argues in *Beloved* and as Hagar's narrative asserts, God welcomes those of African descent—even though, as Baby Suggs states, their “flesh” has been violated and exploited. In both texts, the wilderness experience is key to this spiritual transformation from enslaved property to people of God. Therefore, once again, we see that for black women, and even the entire black community as *Beloved* shows, spiritual experience is tied to the journey embarked on and the place in which we encounter God.

The Unruly, Disruptive Body in Hagar's Narrative

Not only is Hagar's itinerant practice transgressive but her physical presence throughout the narrative is disruptive as well. In fact, in the text, Hagar's body is represented as different—foreign and alien. For example, the first thing that we learn about Hagar is that she is an enslaved woman from Egypt, and her status as foreign and alien is repeated frequently throughout the text. The beginning of the narrative explains that Sarah “had an *Egyptian slave-girl* whose name was Hagar” (Gen 16:1, italics mine). Shortly after that we are told, “Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar *the Egyptian, her slave-girl*, and gave her to her husband” (Gen 16:3, italics mine). Furthermore, later in the text after Ishmael is born and after Sarah gives birth to Isaac, the narrative states, “Sarah saw the son of Hagar *the Egyptian*, whom she had borne to Abram, playing with her son Isaac” (Gen 21:9, italics mine). The narrator's continued reference to Hagar as “Hagar the Egyptian” and as “slave-girl,” emphasizes over and over again that Hagar is different

from Abraham and Sarah because of her enslaved status and because she is foreign—not part of the Israelite community. This repetition of Hagar as Egyptian not only marks her as an outsider to the community but also marks her exclusion from God’s covenant, as only Israelites were part of God’s chosen people. As a result of Hagar’s exclusion, she is in many ways nameless and faceless to Sarah and Abraham who refer to her as “my slave-girl” or “your slave-girl” (Gen 16:5-6). Moreover, after Sarah sees her son playing with Ishmael, Sarah says to Abraham, “Cast out *this slave woman* with her son; for the son of *this slave woman* shall not inherit along with my son Isaac” (Gen 21:10, italics mine). Once again Hagar is nameless to Sarah; she is simply “this slave woman,” property that has no identity beyond the generic marker of *slave woman*.

Nevertheless, Hagar’s identity, how she is seen in the text, shifts as she changes location. As McKittrick asserts, “*who* we see is tied up with *where* we see” and this is certainly the case with Hagar’s narrative, as her identity is fundamentally or inextricably linked to where we find her (xv). For example, within Sarah and Abraham’s household, as we have already seen, Hagar is “the slave-girl,” and “the Egyptian,” marking her as foreign and “out of place” among this chosen people. However, once Hagar enters the wilderness she is no longer a nameless slave woman, spoken of with contempt and excluded from the larger community. By fleeing to the desert, Hagar, through her transgressive practice, disrupts those boundaries that mark her as slave and alien and in place of this becomes someone who God knows and calls by name: “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” (Gen 16:8). Although God refers to Hagar as the “slave-girl of Sarai,” I read this as God’s recognition of Hagar’s lived experience as an enslaved woman. Moreover, in this new space Hagar is someone

who God sees and who sees God in return. Once again, Hagar's transgressive practice—her movement outside of Sarah and Abraham's domestic space into the desert is what enables this moment of recognition and therefore this moment of transformation for Hagar.

Hagar's narrative also illustrates the unruly potential of the black female body through her continual disruption of Abraham and Sarah's household. For example, after Sarah uses her as a reproductive surrogate, Hagar shows contempt for Sarah and her oppressive control over her body. Hagar's verbal unruliness, her willingness to disobey her mistress, disrupts the power hierarchy within the domestic space. Of course, Hagar's transgressive embodied practice, her willingness to step beyond her "appropriate" place as slave, infuriates Sarah who pleads to her husband Abraham for help. His response to Sarah is that "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please" (Gen 16: 6). Abraham's reply as patriarch of the household reaffirms the power structure within the domestic space, which enables Sarah's limitless, unbounded power over Hagar's body—the absolute power of a slavemistress over her property. Although the biblical passage is not explicit about what Sarah does to Hagar, the commentators' footnote suggests that she is abusive to her, presumably using physical violence. According to the note for verse 16:6, the words "dealt harshly with her" literally mean "oppressed her," which link Sarah's oppression of Hagar with the Egyptians' oppression of the Israelites (Harper Collins 25). Given that the Israelites' oppression was physically degrading and frequently brutal in nature, we can presume that Sarah's oppression of Hagar was similar. Moreover, the treatment is harsh enough to cause Hagar to run away—a much stronger form of disobedience than what she practices earlier in the narrative. Of course, her

decision to run away with her unborn child, Abraham and Sarah's heir, is extremely disruptive to the household. Without Hagar and her unborn child, Abraham and Sarah have no offspring and therefore no evidence of God's promise to make a great nation of their descendants. Yet Sarah does conceive a child after Hagar returns at God's command. After she gives birth to Isaac, Hagar, along with her son Ishmael as well, becomes a disruptive presence once again to the household as she and her son now threaten Isaac's (the "legitimate" heir) inheritance. Sarah is so concerned about her own son's claim that she demands that Abraham exile Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness.¹⁰

Despite Hagar's disruptive behavior, her unruliness and physical resistance to her earthly masters, Hagar is continually obedient to God even though God's command to return to Sarah seems unjust. Even in this moment, where most of us would question God's motivation and interests, Hagar obeys, seemingly without hesitation. I'd like to take some time to think more about this tension between unruliness and obedience as an important element of black women's spiritual and embodied practice, particularly because it is a tension that we see within nineteenth-century narratives in addition to the later twentieth-century texts as well.

Typically, Hagar has been represented as a disobedient and disruptive figure, and therefore a problematic model of womanhood, in both the Christian tradition and throughout nineteenth-century American culture. For instance, in the Christian tradition the celebrated ideal woman has "a gentle and quiet spirit" and women "accept the authority of their husbands" (1Peter 3:4). Moreover, in this tradition Sarah is the model of ideal womanhood and to be her daughter is to imbibe these qualities of ideal

womanhood as well. In the New Testament, Sarah consequently becomes the spiritual mother of all future Christians, while Hagar is excluded from this lineage because of her enslaved status.

Nineteenth-century American culture enforced a similar model of ideal or “true” womanhood. Hazel Carby explains that a true woman was virtuous, chaste, and pure. Moreover, Carby asserts that

[W]ithin the discourse of the cult of true womanhood, wifehood and motherhood were glorified...; the home was the sphere of all a woman’s actions [sic]. The prime objective of a woman’s life was to obtain a husband and then to keep him pleased; duties focused entirely on the bearing and rearing of heirs and caring for the household. In order to qualify as a paragon of virtue it was necessary to repress all overt sexuality. (26)

As an enslaved woman, Hagar has no access to this model of womanhood that places marriage at the center and rewards obedience to patriarchal authority. Unlike Sarah, Hagar has no husband and is forced to conceive a child outside of marriage. And although being gentle, quiet and obedient to authority are central characteristics of a true woman, Hagar refuses to exercise any of these qualities within the domestic space. Rather than respect the clear hierarchy within the patriarchal Israelite household, Hagar disrupts this hierarchy by rejecting Sarah’s authority over her and by thwarting both Abraham’s and Sarah’s claims of ownership by running away. Furthermore, like all enslaved women, and even free black women who labored in white homes, Hagar is under a continual sexual threat from her slaveowners. Ultimately, Hagar’s sexual past,

though not of her own choosing, her status as single mother, and her rejection of authority explain her continued representation as the “fallen” woman—a figure so threatening that nineteenth-century artists, as we have already seen, found it necessary to silence her transgressive potential.

Yet Hagar is not a wholly disobedient figure. In fact, she accepts divine authority unequivocally—obeying every command she receives from God. Hagar’s disobedience then, her disruptive action, is a form of resistant practice that she utilizes under oppressive circumstances. Recognizing the injustice of Sarah’s treatment of her, Hagar resists and when confronted with violence, she runs away. Hence, Hagar’s unruliness is a weapon she uses to protect herself and to ensure her survival. Moreover, Hagar’s obedience to God suggests her belief/faith that God is also invested in her survival. And indeed, this is precisely what Hagar’s relationship with God reveals: her patriarchal obedience to God leads to her survival.

If being quiet and obedient to authority is what makes women “true women” and the spiritual daughters of Sarah, then what kind of spiritual legacy does Hagar create and what might it mean to be Hagar’s daughter? I posit that Zilpha Elaw, Amanda Smith, and Nancy Prince are in fact Hagar’s daughters, and they practice her spiritual legacy of unruliness. Much like Hagar, Elaw, Smith, and Prince exist outside the bounds of true womanhood. As free black women, they are able to marry and have households of their own. However, their domestic labor in white homes, like Hagar, and their itinerant spiritual work as preachers in opposition to patriarchal church authority exclude them from the definition of “true woman” and from Sarah’s spiritual lineage. Reclaiming Hagar’s narrative in this way encourages us to re-see Hagar in opposition to a confining

and exclusive model of true womanhood. Hagar, then, becomes a righteous woman, “a new kind of woman,”¹¹ rather than a failed woman, or the “fallen woman” she is often represented to be in nineteenth-century American literature and culture.

Hagar is neither the “fallen woman” that white southern women writers portray her as nor the mother of an inferior race as proslavery supporters suggest. Neither is she the whitewashed figure that Gabler-Hover asserts nineteenth-century visual artists represent in their sculpture and paintings. Rather, what Hagar’s narrative makes evident is that her body—violated and exploited—is sacred. Therefore, as daughters of Hagar, through her spiritual legacy, all black women, regardless of their status as enslaved, as laborers, or as sexually exploited, can claim access to the Sacred.¹² Hence, I hope to show through my analysis of Elaw, Smith and Prince’s narratives that Hagar’s disruptiveness and unruly behavior are transformative and are key elements of the spiritual practice evident in their texts.

Chapter Two

Sacred Vision: Zilpha Elaw's *Memoirs*

Of the three nineteenth-century spiritual autobiographies that my dissertation looks at, I have chosen to begin with Zilpha Elaw's narrative, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw* (1846), in part because it more closely follows the traditional spiritual narrative form than Amanda Smith or Nancy Prince's narratives do. Moreover, Elaw's narrative, preceded only by Jarena Lee's 1836 text, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*, can be seen as marking the beginnings of African American women's spiritual autobiography. However, much of the scholarship on nineteenth-century black women's spiritual autobiography tends to focus on Lee. Therefore, my decision to focus on Elaw's narrative reflects my desire to add to the growing body of scholarship on Elaw's autobiographical text.

Much of this scholarship on Elaw places her work firmly within the traditional spiritual autobiographical form as it was shaped by the Puritans. Richard Douglass-Chin, for example, acknowledges that both Zilpha Elaw's and Jarena Lee's "autobiographies follow the formula of the early American Puritan spiritual narrative" (34). Similarly, Francis Smith Foster, Joanne M. Braxton, and Joycelyn Moody all agree that Elaw's narrative, as was true of Jarena Lee's before her, follows in the path of early spiritual autobiography, like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), by focusing on the spiritual experiences of sin and conversion. Specifically, Moody asserts, "Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was an especially instrumental text for black spiritual autobiographers to follow, as it generally motivated them to describe the multifaceted quest they had undertaken (24). Elaborating on the importance of this quest, Braxton maintains that

these traditional spiritual narratives “center on the quest for spiritual perfection in an imperfect world.... [T]he autobiographical act was a form of spiritual witnessing...record[ing] a journey characterized by trials, temptations, and, finally triumph” (49-50).

Elaw’s modeling of her narrative on this tripartite structure of the early Puritan spiritual autobiography places her in a lineage with eighteenth-century black spiritual autobiographers, such as Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, whose text, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, Written by Himself*, was published in 1774, and Olaudah Equiano, whose autobiographical work/slave narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, was published in 1789. Both Gronniosaw and Equiano, much like the popular spiritual autobiographers of their day (Paul Bunyan, John Bunyan and Richard Baxter), illustrate the three stages of conversion as an unbearable increase of internal conflict, a climax or turning towards God, and finally feelings of peace, joy and freedom (Hawkins 45). In both of their texts, Gronniosaw and Equiano repeatedly express despair at their current condition and inability to change it. Moreover, both men turn to God for comfort and aid in achieving spiritual, and in Equiano’s case physical liberation, finally experiencing joy and freedom after their transformations.

Although it’s uncertain which spiritual narratives Elaw was familiar with, as a member of a Christian community, she certainly would have been aware of this tripartite structure of “trials, temptations, and triumph,” as the telling of one’s conversion was required for church membership and authentication within a community of believers.

Indeed, Elaw's narrative is one that records and bears witness to her own spiritual journey that begins after she is orphaned and is forced to live with a Quaker family. Elaw's mother dies when she is twelve, after which her father places her in the care of Pierson and Rebecca Mitchel, a Quaker family whom Elaw describes as "kind benefactors"(53). They become her permanent guardians after her father's death, which occurs a year and a half after he sends her to live with them. Although Elaw describes the Mitchels as kind, she laments that her spiritual life was neglected as her Quaker caretakers failed to exercise their faith in any recognizable way—all forms of worship happened internally and silently. Comparing the religious traditions of her own family with that of her new caretakers, Elaw explains,

In my father's house, family devotion was regularly attended to morning and evening; prayer was offered up , and the praises of God were sung; but the persons with whom I now resided were Quakers, and their religious exercises, if they observed any, were performed in the secret silence of the mind...and, being very young, and no apparent religious restraint being laid upon me, I soon gave way to the evil propensities of an unregenerate heart...and heedlessly ran into the ways of sin, taking pleasure in the paths of folly. (54)

In the midst of this spiritually barren environment, as Elaw characterizes it, God enters her life through a dream, revealing her sinful ways. As in the Puritan spiritual narrative tradition that Gronniosaw and Equiano emulate, becoming aware of her sinful state throws Elaw into spiritual turmoil, eventually leading to her conversion, which occurs after another powerful visionary experience of God. Nevertheless, if Elaw's *Memoirs*

highlight these traditional elements of the spiritual autobiography, this text also pushes beyond these formal aspects of the genre.

The first move beyond tradition that Elaw makes is in the very title of her narrative, which deviates from the spiritual autobiographical tradition in her self-description as “Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour.” The deviation in this title becomes apparent only if we first consider the rigidity of the Puritan spiritual narrative form. Daniel Shea, for instance, attests to the formal rigidity and conformity of Puritan spiritual narratives, which “tended to stultify the [convert’s] articulation of his own experience” (229). Furthermore, Ann Hunsaker Hawkins explains, “the author of a spiritual autobiography almost always regards the self, or the ego, or the finite personality, as a fiction. It is the soul, not the self, that is ultimately ‘real.’ And it is from this initial standpoint that the author tells his story” (22). Hence, the traditional spiritual narrative reflects a turning away from the self “toward[s] the eternal things of God” (Hawkins 19). At first glance, the title page of Zilpha Elaw’s spiritual narrative appears to follow in this tradition with her inclusion of the following scripture underneath the title: “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God” (2 Cor. 3:5). The verse suggests that Elaw’s narrative will follow tradition by turning away from the self, away from the materiality of the world, and instead turn towards “the eternal things of God.” And yet her title clearly illustrates her narrative’s concern with such materiality—evident in her self-representation as married, female and African American. Each of these markings reminds Elaw’s audience that she inhabits a real, material body that cannot and will not be elided by a narrative that seeks to focus solely on spiritual things. Indeed, as I will show later in my analysis, Elaw’s

narrative is quite occupied with her raced, gendered, as well as classed body and the ways in which inhabiting this particular body shapes her spiritual experiences and lived reality.

But first, I begin by discussing the centrality of the body in Elaw's spiritual experience of sanctification or holiness. A key element of Methodist religious practice, sanctification typically occurs after one's conversion. According to Jean Humez, sanctification can be defined as "a kind of redoubling of one's assurance of transformation by grace. This controversial second blessing signaled entrance into a state of Christian perfection, purity, holiness, or perfect love, in which one felt permanently beyond the reach of committing further intentional sin" (133). Spread through the teachings of John Wesley, a Methodist itinerant minister during the Second Great Awakening (1800s-1840s), sanctification was such a controversial theological stance because it rejected the belief in the body as irrevocably sinful. This belief, a central tenet of Christian theology, affirms that the soul can be redeemed, while the body, on the other hand, must "fall away," because it hinders one's spiritual growth.¹³ Methodism, however, denies this soul/body split, acknowledging the possibility of a purified body.¹⁴

Despite its controversial reception within the Christian community, sanctification is a central tenet of black women's theology, as made evident in their spiritual narratives, because of the power and authority it provided them. Expounding on the principle of holiness, Bettye Collier-Thomas explains that

Believing in holiness was the basic source of these women's empowerment. It provided them with a strategy to overcome the barriers of the Church, which contended that the Bible does not sanction women to preach. Preaching women who embraced the holiness doctrine asserted

that they did not need the Church's sanction, because their ministry was authorized by a power beyond the Church, namely God, who spoke to them through the Holy Spirit. The feminist activism of most of the preaching women derived from religious inspiration, particularly their belief in the holiness doctrine of spiritual sanctification. (12)

Although occupying a female body typically made preaching an impossibility, the promise of purity and indwelling of the Holy Spirit through sanctification opened up, for believers, the possibility for women's bodies to become acceptable vessels for God's message to be spread. As Yolanda Pierce claims, "Sanctified believers feel that this process *constantly* purifies them and that their lives, souls, and bodies are set apart for a special purpose" (91). This message of purification was particularly appealing to black women whose raced and gendered bodies were deemed, as Beverly Guy-Sheftall contends, "not sacred."

Like Hagar, Elaw's body would have been read as spectacle, as foreign, and as useful only for physical and sexual labor—a body certainly unfit to carry God's holy message. Yet, I will argue in this chapter that Elaw manipulates her white audiences' positioning of her as a "dark coloured female stranger...from afar" (Elaw 92). By appropriating this dominant trope of the black female body as exotic spectacle, Elaw revises her "differently marked" body as a vessel of divine knowledge and as the source of an alternative vision that enables her to critique the narrow and failed vision of her white audience.

This chapter, then, as the title suggests, focuses on Elaw's vision as a central part of her embodied spiritual practice. Like Hagar, who is able to see new possibilities for

her and her son's future through her visionary encounters with God, Elaw's own encounters with God endow her with a new way of seeing herself and with a sharp critical vision (in other words, a critical way of seeing, looking, and gazing at herself and the world around her) that she uses to challenge and transform the often hostile vision¹⁵ of her white audiences. Drawing from Delores Williams' essay "Visions, Inner Voices, Apparitions, and Defiance in Nineteenth-Century Black Women's Narratives," I define visionary encounters, visionary experiences and spiritual visions as including dreams, apparitions, and experiences of seeing God, angels and/or Jesus—all of which I consider as encounters with the divine.

In addition, black women's visionary experience is also what propels them into the public arena and what sustains their careers as preachers. Specifically, Williams argues, "the spirit is nurtured for the work of resistance" through visionary experience (89). Yolanda Pierce similarly expounds, "[i]nterpreted as purposeful, divine interventions in one's daily life, dreams and visions provided black women with prophetic intelligence and symbolic guidance" (90). Without these continual encounters with the divine (i.e. God and the various manifestations of God mentioned above), black women spiritual itinerants, like Elaw, would have lacked the confidence and persistence to stand before those who were critical of their decision to travel and preach God's word. Moreover, Godly vision informs and brings about each stage of Elaw's spiritual transformation. For example, Elaw first becomes aware of her sinful state and her desire for God through divine encounter. She explains that she receives "an effectual call through the following dream":

[A]fter I had offended my heavenly Father by taking His name in vain, He aroused and alarmed my spirit, by presenting before me in a dream the awful terrors of the day of judgment.... I then exclaimed in my dream, "Oh, Lord, what shall I do? I am unprepared to meet thee." I then meditated an escape, but could not effect it; and in this horrific dilemma I awoke: the day was just dawning; and the intense horror of my guilty mind was such as to defy description. (55)

Here we see that Elaw's spiritual vision, her dream, makes evident her intense need for God and specifically her need to depend on God rather than on herself for salvation. Significantly, her own efforts to escape ultimately fail, suggesting that like Hagar whose survival in the desert depends on her willingness to follow God's direction, Elaw's own survival requires her to look to God for spiritual sustenance.

The centrality of visionary experience to Elaw's spiritual growth becomes increasingly apparent as she narrates her experiences of conversion. A few months after Elaw's first visionary experience, she has a second visionary encounter with the divine that ultimately leads to her conversion, typically the next step in the Christian spiritual journey. Elaw explains,

As I was milking the cow and singing, I turned my head, and saw a tall figure approaching, who came and stood by me. He had long hair, which parted in the front and came down on his shoulders; he wore a long white robe down to the feet; and as he stood with open arms and smiled upon me, he disappeared.... I was overwhelmed with astonishment at the sight, but the thing was certain and beyond all doubt.... After this wonderful

manifestation of my condescending Savior, the peace of God which passeth understanding was communicated to my heart; and joy in the Holy Ghost, to a degree, at the last, unutterably by my tongue and indescribable by my pen; it was beyond my comprehension; but, from that happy hour, my soul was set a glorious liberty; and, like the Ethiopic eunuch, I went on my way rejoicing in the blooming prospects of a better inheritance....

This, my dear reader, was the manner of my soul's conversion to God.

(56-57)

Elaw's conversion narrative closely parallels that of traditional conversion narratives, particularly the feelings of peace that arise after experiencing God's salvation. Joanne Braxton defines conversion as conveying "instantaneous positive change in one's whole self-image and orientation toward ultimate reality, leaving one with the joyful sense of being a completely 'new creature'" (133). Hence, we can see obvious similarities between Elaw's experience of joy, which is "unutterable," "indescribable," and "beyond comprehension" and the typical Christian experience of conversion.

Moreover, her words echo those used to describe the experience of conversion by other spiritual autobiographers, writing before her, who also emphasize the inability of language to describe what this experience truly felt like. For example, in Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, he describes his own struggle with sin and eventual conversion evoking emotions that are strikingly similar to Elaw's narrative. Equiano exclaims, "My mind was uncommonly chagrined...and was discontented...that I could not be saved by what I had done; I hated all things, and wished I had never been born; confusion seized me, and I wished to be annihilated" (Equiano 142). Although Equiano's

language is perhaps more dramatic, both he and Elaw are horrified by their apparent powerlessness to change their situation. Moreover, Equiano's narration of his conversion mirrors that of Elaw's. He explains, "[t]his was indeed unspeakable, and I firmly believe undeniable by many...The amazing things of that hour can never be told—it was joy in the Holy Ghost! I felt an astonishing change; the burden of sin, the gaping jaws of hell, and the fears of death...now lost their horror...Such were my grief and joy" (Equiano 144). This moment of conversion is so awe-filled for Elaw and Equiano that neither can find words to narrate adequately the experience. And yet as they try, however unsuccessfully, to narrate this life-changing moment, the language they use and feelings they evoke are overwhelmingly similar—for both writers, their experiences of conversion are unspeakable, unutterable, indescribable, astonishing, and filled with joy.

One explanation for these similar narrations in texts that were published nearly 60 years apart and in two different centuries is Equiano and Elaw's concern with validity and authenticity. As black authors, writing in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries respectively, both Equiano and Elaw must prove the veracity of their narratives. Like all black writers seeking to be heard by a white Western audience, they must successfully convince their audiences that they can be trusted. For Equiano and Elaw, this means appropriating Christian discourse within their narratives, which as I have already shown, they accomplish by adhering to the traditional formal structure of conversion narratives (including the three stages of trials, temptations, and finally triumph), as well as using similar language to describe their experience of these stages. Couching their experiences as black Christians within the formal bounds of the spiritual narrative, both Elaw and Equiano declare their membership within the Christian community. According to

Frances Smith Foster, the conversion narrative, particularly in the Methodist tradition which informs both Elaw and Equiano's narratives, was central to a convert's religious experience as it provided proof that he/she had truly experienced salvation in return for repentance of sin and was committed to following God's direction (60).

For Equiano, this use of Christian discourse proves particularly effective as a British reviewer of his narrative in the June 1789 issue of *The Monthly Review* demonstrates, "[t]he sable author of these volumes appears to be a very sensible man; and he is, surely, not the less worthy of credit from being a convert to Christianity.... [A]ll this...only serves to convince us that he is guided by principle" ((qtd. in Costanzo 43-44). Writing and publishing her narrative in London, like Equiano, Elaw seeks the same acceptance as "sensible" and "worthy of credit" as she argues for the veracity of her narrative through Christian discourse. Although the black body, and particularly the black female body, was seen as an untrustworthy body—a body to be viewed with suspicion, the review above illustrates the true usefulness and power of writing within a recognizable discourse. By representing her experiences within the recognizable Christian discourse of the spiritual autobiography, Elaw simultaneously renders her body recognizable to a reading audience who, like those who come to hear her preach, see her blackness and femaleness as something "surpassingly strange."

In fact, Elaw appears to be intensely aware of the importance of being seen as "sensible" and legitimate as she narrates a vision her sister has while sick. She explains that her sister receives a command to "tell Zilpha that she must preach the gospel; and also that I must go to a lady named Fisher¹⁶, a Quakeress, and she would tell me further what to do.... [S]he wished me to go directly to visit this lady, and also to commence my

ministry of preaching by delivering an address to the people then in the house” (73).

Although Elaw is initially taken aback by her sister’s vision and the message God communicates through her, she makes clear in her narrative that we must take her sister’s spiritual experiences seriously:

What will infidelity say to this? It surely will not attempt to charge a sincere and godly Christian on her death-bed with hypocrisy; nor can it be consistently attributed to fanaticism. The antagonizing conflicts of Christian faith, and its triumphs through the aids of the Holy Spirit over the powers of darkness, as exemplified on such occasions, are very remote from the whimsical vagaries of an over-heated and incoherent imagination;... and it is a fact worthy of extensive observation, that the vast variety of mental exercises and religious experiences of all true and lively Christians, in every grade of society, in all ages, and in all denominations and sections of the Christian Church, are of too uniform and definite a character to be ascribed to the wild and fluctuating uncertainties of fanaticism.(72-73)

Lest her readers discount her sister’s spiritual experiences, Elaw assures her readers that these kinds of experiences and encounters are far from imagined. Rather, Elaw presents her sister’s spiritual reality as true and reasonable because it parallels the experiences of other Christians throughout history. By locating her sister’s visionary encounters within a tradition of spiritual experience, Elaw effectively proves her sister’s spiritual encounters to be rational and real, rather than the result of incoherency or delirium. She lends further authority to Christian visionary experience by positing these visions as “fact” in

opposition to what she calls “fanaticism,” which Elaw posits as “whimsical,” “wild,” “fluctuating,” and uncertain.

Elaw’s predicament, her concern over how she is represented and even more so how Christian visionary experience is perceived by her audience, becomes clearer when read in light of Nat Turner’s rebellion, which took place on August 21, 1831, and his representation in print thereafter. Whether in Thomas Gray’s account of Turner’s confession, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), or in the countless newspaper documents that reported on the rebellion, we see a very similar and consistent representation of Turner as “a gloomy fanatic,” whose mind was “dark, bewildered, and overwrought” (41). According to the *Confessions*, Turner was a preacher and prophet, who was called by God via several visionary experiences and communications with “the Spirit,” to organize and lead a slave revolt in Southampton, Virginia, in 1831 (46). Although Turner believes his visions to be true and authentic, his spiritual power and visions are continually discredited in white newspapers who portray Turner as “misled by some hallucination of his imagined spirit of prophecy,” as someone who “pretends to be a...preacher,” and who “pretend[s] to have conversations with the Holy Spirit” (Pleasants 66, “Banditti” 68, *Constitutional* 81). Moreover, Turner’s belief that God has called him to a special purpose, to lead a slave revolt, is portrayed in white newspapers as the product of “heated imaginations,” “passion,” and “pretended visions” (*Constitutional* 80-81). Perhaps the best example of these incriminating and dismissive representations of Turner in the press is the *Norfolk Herald*, which reports that

he was instigated by the wildest superstition and fanaticism, and was not connected with any organized plan of conspiracy beyond the circle of the

few ignorant wretches whom he had seduced by his artifices to join him. He still pretends that he is a prophet, and relates a number of revelations which he says he has had.... His profanity in comparing his pretended prophecies with passages in the Holy Scriptures should not be mentioned, if it did not afford proof of his insanity. (“Nat Turner” 88-89)

Here we see language surprisingly similar to Elaw’s narrative, in which she argues vehemently for the veracity and authenticity of Christian visionary experience—distinguishing it from “the whimsical vagaries of an over-heated and incoherent imagination” and “the wild and fluctuating uncertainties of fanaticism” (Pleasants 73). Certainly, given that Elaw resided in the United States at the time of Turner’s rebellion, she most likely would have been aware of Turner’s rebellion and his misrepresentation in the press as a wild fanatic, who fell prey to his own impassioned imagination. Is it also possible, then, that Elaw too feared being dismissed (like Turner) as a false prophet and as crazy? Given that both Turner and Elaw were black preachers who were deeply indebted to spiritual visionary experience as the primary source of their power and knowledge, it would seem that Elaw might feel the need to separate herself from Turner, who represented for many white people the true danger of not only black preaching, but also black religiosity in general. *The Richmond Enquirer* declared, for instance, that “No black man ought to be permitted to turn a Preacher through this country. The law must be enforced or the tragedy of Southampton appeals to us in vain”(“Banditti” 67). In the wake of Turner’s rebellion, *The Constitutional Whig* entreated its readers that “if any desire... to increase this [rebellious] spirit among our slaves, I would advise our citizens, to permit coloured preachers to go on, as they have for several years past haranging vast

crowds, when and where they pleased, the character of their sermons known only to their congregations” (80). The writer goes on to argue, “when a minister goes into a pulpit, flies into a passion, beats his fist, and in fine, plays the bloackhead, that he gives a warrant to any negro who hears him, to do whatever he pleases provided his imagination, can make God sanction it” (80). It becomes clear, then, after reading these newspaper articles that many whites believed that Turner’s “fanaticism” had its roots in black spirituality and even more so, that his preaching was the catalyst for the insurrection. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the Virginia legislature outlawed preaching for both enslaved and free blacks in 1832 (Greenberg 23). Within this context, it becomes clearer why Elaw might feel the need to defend her own and her sister’s visionary experiences against attempts to dismiss such spiritual encounters as “pretended,” or products of “passion” and “over-heated imagination.”

Of course, by arguing for the veracity of her sister’s visionary experience, Elaw further authenticates her own spiritual visions, which she continues to experience throughout her narrative. In fact, after her sister’s death, Elaw has her own visionary encounter with God, while recovering from a serious illness:

[I]n this illness, I received another striking communication in reference to my future employment in the ministry.... [A] human figure in appearance, came and stood by my bedside, and addressed these words to me, “Be of good cheer, for thou shalt yet see another camp-meeting; and at that meeting thou shalt know the will of God concerning thee.” I then put forth my hand to touch it, and discovered that it was not really a human being, but a supernatural appearance. I was not in the least alarmed, for the room

was filled with the glory of God, who had permitted the veil to be removed from my mortal vision, that I might have a glimpse of one of our heavenly attendants,—of one who had a message to deliver to me from God. (77)

As in Elaw's previous visions, she is able to hear the voice of God, who declares prophetically that she will recover from her illness and explains where Elaw must go in order to fulfill God's call to her. In this moment, we see Elaw's vision being transformed by her encounter with God. Specifically, "the glory of God" changes Elaw's vision from human sight to divine vision. This ability to see divinely is what enables Elaw to receive the message that God has for her—assuring her of God's continued care and concern even amidst her suffering and providing further evidence of God's calling Elaw to a position of spiritual authority and power.

The significance of this vision is further revealed during the camp meeting that Elaw is called to attend. During another similar visionary encounter at this camp meeting, Elaw becomes sanctified by God. Narrating her experience of sanctification, Elaw makes a significant claim about the intersection of the body, space, geography and the Spirit:

I, for one, have great reason to thank God for the refreshing seasons of his mighty grace, which have accompanied these great meetings of his saints in the wilderness. It was at one of these meetings that God was pleased to separate my soul unto Himself, to sanctify me as a vessel designed for honour, made meet for the master's use. Whether I was in the body, or whether I was out of the body, on that auspicious day, I cannot say; but

this I do know, that at the conclusion of a most powerful sermon...., I became so overpowered with the presence of God, that I sank down upon the ground,... and while I was thus prostrate on the earth, my spirit seemed to ascend up into the clear circle of the sun's disc;... I distinctly heard a voice speak unto me, which said, "Now thou art sanctified; and I will show thee what thou must do." (66)

Here Elaw's description of her visionary encounter illustrates, as previously discussed, the centrality of both the body and the spirit within sanctification. Not only does Elaw's visionary encounter enable her to transcend her body, to rise above her body and beyond the material world, but also her narration makes clear that the body is still important. For one, Elaw cannot distinguish whether she is in the body or out of the body, suggesting that the boundaries between physical and spiritual reality have been blurred. Moreover, her experience of God's presence physically moves her body, causing her to fall to the ground and prostrate herself before God.

Elaw's characterization of the space she inhabits as a wilderness further reveals the importance of both the spirit and material world. Thinking back to Delores Williams' discussion of wilderness, we are reminded that this place is both a physical and spiritual space. For Hagar, the wilderness was a real, physical desert that threatened her survival and yet also a spiritual place that facilitated her visionary encounters with God. Similarly, for Elaw this wilderness is the physical location of the camp meeting outside in nature, in an uncultivated wooded space or as Elaw states, a "wildly rural and wooded retreat" as well as a place of spiritual transformation, as the above passage makes evident (65). Elaw's emphasis on the physicality as well as the spirituality of this space becomes

apparent in her description of the camp meeting as a place characterized by bodily movement. According to Elaw, “Many precious souls are on these occasions introduced into the liberty of the children of God;...the grove is teeming with life and activity...the salutations of old friends again meeting in the flesh...the concourse of pedestrians, the arrival of horses and carriages of all descriptions” (65). Elaw’s emphasis on moving bodies and active flesh suggests again that this space of wilderness is not only an embodied space but also an itinerant space—a space in which spiritual experience is very much shaped by the surrounding physical world and the bodily movements of those who inhabit this space.

Dickson Bruce, in his book *They All Sang Hallelujah*, confirms Elaw’s linking of the physicality of the wilderness to spiritual experience when he asserts the importance of the physical space of the camp-meeting for creating “the proper camp-meeting atmosphere” (71). He goes on to elaborate, “when cleared—when the small trees were removed, the large ones remaining should form a natural canopy of tree limbs over the site, the effect being to emphasize the site in contrast to the natural gloom of the forest and to create a cathedral in the wilderness” (Bruce 71). This “clearing,” this “cathedral in the wilderness” was essential for enabling “a particular kind of interaction to occur between the individual and the divine” (Bruce 69). Like Elaw’s passage, Bruce confirms that the physicality and materiality of the wilderness were crucial for spiritual encounters and visionary experience.

Moreover, I would like to argue that Elaw’s privileging of visionary experience is coupled with her distrust of written and spoken language, which as discussed earlier, always fails to translate vision into words. Elaw paradoxically, in spite of her desire to

have her narrative accepted and authenticated by the Christian community, has a profound distrust of language even as she uses it to assert her voice within the public sphere. In response to her sister's singing and testimony of seeing angels while on her deathbed, Elaw exclaims,

I have...since learnt that some other Christians have occasionally been known, when in the very arms of death, to break forth and sing with a melodious and heavenly voice, several verses in a language unknown to mortals. A pure language, unalloyed by the fulsome compliment, the hyperbole, the tautology and circumlocution, the insinuation, double meaning and vagueness, the weakness and poverty, the impurity, bombast, and other defects, with which all human languages are clogged, seems to be essential for the associations of glorified spirits and the elevated devotion of heaven, are, doubtless, in use among the holy angels, and seems to be a matter of gracious promise on the part of Jehovah, on behalf of his redeemed people. (74)

Just as Elaw early in her narrative positions Christian visionary experience as “fact,” rather than as “fanaticism,” as “wild,” and as “fluctuating,” so too does she elevate, in the above passage, godly language as “pure” and unchanging over the “impurity” and always shifting nature of human language. Perhaps Elaw's frustration with human language is the result of her spiritual work as a preacher, which requires her to make God's words and message known to and understood by other people. Certainly such a task would have been difficult for any preacher, but particularly challenging for a black woman preaching to white and male audiences who harbor a profound distrust of her body and therefore her

words. Despite the realities of race and gender, Elaw must translate the message she receives from God through her visions into human language. And as we see from the passage above, this task, because of the unfixed and uncertain nature of language, is always doomed to fail.

Even from the very beginning of Elaw's *Memoirs*, she makes her tenuous relationship with language evident. In the "Dedication," she warns her readers,

Take heed what you read: as a tree of knowledge, both of good and evil, is the press; it oftentimes teems with rabid poisons, putting darkness for light, and light for darkness; extolling earthly grandeur and honour, spurious valour and heroism; fixing reputation and character on a false basis; and frequently appearing as the panegyrist of the rankest principles, and the basest vices. Above all, shun an infidel, obscene or disloyal newspaper press, which is the scavenger of slander, and the harlequin of character; the masquerade of morals, and the burlesque of religion; the proteus of sentiment, and the hot-bed of sedition. Defile not your eyes with the sight of its columns, nor your heart with its proximity. (52)

Similar to her earlier critique of the "vagueness," "impurity" and defectiveness of human language, this passage, Elaw vehemently condemns the written word as a potential evil and "poison." Of particular significance is her comparison of the press to the tree of knowledge from the book of Genesis. Although her attack is specifically on the newspaper press, I believe this metaphor is useful for understanding the roots of Elaw's distrust and critique of all written and spoken language. In the biblical story, Adam and Eve fall from grace by believing the serpent's lie that along with the

knowledge that comes from eating fruit from the tree of good and evil comes power—not just any power but enough power to make them equal to God. Ultimately, this narrative is about greed and pride as the defect of human nature. I assert then, that in Elaw’s referencing of the tree of knowledge in her dedication and through her later critique of “human language,” she undermines traditional Western epistemology that equates the attainment of language with power. Just as Adam and Eve, in the Genesis story, discovered that the attainment of knowledge does not make them greater than God, so too does Elaw argue in these passages that any privileging of what she refers to as “human language” is potentially destructive.

Establishing all human language as distrustful is a shrewd rhetorical move for Elaw, who as I discussed earlier, must labor under the pressure of proving herself trustworthy to her white audiences. If all human language is impure and cannot be trusted, that as readers and/or hearers of the word, we should be equally critical of every word written or spoken by any human being, not just the words of black women. Rather than privilege “false” human language, Elaw privileges godly language as pure, a language she has access to only through “visions, inner voices, [and] apparitions” (Williams 81). As Williams asserts, such visions and voices are central to black women’s spiritual experiences as they challenge the patriarchal, institutional church’s claim to be the sole source of knowledge about God. Ultimately, Elaw’s continued critique of language makes sense given her status as a poor black female preacher against whom language, both spoken and written, was used to “misrepresent” and “slander.” Against the continuous representation of the black female body as foreign, exotic, spectacle, and property to be bought and sold, Elaw through her tacit critique of Western epistemology

and her assertion of visionary experience as an alternative form of knowledge, effectively argues against attempts to posit the black female body as “not sacred.”

Although the dangers of misrepresentation were indeed felt by all black authors writing before a white audience, the act of self-representation to a white Western male audience would have been doubly challenging for Elaw who is marked by both race and gender. For this reason, Elaw’s likening herself to the Ethiopian eunuch found in Acts 8:26-39 is particularly interesting.¹⁷ Like Elaw, the Ethiopian eunuch has a visionary encounter with God and as a result is converted through the Apostle Philip’s ministry. This particular reference in Elaw’s narrative is significant because this biblical passage signals that Christianity is open to all, even people of color. Consequently, it serves as a reminder to Elaw’s audience of the important role of those who spring from African descent in the bible and in the propagation of Christianity. The Ethiopian eunuch is a particularly important figure precisely because he seeks out the gospel, and his narrative legitimizes Elaw’s visionary encounters, providing biblical proof that people of color do in fact have access to such intimate encounters with the divine and that such encounters are true and authentic, rather than the product of “deceptive imagination” (Elaw 57).

Yet, in spite of the clear argument the Ethiopian eunuch makes against racial injustice, the bible makes clear that it is not the eunuch’s Ethiopian heritage that excludes him but his status as eunuch. As a castrated male, he would have been excluded from the Jewish community because of the Jewish law prohibiting membership to any male with genital impairment.¹⁸ Moreover, the eunuch’s body, which defies gender categorization (neither fully male because of his castration, nor female) makes him a marginalized figure. Nevertheless, paradoxically, in spite of or perhaps because of their lowly status,

eunuchs were often given positions of authority as we see with the Ethiopian eunuch, who is described as “a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury” (Acts 8:26-39). I argue that all of these qualities of the Ethiopian eunuch, as a marginalized figure who disrupts race and gender boundaries and who occupies a position of power, enable Elaw to overcome the representational concerns she has in her narrative.

Similarly, Richard Douglass-Chin notes the significance of Elaw’s self-representation as a eunuch, focusing especially on the eunuch’s lack of a phallus. Reflecting on why such a lack might appeal to Elaw, Douglass-Chin asserts that Elaw “rejoices because of [t]his lack of that commodity deemed indispensable by patriarchal standards....Throughout her text, Elaw urges her readers to renounce their love of all those qualities extolled by prevailing white American standards...whiteness, riches, and social standing are...evils. Only by rejecting prevailing notions of power can the Christian be whole.... Lack in prevailing discourse, then, becomes wholeness...in the subversive discourse of Elaw” (54-55). Demonstrating the parallel between herself and a eunuch, Elaw “draws her readers’ attention to lack. But it is that very lack—lack of whiteness, lack of riches, lack of social position—represented by the shocking physical lack of the phallus that facilitates her ability to go on her way rejoicing in Christ” (Douglass-Chin 55). Through this signification, we see Elaw once again redefining power—not as rooted in worldly standards that privilege race, gender and class status, but as coming only from Christ, who enables “power in weakness” (Elaw 51).

Also writing about the representational challenges that black authors faced in the nineteenth-century, Katherine Fishburn attends in *The Problem of Embodiment*, that “a

dominant concern of African American writers...was...to protect the racialized body from the white reader's gaze—whether this gaze was considered to be disciplinary, scopophilic, or voyeuristic in nature. It is my belief that postbellum writers and their successors...hid the black body from view because they no longer felt they could trust their (white) readers" (96). Although Fishburn focuses on postbellum works, she locates the roots of such distrust in antebellum works like Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Nancy Prince's *The Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (1853) and Louisa Piquet's *The Octoroon* (1861). Although it is true that, as we have seen, Elaw exhibits a clear awareness of the white reader's gaze, I do not believe Elaw hides her body from view. Rather, I argue that Elaw represents herself, a tangible and physical self, as the Ethiopian eunuch—a body that thwarts categorization and gendered boundaries in order to critique her white readers' attempts to devalue her because of her gendered and racially marked body. Like the Ethiopian eunuch, Elaw, through her spiritual practices as preacher, prophet and healer, deviates from normative gender roles and disrupts the boundaries that stabilize and naturalize race and gender.

In her writing about her experience as a preacher, Elaw makes evident her awareness of and resistance to the "scopic gaze" of her white audience. According to Lindon Barrett, "the scopic is a preeminent cultural matrix of power and order" in the West (216). Moreover, he explains,

Diasporic populations find themselves in circumstances in which the sense-making capacity of vision, the significance of vision, is monopolized from a hostile perspective.... Visual reflexes, in the same way literacy determines in large part the logic of racial blackness, aim to

hypostasize [assume the reality of] racial blackness. Judgments of individual and cultural legitimacy based on literacy propose abjected Otherness for African Americans; visual evidence proposes the same. (215)

In other words, for Barrett, vision has been used against black people in hostile ways in order to exclude, marginalize and mark black bodies as “abject.” Because of this hostile manipulation of vision by white people, Barrett contends that black people have turned to other sensory practices, particularly that of orality, as resources through which to construct an alternative subjectivity. He defines orality and specifically black oral tradition/culture, which includes singing, folktales, preaching, etc. as “revisionary” and as “a form of contestation” that rejects the dominant notion in the West that literacy is the sole marker of meaning, value and self-expression—a belief which effectively silences black people by excluding them from Western definitions of civilization and humanity (58, 61).

Certainly, I agree with Barrett’s claim that orality can function as an oppositional practice for black people. However, Elaw’s text suggests that the field of vision need not always be hostile for black people. One passage in particular highlights Elaw’s preaching to a white southern audience—making evident the potentially transformative possibilities of the field of vision by expanding its boundaries beyond the human to include the divine. In this passage, Elaw disrupts the monopoly white people have had over the field of vision by appealing to an alternative way of seeing enabled only by God. During her travels south, Elaw preaches in Alexandria, Virginia, before white slaveholders—another

example of her embodied spiritual practice as a performance that disrupts the social and legal boundaries of race and gender in the South. According to Elaw,

There were some among the great folks whom curiosity induced to attend my ministry; and this formed a topic of lively interest with many of the slave holders, who thought it surpassingly strange that a person (and a female) belonging to the same family stock with their poor debased, uneducated, coloured slaves, should come into their territories and teach the enlightened proprietors the knowledge of God; and more strange still was it to some others, when in the spirit and power of Christ, that female drew the portraits of their characters, made manifest the secrets of their hearts, and told them all things that ever they did. This was a paradox to them indeed: for they were not deficient of pastors and reverend divines, who possessed all the advantages of talents, learning, respectability and worldly influence, to aid their religious efforts; and yet the power of truth and of God was never so manifest in any of their agencies, as with the dark coloured female stranger, who had come from afar to minister amongst them. But God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty. (92)

Clearly, the white slaveholders that Elaw speaks of have come to gaze at her—they have come to see a spectacle. As Barrett contends, the realm of vision is manipulated in this scene by white slaveholders in order to render Elaw's body "Other." Elaw is on display in this scene; she is an oddity, a "curiosity," something "surpassingly strange. And although Elaw posits herself as "the dark coloured female stranger...from afar," giving voice to

how her white audience sees her, she positions herself in this role as spectacle only to disrupt the boundaries of race and gender that underlie it and to offer an alternative representation of herself.

My reading of this scene is shaped largely by Katherine McKittrick's analysis of how the slave auction block functions as a site of domination. She claims,

[T]he human—commodity is put on display and the auction block serves to spatially position black men and women as objects “to be seen” and assessed. Even “private” auctions were strikingly public, requiring a seeable, measurable, black body. Regardless of the type of auction block, the enslaved woman, man, child, or family is rendered an intelligible, transparent commodity. Without a doubt, the body on the auction block is rendered an object; geographically, black men, women, and children become part of the slave trade landscape, like other objects for sale. (72)

Given McKittrick's positing of the auction block as a space that “position[s] black men and women as objects,” I am arguing that Elaw occupies a figurative auction block in the scene in which she preaches before a group of slaveholders. Although Elaw's body is not for sale in this scene, her body is available “to be seen” and therefore available for consumption by her white audience. Moreover, given her location in the South before a group of slaveholders, Elaw's body is immediately associated with slavery, the buying and selling of black bodies. As Elaw states, those in her audience “thought it surpassingly strange that a person (and a female) belonging to the same family stock with their poor debased, uneducated, coloured slaves, should come into their territories and teach the enlightened proprietors the knowledge of God” (92). With this statement, Elaw

demonstrates that these slaveholders believe her body to be knowable or as McKittrick states above, “intelligible.” As a result, they posit Elaw as object, as commodity like their own slaves.

Nevertheless, through her spiritual practice, Elaw dismisses her white audiences’ gaze, proving that this Southern space is not simply a site of domination for black women. Rather, through her movement south, Elaw affirms, as McKittrick claims, that “black women’s geographies push up against the seemingly natural spaces and places of subjugation, disclosing, sometimes radically, how geography is socially produced and therefore an available site through which various forms of blackness can be understood and asserted” (xviii-xix). Using McKittrick’s theory of space and geography, I argue that Elaw’s spiritual practice, her itinerant preaching and positioning her body before these slaveholders, enables her to reveal the constructed boundaries of race and gender to her audience and to argue for a different way of seeing the black female body.

To begin, Elaw’s critical response in the passage above makes a clear distinction between her white audience’s perceived knowledge about God and about the black female body and her own oppositional knowledge of God and of her raced and gendered body. Beginning first with the perceptions of her white audience, Elaw underscores that white slaveholders’ racist and sexist knowledge about black female bodies causes them to identify Elaw’s marked body as “poor debased, uneducated” and to link her with their own slaves as not free. In short, her white audience questions Elaw’s humanity and therefore her ability to possess any access to spiritual knowledge, “the knowledge of God.” Elaw explains that, according to her white audience, those who do have access to such divine knowledge possess “talent, learning, [and] respectability.” In short, whiteness

and maleness become prerequisites for divine knowledge and authority. Hence, Elaw's presence in this white community, and specifically her claim to spiritual authority and sacred power, create what Elaw refers to as "a paradox," or something "surpassingly strange." Her words make clear that the location and movement of her body within this white racist patriarchal space create a kind of rupture in the social fabric of the community. Even before Elaw speaks, her mere physical presence disrupts the boundaries of race, gender and even class. According to Elaw's narrative, part of her spiritual performance before this audience includes a display of her prophetic knowledge—the ability both to see into the lives of her white spectators and to know "the secrets of their hearts." Certainly Elaw's secret knowledge is equally as disruptive if not more so than the rupture caused by her physical presence. In fact, it is her bodily performance of such knowledge—Elaw's gift of foresight and the ability to expose her largely white male audience, naming their weaknesses and sin—which seems to concern them most.

Yet what her spectators see as a paradox, Elaw sees as God's agency, God's willingness to choose a "dark coloured female stranger...from afar" to house "the knowledge of God" and to become the arbiter of "the power of truth and of God." In this moment, Elaw does not deny her materiality or attempt to transcend her racially and sexually marked body. Rather she embraces her blackness and femaleness—claiming that it is precisely this body (marked as weak, as debased and as unfree) that God has chosen to "confound" those who define themselves as strong. I am especially intrigued by the word "confound" that Elaw paraphrases from biblical scripture.¹⁹ This word means also to mystify, bewilder, or baffle as if to suggest that the purpose of Elaw's embodied

spiritual performance is to call into question the perceived knowledge, wisdom and power of her white spectators—perhaps even to reveal the limits of their knowledge and their power.

Throughout her narrative, Elaw's spiritual practice continues to disrupt the racial landscape of the South, and the risks she faces in doing so become increasingly apparent. Upon her arrival in the South, Elaw expresses her "fear of being arrested and sold for a slave, which their laws would have warranted, on account of my complexion and features" (91). Here Elaw illustrates the precarious location she occupies in the South as a "free" black person. In this space, her body is seen by white spectators as an enslaved body. Hence, Elaw's narrative, not surprisingly, also communicates a fear of being seen—a fear of the white gaze that cannot only envision her body as enslaved but can also legally mark her body as such. She explains, "news of a coloured female preaching to the slaves...had produced an immense excitement and the people were collecting...to gaze at the unexampled prodigy of a coloured female preacher.... I observed, with very painful emotions, the crowd outside, pointing with their fingers at me, and saying, 'that's her,' 'that's her'" (91). Her white spectator's gawking and finger pointing mark Elaw's body as spectacle, not unlike the earlier scene in which Elaw preaches before white slaveholders. However, in this moment Elaw articulates the risks involved in a spiritual practice that disrupts social boundaries of race and gender.

Despite her warranted fear of being enslaved, she appeals to her alternative spiritual knowledge to assert her freedom within a space that threatens the legibility of her *free* black body. Elaw, for example, asks herself "'from whence cometh all this fear?' My faith then rallied and my confidence in the Lord returned, and I said, 'get thee behind

me Satan, for my Jesus hath made me free.’ My fears instantly forsook me, and I vacated my retired corner, and came forth before all the people again; and the presence and power of the Lord became greatly manifested in the assembly” (91). As I stated earlier, Elaw does not allow herself to be silenced by her white audience’s gaze for long. Appealing to her alternative source of knowledge, Elaw constructs an oppositional vision of herself as free even though she occupies a space that threatens to render her body as chattel. Significantly, Elaw acquires confidence from this appeal to divine knowledge and vision—a confidence that enables her to step, once again, before the crowd of white spectators and enact a spiritual performance that reveals “the presence and power of the Lord” to all who look upon her. Elaw’s spiritual vision and knowledge transform her from spectacle to a vessel of sacred power.

During this incident, several white men from the Methodist Society witness Elaw’s spiritual performance. As a result, Elaw explains “they introduced themselves to me, and wished me to preach for them in the afternoon; to which I agreed; and they obtained permission of the authorities to open and use the courthouse; and therein I obtained a very large auditory; and God gave forth proofs that my ministry was from Him, in giving me many seals to it on that day” (91). Importantly, Elaw’s invitation to preach in the courthouse before white patriarchal church leaders immediately follows her earlier experience of fearing arrest or enslavement under Southern law. The proximity of the two moments invites a reading of these two events in relationship to one another. I argue that Elaw’s physical presence in the courthouse undermines and disrupts this legal space where black bodies have been marked as criminal and abject. Within this legal space,

the enslaved could neither give nor refuse consent, nor offer reasonable resistance, yet they were criminally responsible and liable. The slave was recognized as a reasoning subject who possessed intent and rationality solely in the context of criminal liability; ironically, the slave's will was acknowledged only as it was prohibited or punished. It was generally the slave's crimes that were on trial, not white offense and violation, which were enshrined as legitimate and thereby licensed. (Hartman 82)

Hartman's analysis of the limited subjectivity granted to blacks under the law reveals that within the courthouse it is always the black body that is on trial. Hence, we must read Elaw's courthouse performance within this context of the black body on trial.²⁰

Although she has been called before a panel of respected white male leaders to bear witness to her spiritual gifts and talents, Elaw contends that true authentication comes from God, rather than men. She does not believe the white male spectators before her have the power to approve of or disprove her ministry. She rejects them as ultimate judge and jury. Rather, according to Elaw's words, it is God who provides a seal of approval to her ministry. Dismissing their right to occupy the role of judge, Elaw transforms the space of the courthouse, proving it to be socially constructed and therefore changeable, from one in which black people have always been silenced, found guilty and wanting, into a space where the black female body can, instead, be seen and heard as sacred and holy. This *hearing* that Elaw receives is particularly important given that black people were denied the ability to testify in court. Therefore, we can read Elaw's courthouse performance as both a spiritual testimony, bearing witness to God's work and presence in her life, and a legal testimony in which she proves the authenticity of her

gifts. Through her oppositional bodily performance in the courthouse, one that undermines and disrupts racist and patriarchal constructions of black women's bodies, Elaw effectively recasts this typically oppressive and dehumanizing space as a place in which the humanity, power and spiritual authority and agency of black women can be seen.

In my critical analysis of Elaw's courthouse performance, I wish to highlight her engagement in a practice of "respatialization" to use McKittrick's term (xiv). These "respatializations" are practices that resist spaces of domination which objectify and violently circumscribe black bodies. According to McKittrick, such spaces of domination are socially produced; they are not natural or inherent, though they may masquerade as such. Ultimately, if space is socially produced, it can be changed or altered. Through practices of respatialization it is possible, then, to transform spaces of domination into places or sites in which black humanity and personhood can be performed. Elaw's courthouse performance is indeed a practice of respatialization that destabilizes the racial-sexual identities produced in the typically objectifying and dominating space of the courthouse. By enacting a bodily performance in a space where she does not belong, a space where such a bodily practice seems "out of place" (xv), Elaw proves such spaces to be socially constructed and, therefore, alterable. Significantly, her body reconfigures socially hierarchized spaces, introducing a different kind of knowledge about not only non-dominant bodies but also dominant ones as well—forcing us to rethink, as my earlier discussion of Elaw's visionary preaching before white audiences suggests, what we believe to be true about not only black femininity but also whiteness.

The courthouse, however, is not the only white patriarchal space in which we see Elaw's disruptive bodily practice. In addition, we witness her embodied spiritual practice as a critique of both the violence and the violation of black bodies within white domestic space and the marketplace. While traveling throughout the South, Elaw is invited on multiple occasions to preach in the homes of prominent and wealthy white families. During her visit to Annapolis, she receives an offer from a gentleman residing there "to give [her] a house and a plot of ground on condition of [her] residing there" (99-100). This offer sounds strangely similar to the one Linda Brent receives from Dr. Flint in Harriet Jacobs' narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Like Dr. Flint, this white man offers Elaw a "home of her own."²¹ As in Jacobs' narrative, this offer of "security" merely extends the arm of white patriarchal control over black women's bodies. In Brent's case the desired labor is sexual as Dr. Flint's continued sexual advances throughout the narrative make evident. While the man in Elaw's narrative avows a desire for her spiritual and bodily labor as preacher, like Dr. Flint, within the context of slavery and the history of sexual exploitation of black women's bodies, this offer also includes a tacit desire for black women's sexual labor. Elaw, of course, never gives voice to this possible sexual proposition. Nevertheless, black women's physical and sexual labor is inextricably linked, as Katherine Fishburn similarly confirms,

While I think it is reasonable to assume that many female slave narrators remained silent about their sexual misuse out of a deep-seated sense of privacy or even a sense of shame, many did not hesitate to describe the work they were required to do.... Given this silence, it is possible to read the detailed accounts of women's work in the slave narratives not just as

representing or speaking for women's bodies, but as displaced metaphors of the sexual mistreatment they received at the hands of their white masters. (98)

Certainly Elaw's piety would give her a "deep-seated sense of shame" in outwardly discussing any "sexual misuse." Consequently, I read the white gentleman's offering of a home for Elaw as a displaced metaphor for sex—as indeed a sexual proposition. Elaw's intense rejection of his proposal, moreover, couched in terms of sinful materiality and a rejection of worldly desires, is also a tacit rejection of the marketplace in which the bodily and sexual labor of black women are for sale.

Just as Jacobs' narrative is suspicious of representations of white domestic space as harmonious and safe, so too does Elaw critically reject such an offer of material security at the hands of a white man. She asserts, "it was not meet for me to depart from my Master's work, from considerations of worldly interest. I dared not, like Demas, forsake my itinerating ministry, to love this present world: nor was filthy lucre the object I had in view in the service of the gospel...; the love of mammon has no place in the hearts of his true ministers, who love the flock rather than the fleece" (100). Here Elaw clearly understands that accepting this gentleman's offer would mean choosing to become dependent on human beings, and here specifically a white man, for economic security rather than relying on God for her provision. Central to her rejection of this offer of economic security within white domestic space is Elaw's fierce criticism of the marketplace and its central values of wealth, greed, and even lust that fuel the physical and sexual exploitation of black flesh. Although the white men and women who invite Elaw into their homes believe that their wealth and domestic space are desirable to a poor

black woman, Elaw's oppositional spiritual knowledge and values free her from the pull of the market and commodification, as well as, sexual exploitation within that space. Indeed, in this moment Elaw proves that she has no price; her bodily practice and spiritual/bodily labor cannot be bought.

In addition to providing Elaw with direct, unmediated access to God's voice and direction, her gifts of divine vision and godly knowledge give her the power to transform those who witness her spiritually embodied practice. During an invitation to visit Mount Tabor in Maryland, a local preacher invites Elaw to preach from the pulpit: "I found that the people had not been apprised of my coming, but Mr. Watson ascended the pulpit and introduced me...; he then retired and I occupied his place, very much to the astonishment of the people. A young man was present who behaved very indecorously, and as the people came in he pointed with his finger to me, tittering and laughing. Poor young man; before that meeting was terminated, his laughter was turned to weeping" (100). Once again, Elaw's physical presence disrupts the typical boundaries of race and gender. By occupying the pulpit, a space traditionally defined as white and male, Elaw's bodily practice reveals the constructed nature of such boundaries and definitions—rejecting this white male spectator's narrow vision of the black female body as spectacle.

Moreover, we see the transformative power of Elaw's embodied spiritual practice which converts this man, whom she later describes as "a slave-driver, accounted the most profligate drunkard in that vicinity, and habituated to every vice," from a heckler to a believer (100). According to Elaw, "it was remarked that he had never been previously known to evince so much serious attention to a sermon as he had paid to my discourse, in the morning: and that his kneeling during the concluding prayer was a matter of surprise

to them” (100). This display of Elaw’s embodied spirituality reveals her power over her white spectators. Although they intend to denigrate her performance as a form of entertainment and spectacle, her bodily practice literally turns this man’s laughter to tears—revealing his own weakness and need to experience God’s healing power made accessible through her black female body. In this way, her bodily practice also reconstitutes the black female body not as a body to be consumed and therefore objectified and dehumanized by the white scopic gaze, but as a body that houses sacred power and divine authority.

Similarly, when Elaw is in Hartford, Connecticut, we see another display of her transformative sacred power. She explains that in this city, “some of the most influential ministers of the Presbyterian body greatly opposed me; and one of them, a Mr. House, resolutely declared that he would have my preaching stopped; but he...imagined a vain thing; for the work was of God, who made bare his arm for the salvation of men by my ministry” (104). Elaw’s words illustrate the confidence with which she engages in her embodied spiritual practice—a confidence that clearly comes from the knowledge that God has authorized her ministry. This divine authorization frees her from the traditional boundaries of gender that would exclude her from the pulpit, as we have seen evidence of in the previous passage. Yet not only does Elaw’s embodied spiritual practice include preaching, but also healing through prayer. Shortly after this moment in which Elaw announces the opposition of the patriarchal leadership in Hartford, we see Elaw engaged in the practice of healing a man, whom she describes as “dangerously ill” (104). After she spends time “praying with him” and for him, the man’s doctor discovers that he is quite

improved in health. After witnessing his patient's improvement at the hands of Elaw, he decides to attend one of her preaching engagements, after which Elaw tells us,

The doctor then visited his minister, the Rev. Mr. House, the very gentleman who had declared that he would stop me from preaching in that city, and spoke of me to him in such terms as induced the clergyman to exclaim, "Well, if God has sent her, I bid her God's speed." The work of the Lord spread throughout the city...; and such a revival took place as filled the city with astonishment; and Mr. House, my former opponent, seeing the wonderful works of God, exhorted his congregation to be sober and stand at their posts, "for," said he, "I perceive that God is about to do a great work in this city, therefore be ye still, and know that it is of God."

(105)

Elaw's embodied spiritual practice in Hartford—both her preaching and her use of sacred power to heal the sick reveal the transformative nature of her work. Not only does her practice bear witness to God's power from the pulpit, but the passage above suggests that even Elaw's practice throughout her daily life, her visiting and praying for the sick and those in need, illustrates that her sacred power cannot be confined to the pulpit. Nor is it simply her audiences who come to hear her preach that are transformed. Her performances even lead to the conversion of her strongest opponent from a misogynist stance to one that recognizes that God has authorized Elaw's ministry and, therefore, he has no power or right to stand in the way of her spiritual work.

In her narrative, Elaw emphasizes that such displays of transformative sacred power are possible only when she is completely reliant and dependent on God. Just as

God's provision for Hagar required her unconditional willingness to follow God's voice and direction, so too does Elaw learn that in order to be filled with divine power, in order for her embodied spiritual practice to be effective, she must rely solely on God. After Elaw receives her call to "preach the gospel, and...travel far and wide," she begins to doubt how such a mission could be supported financially (86). Thinking that it might be possible to raise the money to cover her provision first and then follow her call to itinerant ministry, Elaw's spiritual vision begins to suffer. Furthermore, she begins to doubt the validity of the call she receives to preach. As a result, she acknowledges,

the Spirit of the Lord fled out of my sight, and left me in total darkness—such darkness as was truly felt; so awful a sensation I never felt before or since. I had quenched the Spirit, and became like a tormented demon. I knew not what to do, for I had lost my spiritual enjoyments; my tongue was also silenced, so that I was unable [to] speak to God: and though my congregation continued to meet every Lord's day, I had no power whatever to preach to them. (87)

Elaw's narrative reveals that her lack of belief in God's call and her refusal to rely totally on God for her provision make it impossible for her to embark on her journey. In this moment Elaw is both spiritually and physically stagnant: as she states, "here Satan bound me down for two years" (86). Her doubt also causes her to lose her spiritual vision and voice, the source of her sacred power—leading her to exclaim, "I had no power whatever."

Eventually, however, Elaw learns from her mistakes and once again puts her full trust in God's provision rather than in worldly materiality:

I solemnly pledged myself to the Lord, that if He would again bestow on me the aids of His Holy Spirit, I would go forth in His ministry just as I was, not waiting for any further provision or preparation, but trusting alone in His holy words; and I prayed that He would enable me again to preach to my people.... The Lord accepted of my proposition; and on the next Lord's day, my tongue was set at liberty, and my heart was enlarged; and I was enabled to preach with more fluency and copiousness than ever before.... Heaven again opened to my eyes and ears, because I was at last led to discern the path of obedience, and hearken to the counsel of the Almighty, saying, "This is the way; walk ye in it." (87-88)

Like Hagar, Elaw must learn that God is willing to meet her in her place of need and, therefore, desires to send her just as she is. Furthermore, as Hagar's narrative illustrates, those called by God need only follow God's command to move and the way will be provided. Once Elaw learns this lesson, her powers of voice and vision return. Her claim that "[h]eaven again opened to my eyes and ears" illustrates her ability to see with divine sight and hear God's voice. And, once again, God's words express a call to move—a call to bodily practice: "This is the way, walk ye in it." This call to walk in the way God has chosen refers of course to the spiritual journey that Elaw has been called to embark on. However, it also reflects a call to itinerancy—to physically "walk this way." Again we see the intersection of Elaw's spiritual experience and her physical body, and perhaps the inextricability of the two. Her spiritual mission is enacted and made visible through her bodily practice.

As we have seen, Elaw's itinerancy has evolved from traveling to various houses to provide prayer and exhortation, traveling to camp meetings to preach to large groups in the wilderness, to traveling across state lines to fill invitations to preach in churches, courthouses and homes throughout the South and in New England. Yet the aspect of Elaw's itinerant practice that is perhaps most interesting is her passage across the Atlantic to become a missionary in England. From the very beginning, Elaw's passage to England reflects her oppositional spiritual practice: a critique of the imperial roots of missionary travel is embedded in Elaw's journey to England. As a free black woman traveling across the Atlantic, her passage literally reverses the slave trade and colonization by affirming the black female body not as cargo to be exchanged but as sacred—a missionary whom God has called to save the British people.

Before Elaw leaves the United States, we see this imperial critique in her narrative. While preaching in Alexandria, Virginia, she encounters white men who try to convince her to become a missionary to Africa. She explains, "Some religious gentlemen, friendly to the cause of missions, proposed for me to go out to Africa, and labour among the native tribes; but I declined their proposal; telling them, my heavenly Father had given me no such direction; and I dared not go thither unless sent by his Divine Majesty" (96-97). First we must read this proposal for Elaw to "return" to Africa within the larger contexts of imperialism and colonization. Significantly, I use the word "return" to describe this proposal in order to invoke the popularity of colonization schemes at the time to rid the nation of people of African descent in a kind of reversed Middle Passage.

According to many scholars, the project of missions and the project of colonization were inextricably linked from the very beginning. Sylvia Jacobs, Sandy Dwayne Martin and Tom Shick, for instance, all agree that “the missionary tradition had its roots in the colonization movement” (Jacobs 19). Similarly, Dwayne Martin explains that missionary efforts were central to the American Colonization Society:

Founded [in 1816] to transplant Afro-Americans to Africa, it gained much of its support from Christian denominations and saw its effort in the colony of Liberia as an experiment in transmitting Christianity and ‘civilization,’ that is, Western culture, to so-called backward, heathenistic, and barbaric Africa through the agency of black colonists who had had first-hand experience with both Christianity and Western culture. (65)

As Dwayne Martin points out, colonization and missions went hand-in-hand during the nineteenth-century. Typically, colonial missionary travel involved white “saved” subjects traveling from the West to Africa in order to redeem “savage” black bodies. Within this context, we can read the suggestion for Elaw to travel to Africa as an attempt by these white men to implicate Elaw in this project of colonization, similar to Olaudah Equiano’s joining of the missionary venture to the Mosquito Indians in the Caribbean.²² In fact, this sending of black people who have been brought to the West and “redeemed” illustrates a kind of perfecting of the imperial project in which white people can now send converted black people as missionaries to do this imperial work of saving “savage” black bodies. Elaw’s rejection of such a proposal suggests a dismissal of the colonized model of Christianity that these white men operate within. Dwayne Martin claims, similarly, that black people were not mere imitators of white Christian theology: “They gleaned from

scripture and their own experience in America a modification of the average white interpretation of the faith. If they accepted American ethnocentrism, they rejected both racism and slavery as inconsistent with Christian faith and the dignity and worth of their persons” (73). Elaw similarly revises this white imperialistic model of Christianity that identifies whiteness as righteous and blackness or Africanness as heathen. She refuses to see white people as *the* source of spiritual authority, believing—as we have seen through her transformative spiritual practice—that she has been called to convert everyone but especially white people, whose racism, patriarchy and elitism prevent them from becoming true Christians.

Elaw’s response suggests that the call to go and preach cannot be made by humans (here, specifically, white men). Only God can send her out into the world and only God can direct her path and journey, further emphasizing that Elaw’s sole source of authority is God to whom her obedience and allegiance lies. This obedience to God—an alternative and higher source of power—enables her to resist and oppose white patriarchal authority. Illustrating the power of divine authority, after Elaw’s response that ‘only God can send me,’ these men accept her response and push her no further on the issue.

And, indeed, Elaw is eventually sent by God, not to Africa but to England through a series of visionary experiences that occur over the next few years. She does not leave for England until June 10th, 1840. The delay may be caused by Elaw’s own fears of inadequacy as a poor black woman. She wonders what she could possibly have to offer “a country so polished and enlightened, so furnished with Bibles, so blessed with ministers, so studded with temples” (137). Yet God ignores her protestations. While praying Elaw

hears God's voice respond, "say not, I cannot speak; for thou shalt go to all to whom I send thee, and what I command thee, thou shalt speak" [Jer. 1:7] (137). Once again, we see that God meets Elaw, like Hagar, in her place of need, taking her just as she is and providing what she lacks. Clearly, these encounters with God give Elaw confidence as we see her enact a critical and bold oppositional practice from the moment she arrives in England.

Upon her arrival in England, one of Elaw's initial stops is at the British anti-slavery society, where her oppositional practice becomes immediately apparent. Once inside the anti-slavery society, Elaw admits she feels awkward and scrutinized:

Had I attended there on a matter of life and death, I think I could scarcely have been more closely interrogated or more rigidly examined; from the reception I met with, my impression was, that they imagined I wanted some pecuniary or other help from them; for they treated me as the proud do the needy...they demanded to be informed, whether I had any new doctrine to advance, that the English Christians are not in possession of? To which I replied, no; but I was sent to preach Christ...they also wished to be informed, how it came about that God should send me? To which I replied, that I could not tell; but I knew that God required me to come hither, and that I came in obedience to His sovereign will. (140)

Here we see Elaw critiquing the anti-slavery society's paternalism, their assumption that Elaw is a charity case—that she has come because she needs something from them rather than to give something they need. In fact, it is unimaginable to them that she might have anything to offer theologically to the British Christian community

just as it is inconceivable for them to believe that God would call a poor black woman to preach to them. Here we see a national, racial and class elitism at play—all of which Elaw critically deconstructs in her narrative.

After her encounter with the men at the anti-slavery society, Elaw writes, “Pride and arrogancy are among the master sins of rational beings; an high look, a stately bearing, and a proud heart, are abominations in the sight of God, and insure a woeful reverse in a future life. Infidels will indulge in pomposity and arrogance; but Christians are and must be humble and lowly” (141). Here we see Elaw engaged in a teaching moment, a preaching moment, in which she asserts her moral authority and offers a spiritual lesson about the downfalls of pride and arrogance. Elaw’s emphasis on a reversal of what we see here on earth illustrates an important theological belief that is central to African American’s historical practice of Christianity. Yolanda Pierce, for example, explains that for the slave convert to Christianity, “his or her sense of justice rests on the notion of spiritual retribution. Hell without fires may be the reality of slave existence; but it is the hell *with* fires that oppressors will endure for all eternity” (8). Although Elaw is a free black woman, Pierce’s analysis of slave’s theological understanding of hell certainly applies to her. Elaw’s prophecy that the pride and arrogance of these three men will “insure a woeful reverse in a future life” is clearly about retribution for their unjust treatment of her on this earth and in this life. And while Elaw does not explicitly reference hell in this passage, her description of their future life as “woeful” suggests that whatever the afterlife holds for them, it will not be pleasant.

Also central to Elaw’s critical response is her characterization of these men, who incidentally have claimed all superior and original knowledge of God, the Bible and

Christianity, not as Christians but as “infidels.” In contrast to these “infidels,” Elaw positions herself “as a servant of Jesus...required to bear testimony in his name, who was meek and lowly, against the lofty looks of man, and the assumptions of such lordly authority and self-importance” (141). So again, we see Elaw declaring her moral authority and Christ’s authority by flipping social hierarchies. Instead of privileging whiteness, maleness and wealth, Elaw declares power and authority for the “meek and lowly.” She continues by highlighting that God has chosen a “coloured female preacher” to “preach His Gospel on the shores of Britain...to residents in localities plentifully furnished with places of worship and ministers of the gospel, and had scarcely heard a sermon in their lives” (141). While the members of the anti-slavery society make it clear that the process of conversion and missionary travel occur in one direction (white people convert black people, the poor, “heathens,” and those enslaved), Elaw rejects this colonizing objective of Christian missions by declaring that the British are in need of conversion, spiritual transformation and renewal—a change that Elaw suggests comes legitimately only at the hands of a divinely-called poor uneducated black woman.

Chapter Three

Conflicted Journeys: Colonial and Missionary Crossings in Amanda Smith's *An Autobiography*

This chapter looks closely at the 1893 spiritual narrative *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith* (1837-1915). Born into slavery to Samuel and Mariam Berry in Long Green, MD in 1837, Amanda Berry Smith was later freed by her owner after her father purchased the freedom of his wife and four children. Since much of Smith's narrative focuses on her childhood experiences in slavery and her life as a free black woman in the North, I begin my analysis with a discussion of how Smith's spiritual practice was shaped by these early experiences of slavery, ancestral and communal knowledge about work and spirituality, as well as her experiences as a free black woman employed in the North. Next, after laying this foundation for understanding Smith's spiritual practice, the second half of my chapter will focus on Smith's travel, particularly her international journeys. A nineteenth-century African American evangelist and missionary who traveled across four continents, including North America, Europe, Asia and Africa, Smith's freedom of mobility is extraordinary during a time when the majority of black women were trapped in slavery throughout the Diaspora. Given this context, *An Autobiography* engages with the question of what it means for black women to be mobile subjects in the increasingly colonized world of the nineteenth-century.

Though we have a tendency to think of black women as victims of colonial and imperial oppression because of the coerced movement of black female bodies via the transatlantic slave trade, Smith's narrative, necessitates that we move beyond this narrow construction of black female subjectivity within the nineteenth-century. Focusing specifically, in the second half of my chapter, on Smith's tour of Europe, her travels to

India, Egypt, and her eight-year-stay in Liberia, I argue that Smith's itinerant spiritual practices as tourist and missionary enable her to shift from spectacle, one who is objectified by the gaze of her white audiences, to spectator, one who sees and who is free to interpret what she sees. Although tourist and missionary travel are firmly entrenched in Western imperial privilege and power, I assert that Smith, engaging in an itinerant rhetorical practice, appropriates colonial travel and missionary discourse in order to undermine and critique imperial practices, hierarchies, and values in America and abroad.

I begin my analysis with an exploration of the centrality of work, both physical and spiritual work,²³ to Smith's embodied spiritual practice. In opposition to the institution of slavery, in which enslaved people are denied access to the value or fruit of their labor, the opening of Smith's narrative celebrates her father's hard work, sacrifice and the value and meaningfulness of his work to sustain the family rather than his white owner. Working tirelessly to buy himself and his family's freedom, Samuel hires himself out throughout the countryside:

So he used to make brooms and husk mats and take them to market with the produce. This work he would do nights after his day's work was done for his mistress. He was a great lime burner. Then in harvest time, after working for his mistress all day, he would walk three and four miles, and work in the harvest field till one and two o'clock in the morning, then go home and lie down and sleep for an hour or two, then up and at it again. He had an important and definite object before him, and was willing to sacrifice sleep and rest in order to accomplish it. It was not his own liberty

alone, but the freedom of his wife and five children. For this he toiled day and night. (18)

This passage makes a clear distinction between the labor Smith's father does for his mistress and the work that he does for his family. The labor that he does for his mistress does not belong to him, but the work he does for his family is that which he can claim as his own, work that he can profit and benefit from. While slavery denies enslaved people control over their labor and redirects the profit their labor yields²⁴ to their white masters, here Smith chooses to highlight work as meaningful and valuable to enslaved people. Her representation shows black bodies not as beasts of burden, who exist solely for another's profit, but as human beings who work with meaning and purpose to improve their own lives and whose work invests in the life of the community.

Scholars such as Jacqueline Jones, Larry Hudson, and Mary Beth Corrigan, attest to slaves' participation in work that was not forced and that had meaning and value for the slaves.²⁵ Jones, for instance, affirms that "not all of the labor...took place at the behest of white people" (*American Work* 191). Rather, slaves performed work for self and for the larger community. According to Larry Hudson, "slaves reserved the top rung of the social ladder for those...who performed services for other slaves rather than for whites.... The slaves who worked hardest and produced goods and services for their families and the community set the standard for others" (81). Consequently, work performed willingly for others was deemed more valuable and meaningful than forced labor done for the master. Likewise, Jones' analysis of black women's labor in her seminal work, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, further illustrates that work done in the service of family and community "offered a degree of personal fulfillment" (29).

Included in her text is the testimony of Martha Colquitt, a former slave, who witnessed the work her grandmother and mother did sewing clothing for her and other slave children. Colquitt explains, “Dey done it `cause dey wanted to. Dey wuz workin’ for deyselves den” (qtd in Jones *Labor of Love* 29).

Echoing Hudson and Jones’ analyses of the meaning of work for enslaved people, womanist scholar Joan Martin argues that the slave community defined work in opposition to the oppressive labor and exploitation of slavery.²⁶ In *More Than Chains and Toil: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women*, Martin focuses her analysis on the slave community’s construction of a “work ethic,” which she defines as “a motivating vision of livelihood—that is, the creation and use of intuition, skills, and practices which allow for the sustaining of self and family, and which contribute to the process of liberation from oppression for one’s community.... [T]he nature and meaning of work itself is found in the quest for concrete freedom and human wholeness in the face of humanly constructed oppression and evil” (80). Martin’s definition attests to the slave community’s understanding of work as meaningful and fulfilling in opposition to the oppressive labor required by slave masters.

Further extending her explanation of evil, Martin sees evil as growing out of human sin. Locating the root of evil in “the sinful human will to subjugate and exploit others in terms of individual and group self-interest,” Martin concludes, “the result of such evil was unwarranted, unearned, and undeserved suffering” (106). Importantly, Martin sees the slave community’s understanding of evil as rooted in an African cosmology in which evil was “the result of human action, or the spirit forces that inhabited the world. God, or the supreme deity, within such a cosmology was not the

source of evil. Rather, it was immoral behavior and a product of the human world” (106). Given this definition of evil, Martin defines slave labor performed for slave masters and slave mistresses as evil because such labor was oppressive, exploitative and because it caused undeserved suffering.²⁷ In contrast, slaves engaged in work for themselves and for their community in spite of and in resistance to the suffering they experienced at the hands of their masters. This meaningful work was that which sustained the lives of others, rather than destroying lives, and work that sought the liberation of self, family, and community.²⁸

Applying Martin’s concept of a “work ethic” to *An Autobiography*, I interpret Smith’s father’s work as meaningful; his use of his skills as a lime burner and broom maker is valuable precisely because he uses this skill to achieve liberation for himself and for his family. Just as Smith’s passage draws a distinction between the labor her father performs for his mistress and that which he does to serve his family, Martin claims that slaves had a dual understanding of work: “In relation to exploitation, work was evil and caused suffering. In relation to resistance for self, family, and community in the midst of oppression, work was a source of faithful, moral living. Work, was, in this way, about living and resisting the consequences of evil” (107). Ultimately, through his own resistant spiritual practice, Smith’s father passes on this “work ethic” as part of an ancestral legacy that greatly informs Smith’s later experiences as a free laborer in the North.²⁹

In addition to highlighting her father’s work as a meaningful source of liberation, Smith also posits her mother and grandmother’s spiritual practices as liberating and as central to this “work ethic” as well. For example, Smith tells us that her mother and grandmother had been praying for their mistress’s (Miss Celie) conversion for quite some

time (19). While attending a Methodist Camp Meeting, Miss Celie is converted, so that shortly thereafter when she catches typhoid fever, she demands of her mother, “promise me that you will let Samuel have Mariam and the children” (21).³⁰ Upon hearing her mistress’ words, Mariam “ran with all her might and told grandmother, and grandmother’s faith saw the door open for the freedom of her grandchildren; and she ran out into the bush and told Jesus” (21). Smith’s grandmother continues to hold her conversations with Jesus in the woods, and Miss Celie repeats her request to her family two more times before they finally grant her wish. At the end of this chapter, Smith attributes the liberation of her family to the spiritual practices of these black women, along with the physical, yet no less spiritual, work of her father:

My grandmother was a woman of deep piety and great faith. I have often heard my mother say that it was to the prayers and mighty faith of my grandmother that we owed our freedom. How I do praise the Lord for a Godly grandmother, as well as mother. She had often prayed that God would open a way so that her grandchildren might be free.... She had often tried and proved Him, and found Him to be a present help in trouble. And so in the way I have already related, the Lord did provide, and my father was permitted to purchase our freedom. (23)

As the passage suggests, Smith and her family’s liberation is secured by the spiritual work of her father and her foremothers, reflecting a work ethic that defines this work of liberation as meaningful. Moreover, Smith’s passage makes clear that such liberating work is God-supported. Martin, for instance, claims that this kind of practice that works towards liberation and justice represents “co-creative work with a liberating God who

acts in human history” (151). Hence, Smith’s father, through his attempts to buy his family’s freedom, and her foremothers, through their continual prayers, conversations with God and active faith, work alongside God to achieve liberation together.

We continue to see Smith’s mother’s spiritual work and its role in ensuring justice and liberation even after the family has achieved its freedom. Smith tells us of the important role her family plays in aiding runaway slaves and helping them to secure their freedom. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, the same year in which Smith reports her family begins aiding runaways, it would have been imperative to keep such practices concealed. On one particular evening, Smith’s parents are accosted in the middle of the night by some white men trying to catch them in the act of hiding runaways. Mariam is so outraged by this invasion of their home that, as Smith explains, the next morning

mother dressed herself and went to New Market; as she went she told everybody she met how she had been hounded by these men. Told all their names right out, and all the rich respectable people cried shame, and backed her up... so she stood on the stepping stone...right in front of the largest Tavern in the place. There were a lot of these men sitting out reading the news...and she opened her mouth and for one hour declared unto them all the words in her heart. Not a word was said against her, but as the spectators and others looked on and listened the cry of “Shame! Shame!” could be heard; and the men skulked away here and there. By the time she got through there was not one to be seen of this tribe. (34)

Smith's narrative about her mother's public act of resistance illustrates her mother's, like her grandmother before her, embodied spiritual practice. First, this passage reveals Mariam to be a moral authority. She has the power to speak out against those who have committed crimes by dishonoring or threatening her family and others in the community listen to her and believe her judgment.³¹ Her words, her moral judgment, are also powerful enough to run these men that have threatened her family out of town. While Mariam is not a preacher as Smith later declares herself to be, we do see her demanding the right of black women to speak publicly.

Mariam, in her claiming a public voice, disrupts the space of the marketplace, a place where black bodies are frequently displayed and auctioned off, and transforms it through her embodied spiritual practice into a space where she, a black woman, can exercise authority, power and justice. Katherine McKittrick's theorizing of the auction block as a site of domination is useful for further understanding Mariam's bodily practice in the marketplace as disruptive and transformative. Underscoring the display of black bodies in the marketplace, McKittrick maintains that

the auction block serves to spatially position black men and women as objects "to be seen," and assessed. Even "private" auctions were strikingly public, requiring a seeable, measurable, black body. Regardless of the type of auction block, the enslaved woman, man, child, or family is rendered an intelligible, transparent commodity. Without a doubt, the body on the auction block is rendered an object; geographically, black men, women, and children become part of the slave trade landscape, like other objects for sale. (72)

Applying McKittrick's analysis to my own reading of Smith's text, I assert that when Mariam steps into the marketplace, she enters a space that traditionally operated as a site of commodification and objectification for black bodies. Of course, as the previous passage suggests, Mariam is not on a literal auction block (she is after all a free black woman at this point). Yet following McKittrick, I believe that this space of the marketplace, and indeed our entire landscape, has been touched by slavery and its violence (xvii). Moreover, the terrain of slavery shapes the very spaces within which black women move, regardless of their status as free or enslaved. For Mariam, this means that by entering the marketplace, a space shaped by the realities of racial and sexual domination, she risks placing her black female body on display "to be seen," "assessed," and ultimately to be objectified by her white spectators.

However, as Smith's narrative makes clear, this is not what happens to Mariam—her bodily practice does not lead to her objectification and commodification but rather leads to a transformation of that space from strictly a site of domination to a site in which the black female body can become something other than a commodity or an object. McKittrick, further supporting this notion of the auction block as a space open to transformation and revision, contends that

the slave auction block is not an unalterable materiality. Instead, the slave auction block is part of a social process that situates and localizes the moment of human sale, and in turn enables the objectification of black women and the repetitive naturalization of race-sex.... I also suggest that the auction block opens up the possibility of human and bodily contestation: it creates a space through which black women can sometimes

radically disrupt an otherwise rigid site of racialization and sexualization.

(xxix)

Masquerading as a static and rigid space in which race and sex differentiation are naturalized, the auction block, as McKittrick explains, is nonetheless socially constructed and therefore able to be transformed by those very bodies it seeks to control and define. Because of this alterability, I conclude that Mariam is capable, through her bodily practice, of disrupting this space. Her resistant practice shifts the white gaze away from her typically “intelligible” and commodifiable black female body to those of her white assailants, rendering their bodies and their unjust actions public and “transparent.” The public display of their bodies and actions is so shameful to these men that, according to Smith, they “skulked away” until they could be seen no longer.

Further demonstrating Mariam’s disruptive practice, I argue that Mariam’s public testimony about the injustices suffered by her family at the hands of these white men also transforms the space of the market into a courthouse—a space in which the illegible crimes of these men are placed on display and therefore seen and judged by the larger community. Like the auction block, the courthouse traditionally functioned as a site of domination for black men and women, who could not testify against white people.³² While they could be charged in court as criminals, they could not seek justice from the many wrongs committed against them by the larger white community.³³ McKittrick does not explicitly analyze the site of the courthouse in her book, *Demonic Grounds*; however, her theorizing of space, such as the slave ship and the auction block, as alterable still very much applies to the space of the courthouse.

In spite of this traditional functioning of the courthouse as a site of domination and oppression for black men and women, Mariam, through her bodily practice publicly bears witness to injustices her family has suffered at the hands of these “respected” white gentlemen. She turns the marketplace into a figurative courthouse in which a black woman can be seen as an innocent victim, while the unjust actions of white men can finally be seen and judged as criminal. Mariam’s public testimony ultimately vindicates her family and enables them to continue their covert work in helping runaway slaves achieve freedom. And, as we will see, this narrative of her mother’s embodied spiritual practice, which makes evident the possibility of a different kind of black female performance before a white audience—the possibility of a liberating performance even within a space known for captivity and violence—profoundly shapes Smith’s own theology and spiritual practice.

Smith’s mother’s and grandmother’s spiritual practices bear witness to a kind of Christianity that is quite different from what she witnesses from the slaveholders around her. Much like the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Smith is highly critical of hypocritical white Christianity, juxtaposing it with the lived spiritual experiences and tradition of her foremothers. In order to illustrate this hypocritical white Christianity, Smith deviates from her central narrative to tell the story of Ned Gossage, a slaveholder who died trying to capture two of his runaway slaves. According to Smith,

The law then was that a master could take his slave anywhere he caught him. These boys had been gone for a year or more, and were in Carlisle [Pa] when he heard of their whereabouts. He determined to go after them.... I used to think how strange it was, he being a professed Christian,

and a class leader in the Methodist Church, and at the time a leader of the colored people's class, that he should be so blinded by selfishness and greed that he should risk his own life to put into slavery again those who sought only for freedom. How selfishness, when allowed to rule us, will drive us on, and make us act in spirit like the great enemy of our soul, who ever seeks to recapture those who have escaped from the bondage from sin. How we need to watch and pray, and on our God rely. He did not capture the boys, but in the struggle he lost his own life, and was brought home dead. (18)

The significance of this anecdote becomes more apparent when considered within the larger context of the chapter, which also includes Smith's mother and grandmother's spiritual experiences and the conversion of her mistress. These latter moments reveal Smith's belief that true Christianity leads to liberation rather than bondage. And as we've already seen, for Smith liberation is not merely spiritual but material as well.

Furthermore, this passage reveals Smith's refusal to equate freedom with death.³⁴ Rather than suggest that enslaved people must wait until "the next life" to experience liberation, here, Smith emphatically rejects such a position by highlighting the active struggle of enslaved people to attain their freedom now—in this world. In the above passage, not only does Smith equate the desire for freedom with godliness, she even parallels Ned Gossage's selfishness, greed and the desire to enslave with the actions of Satan or the devil, who threatens to spiritually enslave us.³⁵ In this way, Smith makes a powerful theological critique of not only slavery but also of the Fugitive Slave Law—

establishing slavery and the desire to enslave as sinful and proclaiming the spiritual and material consequences of such sin to be death.

The themes that first make their appearance in the opening chapter of Smith's autobiography continue to shape the rest of her narrative. In this next section, I will focus on how Smith's own theology has developed from her lived experience of slavery and the embodied spiritual practices of her ancestors.

The next few chapters of Smith's autobiography focus on Smith's physical labor as a free black woman and her attempt to find spiritual fulfillment and contentment within domestic space. Smith is married twice during her life. Her first husband dies while fighting in the Civil War,³⁶ leaving her with a daughter named Mazie. Offering very little information about this initial union, her narrative focuses on her marriage to her second husband, James Smith, a preacher in the A.M.E. Church. Smith's second marriage to a preacher is her response to the spiritual vision she received earlier, calling her to preach.

Although Smith has yet to begin her spiritual work, we can begin to see the embodied spirituality that Smith practices through her visions and through her conversion experience, as well as through her experience of sanctification. Smith tells of her first spiritual vision occurring during an illness in 1855:

I fell asleep about two o'clock, or I seemed to go into a kind of trance or vision, and I saw on the foot of my bed a most beautiful angel. It stood on one foot, with wings spread, looking me in the face and motioning me with the hand; it said "Go back," three times.... Then, it seemed, I went to a great Camp Meeting and there seemed to be thousands of people, and I

was to preach and the platform I had to stand on was up high above the people.... O, how I preached, and the people were slain [converted] right and left. I suppose I was in this vision about two hours. When I came out of it I was decidedly better.... Then I made up my mind to pray and lead a Christian life. I thought God had spared me for a purpose, so I meant to be converted. (42-43)

Smith's vision reveals the embodied nature of her spirituality, emphasizing the link between spirituality and the body. That this vision occurs during a physical illness is no coincidence. The fragility of Smith's physical body, particularly her feverish state, seems to facilitate this spiritual vision, while her vision of God's desire for her to preach leads to her physical healing.

But even within her vision, we see the centrality of the body. First, Smith sees a physical manifestation of God in the form of an angel with hands, feet and wings. This emphasis on the physical parts and positioning of the angel's body (standing on one foot, wings spread out and hand pointed) reveal the angel to be embodied, rather than an apparition. Smith's vision, therefore, affirms God to be both concrete and tangible. Moreover, the command she receives from the angel to "Go back," and preach echoes God's command to Hagar to "Go back" to Abraham and Sarah's household. As in Hagar's narrative, Smith's call to return is in response to her flight away from the place God has called her to be. Just as God spares Hagar's life in the wilderness—offering her a hope and a future, so too has God "spared [Smith] for a purpose" (43). And like Hagar and Elaw before her, this purpose is realized only by answering the call to move, the call to itinerancy and travel. Later we will see the importance of both this itinerancy as well

as preaching to Smith's embodied spiritual practice. Not only does Smith receive the command, she also sees the physical manifestation of God's call—sees herself successfully preaching in front of thousands of people.

Finally, when Smith awakens from her vision, she discovers that her body has been healed, further illustrating the direct connection between the body and spirit. A central characteristic of black women's theology in nineteenth-century spiritual narratives is this belief that physical illness is a reflection of a deeper spiritual sickness. Such a bodily illness could often be interpreted as a sign of being out-of-sync with God or, as is the case with Smith, the result of fleeing from God's plan and direction (Moody 66). Given this context, we can read Smith's spiritual obedience—her decision to heed the angel's command to return, to “Go back” and preach— as facilitating her physical healing. Demonstrating the intimate connection between spirit and body, Smith's vision emphasizes the lack of separation between her spiritual life and physical reality. And once again, we see that Smith's faith leads to the liberation of both her body, her liberation from sickness, and her spirit.

During Smith's conversion in 1856, we continue to see the inextricable link between her body and spiritual experience:

I sprang to my feet, all around was light, I was new. I looked at my hands, they looked new; I took hold of myself and said, “Why, I am new, I am new all over.” I clapped my hands; I ran up out of the cellar, I walked up and down the kitchen floor. Praise the Lord! There seemed to be a halo of light all over me; the change was so real and so thorough that I have often said that if I had been as black as ink or as green as grass or as white as

snow, I would not have been frightened. I went into the dining room; we had a large mirror that went from the floor to the ceiling, and I went and looked in it to see if anything had transpired in my color, because there was something wonderful had taken place inside of me, and it really seemed to me it was outside too, and as I looked in the glass I cried out, "Hallelujah, I have got religion; glory to God, I have got religion!" I was wild with delight and joy; it seemed to me as if I would split! (47)

As the passage illustrates, Smith's conversion narrative is largely focused on her body. What is often thought of as a spiritual change or transformation, Smith represents here in very physical and material terms: clapping hands, running and walking. Not only does physical movement become the expression of Smith's spiritual life and experience, but even more important, Smith's body changes or at least her vision of her body changes to the point where her hands "look new." Smith believes her spiritual transformation to be so powerful, that she even expects to look differently in the mirror.

This moment where Smith expects to see a change in her skin color illustrates the ways in which she has been profoundly shaped by racial constructions in nineteenth-century America. Smith is certainly entrenched within a particular historical moment in which whiteness carries legal, social, economic and even spiritual value. Yet her conversion narrative reveals Smith's operation within these racial constructions, while also demonstrating a tenuous critique of white power and privilege. Central to this critique is Smith's refusal to equate conversion with whiteness. While Smith does imagine herself as "white as snow," a phrase that suggests her internalizing of colonized Christian discourse that equates whiteness with spiritual purity, she also imagines herself,

quite unexpectedly, as “black as ink or as green as grass.” Here Smith strategically removes whiteness from its place as privileged signifier by placing it last in a series of similes that equate blackness, greenness, and whiteness. By creating her own metaphorical images (“black as ink” and “green as grass”), Smith reveals the language “white as snow” to be constructed and undermines the image’s supposed universality. Smith’s desire here is to express in material terms how powerful a change she has experienced and perhaps for her, given the particularities of her time and place, there is no physical change more dramatic than that of skin color. This does not, however, mean that Smith desires to change her skin color or wishes to be white. As we will see shortly, the rest of her autobiography reveals her attempts to reclaim the spiritual and cultural value of blackness in opposition to white power and privilege.

Although Smith receives a clear command from God to “go and preach,” she evades the call and decides to marry James Smith, her second husband, because he is a preacher. Smith’s initial unwillingness to follow God’s call to preach is perhaps unsurprising given that preaching was a position of authority open only to men in the large majority of Christian churches in the nineteenth-century. In the A.M.E. church, Smith’s denomination, women were excluded from ordination until 1948 (Dodson xxxv). The notion that God would call a woman to preach was certainly a radical idea for Smith. Given that she would have to oppose church law and social convention in order to follow that call, it was a far easier and safer choice to settle for being a preacher’s wife. Smith initially believes that through her marriage to James, as a preacher’s wife, she will be able to fulfill her spiritual calling. She tells us that she marries James in order to “have a Christian home and serve God more perfectly. I thought to marry a preacher would be the

very thing.... I had seen and known the influence of a minister's wife, and how much she could help her husband.... Mr. Smith said that was just the kind of wife he wanted" (58). Despite his promises to join the A.M.E. Conference as an itinerant minister, when the time comes, he fails to do so. Smith quickly realizes that her marriage to James merely traps her within domestic space—preventing her from becoming an itinerant preacher, and keeps her locked within a system of exploitative and abusive labor that hinders her attempts to create a home for herself and her children.

Smith shows us the alternative to doing spiritual work by juxtaposing itinerancy with her experiences as a domestic for a white family. Smith's domestic labor still requires her to travel from family to family providing whatever labor they need; however, the economic and financial rewards are slim. After realizing that her husband has destroyed her dreams of becoming a spiritual itinerant, Smith takes a position for the summer with Mrs. Colonel McGraw, bringing her nine-year-old daughter, Mazie, and her baby Nell with her. Remembering the summer vividly, Smith exclaims

O, what I went through during those three months! I had to do all the cooking for the house, and eight farm hands, besides helping with the washing and doing up all the shirts and fine clothes and looking after my children. How I did it I don't know. There were but two other servants in the house...so I had no help.... My baby seemed to get along nicely for the first three weeks, then she was taken sick with summer complaint, and in six weeks I had to lay her away in the grave. (59-60)

Smith's narrative abounds with experiences like these—attesting to her constant need to travel to find employment, the severity of the conditions and the harsh consequences of

such labor to herself and to her family. Although Smith's physical labor never breaks her spirit, constantly reminding us that "the Lord stood by me," it becomes clear that her life as a domestic worker offers little fulfillment and comes at a high price—most often the cost of her own physical health and the lives of her children.³⁷

In my analysis of Smith's narrative about her experience as a domestic, I also seek to highlight the particularities of free black women's experience in the mid-nineteenth-century, especially the difference between middle class white women's experience of being trapped within domestic space and free black women's experience of continued captivity within white domestic space. In her examination of black women's experience of race and sex oppression in the nineteenth-century, Paula Giddings maintains that for the white middle and upper classes, "Domesticity had a central position.... The true woman's exclusive role was as homemaker, mother, housewife, and family tutor of the social and moral graces. Isolated within the home, women 'raised' men above lusty temptation while keeping themselves beyond its rapacious grasp. Women's imprisonment in the home virtually guaranteed piety and purity" (47). In stark contrast to middle class white women remaining isolated and protected within the home, free black women in the nineteenth-century, whether single or married were required to work outside their own homes as domestics and washerwomen for white families. Since women who worked outside the home, especially black women, were seen as "unnatural, unfeminine" and even immoral, Giddings contends that black women were constantly exposed to the threat of sexual violation by white men (48-49). While white domestic space served to protect and foster the purity and piety of white women, it posed an unceasing threat to black women.

For Smith, in addition to being exposed to violence and violation within white domestic space, neither is her own home a place where her piety and morality are fully valued. In fact, Smith sees her husband as a threat to her own spiritual growth. Although her husband is educated and is a preacher, Smith resists his spiritual authority, particularly his stance on sanctification or holiness. Revealing her husband's attempts to stifle her spiritual growth, Smith states "he had no sympathy with holiness. He had had advantages far above me, and was far more intelligent. He would always want to argue on this subject, and I could not keep up on that line and it would throw me back, so I told the Lord one day if He would send James away somewhere till I got the blessing he would never get it away again, but that he hindered me from getting it"(70-71). Smith clearly believes that James has set her back spiritually and refuses to privilege her husband's theological position, despite his educational status. Instead, she does what is necessary to ensure the cultivation of her own spiritual life even if that means distancing herself from her husband.

Smith's theological resistance to her husband places her in firm opposition to the nineteenth-century expectation of "feminine self-sacrifice" that was central to definitions of a 'true woman' (Haynes 88). According to Caroline Haynes, within this true womanhood ideal, "woman's primary allegiance is not to God but to her husband. Moreover... she is to remain supposedly within her divinely ordained, 'natural' sphere," which ironically requires her to "abdicate her own spiritual development and even her entitlement to salvation to ensure those of her undeserving spouse" (88). Smith, however, completely rejects this ideology that calls for the relinquishing of her own spiritual growth and the placing of her husband's spiritual needs before her own.

Smith's narrative bears witness to her attempts to obtain some measure of independence for herself—both economically and spiritually, so that she can continue on her own spiritual path. Later Smith tells us that James receives a job offer as a coachman that would require them to move. Smith argues with James to let her stay at her current position at least for the time being, declaring, "I am afraid to go; you have done me so bad right here where I have just begun to get used to the people, and know how to turn around, and what will it be if I go there out in the country, no church near, and a stranger, and if I give up my washing what will I do? I can help myself a little now" (71). Not only does her domestic life with James undermine her spiritual growth but it clearly also forces her dependence on an unreliable spouse. In this passage, then, we see Smith trying to maintain a level of independence from her husband, which she has been able to do in the city, where she has the communal support of friends and the church to sustain her.

Not only does Smith resist any reliance on her husband spiritually but economically as well. Although being a washerwoman and a domestic in white homes is frequently dangerous and unrewarding labor for black women, it does at the very least give Smith some measure of economic control over her life. In the face of her husbands' unstable and uncertain provision, Smith can at least depend upon her own labor to meet her family's needs. Despite the exploitative nature of Smith's labor, this employment does enable her to maintain independence from her husband's spiritual and material control and authority.

Smith's physical distance from her husband provides her with the spiritual independence necessary to receive the blessing that she so fiercely sought after. As with her conversion narrative, Smith's experience of sanctification also reveals the embodied

nature of her spiritual practice. After receiving the blessing during a church sermon, she tells us, “I don’t know just how I looked, but I felt so wonderfully strange, yet I felt glorious.... Just as I put my foot on the top step I seemed to feel a hand, the touch of which I cannot describe. It seemed to press me gently on the top of my head, and I felt something part and roll down and cover me like a great cloak! I felt it distinctly...and O what a mighty peace and power took possession of me” (79)! Relying heavily on bodily metaphor to narrate her experience of sanctification, Smith first suggests, as during her conversion, that she may look physically different upon receiving the blessing. Smith describes her receipt of the blessing in quite physical terms as a hand touching her head.

Further extending this bodily metaphor, she explains that the blessing feels like a large cloak covering her body. I would argue, then, that in this passage, like in the previous narrative of her conversion, Smith highlights the connection between the spiritual world and the material world. For Smith, her spiritual reality can be expressed only through her body and material reality. Moreover, her body functions as a marker of her spiritual transformation. Smith’s experience of “a hand touching her head” reveals God to be a real spiritual and physical presence in her life. This connection that she has to God is so real and so intimate that God can literally reach out and touch her. Further demonstrating the inextricable link between her spiritual and material realities, Smith’s description of “a large cloak covering her body” shows how this internal change is reflected externally onto her physical self. Significantly, this cloak that covers Smith’s body refers to the new clothes a Christian receives when joining God’s family.³⁸ As an outward marker of the internal transformation a new Christian undergoes, these new clothes, or cloak as Smith calls them, represent the Christian’s newfound identity in

Christ. In her referencing of this physical and spiritual marker, Smith once again affirms the embodied nature of her spiritual practice.

This link between the body and Smith's spiritual transformation becomes even more apparent after Smith leaves the church where she receives the gift of sanctification. Smith suggests that her spiritual change gives her a newfound emotional but also physical confidence, enabling her to face those she fears most. As she walks down the street, Smith encounters three prominent black women from her church, women whom she fears and who cause her to feel inadequate.³⁹ Yet Smith acknowledges, "when I got up to them I seemed to have special power in my right arm and I was swinging it around.... O I felt mighty, as I came near those sisters. They said. 'Well, Smith, where have you been this morning?' 'The Lord,' I said, 'has sanctified my soul.' And they were speechless! I said no more, but passed on, swinging my arm! I suppose the people thought I was wild, and I was, for God had set me on fire" (79)! Again Smith's body enables her to express the internal change that she has experienced. In this case, it is her swinging right arm that communicates Smith's newfound empowerment and confidence.

But Smith's encounter with these three women reveals an even greater change in Smith, whose confidence is manifested not only through her arm but also through her voice. Smith, who would have been afraid to speak to these women and to share her belief in sanctification with them before her spiritual change, now has a "wildness" about her. Indeed, Smith's tongue, much like Hagar, has become unruly, so much so that she after her encounter with these women she announces, "if there was a platform around the world I would be willing to get on it and walk and tell everybody of this sanctifying power of God" (79)! This passage illustrates the newfound confidence that Smith has

gained from her belief in holiness. Haynes similarly acknowledges that “While feminine submission for conservatives meant following the dictates of one’s husband or father; for perfectionism [or holiness], it meant absolute trust in God’s will...as a result, its followers not only were given permission to develop and change in response to God’s calling but also were licensed to obey God’s will over and above the will of all other earthly beings” (103). Consequently, after Smith acquires sanctification, she no longer fears what others may think of her and, perhaps most important, she is able to stand in opposition to the various forms of oppression she faces, including patriarchy and racism.

Evidence of Smith’s newfound liberation, becoming sanctified enables Smith to overcome her fear of white people. She tells us, “I was not afraid of them in the sense of doing me harm, or anything of that kind—but a kind of fear because they were white, and were there, and I was black and was here” (80)! Here Smith expresses racial difference and her fear of whiteness in spatial terms. Noting the distance between herself and white people, Smith suggests that white and black people occupy different spaces (“they were white, and were there...I was black and was here”). I highlight Smith’s emphasis on the spatial boundaries of race because as she begins her spiritual work, we see her undermining such boundaries, calling them into question and using her body to disrupt raced, classed and gendered space. We can begin to see this change in how she views race, particularly whiteness, when Smith exclaims “the Holy Ghost had made it clear to me...as I looked at white people that I had always seemed to be afraid of, now they looked so small. The great mountain had become a mole-hill” (80). It seems then that Smith’s spiritual change brings her a new vision—enabling her to see the world differently. Rather than seeing with her own eyes, she appears to see with godly eyes

(“the Holy Ghost...made it clear”) and with this vision Smith is able to see whiteness as something conquerable rather than fearful. Smith’s vision, moreover, suggests that the boundaries of race are permeable. Whatever boundary or chasm existed between blackness and whiteness, between here and there, to use Smith’s terms, can now be traversed. Furthermore, as I will show later in this chapter, this willingness to disrupt such boundaries is the central expression of Smith’s spiritually disruptive practice.

If Smith’s achievement of this spiritual transformation that brings her power, vision, and freedom occurs only after she creates physical distance between herself and her husband, it is perhaps no surprise that she does not begin her spiritual work until this distance from her husband becomes permanent. Smith shares the news of James’s death rather succinctly and matter-of-factly: “He died in November, 1869, at New Utrecht, N.Y. Since then I have been a widow, and have traveled half way round the world, and God has ever been faithful” (96). God’s faithfulness stands in stark contrast to the unfaithfulness of her husband, who often left Smith alone to meet the material needs of the family and who failed to support her spiritual growth—even belittling her spiritual vision.⁴⁰ Clearly, her husband’s death was not a loss for Smith but rather a gain, as freedom from her marriage brings with it the freedom to travel and the freedom to fulfill her spiritual calling.

Disruptive Bodies

Much like her female ancestors before her, Smith practices an embodied spirituality that is disruptive. Like her mother's own resistant bodily performance in the "marketplace," in which she publicly chastises several white men for threatening her family, so too do we see Smith's body disrupting traditional definitions and boundaries through her own public performances.

From the very beginning of *An Autobiography*, Smith is presented, much like Elaw, as a "dark female stranger from afar." Even before the opening of Smith's narrative, the preface, written by Bishop J.M. Thoburn, constructs Smith as spectacle.⁴¹ Thoburn says of Smith's presence in India, "The novelty of a colored woman from America, who had in her childhood been a slave, appearing before an audience in Calcutta, was sufficient to attract attention" (vi). Thoburn's words reveal Smith as a spectacle to be gazed at by audiences who had perhaps never seen a black female ex-slave.⁴² Indeed, Smith is "out of place." Although Smith's mission is a holy one, we see a blurred line between Smith's spiritual practice and her body, her singing and preaching, as entertainment and as spirit-filled. In fact, when Smith is asked to "perform" in a local theatre in Calcutta, she is advised by friends not to do so because "the man merely wishes to have a good opportunity of seeing you, so that he can take you off in his theatre" (vii). This warning to Smith highlights the looming threat to any black woman who steps on stage—the risk of becoming a circulating commodity within the entertainment marketplace.⁴³ The threat for Smith of being seen and taken off by a man who wishes to profit from the display and performance of her body places her in close company with other black women like Joice Heth, who were also circulating spectacles on the worldwide white entertainment circuit.⁴⁴ Even though Bishop Thoburn describes Smith

in the opening of his preface as “a woman of remarkable gifts” and as “a person of more than ordinary power,” her spiritual power does not eliminate the threat of commodification for Smith. Every time Smith performs before a white audience, and in India a largely non-white audience, she faces the threat of consumption by those who come to gaze at her—seeking either pleasure or spiritual renewal from her body.

Despite this ever-present risk of commodification, I argue that Smith’s embodied spiritual practice disrupts such a construction of black women as commodifiable objects. Smith uses her own spiritual vision and power to undermine the white gaze—transforming not only the spirits of her spectators but their gaze as well. For Smith the two are connected; converting white people means not only bringing about a spiritual change but altering their political vision, specifically their vision of Smith. There are multiple examples in *An Autobiography* of Smith’s definition of conversion as not just a spiritual turn away from sin but also a political turn away from racism and towards an anti-racist stance. For instance, Smith’s attendance at the Kennebunk Camp Meeting reveals how her raced and perhaps also classed body marks her as “out of place” and as a spectacle:

the people gazed at me and followed me about from place to place and just stared at me. ...Sometimes I would slip into a tent away from them. Then I would see them peep in, and if they saw me they would say, “Oh! here is the colored woman. Look!” Then the rush! So after dinner I managed to get away. I went into a friend’s tent and said, “Let me lie down here out of sight a little while.” ...I could see them as they would pass by, and hear them say, “Where is she, the colored woman?” (183)

Smith's initial reaction to the white gaze is one of dismay, fear and discomfort, so much so that she hides in a friend's tent. At first Smith is so disturbed by the intensity of the white gaze that she thinks "there is something the matter with me"; however, shortly after she hears a voice from God that enables her to triumph over this fear of being seen by white people. In her exchange with God, Smith is reminded of a time when she noticed a crowd of people in New York staring through a window at a picture, and she joined the crowd and stared as well. God assures Smith that there was nothing wrong with the picture; the picture had done nothing wrong and that the picture's beauty had not been altered by the crowd staring at it—regardless of their opinions about its worth or value.

The next day when Smith awakens, she is overjoyed at this sudden realization that she too has an untouchable value and worth that no spectator or gaze can take from her: "I got up and shouted, 'I have got the victory! Everybody come and look at me! Praise the Lord!' I was free as a bird" (184). Again, Smith describes her freedom in very physical terms—jumping up, shouting and calling to people to "come and look at me." Comparing herself to a bird, Smith feels her newfound freedom so intensely that she imagines she can fly. This freedom that occurs after receiving God's assurances stands in stark contrast to her body in hiding from the white gaze—she is in many ways paralyzed by her fear of this gaze. Yet after her talk with God, Smith is literally freed from this paralysis as evident in her bodily practice: jumping, shouting and calling.

This moment of liberation from the threatening power of the white gaze enables Smith to perform her embodied practice with full confidence. Moreover, the result of her embodied spiritual practice is the conversion of Jacob C., who Smith describes as being "cured...of prejudice" (184). Describing Jacob C., Smith states,

He was a well-to-do man, and had lived in Maine all his life. He said he had never seen many colored persons, and never cared to have anything to do with them when he could help it. ...So now, when he saw me about in the meetings he was much disturbed. But still he felt that he needed the blessing.... Whenever the invitation was given for those who wanted a clean heart, he would go forward and kneel down. But then the black woman would be in every meeting; would sing, or pray, or testify. He could not get on. (185)

Smith's narrative of Jacob C. clearly illustrates the disruptive potential of the black female body. First, Smith refers to herself in this narrative as "the black woman," as if to draw even more attention to her singular and "out of place" status. However, it is precisely Smith's ability to disrupt that enables the abrupt change required for conversion. Smith goes on to explain that in one such meeting, "the Lord poured in his [Jacob's] heart the blessing of full salvation. My! How he shouted! ...The first thing he saw when he got up and stood on his feet, he said, was the colored woman standing on a bench with both hands up, singing.... And he said every bit of prejudice was gone, and the love of God was in his heart, and he thought I was just beautiful" (185). Here Smith confirms her definition of conversion as more than just a spiritual change, illustrating that this spiritual change informs a political turn away from a racist vision. In other words, along with his spiritual transformation Jacob's vision of the black female body is transformed as well, as he moves from seeing Smith's body as disruptive and monstrous to beautiful and sacred. And in order to assure us that Jacob's transformation is indeed real and legitimate, she informs us that "I saw him the next year, and he was still saved.

And he sat down by me in the dining hall at the table and gave me two dollars; and he said the past year had been the best year of his life. Oh how happy he was” (185).

Much like her experience in Kennebunk, while attending the Martha’s Vineyard Camp Meeting, Smith receives a message from God to “speak as I command you” (221). Smith’s response to this call is once again initial fear: “I was afraid and said, ‘O, Lord, I am a stranger and a colored woman, and the people are proud and wicked’ ...and I wept and trembled” (221). Again Smith occupies the position of spectacle and stranger. Although her raced, classed, and gendered body render her “out of place” in this meeting filled with wealthy white attendees, Smith receives the call a second time, “Go, do as I command you” (221). And this time, Smith does do as she is commanded and uses her disruptive body to transform the lives of her white spectators.

Similar to Jacob C.’s narrative, Smith tells the story of a woman from Providence, R.I. whose race and class privilege also make her uncomfortable with Smith’s embodied spiritual performance. Smith says of the woman,

She had come with a very definite object, to seek the blessing of a clean heart. She was called a swell lady; she was one of the ones rather up, and did not condescend to things of low estate! So as I began to sing “All I want is a little more faith in Jesus,” she walked out of the tent and said to herself... “I came here to seek the blessing of a clean heart. I did not come to hear a negro ditty,” and the blessed Holy Spirit said to her, “Is not that your need, ‘a little more faith in Jesus?’” Then her eyes were opened...she went into her tent and there prayed, and the Lord sent the baptism and gave her the desire of her heart. (223)

Once again, Smith testifies to using her embodied spiritual performance and her disruptive body—a body that undermines racial and class boundaries—in order to change this woman’s spiritual life but also to transform her vision of Smith. Although initially the woman is appalled at Smith’s presence because she is black and because she is poor, it is precisely that which she devalues that God uses to facilitate her conversion. As proof of this newfound change, the white woman moves from referring to Smith as a “negro” to calling her by name shortly thereafter. Smith tells us that she hears the woman call her “Amanda Smith” from behind and offers to share the above testimony, letting Smith know that it was she who facilitated her transformation.

Shifting Locations

My analysis begins in this section with Smith's passage from America to England, which she discusses only briefly, stating, "There were quite a number of aristocratic passengers, and I, being a colored woman and alone, there was quite a little inquiry who I was, what I was going to England for, etc. I must say I did feel somewhat embarrassed" (250). Here Smith highlights her status as out of place on this ship traveling to England. Like Elaw before her, Smith's passage to England stands in stark contrast to the traditional ways in which black female bodies have circulated across the Atlantic. As her narrative reveals, Smith's fellow passengers are aware of the paradox of a black woman traveling alone (not in the employ of whites) to England. Typically the only black women aboard transatlantic ships, traveled as enslaved cargo during the Atlantic slave trade or as servants in the company of white passengers.⁴⁵ Unlike white women travelers who largely traveled for leisure as tourists, black women largely traveled as laborers. The circulation of black women's bodies across the Atlantic was a way to transport their labor to another location where that labor could be bought, sold, and consumed.

Free black women who traveled for religious purposes, as missionaries and preachers, and for secular reasons, as tourists or to receive an education, were rare and exceptional. Mary Schriber further emphasizes the unlikelihood of black women traveling in the nineteenth-century:

While the possibilities of international travel for African American women were at best severely limited, some from among the population of Free Blacks undertake foreign ventures.... But while affluent white women who took to travel escaped the confinement of their own kitchens and parlors, African American women who found their way abroad escaped

the confinement of labor in fields and kitchens and parlors owned by (white) others. White women were charged with domesticity; black women were domestics.... While affluent white women were circumscribed by convention, African American women were enslaved by racism and poverty. (xvi)

Although Schriber recognizes the particularities of black women's experience that made travel, especially travel abroad, difficult in the nineteenth-century, her collection of travel writing written by American women is severely limited in terms of race. Nancy Prince is the only black woman included in the collection. Her sole focus on domesticity as the prime motivator for understanding and shaping women's travel may explain the exclusion of women, particularly black women like Zilpha Elaw and Amanda Smith, whose travel is motivated less by the desire to escape the domestic sphere than by their spiritual practice.⁴⁶

Amanda Smith's travels are also motivated by her work, specifically her spiritual work and call by God to spread God's message to the people of England. This work, however, is quite distinct from the labor she and her family were forced to perform as slaves and is distinct from the exploitative labor she is forced to endure as a free black domestic in the North. Much like the meaningful and value-filled work performed by her male and female ancestors in the service of individual and collective freedom, it is Smith's spiritual work, her "co-creative" work with God as missionary and preacher that liberates her from these other forms of exploitative and violating labor within the marketplace.⁴⁷

England

Nevertheless, when Smith arrives in Liverpool, England in 1878, she still finds herself occupying the position of spectacle, in which her white audience's objectifying and dehumanizing gaze continues to threaten her.⁴⁸ While waiting for a train to take her to a conference in Keswick, Smith explains,

I was a curiosity. How the people did look at me. I thought I would buy me a newspaper, and then they wouldn't look at me so much, but, lo and behold, that only made it worse. They seemed to wonder what in the world I was going to do with a newspaper. Then I walked up and down, then they walked up and down, as though they wondered what I was walking up and down for. They were very respectful; they did not laugh and make remarks like they would have done in this country, but they seemed to look as though they pitied me. (255)

Smith's admission that she was a curiosity attests to her status as spectacle. From her description of her spectators, particularly their shock to see her walking and reading, we might get the impression that those watching Smith are gazing at an unfamiliar animal rather than a human being. Smith's reference to these spectators as "respectful" does not lessen the dehumanization of their gaze—one that sees Smith as less than human, less than capable of performing the human activities of buying and reading a newspaper. Rather, Smith's characterization of her white audience as "respectful" draws a clear juxtaposition between British and American racism—in both countries Smith is viewed as "less than," by her white spectators. However, in the U.S. the objectifying gaze of her white audience would be accompanied by laughter and degrading or derisive speech.

Highlighting this difference, Smith offers an explicit critique of American racism, which she posits as more cruel and violating than what she experiences in England.

This comparative critique that Smith offers was a common rhetorical strategy of nineteenth-century African American travel writers. Malini Johar Schueller maintains, “African-American travel writers, . . . like William Wells Brown or Nancy Prince, used their changed vantage points as sites from which to rearticulate and refashion arguments against the dehumanizing effects of slavery and the degrading treatment of African-Americans in the home country, particularly in comparison with the relative humanity afforded black peoples overseas” (Intro x). This characterization of England as less hostile towards black people helps explain why Smith is permitted greater freedoms than those available to her on U.S. soil. Once in Europe we see a shift in Smith’s subject position. No longer merely a spectacle for others to gaze at, Smith also occupies the position of spectator. More precisely, Smith becomes a tourist, someone who travels for leisure.

Traveling with a group of white “friends,” Smith’s itinerary included many of the stops typically found on the American “grand” tour of Europe. Charmaine Nelson, for instance explains, “American tourists generally sailed to England, often docking at Liverpool, and visited London before moving on to the Continent, where trips to Germany, Switzerland, and France often culminated in Italy” (3). Smith’s own tour abroad illustrates her “freedom of mobility and access to sights and cultural spaces” that the typical traveler possesses (Intro ix). Schueller defines the traveler as someone who possesses “the power to comment and interpret. . . . Being a traveler meant assuming mobility and the complex network of race, class, and gender privileges accruing a genteel

(Anglo) identity” (Intro ix). Ultimately, Smith’s mobility, her travel abroad, enables her to appropriate the role and voice of white tourist and as we will see, grants her the privilege of interpreting for her readers all that she surveys.⁴⁹

Smith’s shift from spectacle to spectator first becomes apparent when she and her friends, the white women with whom she travels, arrive in Paris. Smith’s entry in her journal, which up until this point has focused on her missionary work and spiritual experiences, candidly expresses the excitement and pleasure so central to travel, tourism and by extension, the construction of subjectivity. As Paul Fussell asserts, a traveler is someone who “retain[s] all...the excitement of the unpredictable attached to exploration, and fus[es] that with the pleasure of ‘knowing where one is’ belonging to tourism” (39). Smith voices this excitement and pleasure, speaking excitedly as she discovers her new physical surroundings in Paris, “My! The wonders; not strange, perhaps, to others, but to me; the statuary, and parks, and buildings were lovely to behold” (286). Here Smith mimics the “Manners, morals, and class [of]...Anglo-American travel writers to Europe [who]... wrote with appropriate respect for the artifacts of European culture” (Schueller xxii-xxiii). Much like her earlier comparative critique of England and America, Smith’s appropriation of travel writing discourse is strategic—encouraging her largely white middle class audience to identify with her vantage point. This becomes a shrewd rhetorical move as Smith’s gaze shifts from that of adorer of Western cultural artifacts important signs of empire to fierce critic of Western imperialism. Confidently writing within this travel narrative position, Smith’s narrative clearly focuses on what Smith sees as opposed to so many earlier entries that focus on Smith being seen. In this new role of spectator and tourist, Smith’s usually overexposed and out of place body takes a back

seat. Not only does Smith move the reader's lens away from her body and onto the surrounding landscape, but she begins to focus her gaze on the other bodies around her.

Egypt

As Smith travels we begin to see the bodies of other people of color, African-descended and South Asian bodies in particular, enter the foreground with Smith's own critical gaze shaping how we see them.⁵⁰ While in Alexandria, Egypt, for example, Smith dedicates a generous section of her narrative to discussing the Egyptian men she sees and the significance of Egypt to the Bible.⁵¹ She exclaims,

And who are these men coming off in the boats?...black men—my own race. I had been so long without seeing any of my own people that I felt like giving three cheers!...Many of them were fine looking men, black as silk and straight as arrows, well developed, and independent as kings....They didn't know what it was to crouch to any man. I felt proud that I belonged to that race when I saw such nobility in ebony. Then I thought of the passage in the Old Testament history: "Princes shall come out of Egypt." Then I remembered it was the birthplace of Moses, and the hiding place of the infant Jesus from the cruelty of Herod, the king. And out of all the world round it pleased God to bestow this great honor on the black race, which ought to be held in everlasting remembrance. And I prefer being black, if for no other reason than to share this great honor with my race. (295)

In her description of these Egyptian men, Smith takes a strong stance against imperial and colonial representations of black bodies.⁵² First, her characterization of these

Egyptian men as “black men—my own race” is an important political move that identifies Smith not with the colonizers and the colonial project, which enables her tourism in the first place, but with the colonized peoples of Egypt, whose plight Smith sees as identical to her own. Through her very calculated and deliberate representation of these Egyptian men, we see Smith fighting for a more just representation of all black people, their capabilities and their history. Her attempt to re-value the black body is most evident through her description of these black men as “black as silk and straight as arrows, well developed, and independent as kings” (295). Moreover, her characterization of the men as noble, and dignified further illustrates Smith’s attempts to oppose racist and imperial representations of black bodies as inferior, as foreign, as spectacle and as monstrous.

Rather than exoticizing the black body, as we have seen white audiences do to Smith’s body, here we see her looking on these men with a gaze of respect and reverence.⁵³ Similar to her response at seeing the amazing statues and parks of Paris, Smith stands in awe at the beauty of these black bodies before her. Using what Schueller refers to as the traveler’s “power to comment and interpret,” Smith co-opts the visual practice of tourism in order to ascribe meaning and value to the black bodies she sees. Smith’s visual practice illustrates what Charmaine Nelson also affirms, “There is no one gaze, no singular universal way of seeing. The process of vision, of viewing, is classed, raced, and sexed, and the way one sees and what one sees are both products of that person’s identification and location and a part of what confirms and reinstates both” (Introduction xiv). Rather than reproduce a colonized gaze by positing these bodies as foreign or out of place, Smith sees her own body as inextricably linked to the bodies of

these Egyptian men—not only are their bodies linked but so are their histories, their lineages, their struggles and their destinies. Ultimately, through her visual practice, Smith argues that there are multiple ways of viewing and interpreting black bodies. Refusing to identify with the white western imperial mission, Smith instead imagines a shared kinship with black people throughout the diaspora—a kinship based upon the particularities of her experiences of oppression as a formerly enslaved black woman in America.

Smith's political turn to Egypt as a strategy for recuperating the black body as meaningful and valuable places her in conversation with the many nineteenth-century black intellectuals engaged in battle over the meaning of Egypt for African Americans. In response to "proslavery anthropologists [who] strove to demonstrate the lowly status of black peoples in Egypt, prominent African-Americans like Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, and later Pauline Hopkins, used Egyptology to validate the idea of Africans being the originators of civilization" (Schueller xxvii). Scott Trafton, who excludes Smith from his lineage of nineteenth-century Egyptologists, asserts that black intellectuals, such as Martin Delaney, David Walker and Edward Wilmot Blyden⁵⁴ "understood how quickly claims about 'Negro nature' in the ancient world were being imported for use into the nineteenth century, and they insisted on disproving ethnological claims on the grounds both of the past and of the present" (65). Refuting these racist ethnological assertions of white superiority and black inferiority made by white Egyptologists, such as Josiah Clark Nott, George Robins Gliddon, and Samuel George Morton, black intellectuals "ran a constant and varied campaign of anti-antiblack ethno-Egyptological countertheorizing" (64). Though Smith has been generally excluded from

scholarship on nineteenth-century Egyptology, she too understood what was at stake in identifying Egypt as black, as she inserts her own critical voice into this diasporic debate about the origins of black people and of Western civilization. Distinguishing herself from the majority of these black thinkers who establish solely a racial kinship with Egyptians, Smith extends the Egyptological discussion by arguing for a spiritual kinship with Egyptians as well.

Smith's unique critical stance becomes more apparent in her revisionist history of Christianity and the bible, in which she places black people at the center. Having already argued that Egyptians are part of the same racial lineage as all black people of African descent, Smith goes on to insist on the centrality of this black Egypt to the bible and to Christianity.⁵⁵ First, she explains that Moses was born in Egypt, which necessarily includes him within this lineage of black people, and more importantly, gives black people access to the spiritual royalty that Moses represents. Similarly, Smith's highlighting Jesus' protection from King Herod's death sentence against him suggests that black people are responsible for keeping Jesus alive and for enabling the very mission and ministry that he implemented throughout his life. In this way, Smith makes black people important contributors to the very existence and spread of Christianity. By locating two of the most important biblical figures within a black Egypt, Smith disrupts notions of the Western world as the central contributor to the life and spread of Christianity.

This anti-imperial move on Smith's part becomes even more evident when we consider that her recuperation of Egypt, and therefore Africa, as central to Christianity comes just a page after her tour of Italy, where Smith has nothing but harsh criticism of

the people and practice of Christianity, specifically Catholicism, that she sees evident there.⁵⁶ Describing the monks and priests that she sees in the streets as “[o]ld men, with gray hair, who had never done a day’s work in their lives,” Smith goes on to explain, “[s]ome of them looked almost like idiots; their brain, and muscle, and thought had never been developed” (288-89). This unreserved description of the European monks and priests as lazy, underdeveloped “idiots” stands in stark contrast to her portrayal of Egyptian men as intelligent hard workers and as heirs to the spiritual lineage of Moses and Jesus.

India

Yet, when Smith arrives in India, we do not see this continuation of anti-imperial rhetoric. Instead we see Smith shifting from a discourse that humanizes to an “othering” discourse that expresses her pity for the Indian people and her horror and disgust at their cultural practices, which she refers to as “heathen idol worship” (300). Locating herself firmly in the traditional discourse of missionary travel writing, Smith’s representation of India “demonstrate[s] the depravities and degradations of the Orient and thus illustrate[s] the need for Christian conversion” (Schueller 31). Smith’s narrative continues to focus on the “depravities” of India while at a fair in Allahabad. She laments, “[h]ow sad to see the different idols they worship displayed on their flags and in every possible shape and way. My heart ached, and I prayed to the Lord to send help and light to these poor heathen” (301). From her words it becomes quite clear that Smith’s gaze in India has shifted from her gaze in Egypt. During her time in Egypt, Smith’s identification with Egyptians, her ability to see herself in these bodies, freed her from this imperial rhetoric that she falls into in India. The problem for Smith is that she does not see herself when she looks at

Indian people; rather she sees an exoticized “other”—foreign and out of place, though she is the one out of place. Slipping back into the discourse of Western colonial travelers, Smith displaces her own strangeness onto the bodies of Indian people. These bodies are not of African-descent and do not fit into Smith’s spiritual genealogy that places Africa, not India, at the center of Christianity. Here we see Smith practicing a kind of religious, cultural and even racial imperialism that was quite common in the nineteenth-century. Sandy Dwayne Martin, for instance, affirms that “most black church people took for granted that non-Western and non-Christian peoples must come under the purview of American Christian understanding of ‘Christian civilization’” (73).

Smith’s imperial rhetoric becomes increasingly apparent as she continues her travels throughout the country. While sightseeing, Smith encounters

the great juggernaut car, so well known in the history of sacrifices in India, whose wheels have crushed so many infants at the hands of their poor mothers. How my heart ached as I listened to the story, told by the Chief of Police. How dreadful is heathen blindness. Thank God that the car of the juggernaut for such sacrifice has come to belong to the things of the past; has been superseded by the glorious light of Christian civilization, and judicious Christian legislation. (320)

Classic imperial hierarchies are once again at work in Smith’s observation. Positing Indian people as blind, ignorant, and, at best, pitiable, Smith declares India’s need for salvation from its “heathen” cultural practices. This salvation, however, can come only from the Christian, and therefore, civilized Western world. This passage even goes so far

as to celebrate Western imperialism as humane and life-saving, when in reality we know the imperial project was anything but humane.

Nevertheless, Smith appears to be aware of the inequities perpetuated by the imperial system. While traveling through the Indian countryside, Smith explains the structural inequalities that existed because of imperialism: “There are generally two roads; a native road, and an English road; the English roads were better, as a rule; they generally kept in their provinces good roads; we were on the English road, so we had to turn out and go down on the native road, which was very rough, because they never mended them, or made any repairs on them” (301). Although the English roads were typically in better shape, the one Smith and her companions were traveling on had “a great deep gutter about a quarter of a mile in length” that was still in the process of being fixed (301). Because of these conditions, they were forced to use the native road. Smith’s juxtaposition of these two roads draws critical attention to the hierarchized, segregated, and unjust nature of a colonial society in which all things British are valued always at the expense of the country’s local inhabitants. This less idealized portrait of colonization stands in stark contrast to Smith’s earlier representation of imperialism as a benign, life-saving force. Yet Smith never attempts to reconcile these two representations—at least not while in India.

Although Smith’s re-imagining of a black Egypt reveals the subversive potential of her itinerant rhetorical practice that shifts between reproducing colonial discourse and critiquing it, Smith’s unequivocal representation of India as a “heathen” land illustrates the limitations and weakness of her critical practice. There are two explanations for Smith’s obvious use of colonial discourse in India. First, we need to locate Smith’s

shifting discourse as part of what Schueller refers to as a “cunning” and “complex” rhetorical strategy to appease her white western evangelical audience (Intro xx). Initially it seems strange that Smith would be fiercely critical of colonial representations of black people in Egypt only to embrace typical colonial representations of Indian people. On the other hand, this shift becomes less surprising when we consider the difficult line Smith, like so many black writers, had to walk between criticizing the racism and colonial privilege of her readers and meeting their expectations. Not only must Smith meet the expectations of white readers so that they purchase and read her book, but she must also appease her financial supporters, without whom she would not be able to travel and live abroad as a missionary. As supporters of the missionary enterprise, so too would Smith’s audience have been supporters of extending Western empire abroad. Schueller, for instance, maintains that “Missionary activity was seen as related to nation making and empire making, just as the idea of a U.S. empire was always seen in terms of a mission” (39). Within this context, Smith’s critical vision is necessarily limited by her audience’s expectations. Consequently, we see her using her itinerant spiritual practice to creatively surmount or evade these obstacles.

Unfortunately, Smith’s critical appropriation of Egyptology in order to undermine Western imperial hierarchies rests on the re-inscribing of those hierarchies in India. In other words, Smith redeems the humanity of black people throughout the diaspora at the expense of denigrating India and its people. By creating a discursive distance between herself and Indian people, Smith proves herself an ally of her white evangelical audience even as she identifies herself as an heir of a civilized and glorious Egypt—undermining white Western claims to power and privilege.

Liberia

Smith's time in Africa, specifically Egypt and Liberia, offers a much more nuanced picture of colonization; nevertheless, her discursive and rhetorical shifting continues as she attempts to negotiate the critical mission of her text with the expectations of her audience. Providing further context for Smith's use of imperial rhetoric, Dwayne Martin reminds us that "blacks were not mere imitators of white Christian theology. They gleaned from scripture and their own experience in America a modification of the average white interpretation of the faith. If they accepted American ethnocentrism, they rejected both racism and slavery as inconsistent with Christian faith and the dignity and worth of their persons" (73). Proving this alternative interpretation of "white Christian theology" to be true, the portion of Smith's narrative that focuses on her eight years on the African continent (1882-1890) reflects her increased critical awareness of the role missionary work plays within colonization. Moreover, we see Smith's continued opposition to racist representations of indigenous African people and her staunch critique of the white racism too often at the heart of white colonial missions.

Smith's oppositional stance is most apparent in her representations of indigenous Africans in Liberia. Mirroring her earlier attempt to free the black male (Egyptian) body from racist and imperialist definitions, Smith's portrayal of indigenous African women in Liberia posits an alternative vision of the black female body as beautiful. While living in Monrovia, for instance, Smith elaborates on the beauty of one of the king's wives, explaining, "[s]he was a woman not very tall, but very black, beautiful limbs, beautifully built, small feet, as a lady would have, and beautiful hands and arms" (387). In her description, Smith highlights this woman's dark skin color to emphasize repeatedly, three

times in fact, that her blackness is beautiful. Much like her earlier portrait of Egyptian men as strong, agile and noble, here Smith wishes to emphasize this woman's physical grace in opposition to typical colonial identifications of the black female body.⁵⁷ Most importantly, Smith describes the African woman as possessing "small feet," a particularly feminine characteristic and an obvious mark of a "true" lady that Smith's white audience would have easily recognized. Given what we know of black women's continued exclusion from the category of woman within nineteenth-century Victorian culture, it seems an important political move on Smith's part to note that this African woman possesses the physical features of a lady. Though typically a black woman's body excluded her from achieving the status of "true woman," here Smith upholds the African woman's body as grounds for inclusion within the category of woman.⁵⁸

According to Hazel Carby, nineteenth-century Victorian Culture defined a "true woman" as possessing four virtues: "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (23). She goes on to assert that these "internal qualities of character" were discernable through "external physical appearance" (25). Hence, race functioned in the nineteenth-century as a prime marker of "true woman" status, meaning that while the white middle class body was deemed as sacred, set apart for a special purpose, the black female body was seen strictly as a source of labor and "capital accumulation" (Carby 25). Smith's celebration, then, of this African woman's physical features undermines this dichotomizing of white and black women's bodies and calls for the black female body to be read as something other than a commodifiable object.

In addition to her reclaiming of the black (here specifically African) female body, Smith offers a positive and celebratory endorsement of African medicine when she states,

“the natives helped in fever cases, and all kinds of sickness, by the use of herbs, which, when skillfully administered, as many know how to do, in my opinion are much better than doctors’ medicines” (393). Here Smith privileges African over Western ways of knowing by defending African medicine as far more useful and effective than Western medicine.⁵⁹ Her showing that so many African people have access to this knowledge further celebrates their skillfulness and talents.

Smith similarly uses her adoption of an African boy, named Bob, to further demonstrate the intelligence of African people.⁶⁰ The adoption of indigenous African children was a common practice in Liberian society. As Clegg explains, “most immigrant families kept indigenous children who had been sent to Monrovia by their parents to ‘learn the fashion of white man’” (94). Although these immigrant families were black in skin color, “many Africans simply thought of the colonists, culturally, as white men who just happened to have dark skin” (Clegg 97). The cultural imperialism of these immigrants sometimes turned such “adoptions” into practices of domination that allowed for the economic exploitation of indigenous African children. Clegg suggests that

many of these African children were undoubtedly exposed to the ethnic prejudices of their immigrant custodians who believed that their contact with American-born blacks offered them a chance to become “civilized” Christians...incorporating African youths into settler households was the best way to “wean” them from the spiritual values of their parents. Along with such religious motivations, these relationships were usually paternalistic and economic in tone, arranged along terms most beneficial to immigrants. (243-43)

Certainly Smith shared the belief that by offering Bob a Western, and therefore Christian, education she was improving his quality of life. Beyond such paternalistic and religious motivations, the practice of adoption had positive benefits as well—most importantly the formation of extended kinship relationships between black colonists and indigenous Africans. This increased contact between both communities enabled the “transference” of culture that was reciprocal.⁶¹ Clegg explains, “The presence of these youths in Monrovia and elsewhere certainly opened lines of communication between immigrants and Africans which undoubtedly facilitated trade, diplomacy, and other interactions. These linkages spread both colonial culture among indigenous people and African cultures among immigrants” (95). Moreover, Smith’s narrative suggests that her adoption of Bob was not in order for him to serve as an apprentice. Rather than mirroring an oppressive servant/master hierarchy, her relationship with Bob was that of guardian and teacher.

Her initial reluctance to take on the care and support of another human being, also suggests that Smith sees this relationship not in terms of what she can gain but as an extreme sacrifice—one in which she will be required to give much of herself, including her time, energy, and emotional and material resources, in the service of another human being.⁶² Smith’s level of investment in Bob’s well-being becomes quickly apparent after she eventually agrees to adopt him. After teaching Bob to read for just a few months, Smith exclaims that

He had learned English remarkably fast, so that months before I brought him to England he had got so he could read in the Testament, and, at family prayers every morning, he and I would read verse about; and he

could read almost as well as I could in the Testament.... The people were astonished. They could hardly believe that a little while before, he was a little, raw, naked heathen, and could speak but two words of English.... Now, when all is considered, I don't believe there is a child in this country, born of Christian parents, that would have shown a capability beyond that child's. It is nonsense to say that a native African is not capable of learning. (399)

Despite Smith's colonial language evident in her reference to Bob as a "raw, naked heathen,"⁶³ Smith's words emphasize the impressive intelligence of Africans and their capacity for learning. However, they also suggest that this capacity can be realized only through the transforming power of Western knowledge. Unlike in the passage before on indigenous medicine, here Smith does privilege Western ways of knowing, specifically the English language and Christian education, over and above African language and culture.

Smith's support of Western culture, particularly religion, becomes increasingly evident as she critiques what she sees as "local superstitions" and African traditional religious practices. During her visit Old Calabar in West Africa,⁶⁴ Smith observes that

At the house of Ironbar, who is a big chief, the first thing we saw on entering was in one corner of the courtyard a large juju, the head of an elephant, which represents a superstition they all believe in....He dressed like a gentleman, in English clothes... went to church nearly every Sunday; and yet he was as full of superstition and heathenism as if he had never heard the Gospel. (379)

Here Smith draws a clear distinction between African traditional spirituality, which she posits as “superstition and heathenism,” and Christianity. What is most disconcerting to Smith is what she refers to as Ironbar’s “hypocrisy,” his ability to embrace both Englishness and Africanness.

This embrace of duality is extremely problematic for Smith, who clearly operates in this passage within a Western imperial worldview that sees and orders the world according to narrow and strict dichotomies: civilized vs. heathen, Western vs. Non-Western, saved vs. damned. Because of this “either/or” ordering principle so central to Western epistemology, Smith defines Ironbar’s actions as hypocritical. As a result, she calls into question his conversion, which requires more than an outward display of Western Christian civilization, but a literal falling away of all things African. Her definition of conversion in this passage reflects an ideology that, according to Sylvia Jacobs, was quite popular and central to “mid-nineteenth century missiology” (6). Jacobs defines conversion as “induced cultural change,” and further contends, “Christianity and ‘civilization’ were inseparable” (6). Also supporting this notion of the inseparability of religion and culture, Dwayne Martin similarly argues that “religion and culture were so closely allied that giving up one meant surrendering the other” (70). In this passage then, Smith displays a form of colonized Christianity that is particularly dangerous and threatening to indigenous Africans because it requires of its converts a violent rejection of an African self in order to be transformed into a Western civilized Christian self.

West African writer, Casely Hayford, best known for his speaking and writing on land rights in West Africa, offers a subtle yet powerful critique of missionaries and their collusion with imperialism in his book *The Truth About The West African Land Question*

(1913). He begins by claiming, “There are two kinds of tyrannies with which West Africa is afflicted: the tyranny of the capitalist and the tyranny of the philanthropist.... West Africa has found to her hurt that it is within the power of philanthropy to kill” (4).

Hayford further quotes British writer and explorer Mary Kingsley,⁶⁵ who critically asserts that “while it is quite conceivable...that a missionary could kill a man to save his soul, a philanthropist kills his soul to save his life” (6). Both of these scathing critiques emphasize the philanthropist and missionary’s propensity for using violence to further their “good” intentions. Moreover, both Hayford and Kingsley recognize the true threat these imperial and tyrannical figures pose to West Africa: in short, their willingness to suck the life and soul out of West Africa in order to “save” her. For Hayford, especially, the life and soul of the nation can be found in its culture. Therefore, Hayford insists that we view conversion to Western culture and values with suspicion: “You cannot think great thoughts in Africa by adopting wholesale the...way of life of the European. Nature did not intend it. Those who attempt it end in trouble. Nay, worse. It means death” (101). Because of this inextricable link between religion and culture that both Dwayne Martin and Jacobs attest to, conversion, as Hayford’s analysis suggests and Smith’s narrative makes clear, required the literal death of African culture.

Ironbar, however, operates not within a Western dichotomous worldview, but rather in a non-Western epistemological framework that embraces duality as wholeness rather than as hypocrisy. Peter Paris confirms the centrality of multiplicity and unity within an African cosmological framework, defining the central elements of this cosmology as including “the realm of the spirit...the realm of tribal or ethnic community...the realm of family...and the individual person who strives to integrate the

three realms in his or her soul” (25). The interdependence and integration of these differing realms is key to achieving a sense of wholeness and balance. Paris’ explanation of African cosmology, particularly his description of the individual person, makes clear that subjectivity is multiple and is shaped by the integration of spirit, community and family. Because of this “spirit of unity” central to an African worldview, Paris attests to the “eventual formation of a syncretized cosmology comprising an amalgam of Christian and African elements: a cosmology that shaped the African expressions of Christianity both on the continent and in the African diaspora” (26). Hence, Paris argues that the result of colonial and imperial expansion throughout Africa and the Diaspora was not the destruction of African culture and cosmology but rather the joining of Christian and African traditional spiritual elements. Within this worldview, Ironbar can quite easily embrace a subjectivity that is multiple—part English and part African. This means he can attend church regularly, read his Bible, pray to the Christian God and yet still practice his local spiritual traditions of venerating human and animal ancestors. And most importantly, he can do these things without contradiction—demonstrating a “both/and” non-Western ordering principle rather than an “either/or” Western dichotomy. Ultimately, this kind of worldview, one that embraces multiple subjectivity, enables Ironbar to resist the violence of this Western imperial framework that threatens to tear all colonized people in two.

Though Smith is intensely critical of what she sees as Ironbar’s ‘hypocrisy,’ his presence in the text draws attention to Smith’s own unstable subject position. Ania Loomba reminds us that although colonial discourse utilizes binaries in order to construct clear insiders and outsiders, identity is always multiple, shifting and unstable: “Of course,

in reality any simple binary opposition between ‘colonists’ and ‘colonized’ or between races is undercut by the fact that there are enormous cultural and racial differences within each of these categories as well as cross-overs between them” (105). As we’ve already seen, Smith does occupy a position of privilege as a Western subject, specifically as a traveler and writer who has the power to ‘comment on and interpret’ the people and places she encounters in her travels. Yet, as I discussed earlier, Smith is also subject to the colonial gaze of her white evangelical audience who expects a particular performance of blackness—one that reinforces white Western colonial values abroad. Consequently, during her stay in Liberia and in her analysis of colonization in Africa, we continue to see Smith, in an attempt to negotiate these two subject positions, engaged in an itinerant practice—most evident in her shifting between her reproduction of colonial discourse and her critique of oppressive colonial practices and values.

The narrowness of Smith’s dichotomous thinking is perhaps most evident when she responds to the question, “What is the religion of Africa?” (383). Her response, perhaps unsurprising, is that “they had no real form of religion. They were what we would call devil worshippers” (383). This passage clearly expresses Smith’s grounding in traditional missionary ideology that, according to Sylvia Jacobs, was characterized by “an amazing degree of confidence in the supremacy of the Christian and Western social and economic order....This sense of certainty often produced insensitivity to indigenous cultures, and missionaries contended that African traditional religion was not merely the absence of religious truth but was in fact ‘a positive evil’” (16). From Jacobs’ analysis, we can see that Smith, too, operates within this ideology that assumes the absence of

religion in Africa. Moreover, Smith's representation of indigenous Africans as "devil worshippers" further positions African traditional spirituality as evil.

Despite her grounding within an imperial framework that privileges Christianity as the only true religion, we see Smith critiquing these other elements of missionary ideology, particularly the racist and unjust treatment of indigenous peoples. When responding to the question of whether or not white missionaries should go to Africa, Smith explains, "Yes, if they are the right kind. If they are thoroughly converted and fully consecrated and wholly sanctified to God, so that all their prejudices are completely killed out, and their hearts are full of love and sympathy" (423). Reflecting her belief that a true Christian must be "saved deep," here, Smith similarly declares that full conversion necessitates not only a spiritual transformation but also a political shift to an anti-racist stance, which significantly requires the death of white supremacy (116). Just as the conversion of indigenous Africans, in the case of Ironbar, requires the death of African culture, so too does the conversion of white Westerners require the death of white supremacy and racism. Furthermore, this spiritual and political conversion is what enables missionaries to come to Africa with the central characteristics for success—sacrifice and humility. Those, on the contrary, who come out of arrogance and greed, rather than to serve, merely undermine missionary efforts in Africa.

While recognizing the usefulness of colonization efforts for a time, Smith offers some harsh criticism of its continuation. Arguing for black people's right to American citizenship, she exclaims,

God bless the Colonization Society. It was raised up at a time of
imperative need.... It did its work. But from the standpoint I look at it, I

would move its disbandment forthwith, and let the white people who want the Negro to emigrate to Africa so as to make more room for the great flood of foreigners who come to our shores, know that there is a place in the United States for the Negro. They are real American citizens, and at home. They have fought and bled and died, like men, to make this country what it is. And if they have got to suffer and die, and be lynched, and tortured, and burned at the stake, I say they are at home. (452)

Though it may seem unclear why Smith begins her critique of the American Colonization Society by paying homage to it first, one likely possibility is that Smith's initial honoring of the ACS is a way to appease her white evangelical readers, who undoubtedly were supporters of the organization, as missions and colonization were often inextricably linked in the nineteenth-century. Claude Clegg explains, "a missionary strand of thought was evident in many of the pronouncements of colonizationists. Some individuals believed that sending Christian African American immigrants to Africa was the best way to spread the Gospel and civilization across a supposedly savage continent while at the same time imparting to the settlers freedom in the land of their ancestors" (33). Whatever the reasons for Smith's initial support of the ACS, her political position on the organization clearly distinguished her from the large majority of other free black intellectuals and leaders, including Richard Allen, Frederick Douglass, Martin Delaney, David Walker, and Maria Stewart.⁶⁶ The criticism of free black people was largely in response to the racism underlying the ACS and its practices: "believ[ing] colonization to be a specious solution to racial discrimination and slavery..., African American spokespersons and writers, almost without exception, shunned the objectives of the ACS

and similar organizations” (Clegg 35). Of course, Amanda Berry Smith was one of these few exceptions who supported the ACS for a time.

Nevertheless, Smith’s position on the ACS does indeed change and her attempts to pay respect to the organization are quickly undermined by her scathing criticism of “white people who want the Negro to emigrate to Africa,” especially those who believe that blacks do not belong in the country, those who believe that they have failed to and will never make any lasting contributions to the society. Responding to these popular reasons for urging the emigration of black people to Africa, Smith posits African Americans as “real American citizens,” whose right to citizenship has been secured by their own willingness to fight, bleed and die in defense of a country who has rewarded such patriotism with the continued violation of and violence against black bodies. For Smith, both forms of bloodshed prove the citizenship rights of black people, who endured centuries of suffering and continue to endure because they believe this land, however unfair and unjust in its treatment of black people, to be their home. In the end, Smith’s position on colonization mirrored that of most free blacks who “thought of themselves as too deserving of American citizenship and civil rights... to lend it much support” (Clegg 143).

Notably, Smith grounds her unequivocal belief in America as home, not in an idealized portrait of America as a land of freedom and Christian civilization but, rather, in the image of black bodies being lynched, tortured, and burned on American soil. This image contrasts strongly with the representation of Africa by so many people, white and black, as a heathen land that needs to be saved.⁶⁷ With this lasting image of irrational and barbaric violence on American shores, Smith calls into question notions of a civilized

West, refusing to privilege America as the source of Enlightenment for all those “native Africans living in darkness.” One need not leave America to find such terrifying darkness—the heart of which, she asserts, can be found far closer to home than most white Americans would like to admit. Smith’s writing these words after spending eight years in Africa, the supposed “Dark Continent,” makes her sharp criticism of American hypocrisy all the more potent.

Chapter Four

Shifting Locations: A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince

*I'm in a wilderness below,
Lord, guide me all my journey through,
Plainly let me thy footsteps trace,
Which lead to heaven, my hiding place.*

*Should dangers thick impede my course,
O let my soul sustain no loss;
Help me to run the Christian race,
And enter safe my hiding place.
~Nancy Prince*

*[T]he slave ship is not stable and unchanging; it is a site of violent subjugation that reveals, rather than conceals, the racial-sexual location of black cultures in the face of unfreedoms. The physicality of the slave ship, then, contributes to the process of social concealment and dehumanization but, importantly, black subjectivity is not swallowed up by the ship itself. Rather, the ship, its crew, black subjects, the ocean and ports, make geography what it is, a location through which a moving technology can create differential and contextual histories.
~Katherine McKittrick*

The tendency of most scholarship to position Nancy Prince's 1853 work, *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*, as a travel narrative or as autobiography has led to a failure to consider the spiritual trajectory of Prince's narrative.⁶⁸ In order to move beyond the limitations of such generic categorizations and to counter the elision of the sacred in Prince's text, I begin my own analysis with her concluding poem, "The Hiding Place," which demands that we read her entire narrative, and particularly her travel, through a spiritual lens. Taking the sacred seriously in my reading of Prince's narrative, my analysis focuses on her employing of a resistant spiritual practice that exposes and critiques race, class, and gender oppression throughout the circum-Atlantic world.⁶⁹ Moreover, I argue that Prince's narrative defines travel as both a material and spiritual quest for home.

I have chosen to begin my analysis of her text with this poem because it provides the necessary context for understanding why Prince begins her narrative as she does and helps us to understand what motivates her travels. I assert that Prince's search for a hiding place in this poem is really a search for home. Home can have many definitions, including one's place of birth, the place where one's family resides or the place where one is originally from; however, the definition that this poem most invokes is home as a safe place, where one feels protected and secure from the troubles of the world. This definition becomes most apparent in the poem as Prince juxtaposes the "tumultuous noise" of the world, which she describes as "a wilderness" filled with danger, against the "peace" and safety of her hiding place, where she discovers Jesus's "smiling face" and "redeeming love."

In this poem, Prince not only invokes notions of home, but she also draws on the traditional Christian understanding of life as a journey and the Christian as a traveler who must find her way home.⁷⁰ The speaker in the poem, exemplifying this journey, states, "I'm in a wilderness below,/ Lord, guide me all my journey through,/ Plainly let me thy footsteps trace,/ Which lead to heaven, my hiding place" (stanza 5). The poem's words assure us that in spite of modern attempts to secularize her narrative, Prince clearly views her own narrative and travel in both spiritual and material terms, as both sacred and secular. Her definition of home is similarly rooted in both material and spiritual experience. This becomes increasingly clear as we reach the end of her narrative, which I will discuss in further detail near the end of my chapter. For now, suffice it to say that Prince attempts to enlarge her understanding of home beyond a physical place and beyond kinship ties.

As the title of this chapter suggests, my analysis of Nancy Prince's 1853 autobiographical and spiritual travelogue will focus on the many shifts at work in her narrative. These shifts are both material and spiritual, as Prince's account of her travels to Russia and Jamaica reflect a journey in which Prince shifts from a physical and spiritual location of alienation, hopelessness, and despair to one of hopefulness and purposeful action rooted in a spiritual practice of resistance. In order to analyze and more fully understand these shifts and tenuous movements in Prince's narrative, I now turn to the figure of the ship, especially the slave ship, to further demonstrate the inextricable link between physical and spiritual journeys that we see in Prince's narrative.

I begin by historically contextualizing the slave ship because the figure of the ship is central to Nancy Prince's text. Her narrative opens and closes with experiences that take place on slave ships. And ships provide Prince, like Zilpha Elaw and Amanda Smith, with the means to travel abroad to Russia and to Jamaica. The ship for Prince, as I will show in this chapter, is at times a marker of captivity, while also a marker of mobility and freedom. Paul Gilroy further underscores the centrality of the slave ship for understanding black history, culture, politics and subjectivity:

[S]hips were the living means by which the points within th[e] Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected. Accordingly they need to be thought of as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade. They were something more—a means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production.... Ships also refer us back to the middle passage, to the half-

remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialization and modernization. (16-17)

Gilroy's study of the ship, like McKittrick's critical analysis, defines the ship as a marker of "shifting space" (17) as well as unstable and changing (xi)—a tenuous space that both enables the commodification of black bodies and allows for resistance to such dehumanization.

Stephanie Smallwood's scholarly work on the Middle Passage, *Saltwater Slavery*, is particularly useful for my analysis of the slave ship as a tenuous space of physical and spiritual struggle. She claims, "Their disappearance threatened to put saltwater slaves beyond both the physical and metaphysical reach of kin. Would the exiles be able to return home to offer protective intervention, to promote the integrity and continuing prosperity of the kinship group? Would their deaths take place in isolation? Would their spirits wander aimlessly, unable to find their way home to the realm of the ancestors?" (61). Smallwood's analysis makes clear that captivity was both a physical and spiritual condition. The violence of the slave ship, in other words, did more than degrade and torment black flesh through starvation, disease and physical torture.

The slave ship, often referred to as a "factory" that specialized in the manufacturing of commodities, sought to erase personhood by stamping out desire, agency and severing cultural, communal, ancestral and familial ties. Marcus Rediker defines the slave ship as "a strange and potent combination of war machine, mobile prison, and factory.... Sailors... 'produced' slaves within the ship as factory, doubling their economic value as they moved them from a market on the eastern Atlantic to one on the west and helping to create the labor power that animated a growing world economy in

the eighteenth century and after” (9-10). This process of producing slaves, transforming individual persons into valuable commodities, occurred through the practice of what Rediker refers to as “culture stripping,”—a practice “designed to objectify, discipline, and individualize the laboring body through violence, medical inspection, numbering, chaining, ‘stowing’ belowdecks, and various social routines, from eating and ‘dancing’ to working” (265). Referring to a similar process of “stripping,” Smallwood, illustrates the drastic extent of the physical, social and spiritual alienation enslaved peoples faced aboard the slave ship: “In all the ways it robbed them of the markers of their social existence, the violence of commodification signaled to captives—stripped of material adornment, physically displaced, torn from the social embrace of kin and community—that they had been doomed to social annihilation” (60).

Rediker and Smallwood’s studies reveal, just as Gilroy and McKittrick’s analyses suggest, that captives defended themselves against such total alienation by engaging in embodied spiritual practices that resisted such physical and psychic violence. Smallwood, for instance, argues that

the only means to survive in this realm was to divine means to explain it, to define and delimit it. And the only means to achieve that was to speak of it—to probe its contours with words spoken among strangers. Words were the glue that made the crowd... into a collective “us,” whose fate stood in the balance during the journey. Agency aboard the slave ship took refuge above all in the voice, the means by which the “self” finds realization “across the bridge of the body in the world. (125, Elaine Scarry qtd in Smallwood 125)

Smallwood's words reveal the crucial spiritual work that captives engaged in to survive the assault and terror of the slave ship.⁷¹ Here, the enslaved use their voices to construct meaning and a collective subjectivity from their experiences. Rediker similarly declares that captives engaged in "an oppositional process of culture creation" rooted in oral tradition, singing, storytelling, and dramatization, aboard the slave ship (265). One focus of Rediker's analysis is the significance of singing, a resistant practice that enslaved women most often engaged in, "about loss—about dispossession, enslavement, alienation" (284). Continuing, Rediker states, "One aspect of these songs was the active recalling of history, in the style of the griot" (284). This practice of resistance was so threatening to the social order aboard the slave ship that enslaved women would be flogged for "daring to remember through song" (284). As Rediker explains, "The struggle for memory by these women was an effort to retain historical identity in a situation of utter social upheaval. It was a central element of an active and growing culture of opposition aboard the ship" (284). Rediker also attests to the importance of drama as a resistant practice as he references an account of boys aboard a slave ship "act[ing] out the trauma of how marauders had captured them and their families" (279). Through such performances, which were always communal, "The drama of dispossession and enslavement was thus reenacted, discussed, lamented, and committed to memory aboard the ship" (Rediker 279).

As we can see, then, slaves responded to the process of *stripping* aboard the slave ship, which threatened their total alienation with a spiritual practice of *creating*. Through this shared creation of culture, singing, storytelling and drama, captives also constructed

ties of kinship and community in opposition to the severing of such ties that occurred during the Middle Passage. Smallwood similarly claims that

Undoing their objectivization as goods to be bought and sold, therefore, required not only that captives escape the physical hold exerted on them by the forts, factories, and other coastal facilities used to incarcerate them but, more difficult still, that they reverse their own transformation into commodities, by returning to a web of social bonds that would tether them safely to the African landscape, within the fold of kinship and community.

(62)

Again, here Smallwood affirms that slavery equals alienation from community and kin. More specifically, “theirs was a ‘social death,’ a form of exile to which no end was foreseeable. They inhabited a new category of marginalization, one not of extreme alienation *within* the community, but rather of absolute exclusion from *any* community” (30). This explains why the rebuilding of community and the preservation of community and kinship ties constitute acts of resistance to such alienation. Rediker further posits the significance of preserving and reconstituting kinship ties as resistance to the alienation of the Middle Passage:

Amid the brutal imprisonment, terror, and premature death, they managed a creative, life-affirming response: they fashioned new language, new cultural practices, new bonds, and a nascent community among themselves aboard the ship. They called each other “shipmate,” the equivalent of brother and sister, and thereby inaugurated a “fictive” but very real kinship to replace what had been destroyed by their abduction

and enslavement in Africa. Their creativity and resistance made them collectively indestructible, and herein lay the greatest magnificence of the drama. (8)

Through such acts of resistance, captives ensured their survival of the Middle Passage with their spiritual lives in tact.⁷²

Despite attempts to produce commodities of persons, the enslaved continued to engage in spiritual practices that undermined such objectification by reaffirming their humanity through culture and community. As Rediker concludes in his work on the slave ship,

Here, on the ship, was a new community in formation. It began when the African Adam and Eve came aboard, and it would continue in plantation communities, maroon communities, church communities, and urban communities. Here was the alchemy of chains mutating, under the hard pressure of resistance, into bonds of community. The mysterious slave ship had become a place of creative resistance for those who now discovered themselves to be “black folks.” In a dialectic of stunning power, the community of mortal suffering aboard the slave ship gave birth to defiant, resilient, life-affirming African-American and Pan-African cultures. (307)

By beginning with historical analyses of the terror and violence of the slave ship, as well as collective resistance to such alienation and objectification, I wish to illustrate the roots of the spiritual practices of resistance that we see at work in black communities in the

New World. I contend that Nancy Prince engages in her 1853 *Narrative* in similar spiritual practices of resistance including the practices of remembering the past through storytelling and dramatization, as well as resistance through the preservation of kinship ties.

The unconventional opening of Prince's autobiography can perhaps best be read and understood in light of this legacy of spiritual resistant practices born and cultivated aboard the slave ship. Unlike Amanda Smith, Prince is born free. Yet the beginning of her narrative shows a preoccupation with captivity and enslavement, which strongly shapes her family lineage and ancestral heritage. She explains,

I was born in Newburyport, September the 15th, 1799. My mother was born in Gloucester,...the daughter of Tobias Wornton.... He was stolen from Africa, when a lad, and was a slave of Captain Winthrop Sargent; but, although a slave, he fought for liberty. He was in the Revolutionary army, and at the battle of Bunker Hill. He often used to tell us, when little children, the evils of Slavery, and how he was stolen from his native land. My grandmother was an Indian of this country; she became a captive to the English, or their descendents. (5)

Prince's ancestral lineage reveals far more than just who she descended from; it illustrates the complexity of slavery in America and her own critique of it, which she inherits from her grandfather. Not only is her grandfather stolen from Africa and enslaved, but her grandmother as a Native American is also enslaved. Prince's narrative therefore marks the historical enslavement of not only African bodies that were forcibly brought to this country but also the captivity and containment of those indigenous

peoples already here. Also embedded in Prince's opening paragraph is a powerful critique of a nation that would enslave those who fought for the country's liberty. The hypocrisy of a nation in which slavery and the fight for liberty co-exist becomes quite palpable in this passage. Although Prince herself is not enslaved, she has learned from her ancestors' experiences of slavery and has learned to critique and resist slavery as part of her family heritage.

The image of the slave ship is central to this family heritage and our understanding of why she begins her narrative with this ancestral lineage. For example, Prince includes a rather lengthy and detailed narrative of her stepfather's experience escaping from a slave ship after surviving the Middle Passage from Africa to America:

My stepfather was stolen from Africa, and while the vessel was at anchor in one of our Eastern ports, he succeeded in making his escape from his captors, by swimming ashore. I have often heard him tell the tale. Having some knowledge of the English language, he found no trouble to pass.

There were two of them, and they found, from observation, that they were in a free State. I have heard my father describe the beautiful moon-light night when they two launched their bodies into the deep, for liberty....

When day began to break, they laid down under a fence, as naked as they were born.... In a few minutes, a man with a broad-brimmed hat on, looked over the fence and cried out, "Halloo boys! you are from that ship at anchor?" Trembling, we answered, yes. He kindly took us by the hand, and told us not to fear, for we were safe.... [W]e were taken to his house and carried to an apartment, where he brought us clothes and food.... No

search was made for us; it was supposed we were drowned, as many had jumped over-board on the voyage, thinking they could get home to Africa again. I have often heard my step-father boast how brave they were, and say they stood like men and saw the ship set sail with less than half they stole from Africa. (6-7)

Like the opening paragraph of Prince's narrative, this passage affirms that slavery must be resisted. It forces us to re-think the traditional narrative of the Middle Passage in which those captured and brought to America either died on board, drowned attempting escape or were enslaved upon reaching U.S. shores. Prince allows for an alternative narrative by re-telling her stepfather's story—a story that calls attention to the bravery of two black men, an intense desire for freedom and the existence of white anti-slavery allies. Also important in this passage is the figure of the ship, which as Paul Gilroy argues, is the symbol of slavery and the Middle Passage (4). While the ship in this passage brings death and enslavement, as it marks the countless drowned bodies of (captive) Africans seeking freedom during the passage, this ship also enables the possibility for life and liberty. Prince's stepfather and his companion take advantage of the ship's liminal status in order to gain their freedom. Although the ship they occupy is indeed a slave ship, its location in a Free State provides Prince's stepfather with access to liberty.

Prince's representation of the slave ship in her own narrative is quite distinct from other textual representations that invoke the materiality of the slave ship to make legible the realities of black suffering and death.⁷³ Prince gives no actual physical details about the ship itself, other than describing it as a slave ship that has come from Africa and has

docked in a Free State. Nevertheless, Prince's narrative, imagines the slave ship as an alterable space, as McKittrick argues—a space that ultimately fails to conceal or fully contain the bodies held captive within it and which enables the production of “differential and contextual histories” (xii). The alternative history enabled by this slave ship at the beginning of Prince's narrative is one in which black bodies, at least black male bodies, can function as free mobile subjects rather than as captive and commodifiable objects.⁷⁴

In addition to the shifting meanings of the slave ship that we see in this passage, Prince's narrative of her stepfather's escape also reveals the formal tensions inherent in Prince's narrative—a narrative that both claims to be an autobiography and yet also resists that genre as well. The opening line of Prince's narrative, for example, suggests that her text will follow the typical autobiographical form: “I was born in Newburyport, September the 15th, 1799” (5). Moreover, the title she grants to this chapter, “A Sketch of the Early Life of Nancy Prince,” further stresses the autobiographical nature of her narrative (4). And yet, it's not her narrative that we receive initially, but that of her stepfather. One possibility for this shift away from herself is that Prince's narrative is informed by a non-Western view of the self which highlights the significance of ancestral heritage for understanding who one is. As previously discussed in my analysis of African cosmology, “the individual person” is inextricably linked to “the realm of spirit,” “the realm of tribal or ethnic community,” and “the realm of family” (Paris 25). Prince's narrative makes a similar claim as her narrative begins with a lineage of her ancestors and detailed information about who they were, what they accomplished and where they had come from. By focusing on her ancestors first, Prince declares that her own subjectivity is linked to and shaped by the lives and experiences of those who came before her.

Another possibility for Prince's diversion away from self and towards her ancestors and family members is the difficulty she faced in executing the traditional role of autobiographer. As William Andrews maintains, "the white autobiographer's letter to the world has always had a social, cultural, and linguistic sanction, though not always success. When black autobiographers addressed the white world, however, they could assume no such sanction for their self-affirming literary acts. ...[T]hey would have to defend or explain away the same literary egoism that in a white autobiographer might be praised as American pride and self-reliance at its best" (2). If such "literary egoism" was a problem for black autobiographers, the exposing of one's personal life was even more difficult for black women.

Anthony G. Barthelemy highlights the particular challenges black women writers faced when he exclaims, "Each [black woman writer] lived under the shadow of capture and sale. Can we expect, therefore, a female writer who had recently escaped some white man's claim of property in her person, including her sexuality and reproductive capabilities, to meet the structural and rhetorical challenges and compromises of self-exposition in the same way as the triumphant fugitive (and male) slave, especially when the effort is motivated by the need for financial security in a culture that knew her price but not her name" (xxxiii)? Barthelemy's question attests to the continued threat for black women of a "literary return to the auction block" (xxxiv), meaning a return to the threat of commodification and consumption before the white gaze—a threat that, as we have already seen, both Elaw and Smith were subject to as itinerant preachers as well.

Although Prince was born free in the North, the publication of her expanded *Narrative* in 1853, just three short years after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act,

suggests that this threat of returning to the auction block was not just a literary fear but quite probably a literal fear as well, since the new law threatened the safety and security of free blacks throughout the U.S. This historical context may also explain the narrative's preoccupation with slavery and Prince's tenuous attempts to represent herself as a free subject.

Prince's tenuous and shifting self-representation is particularly apparent in her telling of her stepfather's escape from a slave ship. At first Prince appears to practice tactics of concealment as she masquerades as a third person narrator of her stepfather's story. She explains, "There were two of them, and they found...that they were in a free State" (6). Notice Prince's disembodied location off screen as a third party witness. But then, quite abruptly, the pronouns shift in the passage so that we cannot clearly distinguish between Prince and her stepfather: "When day began to break, they laid down under a fence, as naked as they were born..." (6). But shortly after this, the man with the broad-brimmed hat arrives asking them (presumably Prince's stepfather and his companion) if they came from the docked ship. Prince exclaims, "'Trembling, we answered, yes.' He kindly took us by the hand, and told us not to fear, for we were safe" (6). Where is Prince at this moment? She has shifted from third person narrator to an actor in the very story she tells. It appears that her own subjectivity becomes conflated with that of her stepfather. While it is true that Prince has concealed her own body off-screen, in her telling of her stepfather's successful escape from a slave ship, she takes center stage inhabiting the body and experiences of her stepfather. While Prince does indeed practice tactics of concealment, though she does hide her body from view, we see her expressing a clear desire to be seen as a particular kind of embodied subject—one

that is free and mobile. Her stepfather's narrative may provide Prince with textual access to this subjectivity, but she also makes clear the gendered limitations of such a subjectivity as she explains, "I have often heard my step-father boast how brave they were, and say they stood like men and saw the ship set sail with less than half they stole from Africa" (7). Prince's comment reminds us that despite the textual conflation of Prince's and her stepfather's body, the two naked figures that "launched their bodies into the deep, for liberty" are indeed male bodies. Her words demonstrate the larger society's equation of manhood and masculinity with bravery and freedom achieved through mobility. Nevertheless, Prince embraces this ancestral heritage that claims itinerancy as a method of resisting oppression.

Though Prince is not male, her self-insertion into her stepfather's escape narrative enables her to engage in a bodily performance that extends beyond the limits of female gender, giving her access to a kind of mobility and freedom typically associated with male bodies. Moreover, Prince's reenacting of her stepfather's escape exemplifies her deployment of resistant spiritual practices of storytelling and dramatization that captives similarly engaged in on the slave ship. As previously discussed, Rediker attests to the slave boys' reenactment of their captivity, sale and transport to the slave ships as a form of communal memory. By inserting herself into her stepfather's narrative, Prince engages in a similar kind of dramatization of the past that enables her to preserve and pass on not only the memory of captivity but the memory of resistance to such captivity. Prince's decision to retell this story, albeit in written rather than oral form, of the Middle Passage and her stepfather's escape from the slave ship that brought him here inextricably links Prince with her ancestors who passed on a legacy of storytelling as a way of

remembering and therefore resisting the oppression and injustice they had experienced. This explains why Prince begins her narrative by emphasizing these ancestral ties and legacy of oral tradition. For example, she describes her grandfather as “stolen from Africa, when a lad...; but, although a slave, he fought for liberty. He was in the Revolutionary army, and at the battle of Bunker Hill. He often used to tell us, when little children, the evils of Slavery, and how he was stolen from his native land” (5). Here, acting in the role of griot, Prince remembers her grandfather’s experiences of racial injustice but most importantly, she also remembers his resistance to it—both his storytelling and his willingness to fight for freedom. By retelling the narratives of her grandfather and stepfather, Prince engages in this oral tradition that the black community uses to transmit this legacy of resistance and oppositional movement. Moreover, Prince’s self-assertion in her stepfather’s narrative also preserves ties of kinship (beyond simply blood relationship)—linking herself inextricably to her ancestors and a legacy, not of slavery, degradation and dehumanization, but a legacy of freedom and resistance rooted in an itinerant practice.

Prince’s status as a “free” black woman in the North, does not consequently free her from the injustice and oppression that her ancestor’s fought against. As the narrative unfolds, Prince’s representation of her own experiences and those of her family members as “free” laborers illustrates that the exploitation of black labor extended beyond the institution of slavery in the South to wage slavery in the North. Despite her family’s achievement of freedom from captivity, the next section of Prince’s narrative, reveals the new struggle to construct a home in the U.S. even as she and her family members are

continually excluded from the promise of America, particularly the North as a haven and safe space for those who desired freedom.

Illustrating the tremendous strain the Northern labor market places on black families and homes, Prince explains that she was hired out, like her other sisters, at the age of 8 as a domestic servant in a white family, while her brothers were apprenticed or became sailors. All were forced to leave home as young children in order to acquire food, board and other necessities. Reflecting on the separation of her family, Prince declares succinctly, “so we were scattered all about” (9). In addition to being “scattered all about,” Prince portrays her home and the people in it as broken. In her repeated representations of her stepfather as a man who “was not kind to me or my sister” (8, 12) and as someone who she needed protection from, Prince reveals the brokenness of home that is a space of violence rather than protection—a place one must be protected from rather than a safe haven (15).

Linking the brokenness of her individual home to the larger home of the nation, Prince illustrates how America’s rootedness in violence and economic exploitation leads to such individual and communal brokenness, as she asserts that “grief, poverty, and responsibilities, were too much for her [my mother]; she never again was the mother she had been before” (8). Illuminating the ways in which oppression and suffering destroys her mother’s mind and spirit, she later describes her mother as “like a lunatic,” who “wandered about” (9). Prince’s descriptions of her mother clearly emphasize her mother’s mental, spiritual and emotional instability, rooted in her dire social and economic circumstances, as someone incapable of properly caring for her children. Prince represents America, then, as a kind of anti-home in which the nation, with its insatiable

greed and desire for wealth and material goods, the same greed that fuels the slave trade, seeks to devour Prince's family by consuming their bodies for cheap labor.

Extending her critique of America's consumption of black bodies, both slave and free, as expendable sources of labor, Prince's text shifts to her own experience as a poor domestic laborer who struggles to provide for her mother and seven siblings after her stepfather fails to return from one of his sea voyages.⁷⁵ Like Smith, Prince's labor in white homes is emotionally draining and physically destructive. One of her strongest critiques is of a Christian family that employs her. She first agrees to work for the family after claiming a "determin[ation] to get more for my labor" (10). Prince, however, soon realizes that the only thing she gets for her labor is abusive treatment and ill health. She states,

There were seven in the family...and of course, the work must have been very severe, especially the washings. Sabbath evening I had to prepare for the wash; soap the clothes and put them into the steamer.... At two o'clock, on the morning of Monday, the bell was rung for me to get up; but, that was not all, they said I was too slow, and the washing was not done well; I had to leave the tub to tend the door and wait on the family, and was not spoken kind to, at that. Hard labor and unkindness was too much for me; in three months, my health and strength were gone. I often looked at my employers, and thought to myself, is this your religion? I did not wonder that the girl who had lived there previous to myself, went home to die. They had family prayers, morning and evening. Oh! yes, they

were sanctimonious! I was a poor stranger, but fourteen years of age, imposed upon by these good people. (11-12)

Prince's experiences working in white homes is in many ways an exact parallel of Smith's experiences—being forced to work long hours, including all hours of the night; having to perform multiple tasks at the same time; being ill-treated and underappreciated for the work she performed; and being forced to leave the job because of deteriorating health. Moreover, no matter how hard Prince works, no matter how thin she stretches herself, she cannot seem to ever command enough money for her labor to provide for her family.

The violence, both physical and psychic, that Prince sustains while working in this white Christian home is reminiscent of Harriet Wilson's 1859 novel, *Our Nig*.⁷⁶ Like Prince's own narrative, Wilson's novel takes place in New England and chronicles the violence and oppression that Frado, the mulatto protagonist, experiences at the hands of a white woman, Mrs. Bellmont, within the domestic sphere. Described in the novel as a "she-devil" (17), Mrs. Bellmont represents the middle class Christian mother who has absolute power in the domestic sphere. Mrs. Bellmont may look like the mirror image of the Victorian ideal mother, but she does not use her power and influence to instill moral values in her husband, children and society. Rather, Mrs. Bellmont is a tyrant, who dominates her family by chastising all those who disagree with or challenge her authority. As a "woman of southern principles," Mrs. Bellmont takes on the role of slave mistress, subjecting Frado to slave status and transforming the Bellmont 'home' into a southern plantation, complete with whippings and various other acts of violence (4). Described as "self-willed, haughty, undisciplined, arbitrary and severe," Mrs. Bellmont subjects Frado

to violence every chance she gets (25). She beats Frado for crying. She beats her for working too slowly. And she beats her for “talking back.”

At first glance, Prince’s mistreatment within the white domestic sphere may seem mild compared with Frado’s experience of violence. However, it’s unclear from the passage just how much Prince is censoring when she describes the Christian family she works for as “unkind.” This is especially true given that she uses the same language to describe her physically abusive stepfather earlier in the narrative (12, 15). Prince’s description of the labor she performs and the unkindness she receives as so physically degrading that her health is completely destroyed, mirrors the illness and sickness that Frado experiences within the violating white domestic space of the Belmont home. These similarities between Prince’s narrative and Wilson’s novel suggest that Prince, like Wilson, puts forth a powerful critique of white domestic space. Though this space is typically represented within Victorian ideology as the heart of Christian goodness and morality, both Prince and Wilson through their oppositional portrayals of this space as violent and destructive towards black women, underscore the complicity of white domestic space with slavery and racial injustice. The enslaving, whether literal or figurative, of black women as laborers within this domestic space attests to their inability to achieve a certain kind of freedom through mobility that Prince has shown, through her stepfather’s narrative, as a viable possibility for black men. Through such juxtaposing of southern slavery with violence and racial oppression in the North, both Prince and Wilson illustrate the ways in which black people have been alienated from the nation and from full and equal participation in the rights and protections of citizenship.

Coupled with Prince's raw and unmitigated representation of America as a failed home, Prince engages in a spiritual practice to defend herself, her family and community against the oppression, violence and exploitation of the market. One example of Prince's resistance to such exploitation occurs when she finds out that her sister, Silvia, who travels to Boston to find better work, has been trapped within a house of prostitution. Prince's description of Silvia as being "deluded away," suggests that this movement was coerced rather than voluntary—even a form of captivity. Here we see another example of how the market commodifies the black female body, exploiting the body for both physical and sexual labor. Silvia's imprisonment becomes more apparent when Prince attempts to "free" her from her bondage. The owner of the house exclaims, "she owes me, she cannot go" (14). Continuing, Prince explains that "[t]he old woman seized her [Silvia] to drag her down into the kitchen; I held on to her, while Mr. Brown at me side, used his great cane; he threatened her so that she was obliged to let my sister go" (14). The necessity of using physical force to free Silvia from this house further illustrates her captive state. Significantly, Prince's narrative demonstrates that this rescue is part of her resistant spiritual practice, as she exclaims, "I was young and inexperienced, but God knew that my object was good. 'In wisdom he chooses the weak things of the earth.' Without his aid, how could I ever have rescued my lost sister?" (13). Prince's spiritual practice, therefore, is rooted in oppositional movements that thwart the market's attempts to commodify the black female body, here specifically her sister Silvia.

Her decision to go and rescue her sister also illustrates Prince's desire to preserve ties of kinship against the violence of a market that threatens to sever those ties. Expressing her deep love for and emotional bond with her sister Silvia, Prince states,

after hearing of Silvia's captivity, "[t]o have heard of her death, would not have been so painful to me, as we loved each other very much, and more particularly, as our step-father was not very kind to us. When little girls, she used to cry about it, and we used to say, when we were large enough we would go away" (12). This text clearly demonstrates Prince's inextricable connection with her sister—a bond of kinship that offers support and defense against the oppression and violence they experienced as young girls. Furthermore, Prince's attempts to preserve this tie by rescuing her sister provides further opposition to those oppressive economic forces that seek to reduce their bodies to objects of exchange in the market. By reclaiming her sister as her own, Prince affirms her belonging within a community that offers a kind of protection, however limited, from a market that would devour any wandering black body—those excluded or beyond the safety of the community.⁷⁷

In spite of Prince's successful rescue of her sister from sexual exploitation and violence, she still finds herself struggling to pull herself out of poverty. In the face of despair, Prince turns to Christianity and faith for spiritual strength and sustenance, perhaps in an attempt to avoid the mental and spiritual break that her mother suffered. Deteriorating in health and emotionally anguished, she relies on spiritual strength for survival. Unlike the other narratives I've discussed, Prince does not give us a long detailed account of her spiritual conversion.⁷⁸ Rather, she simply states, "Care after care oppressed me...all hope but in God was lost. I resolved... to seek an interest in my Savior, and put my trust in Him; and never shall I forget the place or time when God spake to my troubled conscience. Justified by faith I found peace with God.... After

living sixteen years without hope, and without a guide, May 6th, 1819, the Rev. Thomas Paul, baptized myself” (17).

Despite Prince’s decision to place her trust in God, she still experiences distress and dissatisfaction with her material reality, stating that, “[W]ith a determination to do something for myself; I left my place after three months, and went to learn a trade; and after seven years of anxiety and toil, I made up my mind to leave my country” (20). Prince finally actualizes the same desire for freedom that her ancestors expressed by turning to the ship as the figure of mobility. Yet she escapes, not as a sailor, as her stepfather and brother did, but as the wife of a sailor,⁷⁹ stating that on “September 1st, 1823, Mr. Prince arrived from Russia. February 15th, 1824, we were married. April 14th, we embarked on board the Romulus...bound for Russia” (20-21). Again, Prince elides much of her experience. Refusing to give us a clear picture of her life, Prince’s readers can only speculate about those seven years, how she meets her husband and the full reason for why she leaves America for Russia. From what little information we do have, Prince suggests in this passage that her frustration as a poor, underpaid domestic laborer in America fuels her decision to leave the country. Therefore, travel for Prince clearly offers a possible way out of a less than subsistence existence.

Prince’s decision to leave America for Russia must be read in light of the Colonization Movement and increased interest in black emigration in the nineteenth-century as a response to America’s failure to extend full citizenship rights to people of African descent.⁸⁰ Prince does not state her motivations for leaving the U.S. explicitly; however, within this context of nineteenth-century black emigration and Prince’s representation of America’s failure as a home, we can presume that Prince, like so many

other black people past and present, is in search of a place of belonging. For this reason, the next section of this chapter, which focuses on Prince's travel to Russia, hinges on the question: Might Russia be that remedy for Prince?

A Stranger Abroad: Prince's nine years in Russia

“The country in which you disembark is never the country of which you have dreamed. The disappointment was inevitable. What place in the world could sate four hundred years of yearning for a home? Was it foolish to long for a territory in which you could risk imagining a future that didn't replicate the defeats of the present?”

~Saidiya Hartman

Even though Prince spends nine years of her life in Russia and a significant portion of her narrative recounting her life there, according to Kristin Fitzpatrick, “[c]ritics have generally passed over Prince’s writing on Russia because it makes little direct mention of racism” (268).⁸¹ Nevertheless, she contends, “this issue needs to be addressed precisely because the quiet acceptance Prince encounters in Russia contrasts strongly with the racially charged atmosphere in the United States and Jamaica, where such normative relations are impossible. Russia functions as an exemplar of racial tolerance in Prince’s text” (268). In her analysis, Fitzpatrick argues that one of the rhetorical strategies Prince employs in her narrative is juxtaposing the unjust and oppressive American and Jamaican societies against Russia’s racial egalitarianism. I do agree that Prince uses her travels to Russia to expose the racial injustice in America and Jamaica by paralleling this injustice with the “quiet acceptance” she receives in Russia.

Allison Blakely, for instance, in his work *Russia and the Negro*, further supports this claim of racial tolerance in Russia.⁸² He explains, “Among the European states, Russia was highly conspicuous for her lack of involvement in the slave trade.... Although Russia had enormous holdings in America, they were mainly in the far north, [and] did not lend themselves to a plantation economy.... Russia’s vast, contiguous empire did include some cultures in which slavery was an integral part; but there was no

demand for an outside supply of labor” (28-29). With this context in mind, Blakely concludes that

The African slave trade was, therefore, not of vital concern to Russia. Nevertheless, the Russian government chose to assume a very outspoken, progressive position on the issue. Representatives of the tsar at the Aix-la-Chapelle Congress of 1818 not only argued for the abolition of the slave trade, but they proposed the formation of an international court and naval force to enforce the ban. The Congress decided against this proposal; but it is important as a reflection of what was apparently, at least in part, a humanitarian concern over the plight of the Negro. (29)

Blakely’s assertion that Prince’s travels to Russia offer a comparative critique of racial injustice in America is well-founded. Critiquing racial injustice, however, is not the sole rhetorical purpose for this section of Prince’s narrative. Reading her travel to Russia through a spiritual lens, I claim that Prince appropriates the voice of Western tourist in order to shift focus away from her own body and onto Russian social and political practices. In the process, Prince offers a much more tenuous portrait of Russian society and politics than Fitzpatrick allows—one that highlights not only Russia’s racial tolerance, but also exposes the realities of political and religious suppression, violence, and the ever-present threat of death.

At first read, Prince’s portrayal of Russia offers a stark contrast to her description of her life of deprivation, hardship and economic instability in America. Prince says of her initial arrival to Russia that “I spent six weeks very pleasantly, visiting and receiving

friends, in the manner of the country. While there I attended two of their parties; there were various amusements in which I did not partake, which caused them much disappointment. I told them my religion did not allow of dancing or dice playing, which formed part of the amusements. As they were very strict in their religion, they indulged me in the same privilege” (21-22). Here Prince makes it clear that she is immediately accepted and embraced in Russian society, even in spite of her own religious difference. Immediately then, we see a shift in class location for Prince, who now has the leisure to receive friends, visit with others, and attend parties. No longer is Prince being worked to death for less than subsistence wages for employers who are perpetually dissatisfied by her racial difference and labor. In this moment, neither racial difference nor religious preference seems to matter.

This shift in status, enabled by her newly-attained mobility, becomes further apparent in Prince’s description of her first meeting with the Emperor and Empress of Russia. She explains,

[A]s I entered, the Emperor stepped forward with great politeness and condescension, and welcomed me, and asked several questions; he then accompanied us to the empress Elizabeth; she stood in her dignity, and received me in the same manner the Emperor had. They presented me with a watch.... It was customary in those days, when any one married, belonging to the court, to present them with gifts....; there was no prejudice against color; there were there all casts, and the people of all nations, each in their place. (23)

Attesting to the existence of a class hierarchy rather than a racial hierarchy in Russian society, Prince illustrates how her relocation to Russia has enabled a shift in her social and class status. Specifically, Prince's physical mobility allows her to move in a social circle that certainly would have been closed to her while in the U.S. and allows her to be treated with dignity and respect. Significantly, this newfound class and social status also leads to a shift in subjectivity for Prince.

Marking this shift in subjectivity, Prince appropriates the voice of Western tourist. As in Smith's *Autobiography*, where we see how her travels throughout Europe, Egypt and Africa enable a shift in her subjectivity from spectacle to spectator, in Prince's narrative we see a similar transformation. This change allows for Prince's previously raced, gendered, and classed body, a body that was denied mobility and economic security in the U.S., to masquerade as an apparently objective (bodiless) observer. This new subjectivity is most evident through Prince's objective narrative voice in which the personal "I" disappears from her text:

The Russian ladies follow the fashions of the French and English. Their religion is after the Greek Church.... The principal church is on the Main street.... There is another spacious building called the Market, half a mile square, where all kinds of articles many be bought. Between the Market and the church there is a block of buildings where silver articles of all kinds are to be purchased. Besides these buildings, Main Street is lined with buildings with projecting windows, to the extent of twelve miles. (35-37)

This detailed description of Russian fashion, religion and this mapping of St. Petersburg continues for pages and pages and effectively illustrates Prince's role as distant observer, apparently absent from the text.

Earlier, though, I used the word *masquerade* to describe Prince's subjectivity in order to emphasize the performative nature of tourism and travel, which James Buzzard defines as offering "an imaginative freedom not as a rule available in modern social life; it encourages the fashioning of special identities, good for the duration of the journey and afterwards—identities privately and intensely possessed, which are congruent with that freedom" (81-82). Initially, Prince appears to use this imaginative freedom of the traveler in order to move the reader's gaze away from her own body and onto Russia, which she constructs as a space of freedom in opposition to the racial oppression of the U.S. However, a closer reading of the text reveals a surprising preoccupation with instability, violence and death in Russian society that belies the pleasantness, amusement, and open acceptance that Prince meets with after her arrival in the country. Taking this tenuous representation of Russia into account, we can hardly call her portrait of the country ideal.⁸³

This shifting representation of Russia begins as Prince highlights details about the black servants employed in the czar's court. She explains, "The number of colored men that filled this station was twenty; when one dies, the number is immediately made up. Mr. Prince filled the place of one that had died" (23). This very odd statement that job vacancies occur only as a result of death reveals two possibilities: First, we might notice the level of job stability and satisfaction that is clearly missing from Prince's accounts of her labor in America and that of her siblings, who were always leaving jobs

because of mistreatment, dangerous conditions, and low wages. In Russia, on the contrary, employment conditions appear to be much more favorable for people of color. And yet, Prince's words, "when one dies, the number is immediately made up," also suggest a mere substitution of bodies at work in the czar's court—one that calls to mind the substitution of bodies on a slave ship, where there is an equal concern with ideal numbers and achieving a "full complement."⁸⁴ Just as investors in the slave trade cared nothing for the personalities or desires of their slaves, so too does Prince's explanation of service in the Russian court suggest that black people were reduced from individual persons to bodies only, who were valued primarily for their labor. My reading of racial objectification in the Russian court is further supported by Blakely, who explains that "[i]n appraising the Russian attitudes toward the Negro, it is important to note that the question of racial equality... was quite separate from that of the abolition of slavery. Even among the radical intelligentsia one can find total opposition to slavery accompanied by a general acceptance of racist theories denigrating blacks" (34). Subsequently, it is not unlikely that despite the much improved social position black people could occupy in Russian society, they still faced racist ideologies that called their full humanity into question.⁸⁵

The centrality of death in Prince's account extends beyond the czar's court to the burial and funereal practices of Russian people. Prince spends nearly three pages documenting these rituals. Perhaps one reason for such an emphasis is the prevalence of death, the first example of which occurs during a tremendous flood in St. Petersburg on October 9th, 1824. According to Prince, "The water rose sixteen feet in most parts of the city; many of the inhabitants were drowned. An island between the city and Cronstadt,

containing five hundred inhabitants, was inundated, and all were drowned, and great damage was done” (26). Shifting away from her role as distant observer, Prince, slipping back into the personal “I,” recounts her near-death experience after the flood. While on the way to a neighbor’s house, she falls into a sink hole, exclaiming, “I made my way through a long yard, over the bodies of men and beasts, and when opposite their gate I sunk; I made one grasp, and the earth gave away; I grasped again, and fortunately got hold of the leg of a horse, that had been drowned. I drew myself up, covered with mire, and made my way a little further” (27). This part of Prince’s account is unusually heavy in terms of its materiality—you can almost feel the weight of Prince’s body as she is nearly sucked under the earth, and indeed the weight of all life (people, animals, and plants) that is drowned in the deluge.

As scholars, if we strictly read this passage in terms of Prince’s national critique of slavery, colonization and racial injustice, we miss the spiritual work Prince is engaged in at this moment—here, specifically, the redefining of home as a place of security and refuge. It is clear from Prince’s representation of Russia that this is not a potential home for black émigrés disillusioned by racial injustice in America. The immanent realities of death, insecurity and lack of stability are human conditions that follow the traveler everywhere. Hence, Prince may be able to escape racial injustice in Russia, but she cannot escape violence, terror or even death as is evident in this moment in which the very earth beneath her gives way.

Prince’s alienation during this flood becomes further apparent in her text when she states, “I was left alone. At four o’clock in the afternoon, there was darkness that might be felt, such as I had never experienced before. My situation was the more painful,

being alone, and not being able to speak [the language]" (27). Although Prince is in her home in St. Petersburg, it is clear from her words that she struggles with feelings of homelessness and alienation as she is alone, physically disconnected from others, and she is socially isolated as well, since she is unable to speak Russian at this point in her stay. Again, analyzing Prince's experiences during the flood through a spiritual lens, I believe she juxtaposes her physical experience of alienation and the threat of physical death with the spiritual struggles of all human beings who suffer from being spiritually alienated from God.⁸⁶

Utterly transformed by her experience of alienation and near death, Prince, speaking of the reality of this new life, concludes after returning to the pit where she nearly sank beneath the earth,

It was large enough to hold a dozen like myself, where the earth had caved in. Had not the horse been there, I should never again have seen the light of day, and no one would have known my fate. Thus through the providence of God, I escaped from the flood and the pit.

My helper, God, I bless thy name;
The same thy power, thy grace the same;
I 'midst ten thousand dangers stand,
Supported by thy guardian hand. (28)

Prince's prayer invokes her poem, "The Hiding Place," that concludes her narrative. Here in response to "the wilderness below," where "dangers thick impede my course," Prince finds her sustenance, her belonging and refuge in God. As I will argue at the end of this

chapter, this refuge is a spiritual condition, allowing her to find peace and rest even amidst the inevitable dangers and uncertainties of life. In the aftermath of the flood, Prince declares that God's salvation has been both spiritual, reconciling her to God and adopting her into God's family, as well as material—literally saving her from a physical pit. In this moment then God offers Prince spiritual and material sustenance.

Prince's final ruminations on death include her account of a cholera outbreak in 1831, which further posits Russia as a space that particularly threatens to destroy bodily health. She states that this "malignant disease, made its appearance in Austria, from thence to little Russia, making great ravages, thousands of people falling a prey. It then began to rage in St. Petersburg, carrying off 9255....Much might be said of this disease and others that are but little known in this country. God often visits nations, families, and persons, with judgments as well as mercies" (34). Rejecting again the notion of Russia as a potential home and refuge for black emigrants, Prince underscores the inevitable frailty and uncertainty of the human condition regardless of race, as her last statement about the frequency of such "judgments" throughout the world makes apparent.

Perhaps the greatest example of the particular risk of death in Russia is Prince's own deteriorating health, which requires her to return to the U.S. prematurely and without her husband, Nero Prince. Though she does not wish to leave without her husband, Prince claims, "yet life seemed desirable," suggesting that staying in Russia meant imminent death, while returning to America brought with it, perhaps paradoxically, the potential for renewed life (40). Unfortunately, despite Prince's near escape of death in Russia, her husband is not so lucky. Indeed, this potential for bodily illness and death in Russia becomes strikingly evident, as we discover that Nero Prince is never able to return to the

U.S. with his wife. Prince's stay in Russia ends quite emphatically with her statement, "death took him away" (40).

Reluctant Return

One can only imagine that this return to the U.S. is doubly painful, not just because she leaves her husband behind but also because Prince must face the reality of returning to a place that made her survival and thriving as a full human being seemingly impossible. Although she spends seven years in the U.S., her return in her narrative is short-lived—Prince dedicates only two-and-a-half pages to discussing her time there. The brevity of this section could be explained by the profound loss that accompanies Prince's return, which includes not only the loss of her husband, but the loss of the newfound status and subjectivity that she attained while in Russia as well. Despite Prince's reluctant return to the U.S. in 1833, her time there is marked by her commitment to social and political activism.⁸⁷ Prince's engagement in the social concerns of her day further illustrates the transformative experience that I believe she undergoes in Russia—a spiritual transformation that leads to a more formal and lifelong commitment to a spiritual practice rooted in activism and prophetic critique of the failures of not only American slavery but also the failures of Western imperialism and colonization more generally.

Although Prince tells us very little about her time spent in America, she does highlight her involvement in the Anti-Slavery Society, which lasts until "contention broke out among themselves" (42). Despite her personal commitment to anti-slavery

efforts, Prince expresses disillusionment with the organization, as she offers a prophetic critique of the Anti-Slavery Society:

I may not see so clearly as some, for the weight of prejudice has again oppressed me, and were it not for the promises of God, one's heart would fail, for *He* made man in his own image, in the image of God, created he him, male and female, that they should have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the air, and the beast of the field, &c. This power did God give man, that thus far should he go and no farther; but man has disobeyed his Maker, and become vain in his imagination, and their foolish hearts are darkened. We gather from this, that God has in all ages of the world punished every nation and people for their sins. The sins of my beloved country are not hid from his notice; his all seeing eye sees and knows the secrets of all hearts. (42-43)

Fish argues that the “contention” that Prince speaks of is in regards to women’s involvement in the abolitionist movement—apparently, some members, black and white, believed that “sexual integration and the full participation of women as speakers would distract abolitionists from their original goal” (50). Within this context, Prince’s prophetic theological critique arguing for the equality of men and women becomes clearer.

Firmly rooted in the African American jeremiad tradition that informed Maria Stewart’s speeches and writings just two decades earlier, Prince’s words are filled with frustration and anger at her homeland as she sarcastically claims that, although she “may not see so clearly as some,” certainly “[t]he sins of my beloved country are not hid from

[God's] notice; his all seeing eye sees and knows the secrets of all hearts" (42-43). Here Prince juxtaposes her own supposedly flawed sight with God's perfect vision. While her audience may question the truth and authenticity of her own vision because she is a poor black woman, they certainly cannot deny the accuracy and authority of God's vision. Prince's criticism, moreover, posits the U.S. as a space that limits her attempts to claim a free mobile subjectivity because of her corporeality—her gendered, raced, and classed body.⁸⁸ And yet, this passage, which echoes Stewart before her, is rooted in Prince's love for the very country that has forsaken and oppressed her. This love that fuels her prophetic warning to a nation whose destruction she foresees, if it does not turn from its sinful ways, prefaces Prince's departure from the U.S. to Jamaica on November 16, 1840.

I believe Prince's anti-slavery efforts in the U.S. and her desire to help newly freed blacks in Jamaica are connected and are part of her embodied spiritual practice. For Prince, political work and spiritual work are linked. Illustrating her motivation for becoming a missionary to Jamaica, Prince claims as her purpose, to "aid, in some small degree, to raise up and encourage the emancipated inhabitants, and teach the young children to read and work, to fear God, and put their trust in the Saviour" (45). As this mission statement demonstrates, Prince's aim in traveling to Jamaica is to respond to both the spiritual and material needs of Jamaicans.

Prince's embodied spiritual practice becomes even more apparent when she reaches the island. First, Prince offers her representation of black Jamaicans in opposition to American stereotypes:

[I]t may be hoped they are not the stupid set of beings they have been called; here *surely we see industry*; they are enterprising and quick in their

perceptions, determined to possess themselves, and to possess property besides, and quite able to take care of themselves. They wished to know why I was so inquisitive about them. I told them we had heard in America that you are lazy, and that emancipation has been of no benefit to you; I wish to inform myself of the truth respecting you, and give a true account on my return. (50)

Once again, Prince's embodied spiritual practice reveals her concern with not only the spiritual welfare of newly-freed Jamaicans but also an investment in the economic and social reality of these inhabitants. Her spiritual work is not disconnected from her larger political mission of fighting for justice for black people in the West Indies and in the U.S. Rather, this passage reveals the link Prince sees between the racism and injustice towards blacks in America and the similar treatment of blacks in Jamaica. Like Stewart, Elaw and Smith, Prince's critical vision towards slavery and racial and economic injustice extends beyond American borders.

Although emancipation has become a reality in Jamaica before the U.S., Prince's narrative makes it clear that emancipation does not always lead to full freedom.

According to Prince,

Most of the people of Jamaica are emancipated slaves, many of them are old, worn out and degraded. Those who are able to work, have yet many obstacles to contend with, and very little to encourage them; every advantage is taken of their ignorance; the same spirit of cruelty is opposed to them that held them for centuries in bondage; even religious teaching is bartered for their hard earnings, while they are allowed but thirty-three

cents a day, and are told if they will not work for that they shall not work at all; an extraordinary price is asked of them for every thing they may wish to purchase, even the Bibles are sold to them at a large advance on the first purchase. Where are their apologists, if they are found wanting in the strict morals that Christians ought to practice? Who kindly says, forgive them when they err. "Forgive them, this is the bitter fruit of slavery." Who has integrity sufficient to hold the balance when these poor people are to be weighed? Yet their present state is blissful, compared with slavery. (53)

Prince recognizes the improved condition of those who have been emancipated, but she is also well aware that the freedom accorded them is nominal. Her statement that "the same spirit of cruelty is opposed to them that held them for centuries in bondage" illustrates the continued link between slavery and the nominal freedom of colonialism that has taken its place. Prince further suggests that institutions and practices have been put in place to continue the exploitation of black labor. Not only are white employers the subject of Prince's critique, but Christian leaders and missionaries, Prince argues, are just as responsible for such exploitation. Given the immoral and unjust treatment of newly freed blacks, Prince argues that we cannot and should not judge them by strict moral standards. She even goes so far as to suggest that whatever moral degradation may exist among black people is the "bitter fruit of slavery." In this way, she holds the institution of slavery and those in power for the material and spiritual suffering of black people in Jamaica. Importantly, Prince's critique of white missionaries is also voiced by the local inhabitants, who proclaim "the Macroon hunters take all" (54). Recognizing and drawing

attention to the critique embedded in this name, Prince explains, “this is a nickname they give the missionaries and the class-leaders—a cutting sarcasm this!”(54).

Prince’s representation of Jamaicans and particularly her inclusion of Jamaican voices, as made evident in the above passage, have been read by scholars in conflicting ways. Carla Peterson, for example, asserts that “Prince’s narrative progressively enacts a shift in power relations as she increasingly positions the Jamaicans as subalterns whose consciousness she must retrieve and for whom she must speak, and as her cultural enterprise transforms them into native Others in need of racial uplift” (92). Joycelyn Moody, on the other hand, offers a more tenuous positioning of Prince, arguing that through her depiction of Jamaicans “shows herself as both the colonizer and the colonized” (98). Finally, Cheryl Fish similarly maintains that Prince, through her inclusion of Jamaican voices, “is simultaneously making a narrative space for a transgressive ex-slave voice as she co-opts this voice from an ethnographic perspective” (59). What this scholarship confirms is that there is no way for Prince to completely escape the Western imperial worldview that shaped so many Americans in the nineteenth-century.⁸⁹

As Hazel Carby claims, she is both an insider and an outsider. Revealing this precarious location, Carby states, “[t]he dignity and power of Prince’s narrative was gained from her position at once inside and outside the society she wished to condemn.... Prince used her knowledge of other societies to compare and contrast with her own. Somewhat ironically, she commented that she ‘may not see as clearly as some’ because of the weight of oppression, but, of course, this rhetorical device revealed exactly how appropriate a witness and how effective a narrator of racist practices she was” (42).

Carby's statement makes clear that once again, Prince's location is a tenuous one. She is both shaped by Western culture and is intensely critical of its racist and colonial practices. Moreover, Carby's analysis states that it is precisely Prince's tenuous location that enables such a critical vision in the first place.

If Prince's location, however much it shifts, does indeed shape her critical vision, then we can argue that her continued critique of racial injustice and colonialism is a central part of her embodied spiritual practice. After all, Prince's critique is not divorced from her lived experiences in the U.S. or abroad; nor is her critical vision separate from her material reality as a raced, gendered, and classed body. Because Prince's criticism is grounded in her material reality (embodied), it is not completely free of the class and cultural biases that Peterson, Moody and Fish see as reflected in her narrative. Nevertheless, despite the privileged position Prince occupies as traveler and "ethnographer," to use Fish's language, her narrative voices a powerful critique of slavery and colonialism, which she sees as inextricably linked—a critique even more commanding than what we find in either Zilpha Elaw or even Amanda Smith's narratives.

In addition to her inclusion of the voices of newly freed blacks as forceful critics of colonial rule in Jamaica, a rule supported by Christian missionaries, Prince also enumerates the ways in which Church leaders economically exploit black inhabitants:

Such are the persons who hold the office of judges, and go round and urge the people to come to the class, and after they come in twice or three times, they are considered candidates for baptism. Some pay fifty cents, and some more, for being baptized; they receive a ticket as a passport into

the church, paying one mark a quarter, or more, and some less, but nothing short of ten pence, that is, two English shillings a year. They must attend their class once a week, and pay three pence a week, total twelve English shillings a year, besides the sums they pay once a month at communion.

(73)

It is no wonder that Prince argues against rendering judgment upon newly freed slaves. Clearly from her reference to these leaders in the Church as “judges,” she is in part addressing her criticism to them. Prince’s words suggest that such people have no right to judge those whom they exploit on a daily basis. Moreover, this economic exploitation seems so extensive from the above passage that the Church appears to be a kind of marketplace, a place of business rather than a spiritual refuge.

Even worse than this economic exploitation of black people is the violence they are subjected to—a violence Prince bears witness to:

A few young people met to celebrate their freedom on an open plain, where they hold their market; there former masters and mistresses, envious of their happiness, conspired against them, and thought to put them down by violence. This only served to increase their numbers; but the oppressors were powerful, and succeeded in accomplishing their revenge, although many of them were relations.... What little the poor colored people had gathered during their four years of freedom, was destroyed by violence; their fences were broken down, and their horses and hogs taken from them. (57-58)

Prince's account unequivocally testifies to this shift from the violence of slavery to colonial violence and rule, in which white planters still hold the power to control the local economy and continue to control the lives of black people through terrorization.

Witnessing this level of violence and injustice is what leads Prince to finally leave the island.⁹⁰

Prince's journey by sea from Jamaica to the U.S. is perhaps one of the most revealing parts of her narrative and illustrates her embodied spiritual practice more fully than any other moment in the text. Although Prince attempts to maintain the role of ethnographer by focusing on the social and political realities of Jamaica, her embodied spiritual practice disrupts her ethnographic voice to reveal her critique of the continued racial and economic injustice of colonialism in a supposedly free Jamaica. Prince's inability to conceal herself, however, within the role of observer or ethnographer is further demonstrated during her ship passage from Jamaica to America. I argue that Prince's positioning while on the ship becomes more precarious as she is subject to another gaze besides that of the audience, one that is far more difficult to evade—the white gaze of her fellow passengers and especially the white Southerners ashore as her ship docks in various southern ports.

During her ship's first stop at a port in Key West, Prince informs us that "there were twenty slaves at work to unload her; every inducement was made to persuade me to go ashore, or set my feet on the wharf. A law had just been passed there that every free colored person coming there, should be put in custody on their going ashore; there were five colored persons on board; none dared to go ashore, however uncomfortable we might be in the vessel.... We remained at Key West four days" (79). Unlike the opening of

Prince's narrative with the story of her stepfather's escape from a slave ship off the New England coast, here we see Prince in many ways imprisoned on a ship because she is docked in a slave state. In this passage, the ship does not represent slavery as it does at the beginning of her narrative. Rather, the ship provides Prince with a space of freedom, while going a shore, Prince makes clear, would most certainly threaten her freedom.

Yet as we continue to read Prince's narrative, we see this space of the ship continually complicated. As Kristin Fitzpatrick argues, "[t]he ship becomes a contested space, which Prince defends verbally against the men cajoling and threatening her from the shore and docks" (275). Like Fitzpatrick, I conclude that despite Prince's desire to make the ship a space of protection and concealment from slavery, her exposure to the gaze of white onlookers continues to threaten her freedom. However, in response to this gaze, I argue that Prince enacts an embodied spiritual practice to resist this constant threat of enslavement and commodification.

We first see Prince's precarious location between slave and free as she juxtaposes her own position with those of the slaves around her: "On the eleventh, the New Orleans steamer came to our assistance; as we passed up the river, I was made to forget my own condition, as I look with pity on the poor slaves, who were laboring and toiling, on either side, as far as could be seen with a glass" (76). Prince, in this entry, makes a clear distinction between herself as free and the enslaved bodies around her. Although there is distance enough between her position and that of the slaves that she is able to have pity on them, we soon see that Prince's status as free is less clear under the gaze of white onlookers:

We soon reached the dock, and we were there on the old wreck a spectacle for observation; the whites went on shore and made themselves comfortable, while we poor blacks were obliged to remain on that broken, wet vessel. The people were very busy about me; one man asked me who I belonged to, and many other rude questions.... There were a great many people that came to see the vessel;...they watched me very closely. (77)

Prince's statement suggests that she is indeed part of a spectacle that white Southerners from ashore come to gaze at. Armed with both an intense suspicion and "rude questions," the gaze of these white spectators further reveals Prince's precarious location between slave and free. Further attesting to Prince's tenuous status, Fitzpatrick claims, "[w]hen the ship docks in New Orleans, it becomes clear that white Americans do not view Prince as an American citizen returning home but as a ruled subject again under their jurisdiction" (274). Although Prince's status was clear in the preceding passage when compared to the slaves surrounding her ship, here in this passage the white gaze positions Prince as an enslaved body and specifically as one that cannot be trusted.

Prince's embodied spiritual practice, her resistance to the precarious location of free blacks in a slave state becomes apparent when she witnesses "a drove of colored people, fettered together in pairs by the wrist;...men and women, young and old" (77). Speaking from the ship, she asks the white men on shore why they are imprisoned. They respond, "[T]hese negroes have been impudent, and have stolen; some of them are free negroes from the northern ships;' 'and what,' I asked 'are they there for?' 'For being on shore, some of them at night.' I asked them who made them Lord over God's inheritance. They told me I was very foolish; they should think I had suffered enough to think of

myself” (77). Prince’s exchange with these men on shore reveals that in a slave state, all black bodies occupy the same position—indeed, all black bodies under the white gaze are enslaved, criminal and commodifiable. Illustrating this denigration of the black body as enslaved and criminal, the above passage fails to clarify which black bodies are free and which are enslaved, since all are “impudent” whether from stealing or from having the audacity to set foot on land. Since all the bodies (men, women and children) are incarcerated and locked in chains, whatever distinction existed before no longer matters. Even Prince is unable to distinguish between slave and free. And despite the precariousness of her own location, or perhaps because of it, Prince enacts a resistant spiritual practice that criticizes these white spectators, similar to her earlier prophetic critique of America’s overstepping God’s dominion, for seizing power beyond that which God granted them.

We continue to see this resistant spiritual practice on the ship as Prince criticizes the white men on shore for their unjust treatment of a washerwoman. Although Prince does not note the woman’s race, we can assume from the men’s treatment of her and from the fact that black women typically performed such labor that she is probably black. According to Prince, when the washerwoman comes to bring Prince her clothes,

they spoke to her as if she had been a dog. I looked at them with as much astonishment as if I had never heard of such a thing. I asked them if they believed there was a God. “Of course we do,” they replied. “Then why not obey him?” “We do,” “You do not; permit me to say there is a God, and a just one, that will bring you all to account.” “For what?” “For suffering these men that have just come in to be taken out of these vessels, and that

awful sight I see in the streets.” “O that is nothing; I should think you would be concerned about yourself.” “I am sure,” I replied, “the Lord will take care of me; you cannot harm me.” (78)

Shortly after this exchange, Prince informs us that “Every ship that comes in, the colored men are dragged to prison. I found it necessary to be stern with them; they were very rude; if I had not been so, I know not what would have been the consequences” (78-79). Even on board the ship, Prince’s liberty is threatened, as white Southerners wantonly kidnap black travelers from their ships. Hence, we see both the necessity and the risk of Prince’s resistant embodied spiritual practice. What audacity she displays in privileging her own critical spiritual vision over the white gaze of her audience.

Although these men see her as a commodifiable black body, one they can surely enslave for profit, Prince assures them that her body is protected by God. Proclaiming her moral vision and authority, Prince opposes the men’s vision of themselves as godly and justified in their actions. Prince posits their actions, instead as hypocritical, unjust and sinful. And while their practices may be considered legal by slave law, Prince assures them that God’s law will not allow such injustice to go unpunished. It’s no surprise, then, that these men are threatened by Prince—so much so that they are not willing to touch her, and they continue to watch her closely. Each day that her ship is docked there, the men come to gaze at her, exclaiming “we shall watch you like the d— until you go away; you must not say any thing to these negroes whilst you are here” (79). Although Prince is subject to even closer scrutiny under the white gaze, she does not cower or seek to conceal herself below deck. Rather, she continues to assert her moral authority, her spiritual practice. For instance, when asked by the men to see her protection, presumably

from the Russian government, Prince responds, “I pointed them to the 18th chapter of Revelation and 15th verse: ‘The merchants of these things which were made rich by her, shall stand afar off, for the fear of her torment, weeping and wailing. For strong is the Lord God who judgeth her.’ They made no answer, but asked the Captain how soon he should get away” (79).

Positioning Prince’s moral authority in opposition to the white men’s refusal to recognize her authority as a U.S. citizen, Fitzpatrick claims, “[a]s a black woman, she is without recourse to American citizenship or its attendant legal rights, but by reframing a debate about nationality, where she necessarily loses, into one of morality, she appropriates the religion of her oppressors and holds them accountable to their own beliefs. With her ‘citizenship’ Christianity and her ‘protection’ God, Prince has ingeniously given an answer to which there can be no objection that does not challenge the overriding authority of God” (275). Central to Prince’s claim of authority in this passage is her appropriation of the biblical text of Revelation, which offers a prophetic judgment of the city of Babylon. The passage in Revelation warns that because of Babylon’s great sin, it is condemned to destruction and all those who profited from its sinfulness will suffer God’s judgment. The larger biblical passage that Prince quotes from provides some useful context for further understanding why she chooses this particular chapter in Revelation to launch her verbal attack:

“Alas, alas, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! For in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste!” And all shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off and cried out as they saw the

smoke of her burning, “What city was like the great city?” And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned, crying out, “Alas, alas, the great city, where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in one hour she has been laid waste.” Rejoice over her, O heaven, you saints and apostles and prophets! For God has given judgment for you against her. (Rev 18:16-20)

Powerfully prophetic in its judgment, this passage highlights the sin of national pride and is focused on destroying the nation’s source of wealth—trade, seafaring, ships. Clearly, this too is how America, and particularly New Orleans where Prince’s own ship is docked, has gained its wealth, via the Atlantic slave trade. Hence, Prince’s prophetic critique is not just about these men whose greed and racism she despises but is also, once again, focused on the entire nation and the judgment it brings on itself for continuing to gain wealth by trafficking in human flesh.

Drawing an unquestionable parallel between America and Babylon in the Revelation passage, Prince effectively links America’s trafficking in slaves to the greed and pride that destroyed Babylon and, as she posits, will ultimately destroy America as well. But it appears that the white men on shore do not understand all this. They are unaware of the depth, complexity, and breadth of Prince’s critique. Nevertheless, clearly, her words frighten them, perhaps because they do not fully understand their meaning. As Fitzpatrick states, “the men outside are nearly as afraid of Prince as she is of them. They insist they do not want to harm her, but...[a]s the Southerners’ nervousness attests, Prince is dangerous. Her freedom of speech and movement defy their equation of blackness with slavery and could incite other blacks to demand the same liberties she possesses. Her

very existence testifies to the possibility of black literacy, self-determination, and potential racial and gender equality” (275). Indeed, these men are so frightened that her words leave them speechless, and they can only petition the ship’s captain to leave their shores as soon as possible. Ultimately, then, at the end of this scene we see Prince, like her stepfather in the beginning of her narrative, “launching his body into the deep for liberty,” exposing her body to potential harm and enslavement on the ship’s deck in order to affirm her own claim to a free, mobile subjectivity. And as the text above establishes, Prince wins this battle and protects her right to travel once again aboard the ship as a free, mobile subject rather than be taken ashore as a captive body.

Although Prince, like her stepfather, transforms the ship into a means of escape and as a means for attaining liberty, her narrative ends with a far different image of freedom. Paradoxically, Prince ends her narrative with a poem/prayer, entitled “The Hiding Place”:

I’m in a wilderness below,
 Lord, guide me all my journey through,
 Plainly let me thy footsteps trace,
 Which lead to heaven, my hiding place.

Should dangers thick impede my course,
 O let my soul sustain no loss;
 Help me to run the Christian race,
 And enter safe my hiding place. (89)

Prince's concluding her narrative with this image of hiding contrasts strongly with her triumphant self-exposure and subsequent fight for freedom on the deck of a ship. At first, the title of the poem and repetition of the words *hiding place* call into question the exultant nature of her return home. Prince finds herself, upon her return to America, faced not with a welcoming portrait of home, but rather she finds herself "in a wilderness," where she faces "dangers thick."

Such imagery places Prince's narrative firmly within the Puritan spiritual narrative tradition, especially John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which represents the Christian as a wanderer who must journey through a wilderness, life here on Earth, before arriving at the intended destination—heaven. Yet for Prince, the dangers of such a journey are not simply metaphorical but are reality as well.⁹¹ As Fitzpatrick claims, "God, not America, is her refuge and the highest authority to which she can appeal. The freedom she experiences as an American citizen abroad melts away upon reentry.... Freedom at home is at best a conditional, uncertain state. As an African American, she is suspended in the hyphen in-between identities, with neither promising stability nor protection.... Rather than a returning citizen, she is a fugitive in her own land, where the journey out is less perilous than the journey home" (277). Extending Fitzpatrick's claim that Prince loses her freedom upon returning home, I have argued throughout this chapter that Prince's travels illustrate again and again the untenable nature of *freedom*, *stability* and *protection* anywhere in the world—not just in America. The ending of Prince's narrative both calls into question America as a potential home and contests the very notion of home as a physical space.

Indeed, the freedom and stability Prince experiences abroad is always conditional. As we witness from her accounts of Russia and Jamaica, Prince is still faced with serious dangers, violence and the realities of political and social oppression. Significantly, Prince's rejection of these ideals of stability, protection, and freedom at home in America or abroad leads to a far more complex and nuanced critique of oppression and injustice that extends beyond national borders—one that recognizes the ways in which such systems of oppression are both global in nature and are inextricably linked. Moreover, her ability to redefine home as a spiritual condition, rather than a physical location, as the poem suggests, enables her to engage in a powerful spiritual practice aimed not at escaping the terrifying realities of suffering and oppression but rather becoming actively engaged in transforming and destroying such violent and hierarchical institutions.

Although some scholars, those few who attend to the poem at all, might read this positioning of home as spiritual rather than physical, I would like to claim otherwise.⁹² Read within the context of a narrative that clearly delineates a spiritual practice that is rooted in material and lived experience, I assert that Prince's poem attempts to explain how to be at home in the wilderness, here on earth rather than in the next life. In other words, this poem is not strictly about the journey towards a heavenly home, though this reading is most certainly present. Rather, these verses, which radically redefine home as a state of being, maintain that Prince can be at home in any place—even while held captive on a ship docked in a slave state, surrounded by terrifying slaveholders who wish nothing more than to devour her. What Prince and indeed Zilpha Elaw and Amanda Smith recognize is that all of humanity lives in a state of alienation. We are all strangers in a strange land. Nevertheless, the spiritual lives of these women offer hope. This is why

Elaw, Smith and Prince dedicated their lives to traveling around the world spreading what they believed to be the tremendously *good news* of Christianity—God, in a profound act of grace, offers a way out of such alienation. For those who are willing to follow the road, there is a way home.

Chapter Five

Spiritual Crossings: Diasporic Spiritual Practices in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*

I have argued throughout my dissertation that in nineteenth-century black women's spiritual narratives we see a lineage of embodied spiritual practice at work—a practice that is connected to black women's lived experience and material reality and, therefore, one that enables them to be critical of the multiple forms of oppression they are subject to as poor black female itinerant preachers and travelers abroad. Although each of the nineteenth-century narratives included within this dissertation has a critique of imperialism and colonization embedded within them, we still witness a level of complicity with imperial values, most evident in their privileging of Christianity and, by extension, Western culture. According to theorist Houston Baker, “Any single model, or any complementary set of inventive tropes...will offer only a selective account of experience—a partial reading, as it were, of the world. While the single account temporarily reduces chaos to ordered plan, all such accounts are eternally troubled by ‘remainders’” (9-10). Baker's theoretical positioning problematizes my focus on texts that privilege a Christian model of spirituality.

In addition to Baker's critique of the limits of singular models, several literary and theological scholars critique scholarship that operates within a narrow Christian framework. Barbara Christian, for instance, in her analysis of the novel *Beloved*, claims that there is a dearth of scholarship that considers *Beloved's* engagement with an African cosmological framework and a larger failure to take African cosmology seriously in the field of literature. She states,

there are different interpretations of history and different narratives, depending on where one is positioned, in terms of power relations as well as distinctive cultures and there are, given the various cultures of our world, multiple philosophical approaches to understanding life. The perspective I am proposing is one that acknowledges the existence of an African cosmology, examines how that cosmology has been consistently denigrated in the West, and explores its appropriateness for texts that are clearly derived from it. (365)

Like Houston Baker, Christian asserts the limits of singular models and selective frameworks, particularly those that ignore or exclude the significance of an African cosmological perspective within black women's literature. Similarly, Judylyn Ryan asserts that although not enough attention is given to spirituality within black women's texts, even those scholars, such as Katie Cannon and Deloris Williams, who are committed to taking the sacred seriously, tend to work strictly within a Christian framework. Like Barbara Christian, Ryan argues that we as scholars must "expand the mapping of the African American religious continuum" (267). Finally, Tracey Hucks in her article on African-derived spiritual traditions in the black community, claims that

African American women have sustained open and fluid boundaries regarding religion and have been active agents in shaping their own religious meaning. Thus, scholarly studies that attempt to circumscribe and to assign rigid religious identities to African American women often eclipse the ways in which black religious communities have historically fashioned religious orthodoxy and praxis reflecting their immediate

needs.... In exploring specific ways in which many black women have historically practiced, and continue to practice, both African-derived traditions and, in particular, Christianity, I am convinced of the need for more expansive approaches. (90)

The common denominator for all of these scholars, whether in the field of religious studies or literature, is “the need for more expansive approaches.” Though up to this point, I too have worked largely within a Christian framework in my dissertation, in my final chapter I seek to take up Christian, Ryan, and Hucks’ challenge that we must “expand the mapping of the African American religious continuum” (Ryan 267). I have, therefore, chosen to end my dissertation with an analysis of Julie Dash’s groundbreaking 1992 film *Daughters of the Dust*, which I read as a film committed to documenting the “remainders” typically left out of literary and theological scholarship.

Unlike the earlier nineteenth-century spiritual narratives, in *Daughters*, Dash effectively de-centers Western Christianity and Western epistemology by including alternative sources of knowledge, especially African spirituality. Moreover, she is even more critical of Christianity as an imperial force—most evident in her representation of Viola, an evangelical Christian black woman and missionary who practices a colonized form of Christianity. Specifically, Dash refuses to privilege Viola’s itinerant spiritual practice as missionary by placing her in community with other black women and men who enact alternative embodied spiritual performances beyond the Western Christian tradition.

Furthermore, I argue that *Daughters* constructs a communal spiritual narrative that forces us to re-see the spiritual lineage of black people—expanding beyond Christian

expressions of spirituality to embrace Islam and African cosmology, in particular, as alternative spiritual geographies that have informed black people's experiences in the New World.⁹³ Like Hagar's narrative, *Daughters* asserts that there is more than one narrative that expresses the spiritual lineages and inheritances of black people. Moreover, like Hagar's narrative (and by extension, Elaw, Smith and Prince's narratives as well), Dash's film moves black women and the particularities of their spiritual experiences from the periphery to the center so that we can more fully understand the spiritual heritages of black communities beyond an exclusively male perspective.

Cinematic Practice

Although Dash's 1992 film is the first African American woman's feature film to achieve widespread commercial distribution, the significance of *Daughters* lies more in its approach to filmmaking. Dash's cinematic practice eschews Western film practices so common to Hollywood in an attempt to critique and move beyond the narrow representations of black people, black women in particular, that such filmic practices have produced and continue to reproduce. According to N. Frank Ukadike, in response to "the ways black subjectivity has been constantly abused in films," (i.e. through misrepresentation, stereotyping and even outright exclusion) Dash's own filmic practice reflects "a movement toward thoroughgoing cinematic decolonization" (102-03). As part of this critical effort towards *cinematic decolonization*, Dash engages in a spiritual practice in *Daughters of the Dust*—evident in her deployment of African-derived spiritual traditions and practices in the making of this film. These practices are perhaps best illustrated in Dash's focus on communal spiritual experience and her refusal to

privilege a single voice or narrative—what Joel Brouwer refers to as a “kaleidoscopic perspective”—in order to highlight her refusal to privilege one particular viewpoint in the film. His use of the kaleidoscope as a metaphor for the unique visual practice of the film is quite fitting, since in *Daughters*, there is no one way of seeing.⁹⁴ As Brouwer goes on to assert, “*Daughters of the Dust* is a way of seeing a moment in African American history, but not *the* way of seeing it” (12). In order to illustrate Dash’s non-Western cinematic and spiritual vision, I offer a brief analysis of the opening montage of the film.

First, it is clear from the opening images of *Daughters* that Dash wishes to illustrate the multiple trajectories and spiritual practices of black people. Rather than privilege a single character’s perspective, we receive multiple images. These include Nana Peazant as a young woman holding Sea Island soil in her hands, Bilal Muhammed praying/chanting in Arabic, Eli, and Eula (who engages in the African-derived spiritual practice of calling on the ancestors for aid), as well as images of Viola, and Yellow Mary (who holds onto her St. Christopher charm). Reflecting Dash’s focus on a community, rather than a single individual, this brief opening demonstrates the roots of Dash’s filmic practice in African cosmology. As discussed in previous chapters, scholars of West African religions highlight the centrality of the community to African cosmology. The individual, in fact, has no identity apart from the community, which consists of all life—including animals, plants, living people, the ancestors who have passed on and those yet to be born. Dash’s film also centers around a similar notion of community, as the early images in the film demonstrate the significance of not only the living members of the Peazant family but the ancestors as well. We see Eula, for instance, attempting to communicate with her mother, who has passed on, using the practice of placing a letter to

her mother underneath a glass of water. Moreover, the voice we hear after the opening montage is that of the Unborn Child telling us that “Nana prayed and the old souls guided me into the New World,” which further illustrates this complex nature of community in which the living, the unborn and the ancestors or “old souls” work together to ensure the survival of the Peasant family (Dash, *The Making* 80).

Dash’s careful positioning of the West African spiritual beliefs of Nana Peasant and Eula (who live in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina) alongside of Bilal Muhammed (a Sudanese captive who survives the Middle Passage to the West Indies and Sea Islands), Viola (a Christian missionary traveling from the North) and Yellow Mary (whose St. Christopher charm represents the syncretic spiritual practice of Santeria from the Caribbean) highlights the spiritual intersection of black people throughout the Diaspora. Moreover, it is through the spiritual crossings of Nana Peasant, Eula, Bilal Muhammed, Viola, and Yellow Mary that we see the ways in which the various spaces and places of the Diaspora (U.S. North and South, Africa, and Caribbean) are linked. Mirroring Dash’s own critical approach in which she repositions multiple black female voices at the center of her film, I too have chosen to highlight these black female voices in my analysis, while also considering how their spiritual experiences intersect with that of black men (like Eli and Bilal Muhammed), who while not at the center of the film, are still significant to the life of the community.

Viola

Dash’s commitment to decolonization is particularly evident in her representation of the character Viola, whom she uses in order to de-center Western Christianity and

critique it as a colonizing force. Hence, I begin my own analysis of the film by looking closely at her positioning and function in the film. In the screenplay, Viola is introduced as a Christian missionary, which in many ways links her to the early nineteenth-century tradition of Zilpha Elaw, Amanda Smith and Nancy Prince as itinerant preachers and travelers. Moreover, like these earlier women, Viola espouses Western notions of progress and civilization, which she equates with Christianity. For instance, while traveling on the boat to Ibo Landing, Viola explains to her cousin Yellow Mary that she has brought a photographer, Mr. Snead to “document our family’s crossing to the mainland.” After this, Viola lapses into a reference from Shakespeare, exclaiming “What’s past is prologue....” Here, Viola quotes the character Antonio from Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* (1611). In the play, Antonio usurps the title of Duke of Milan from his brother Prospero and sends him and his baby daughter, Miranda adrift at sea. With Prospero gone, Antonio realizes that he is in control of his destiny and can write a new future for himself. Hence, he speaks these well-known lines: “We all were sea-swallow’d, though some cast again/ (And by that destiny) to perform an act/ Whereof what’s past is prologue; what to come,/ in yours and my discharge” (2.1.247-250). Antonio, speaking to his brother Sebastian, wishes to convince him that regardless of what has happened in the past, they have the ability to write their own futures and to perform their own drama in which they become heroes and aspire to greatness. The past as prologue merely provides the setting for this drama. What really matters, what’s truly important is what they choose to do from here on.

Similarly, Viola references this passage of the play in order to marginalize the importance of the past. Rather than focus on the past (i.e. the Middle Passage and

slavery), which she has no control over, Viola wishes to write a new narrative for herself and her family, one in which black people can achieve greatness rather than be consigned to lives of powerlessness as victims of sexual and economic oppression and violence. Following this reference to Shakespeare, Viola says to Mr. Snead about her family, “I see this day as their first steps towards progress, an engraved invitation, you might say, to the culture, education and wealth of the mainland” (Dash, *The Making* 79). Viola’s words clearly position her as someone who privileges Western culture and epistemology (ways of knowing). Moreover, her reference to Shakespeare can be read as evidence of her internalization of and entrenchment within this culture and epistemology. Rendering the past as prologue, Viola effectually marginalizes the importance of the past—relegating it to the role of a few introductory lines before the “real” or “main” action begins.

Indeed many scholars have been intensely critical of Viola, positioning her as a fully acculturated victim of Western colonization. As bell hooks asserts in an interview with Dash about the film, “if she [Viola] had her way, she would strip the past of all memory and would replace it only with markers of what she takes to be the new civilization. In this way Christianity becomes a hidden force of colonialism” (Dash, *The Making* 37). Following this argument, we might read Viola’s Western devaluing of the past as juxtaposed against African cosmology, which greatly values the past as inextricably linked to the present and future (we will see evidence of this shortly in my analysis of Nana Pezant, as well as Eula and the Unborn Child.). Catherine Cuncinella and Renee Curry’s essay “Exiled at Home” offers a similar reading of Viola and her relationship to the past as they assert that “Viola will not fully accept an African spiritual past, particularly not one with a matriarchal spokesperson. She wants a Christian

patriarchal future.... [S]he is not interested in the past. To her mind, the past (and the present) represents exile from Jesus Christ, her God.... Viola views the leave-taking as a beginning, and her post-colonial condition is one of utter assimilation” (212).

While I agree with these scholars’ claim that the film urges us to be critical of Viola’s valuing of Western culture and narratives of progress, their criticism goes too far and unequivocally dismisses Viola as assimilated and as someone whose goal ultimately is to become as white as possible, if not in color then certainly in culture and in values. I find their dismissal of Viola problematic, particularly since we witness her engaged in a critical practice that questions the authority of Western epistemology—a resistance that complicates scholarly readings of her as “utterly assimilated.”

Viola’s complexity is first apparent in her quoting of *The Tempest*, not just any Shakespeare play, but one that offers a critical look at Western imperialism and the process of colonization. Specifically, *The Tempest* offers a critical reflection on the land theft, enslavement and colonizing of indigenous peoples that were so characteristic of Western colonization. Prospero is typically read as the figure of Western imperial power, who upon being shipwrecked on a strange island, immediately subjugates the indigenous population, using manipulation and force to claim the land as his rightful property. Caliban, on the other hand, embodies the voice of colonized and indigenous people, who after welcoming these strange and new people to their home, find themselves stripped of their land and power, enslaved and considered as less than human by the very colonizers they initially welcomed. Although Caliban, learns Prospero’s language and his ways, he also resists Prospero’s perceived authority and power.⁹⁵

We see a similar kind of resistance and disavowal in *Daughters* in an exchange between Viola and Mr. Snead. While traveling on a boat to Ibo Landing, Viola notices “a small deserted island [with] the remains of a small crumbling shanty” (Dash, *The Making* 83). Recognizing the rundown house as the place where her Uncle Spikenard used to live, she explains,

He was from Africa, and just after the war, he moved from the plantation to that little house on the waterfront. Remember how when Uncle Spikenard used to get angry, he’d talk funny so the children couldn’t understand him? He’d speak in African words and sounds. You know, Uncle Spikenard told me, just before the war they’d keep boatloads of fresh Africans off on some secret islands around here. (Dash, *The Making* 84)

Viola’s words make evident memory as the site of a counter knowledge and alternative ways of knowing that have been passed down from generation to generation as a kind of ancestral inheritance. Of course, Mr. Snead, bearer of Western patriarchal knowledge attempts to dismiss Viola’s memory, much as Prospero disavows Caliban’s testimony, as untrue and mistaken at best. Mr. Snead, whose arrogance in this scene makes clear his claims to Western epistemological authority, states rather confidently, “Viola, our government banned the transporting of Africans for slavery 50 years before the Civil War” (Dash, *The Making* 84). This dismissal, however, does not deter Viola. Resisting the presumed authority with which Mr. Snead speaks, Viola privileges the ancestral and communal knowledge that she has inherited from her uncle responding, “Not back off on these islands. Noooo! Just before the war, they were still running and hiding salt water

Africans, pure bred, from the Yankees” (Dash, *The Making* 84). Although Mr. Snead remains unconvinced, the exchange between them reveals Viola’s memory as a site of resistance against and critical engagement with the Western patriarchal knowledge that Snead espouses, which rewrites history in order to justify claims to absolute authority and power.⁹⁶

Through this interchange between Viola and Mr. Snead, the *kaleidoscopic perspective* of this film becomes evident in Dash’s refusal again and again to privilege a single history or a single genealogy. Rather, the film demands that we consider alternative ways of knowing in order to critique the dominant narrative about black people’s experiences in the West. Of course, Dash’s decision to place this alternative knowledge and wisdom into Viola’s mouth renders her a far more complex character than many scholars have considered her to be. Moreover, this evidence of Viola’s counter-memory as a site from which Western colonial discourse and power can be critiqued and questioned, disrupts those critical analyses that position Viola simply as “utterly assimilated.”

Although Viola may carry this source of counter-knowledge within her, she also carries with her the dominant narrative of Western Christianity. In fact, in addition to her quoting of Shakespeare from memory, the only other text that Viola references in the film is a biblical passage that she reads to the children during an impromptu bible lesson on the beach. During this lesson, Viola’s spiritual testimony to the children further reveals her expression of Christianity as “a hidden force of colonialism.” For instance, Viola tells the children, “When I left these islands, I was a sinner and I didn’t even know it. But I left these islands, touched that mainland, and fell into the arms of the Lord.” When

Myown questions her further asking, “What’s out there, Auntie Viola,” Viola asserts, “Life, child, the beginning of a new life.” Moreover, when Myown asks, “Who’s out there,” Viola responds, “Jesus Christ, baby, the Son of God” (Dash, *The Making* 115-116). Viola’s testimony importantly reveals her internalization of traditional Western dichotomies (those same hierarchies expressed by missionaries that Smith criticized so sharply) that posits Africa as heathen and godless and the West as the source of salvation.⁹⁷ Although Viola is technically in the West, her comment suggests that the Sea Islands are an extension of Africa, a place where one can find only sin and darkness—certainly for Viola, God cannot be found there. Moreover, Viola juxtaposes the sin-filled, godlessness of the Sea Islands with the mainland, and specifically the North, where one can find “new life” through Jesus. If the mainland is the source of life, then we can only assume that for Viola, the Sea Islands are a place of death, if not physical then at least spiritual and social death.⁹⁸ This “new life” that becomes attainable only by setting foot on the mainland stands for not only spiritual salvation in Viola’s mind but also a kind of social salvation, as the mainland also offers wealth, education, and progress, which she makes clear in the beginning of the film.⁹⁹ In this way, Western civilization and Christianity become inextricably linked for Viola, who fully embraces Western Christianity as a colonial force. Although, as we have already seen, Viola possesses the ability to critique and resist the totalizing gestures of Western epistemology, she is unable to see how her own expression of Christianity espouses Western colonial ideals.

From the outset, however, Dash’s film is fiercely critical of Viola’s colonizing gestures. For instance, after her initial comments to Yellow Mary, Trula and Mr. Snead

about the culture, education, wealth and progress offered by the mainland, Yellow Mary and Trula respond to this very totalizing colonial gesture with uncontrollable laughter. Yellow Mary and Trula's laughter is intensely critical because of the ways in which it undermines and dislodges the weight and power of Viola's words. Had Dash chosen to end this scene without Yellow Mary and Trula's critically responsive laughter, Viola's words would carry with them the power of finality and the feeling of being absolute truth, particularly given that the film positions her as knowing what Mr. Snead does not. Yet Dash, instead, chooses to interrupt such notions of finality, absolutism and truth with laughter that makes Viola visibly uncomfortable.¹⁰⁰ In the film, Viola appears less sure of herself as she averts her gaze away from Yellow Mary and shifts uncomfortably in her seat. Yellow Mary and Trula's laughter then is unsettling not only for Viola but for the audience as well, who cannot sit passively as spectators merely uncritically internalizing Viola's words.

Instead, Dash in this scene and indeed throughout the film, encourages us to become oppositional spectators. bell hooks defines the term "oppositional gaze" as "a site of resistance...a critical gaze...the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating 'awareness'...one learns to look a certain way in order to resist"(*Black Looks* 116). Furthermore, hooks goes on to assert that "[c]ritical black female spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking" (*Black Looks* 128). I believe that in the above scene, Dash as a filmmaker who has "gain[ed] authority behind the camera to reshape the gaze" (Hobson 54), encourages the audience¹⁰¹ to resist Viola's espousal of white Western patriarchal values through Yellow Mary and Trula's

critical laughter. By creating a moment of cinematic tension in which Yellow Mary and Trula are positioned in opposition to Viola, Dash enables her audience to see Viola's imperial rhetoric differently—not as unequivocal truth but as evidence of a system of value that necessitates “interrogation” and “contestation” to use hooks' words (hooks, *Black Looks* 116-117).

Significantly, while Dash's film is intensely critical of all colonizing gestures, including Viola's expression of Christianity, she does not dismiss her faith tradition. As we will see shortly, in the next section on Nana Peazant, the “Hand” ceremony is a syncretic blend of the various faith traditions represented in the Peazant family (African spirituality, Catholicism, Islam and Protestant Christianity). Unlike Haagar who leaves the ceremony in anger, shouting “Hoodoo...Hoodoo! Hoodoo mess! Ain't no roots and herbs going to change nothing,” Viola, despite her initial resistance, remains at the “Hand” ceremony (Dash, *The Making* 161). And more importantly, she does participate in it, bending down to kiss not only her Bible but the “Hand” that Nana Peazant has created to protect them and bind them together once they leave to go north. This small but momentous gesture marks a considerable shift in Viola's thinking and suggests that she does have the capacity to resist and alter the colonizing tendencies of Western Christianity that she has internalized.

Nana Peazant

Dash's critique of Christianity as a colonizing force, however, extends beyond the film's treatment and portrayal of Viola. Dash effectively de-centers Western Christianity as the sole spiritual geography possible for black people. She accomplishes this first by

offering us multiple images of spiritual expression at the film's opening. One of these early images, as previously noted, is of Bilal Muhammed, a Muslim man, performing his daily prayers. Along with this image, we also see a close up of an open text handwritten in Arabic, presumably a handwritten copy of the Koran. According to Dash, during her research for the film, she discovered Bilal Muhammed. Explaining her inclusion of this historical figure in the film, she explains,

Actually, he lived earlier than the time of my story. He was in the Sea Islands during slavery, but by the turn of the century, his five daughters who were also Muslim, were still carrying on the tradition of Islam. He was an actual person, a Muslim, and his diaries and his papers are on permanent exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution.... He had been a boy of twelve when he was taken from the Sudan, which shows that the African slave trade was more widespread than we thought—because he had memories of growing up in Sudan. He was also fluent in French, having worked as a slave in the West Indies before being brought to the Sea Islands. And he never stopped practicing his faith. As a slave in the Sea Islands he prayed five times a day. People thought he was an odd fellow, but it really goes to show the persistence of tradition.... So it was very important for me to include this man in the story, even though I knew *actually* that he was living and practicing his faith in the 1800s. I wanted him to be a part of this day too, to include him because he meant so much to me. No one else has dealt with him to this point. (hooks and Dash, *Dialogue*, 36-37)

As a film that is dedicated to telling the communal history of black people's experiences of slavery and colonization in the New World (particularly in the U.S.), Dash's inclusion of Bilal Muhammed in her film reflects this commitment to including the diverse physical geographies of black people who had multiple points of origins and who survived multiple passages throughout the Diaspora.¹⁰² Moreover, Bilal Muhammed's narrative proves once again, as Joseph Roach asserts, that the Middle Passage was not necessarily always a transatlantic journey but often times a circum-Atlantic passage uniting multiple locations throughout the Diaspora. Furthermore, as a communal spiritual narrative, which I believe *Daughters of the Dust* to be, Bilal Muhammed's narrative also reflects the multiple spiritual geographies that have shaped and informed black people's experiences of slavery and colonization. In addition, Dash's claim that Bilal Muhammed "never stopped practicing his faith" and her portrayal of him in the film as a devout Muslim who is unswayed by others' attempts to convert him to Christianity affirms that Christianity was not the only spiritual force shaping the lives of African slaves brought to the New World. Moreover, Christian conversion is not the sole spiritual option available to black people—many of whom opted for a syncretic blend of Christianity and African-derived spiritual practices, while others may have "performed" conversion without internalizing it.¹⁰³

Along with her inclusion of Islam as one possible spiritual trajectory for black people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Dash's film, as we have seen from the film's opening, especially highlights the role of African cosmology as a key shaping force in the Gullah community of the Sea Islands. The centrality of African cosmology becomes most apparent through the figure of Nana Peazant, the family elder whose

mission it is to practice, cultivate and pass on alternative ways of knowing that stand in stark contrast to the epistemological, social, and physical violence of the (white) West. Although I offer a brief discussion of African cosmology in my chapter on Amanda Smith, I will reiterate here what some of the core beliefs and values are, while also building on my previous discussion. According to Peter Paris, there are four major dimensions within African cosmology, which include the spirit, the community, the family, and the individual, “who strives to integrate the three realms in his or her soul” (25). In addition to this list, John S. Mbiti includes in his framework of African cosmology, “Man including human beings who are alive and those about to be born. Animals and plants, or the remainder of biological life. Phenomena and objects without biological life” (20). Although Paris enumerates the items in his list, his language emphasizes the interdependence of these realms rather than a hierarchical relationship between them. We also see a refusal to privilege the individual over and above the community. Rather the individual finds meaning and purpose only in relationship to the larger community of spirits, tribe and family. Moreover, both Paris and Mbiti make it clear that all life is interconnected, like links in a chain. This includes God, spirits, ancestors, and the unborn still in the womb, animals, plants, and even non-biological objects.¹⁰⁴

Clearly Dash’s film works within such a framework as she shows us countless images that are reflective of these various aspects of African cosmology, including the colored glass bottles tied to a tree that serve as a reminder of the ancestors, the frizzled hair chicken and newspaper clippings on the wall that ward off evil spirits, Eula’s glass of water under her bed that enables her to communicate with her mother, who has “passed

on,” and of course the Unborn Child who is as much a part of this Sea Island community as the living and those who have already “passed.”

Significantly, the principal goal of this African cosmological framework is the achieving of balance and harmony between the various realms and dimensions of life. Yet what we see at the opening of *Daughters* is a lack of balance and a disharmony, evident through most of the women’s rejection of Yellow Mary as a legitimate member of the community, the constant fighting between family members, especially the disconnection between Eula and Eli, who does not believe the Unborn Child she carries in her womb is his child, and Eli and Haagar’s disavowal of Nana Peazant as a source of spiritual wisdom and power, made evident through Eli’s destruction of the bottle tree and Haagar’s description of Nana Peazant’s embodied spiritual practice as “hoodoo mess.” Recognizing the importance of binding the family and community together before many of them make the journey North, Nana Peazant calls on the ancestral spirits, whom she refers to as the “old souls” in order to access their spiritual power and help in bringing the family back together. This process of communal healing is enabled through the embodied spiritual practices of three black female characters in the film: Nana Peazant, Eula Peazant, and the Unborn Child.

Although we have already seen some evidence of Nana Peazant’s embodied spiritual practice, specifically her calling on the ancestors to help heal her family, we also see similar evidence of her spiritual practice as she visits the grave of her dead husband, Shad Peazant. According to Nana Peazant, she has visited his grave everyday since his death because “It’s up to the living to keep in touch with the dead.... Man’s power doesn’t end with death. We just move on to a new place, a place where we watch over

our living family....” (Dash, *The Making* 93). Deeply rooted in an African cosmological framework as Paris and Mbiti describe it, Nana Peazant shares this spiritual wisdom and enacts her spiritual practice of remembering the “old souls” in front of her grandson Eli, who is emotionally and spiritually distraught because his wife has been raped by (an unknown) white man, and he worries that the child in her womb is not his own. Nana Peazant tries to comfort Eli by appealing to African spiritual knowledge: “Eli, you won’t ever have a baby that wasn’t sent to you. The ancestors and the womb,...they’re one, they’re the same. Those in this grave, like those who’re across the sea, they’re with us. They’re all the same” (Dash, *The Making* 94).

Nana Peazant’s words clearly reflect the central values of an African cosmology, especially the interdependence of all life, including those alive, those who have “passed on” and those who have yet to be born.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, in this call for Eli to recognize his dependence, Nana Peazant offers him a way to access the spiritual power and protection of the ancestors. Eli, however, is in a place of spiritual doubt and responds, “How can you understand me and the way I feel? This happened to my wife. My wife! I don’t feel like she’s mine anymore. When I look at her, I feel I don’t want her anymore.... Why didn’t you protect us, Nana?...were the old souls too deep in their graves to give a damn about my wife while some stranger was riding her”(Dash, *The Making* 95)? Significantly, in his moment of spiritual struggle, Eli falls back into Western patriarchal values. bell hooks offers a poignant analysis of Eli’s selfish response and its roots in Western patriarchy. She explains,

One effect of Eli saying, “My wife, and someone else is riding her,” is that it allows us to see that there is a connection between his own

phallogocentricity, his patriarchal sense of ownership, and the mentality of the unknown rapist. And I think there is something about the ambiguity—of course, certainly there is a lot to substantiate that it's a white person—but that ambiguity serves as a kind of critique of the phallogocentrism that unites Eli with the rapist. It's Nana Peasant who has to come in and remind him that he does not have to attach himself to this patriarchal fantasy of ownership. Because he has another tradition that he can relate to and which can give him a sense of masculinity that is not disrupted by the actions of the oppressor. (hooks and Dash, *Dialogue* 50)

Indeed, as bell hooks asserts, Nana Peasant counters Eli's espousal of Western patriarchal values by appealing to African spirituality as an alternative source of strength and knowledge. She states, "You can't give back what you never owned. Eula never belonged to you, she married you.... Call on those old Africans, Eli. They'll come to you when you least expect them. They'll hug you up quick and soft like the warm sweet wind. Let those old souls come into your heart, Eli. Let them touch you with the hands of time. Let them feed your head with wisdom that ain't from this day and time. Because when you leave this island...you ain't going to no land of milk and honey" (Dash, *The Making* 97).

Drawing from her own embodied spiritual practice, Nana Peasant rejects the notion of marriage as ownership of another human being (linking such patriarchal claims of ownership to slavery and the ownership of black bodies as chattel) and instead encourages Eli to draw strength and sustenance from a spiritual tradition and epistemology that promotes healing and continuity of relationships across time and space

as opposed to an epistemology and value system that leads to disconnection and a destructive self-centeredness as is evident from the current state of Eli and Eula's marriage. This disconnection and destructiveness is most evident when Eli strikes Nana Peasant's bottle tree, which serves as protection for the family. By shattering the bottle tree, Eli attacks the very familial and communal values that Nana Peasant has just finished urging Eli to embrace. The violence of such an act is reflected in Eula's response as she cowers, terrified, in the shadows and covers her ears—almost as though she feels each blow herself.

But perhaps the clearest expression of Nana Peasant's embodied spiritual practice is her creation of the "Hand" and her insistence on holding a "Hand" ceremony before the family departs to go North. Nana Peasant exclaims, "When they come today to kiss these old withered-up cheeks bye-bye, I'm going to have something more than farewell waiting on them. Ya see, I've been working on a plan" (Dash, *The Making* 87). The purpose of Nana Peasant's plan is to bind the family together even though they will be separated by time and distance. In her screenplay, Dash describes Nana Peasant as "sewing together a small leather pouch, she's making a 'charm bag,' better known as a 'Hand'" (Dash, *The Making* 150). As she sews, Nana Peasant explains to those around her, "When I was child, my mother cut this from her hair before she was sold away from us. Now I'm adding my own hair. There must be a bond...a connection, between those that go up North, and those who across the sea. A connection!" After adding in this hair and other "bits and pieces of the 'scraps of memories' from her tin can" (Dash, *The Making* 152), she "holds up the 'Hand' she has made, the St. Christopher's charm [that Yellow Mary wears] is wrapped around it. She takes Viola's Bible and lays the 'Hand' on top of it.

Then, with a firm grip, Nana takes a hold of Bilal's shoulder" (Dash, *The Making* 159). She then exclaims, "This 'Hand,' it's from me, from us, from them (the Ibo)...Just like all of you... Come, children, kiss this hand full of me.... Take my 'Hand.' I'm the one that can give you strength. Take me wherever you go. I'm your strength" (Dash, *The Making* 159-60).

Nana's "Hand," then, represents the interconnection of the family and community across time and space. First, Nana Peazant's "Hand" unites those across the sea and those lost but not forgotten from the Middle Passage with all the ancestors who have "passed on," the elders and this new generation who will go North, those who will remain in the South as well as those yet to be born. In this ceremony, led by Nana Peazant as spiritual priestess, the past, present and future are all connected. Secondly, her tying together of Yellow Mary's St. Christopher charm, Viola's Bible along with her own spiritually empowered objects, and inclusion of Bilal Muhammed in the ceremony by placing her hand on his shoulder are all signs that *Daughters* embraces a kind of religious syncretism that inextricably links the diasporic spaces of Africa and the Americas, including the U.S., the Caribbean, and Brazil.¹⁰⁶ Although Nana Peazant's speech and practice are informed by an African spirituality, the syncretic gesture of Nana Peazant's spiritual ceremony brings these disparate religious/spiritual traditions (Islam, Santeria, Baptist/Evangelical Christianity and African spirituality) together, rather than privileging one over the others.

Eula

Although I've attributed this "Hand" ceremony to Nana Peazant's embodied spiritual practice, in truth, it would not be possible without Eula Peazant's own embodied spiritual practice, which includes intervening when Haagar begins to attack Yellow Mary (thereby interrupting and thwarting Nana Peazant's attempt at spiritually healing the family) for wanting to remain in Ibo Landing as part of the family/community. Eula, whose body appears to be in visible physical distress, exclaims "If you're so ashamed of Yellow Mary 'cause she got ruined... Well, what do you say about me? Am I ruined, too" (Dash, *The Making* 155)? She continues,

As far as this place is concerned, we never enjoyed our womanhood...Deep inside, we believed that they ruined our mothers, and their mothers before them. And we live our lives always expecting the worst because we feel we don't deserve any better. Deep inside we believe that even God can't heal the wounds of our past or protect us from the world that put shackles on our feet.... Even though you're going up North, you all think about being ruined, too. You think you can cross over to the mainland and run away from it? You're going to be sorry, sorry if you don't change your way of thinking before you leave this place. If you love yourselves, then love Yellow Mary, because she's a part of you. Just like we're a part of our mothers.... We're the daughters of those old dusty things Nana carries in her tin can...We carry too many scars from the past.

Our past owns us.... Let's live our lives without living in the fold of old wounds. (Dash, *The Making* 156-57)

Throughout the film, Dash links the spiritual practices of Nana Peazant and Eula and indeed, as the above monologue makes evident, Eula's own embodied spiritual practice mirrors that of Nana Peazant. Eula clearly shares similar traditional West African values of community, the ancestors as a key source of spiritual strength and sustenance, the interrelatedness of all beings and the centrality of the past in shaping the present and the future. Much like Elaw, Smith and Prince who all use public speaking in order to teach and reprove others, Eula's monologue places her firmly in the roles of preacher and prophetess—both central expressions of an embodied spiritual practice. By naming individual traumas, both her own and Yellow Mary's experiences of rape, Eula emphasizes the communal nature of such trauma.¹⁰⁷

Her belief, like Nana Peazant's, that we are all connected informs her claim that her own and Yellow Mary's trauma is a shared trauma rather than an individual one that the other women can run or hide from. Moreover, through her words, Eula highlights the ways in which black women have been denied access to the category of woman—meaning regardless of whether or not one has been raped, every Peazant woman must face the reality that to be a black woman in this place is to be “ruint.” While the women in the community, especially Haagar, would like to ostracize Yellow Mary as a way to protect themselves from the trauma of rape, Eula's claim that “Deep inside, we believed that they ruined our mothers, and their mothers before them.... Deep inside we believe that even God can't heal the wounds of our past,” makes evident that all black women share this history of rape and sexual violence (Dash, *The Making* 156).

Eula's words also suggest that the women in the community have bought into the dominant society's claim that black women's bodies are not sacred. Labeling Yellow Mary with denigrating words such as "heifer" further proves their failure to see the sacredness of all black female bodies. Eula, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life, exclaims that Yellow Mary is inextricably linked to all the women in the community. Moreover, her words, "If you love yourselves, then love Yellow Mary, because she's a part of you. Just like we're a part of our mothers" further highlights the spiritual link between Yellow Mary, Eula and all the women in the community, including those ancestors who have "passed on." Significantly, Eula begins this statement with the phrase "If you love yourselves...." I believe this use of the word "if" reflects Eula's understanding that the women in her community have internalized the dominant claim that "There is nothing sacred about Black women's bodies" (Guy-Sheftall 18). Hence, Eula understands, like Nana Peazant, that a spiritual renewal/healing is necessary before these women go North so that they are prepared to withstand and resist the ideological and physical violence that black women's bodies are and will be subject to.

Eula expresses, I believe, what a healthy relationship to the past should be. Like Nana Peazant, Eula understands that the past does indeed shape who we are and does shape our present reality. Moreover, it is clear that for Eula not only the past but also those who have "passed on" are also important sources of strength and sustenance whenever needed. For example, earlier in the film, Eula says to Yellow Mary, "My Ma came to me last night, you know. She took me by the hand.... I needed to see my Ma. I needed to talk to her. So I wrote her a letter, put it beneath the bed with a glass of water, and I waited. I waited, and my Ma came to me. She came to me right away" (Dash, *The*

Making 119). Although Yellow Mary teases her for still needing her mother, and possibly for her spiritual practice as well, such communication with the ancestors is a central part of Eula's embodied spiritual practice, just as it is for Nana Peazant.

Significantly, Eula's claim that her mother comes to her "right away" and takes her by the hand suggests the immediacy with which one can access the ancestral world. Moreover, Eula's claim to feel her mother touch her hand suggests that there is no discernable separation between the spiritual and material realms and that the ancestors have the power to easily mediate between a spiritual and material reality. It is not as though, for instance, Eula has imagined this encounter. Rather her mother's presence is as real and tangible to her as if she were still alive and in a sense she *is* still alive; she has merely "move[d] on to a new place, a place where we watch over our living family," as Nana Peazant states early on in the film (Dash, *The Making* 93).

Hence, just as Nana Peazant claims, Eula's spiritual practice confirms that the ancestors are always available as sources of spiritual strength, comfort, and guidance. We may not know exactly what Eula's mother tells her or what Eula communicates to her mother in her letter, but given the emotional and spiritual distance between her and Eli, her experience of sexual violation and the impending birth of her first child, we can guess that Eula seeks her mother's counsel about her marriage, motherhood and even possibly healing from her traumatic experience of being raped. Certainly Eula's embodied spiritual practice, her ability to find strength, wisdom and healing from the ancestors, as Nana Peazant urges Eli to do in the graveyard, keeps her grounded and enables her to resist the urge to run away from the past or from her trauma. Moreover, her spiritual practice keeps Eula from internalizing the dominant cultural and social definition of black

women as not sacred. As a result, Eula is able to assert quite confidently to the other Peasant women that despite their shared history of sexual violence and violation, “we’re all good women.”

The Unborn Child

The final key element of this communal spiritual narrative is the continual presence of the Unborn Child throughout *Daughters of the Dust*. Her spiritual work, along with the spiritual practices of Nana Peazant and Eula, is essential to achieving the communal transformation and healing that the film calls for. Even before she physically appears on screen or before she enters the material world of Ibo Landing, the Unborn Child's significance to the film becomes evident through her co-narration (with Nana Peazant) of the story. Through the presence of the Unborn Child as co-narrator in the film, Dash posits an alternative method of viewing and seeing—one that resists any kind of totalizing knowledge about the community we are viewing, one that rejects a linear notion of time, and one that refuses the privileging of a single telling or narrative perspective.¹⁰⁸

Once again, highlighting the spiritual roots of her cinematic practice within African cosmology, this co-narration enables Dash to illustrate in a very tangible way the connection and inextricability between the ancestral world and the world of the living, the link between the past, present, and future, as well as the importance of using a multi-perspectival approach when telling a communal spiritual narrative of black people in the U.S.

Although only the children of Ibo Landing physically see the Unborn Child as they play with her on the beach (Mr. Snead briefly sees her in his camera but dismisses her as an apparition/anomaly when she disappears), the Unborn Child is significantly linked to both Nana Peazant and Eula's spiritual practices.¹⁰⁹ After all, it is Nana Peazant's calling on the ancestors for help that brings the Unborn Child to Ibo Landing in

the first place and although Eula never sees her, the Unborn Child tells us that Eula can feel her presence. In fact, the Unborn Child tells us, “Years later, my ma told me she knew I had been sent forward by the old souls” (Dash, *The Making* 133). Moreover, even though the Unborn Child is just a child, she engages in an embodied spiritual practice like that of Nana Peazant and Eula.

Describing herself to be on a “spiritual mission” the Unborn Child acts as a mediator between the spiritual and material worlds, as well as between the past, present, and future. For example, while the children look at the Wish Book (an old Sears Christmas catalogue), the Unborn Child points at something she wants with an indigo-stained finger. This indigo stain links her to Nana Peazant, whose hands are also stained from working with the indigo dye during slavery. According to Dash, this indigo stain, though historically inaccurate since the dye would not have stayed on the slaves’ hands, functions as a visible physical marker of slavery (hooks and Dash, *Dialogue* 31).¹¹⁰ Therefore, the Unborn Child’s indigo-stained finger links her in a very physical way to the past experience of slavery even as she participates in the present events at Ibo Landing. Yet, the Unborn Child also represents future generations to come, as she has yet to be born.

But perhaps her most important spiritual practice is the healing and reconciliation of her parent’s marriage. Specifically, she leads her father, Eli, to the family graveyard where he is possessed by a spirit, which transforms him and enables him to walk on water. Significantly, Eli’s walking on water occurs while Eula tells the Unborn Child the myth of Ibo Landing, in which the enslaved Ibo walk on the water back to Africa after seeing what the New World holds for them.¹¹¹ The coinciding of these two moments

suggests that the same ancestral spiritual power that enabled the Ibo to walk on water is also what infuses and transforms Eli's spirit and body. According to the screenplay, "Eli comes from the water soaking wet. A vision has sought and claimed him. Under the whip and guidance of his ancestral spirit-rider, Eli has witnessed and performed things that he could not have done 'unridden.' Kneeling before Eula and embracing the fullness of her belly. Eli has seen that the fury growing inside of Eula's womb is, in fact, his Unborn Child" (Dash, *The Making* 142). This transformative spiritual vision, facilitated by his own Unborn Child along with his ancestral spirit guide, enables the displacement of Eli's patriarchal vision, which defined Eula as property that had been "ruined," with a non-Western spiritual vision that enables Eli to unconditionally embrace his wife and Unborn Child not as objects of ownership but as sacred beings.

Although the Unborn Child is central to the spiritual healing of the community at Ibo Landing, as we have seen, she is not solely responsible for such a transformation. Rather it is the combined embodied spiritual practices of multiple women (Nana Pezant, Eula and the Unborn Child with the help of the ancestors) who enable this healing to take place. Several scholars attest to this communal and what I refer to as a multi-perspectival approach of Dash's film. Unlike the singular model of the spiritual narrative that we see exemplified in Zilpha Elaw, Amanda Smith, and Nancy Prince's narratives, in which one individual perspective is privileged, Dash's film rejects such individualism by adopting a "theoretical stance" that claims, like Houston Baker, that there is never just one way of seeing.¹¹² Joel Brouwer, for instance, asserts that *Daughters* reminds us "that we never know everything, and our perceptions are bound by our point of view at any particular moment....There are always other stories to tell, stories which the storyteller ignores

while privileging the stories she tells. Dash recognizes this, and does two things about it: She both chooses to tell one of the stories never before told in a feature film, and refuses to claim that it is definitive” (11). Rather than privilege a single totalizing view point, which as we have seen in Elaw, Smith, and Prince’s narratives is a central characteristic of cultural imperialism, Dash “open[s] up the possibility of varying interpretations”, thereby asserting the “message that many truths exist, and when seen differently by different people in different contexts, they are no less true” (Brouwer 12). Similarly, Toni Cade Bambara claims, as I have already argued, that “The dual narration pulls together the past, present, and future—a fitting device for a film paying homage to African retention, to cultural continuum. The duet also prepares us for the film’s multiple perspectives. Communalism is the major mode of production.... *DD* asks that the spectator honor multiple perspectives rather than depend on the ‘official’ story” (124, 133). Both Brouwer and Bambara correctly argue that *Daughters* has no “official story,” no absolute, totalizing truth as we have already seen from the film’s critique of Viola.

Perhaps one of the best examples of the film’s refusal to privilege one truth is the multiple tellings we receive of the Ibo Landing myth.¹¹³ First, Eula recites the myth to her Unborn Child as unequivocally true narrating, “The minute those Ibo were brought ashore, they just stopped, and took a look around....When those Ibo got through sizing up the place real good and seeing what was to come, my grandmother said they turned, all of them, and walked back in the water.... They just kept walking, like the water was solid ground. And when they got to where the ship was, they didn’t so much as give it a look. They just walked right past it, because they were going home” (Dash, *The Making* 142).

Bilal Muhammed, however, offers Mr. Snead a different telling and a different kind of truth, exclaiming, “I came with the Ibo. Some say the Ibo flew back home to Africa. Some say they all joined hands and walked on top of the water. But, Mister, I was there. Those Ibo, men, women and children, a hundred or more, shackled in iron...when they went down in that water, they never came up. Ain’t nobody can walk on water” (Dash, *The Making* 151-52). Bilal Muhammed’s words give voice to the multiple tellings of the Ibo Landing myth. These multiple interpretations include the possibility that the Ibo flew back to Africa, walked back to Africa or drowned in the Atlantic. And although Bilal Muhammed privileges his own telling as absolute truth, the film refuses to do so both by allowing Eula to offer her own telling of the myth as equally true and by focusing the camera on Eli while Bilal Muhammed speaks the words “Ain’t nobody can walk on water.” In doing so, Dash reminds us that just a few scenes earlier, Eli has a spiritually transformative experience in which he indeed walks on water.

Hence, once again, we see the film rejecting the notion of any totalizing truth or any “singular model” to use Houston Baker’s terms. Rather, once again, we see Dash encouraging the audience to become active, critical spectators, “invit[ing] viewers to create the meaning for ourselves” (Brouwer 12), leaving us with the responsibility of claiming our own truth. Nevertheless, we do so, thanks to the critical/theoretical work of the film, fully aware of the dangers inherent in privileging whatever truth we accept.

I would like to end this chapter with a return to the beginning of my dissertation by discussing the biblical figure Hagar. Such a return to the biblical Hagar may make sense at first given Dash’s decision to name one of her characters Haagar. Linking Dash’s Haagar with the biblical figure, scholar Foluke Ogunleye, for instance, asserts that

“It is not surprising that the name Haagar bears a resemblance to a negative character in the Holy Scriptures. The biblical Hagar is a supplanter who was eventually driven away from Abraham’s house, losing the opportunity of being part of the Abrahamic covenant. Dash casts Haagar in the role of outcast as she storms away from the communion scene without kissing Nana’s charms. She is eventually punished by having her daughter, Iona, snatched away by her Cherokee lover” (163). While I agree that both Haagar and Hagar are disruptive figures, the resemblance between the two really ends there. Hagar, for instance, is in a state of involuntary exile within Abraham’s household because she has been stolen from her own land and enslaved. Hence, although she is technically cast out of their home by Sarah, who is jealous of Ishmael’s claim to Abraham’s inheritance, as I argued in the first chapter, her being ousted is not a punishment but rather a blessing as Hagar has desired to escape her enslavement from the beginning of the narrative.

Haagar’s exile, however, is not involuntary, but rather self-imposed. Dash’s screenplay, for instance, says of Haagar, “With self-righteous indignation, she is moved to physical anger. Haagar strikes out at her daughters, Myown and Iona, who want to be a part of Nana Peazant’s spirit regeneration ceremony. Other family members have to pull Haagar off of her daughters” (Dash, *The Making* 161). After yelling “Hoodoo. Hoodoo! Hoodoo mess! Ain’t no roots and herbs going to change nothing. Don’t go and spoil everything! Old Used-To-Do-It-This-Way don’t help none today!”, Dash writes, “Haagar walks away, she looks back in anger, ignoring Nana Peazant’s open arms and the pleas from her own daughters. Haagar turns inward, perhaps to remain unenlightened and disenfranchised forever” (*The Making* 161). While Hagar’s narrative suggests that she will return home to Egypt (Africa) to find a wife for her son, Haagar, as part of the Great

Migration, is clearly fleeing from her home even at the expense of all family relationships. In short, Haagar rejects community.¹¹⁴ Although Haagar is not a Peasant by blood (she married into the family), Nana Peasant claims her as one of her daughters when she pleads with Haagar, “Come, come child...I love you ’cause you’re mine” (Dash, *The Making* 161). Not only does Haagar reject Nana Peasant and the ancestors by refusing to participate in the “Hand” ceremony, but she also walks away from her own daughters, who wish to participate in the ceremony. The seriousness and weight of this rejection becomes apparent as Myown cries out desperately to her mother as she leaves the ceremony, “Mama, please!” Here Nana Peasant and Myown’s pleas signify both their sadness that they have lost a loved one but also their fear of the consequences of Haagar’s rejection of community—family and the ancestors.

Within an African cosmological framework, to reject the lifeline of community and all the spiritual resources that come with it is to threaten one’s very survival. This does not necessarily mean those who migrate north have rejected or will reject the lifeline of the community, as the film suggests this turn away from community must be internal as well. Dash’s analysis of Haagar’s actions in this scene, moreover, assert that there is a clear turn inward for Haagar—an emphasis on the self and the individual that accompanies this turn away from community. Furthermore, Dash posits such a rejection of community and an embrace of individualism as self-destructive. Refusing to equate such individualism with the achievement of enlightenment (i.e. knowledge) and freedom, Dash affirms one can find these spiritual fruits or gifts only in community.

Conclusion: Yellow Mary and Hagar's Return

To conclude, I'd like to posit Yellow Mary, rather than Haagar, as one possible Hagaric figure in *Daughters of the Dust*. After all, in the beginning, the film portrays Yellow Mary as a wanderer, an itinerant figure like Hagar. Further demonstrating her propensity for movement, Yellow Mary says to Eula that "The only way for things to happen or for people to change is to keep moving. People sitting still, men sitting still, don't get it with me, y'know" (Dash, *The Making* 121). However, after her spiritual transformation, facilitated by Nana Peazant's "Hand" ceremony, we see Yellow Mary, unlike Haagar, become a figure who returns home, rather than fleeing from it. Although initially Yellow Mary says she plans to visit Ibo Landing only temporarily (she and Trula have plans to go to Nova Scotia), by the end of the film, Yellow Mary says to Nana Peazant "You know I'm not like the other women here. But I need to know that I can come home,...to hold on to what I came from. I need to know that the people here know my name. I'm Yellow Mary Peazant! And I'm a proud woman, not a hard woman. I want to stay. I want to stay and visit with you here" (Dash, *The Making* 154). Yellow Mary's own words to Nana Peazant during the "Hand" ceremony, make it clear that she is a disruptive figure—a strange woman who is seemingly out of place in Ibo Landing.

Indeed, her status as out of place is also confirmed by many in the Peazant family who call her "heifer." Even some of the Peazant children join in the verbal ostracizing of Yellow Mary, as one of them exclaims, "Yellow Mary's no family woman, she's a scary kind of woman" while Myown says, "she's a new kind of woman" (Dash, *The Making* 123). Much like the biblical figure Hagar, Yellow Mary is disruptive because of her questionable sexual past, as both prostitute and lesbian, and because of her disordering of

the domestic space, which she rejects in the film by exclaiming, “You know I don’t like messing around in no kitchen” (Dash, *The Making* 112). But although both are victims of rape (Yellow Mary tells Eula that she is raped by her white employer while serving as a wet nurse for a family in Cuba), Yellow Mary’s sexuality is even more problematic because of her profession as a prostitute and because of the lesbian relationship between Yellow Mary and Trula, her traveling companion. The film, however, through Eula’s monologue and through Yellow Mary’s decision to remain at Ibo Landing, calls us to embrace Yellow Mary regardless of her transgressive sexuality and that such an embrace is central to the overall healing and spiritual growth of the entire community. In a sense, then, Yellow Mary’s return marks a kind of figurative homecoming for the biblical Hagar, whose own exilic journey, as I argued at the opening of my dissertation, must finally come to an end. Much like Nana Peazant and Eula’s embracing of Yellow Mary and welcoming her into the Ibo Landing community, so too have I sought to embrace Hagar and her many daughters throughout this dissertation—returning her to rightful place in a lineage of spirit-filled black women.

Given the significance of this chapter to the cohesiveness of my dissertation, it may seem strange that I have located it at the end. However, I envision this chapter as a bookend to the opening chapter on Hagar’s narrative. If chapter one tells us where we have been in terms of the roots of African American literature, and especially the spiritual roots of black women’s literature, then this final chapter looks towards the future by opening up and encouraging new ways of seeing and reading these texts. But although *Daughters of the Dust* seeks to move us forward, it does so by staying connected to the past. Hence, just as I have constructed a lineage of black women spiritual itinerants and

their embodied spiritual practice, so too does *Daughters* construct a similar lineage. The film, in fact, models what I have tried to do throughout this dissertation—to look back and consider critically what and who has come before.

Moreover, placing this analysis of *Daughters* at the end encourages us to look back to the beginning of my dissertation as it literally returns us to the biblical figure Hagar. The central project of *Daughters* is in many ways similar to the purpose of my opening chapter—to recover the silenced and usurped voices of black women, who like Hagar, Zilpha Elaw, Amanda Smith, Nancy Prince, Viola, Eula and Nana Peazant, have had their stories rendered invisible, marginalized and/or misrepresented. Just as my project offers a critical response to this marginalization and misrepresentation within the field of literature, Dash, through her *cinematic decolonization*, rejects Western ways of viewing and seeing blackness, and in particular black femaleness in film. Rather than reproduce such marginalization and misrepresentation, *Daughters* offers us a new vision—a hopeful one that calls for a critical awareness of the diverse spiritual geographies of black people throughout the diaspora.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Kimberly Wallace-Sanders edited collection, *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* (2002).

² Hagar's narrative, however, is not the only biblical text that can serve as an alternative to the Exodus narrative. The book of Esther, in which a young woman becomes the savior of the marginalized Jewish people, is another story that has been appropriated by both black women and men. Esther's narrative, like Hagar's, focuses on a woman's spiritual experience and power. Though it has been appropriated by men and women, Esther's story does not hold the same significance as the Exodus narrative does in black theology.

³ Teubal's analysis of Sarah includes the use of "silent texts"—texts that have been excluded from the bible. Since my own analysis of Hagar's narrative focuses on her significance to the black community, I have chosen to limit my analysis to the text that has been included in the bible. For this reason, Teubal's discussion of Sarah is not particularly useful for my argument.

⁴ In other words, I am interested in potential ruptures in the text—places that challenge this traditional notion that Hagar is a marginal figure, or simply an appendage to Abraham.

⁵ Janet Gabler-Hover includes the following Hagar novels written by white southern women in her critical work *Dreaming Black/Writing White: E.D.E.N. Southworth's The Deserted Wife* (1849) and *Virginia and Magdalene; or the Foster Sisters* (1857), Harriet Marion Stephens' *Hagar the Martyr; or, Passion and Reality: A Tale of the North and South* (1855), as well as Charlotte Moon Clark's *The Modern Hagar: A Drama* (1882).

⁶ It is unclear whether this "whitewashing" of Hagar is purposeful; however, one possible reason for nineteenth-century artists' portrayal of Hagar as white is the American obsession, beginning in the mid-eighteenth-century, with Neoclassical art, "a new classicism based on the ideal and forms of antiquity, especially of Greece and Rome" (Fine 38). Although Americans recognized Hagar as culturally black, within the neoclassical form it was nearly impossible to represent her physical blackness. Moreover, Hagar's "whitewashing" by nineteenth-century artists also illustrates white Americans' paradoxical desire for and fear of blackness and black sexuality—a paradox made evident in Hagar's narrative. Her body is desired for its reproductive and sexual uses but this same body also threatens the very patriarchal institution that requires her physical and sexual labor. For this reason, we can also see Hagar's "whitewashing" as expressing America's "dis-ease" with the presence of black bodies in the country. Ultimately, by erasing Hagar's blackness, white artists (visual and literary) could use this biblical narrative to justify slavery in America, while simultaneously erasing the threat that black female sexuality posed to the white power structure.

One exception is Edmonia Lewis, a nineteenth-century sculptor with African American and Native American ancestry. Although her sculpture, "Hagar in the Wilderness," depicts Hagar using the neoclassical form like other nineteenth-century artists, Lewis' representation of Hagar identifies with black people and their experiences of oppression—especially those of black women. For example, Kirsten Buick, art scholar and Lewis specialist, states that Lewis' Hagar "express[es] themes specific to the plight of African Americans," claiming that Lewis' sculpture "represent[s] her desire to broaden the category of 'woman' to include women who were *not* European American" (11). We might see Lewis' Hagar, then, as a critical response to traditional representations of Hagar that seek to exclude black people from the American cultural and social landscape. See also David Driskell's *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (pp. 48-49) and Elsa Honig Fine's *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity* (pp. 63-67). Both Driskell and Fine agree that Lewis' Hagar expresses the injustices and oppression experienced by black people in America.

⁷ Later in the text as a mark of God's new covenant with them, God changes Sarai and Abram's names to Sarah and Abraham: "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.... As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name" (Gen 17:4-5, 15). Like most scholars, throughout this chapter I refer to them by their new names, Abraham and Sarah.

⁸ As domestic workers, Elaw, Smith, and Prince would have been continually exposed to the threat of sexual violence. Although Elaw, Smith, and Prince never explicitly state that they were sexually violated, I will argue in subsequent chapters that this may have been something they silenced in their narratives.

⁹ The biblical narrative tells us very little about Isaac at this point. The only specific detail that we receive is that Sarah's concern over her son's inheritance comes after he is weaned from breastfeeding and after she sees Isaac and Ishmael playing together (Gen 20:8-9). This suggests to me that Isaac is a few years old at this point in the narrative but still a young child.

¹⁰ As I stated earlier, Sarah possesses absolute authority over Hagar, as Abraham states "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please" (Gen 16:6). However, Sarah's command to Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael suggests that she does not possess that same power over Ishmael, perhaps because he is Abraham's son. This reading is supported by verse 11 in Genesis, which states, "And the thing [Sarah's command] was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son."

¹¹ Here I reference Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* to highlight the connection between my own reclamation of Hagar and Dash's reclamation of Yellow Mary, whose unruly body, like Hagar's, marks her as a failed woman. Yellow Mary, like Hagar, has a problematic sexual past (including rape, prostitution and homosexuality) that makes her a "fallen woman," or as some in the Peazant family call her, "ruin." By representing Yellow Mary as a strong woman, "a proud 'oman" who embraces her family even as they ostracize and criticize her for her sexual past, Dash reclaims Yellow Mary's status as a woman and rejects the "true woman" ideal as a narrow and oppressive model of womanhood that fails to encompass the complexity of black women's experiences. Dash extends this criticism through Eula Peazant, who stands in solidarity with Yellow Mary, claiming that she must be "ruin" too since she has been raped as well. Dash makes the argument, then, that sexual violation is the history of all black women. For this reason, black women must stop judging each other by the standards of a model of womanhood that has always excluded them.

¹² By Sacred, I mean that which is holy, divine, and of God.

¹³ See Galatians 5:16-21 and 6:8 in which Paul calls for Christian believers to "Live by the Spirit" and not by the flesh because those who follow the Spirit will "inherit the kingdom of God," while those who follow the flesh will not.

¹⁴ Sanctification was so controversial that even Methodists disagreed on whether or not it was a valid theological tenet. Bettye Collier-Thomas claims in her book *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and their Sermons, 1850-1979*, that there was a schism within the Methodist Church over holiness doctrines—some supported it, while others fought vehemently against it being taught and practiced.

¹⁵ I refer to the vision of Elaw's white audiences as hostile because of the way in which their gaze, as Lindon Barrett asserts, devalues and dismisses black women from legitimacy. See pp. 60-61 for a more in-depth discussion of Barrett's definition of vision.

¹⁶ This reference to a Quaker woman named Fisher alludes to Jesus' calling his disciples to be "fishers of men" in the book of Matthew. As a result, the reference implicitly suggests that Elaw, like the disciples, is called by God to save others, which ultimately adds further credence to her itinerant ministry.

¹⁷ "Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen to the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?'" He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.... Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:26-39).

¹⁸ As stated in Deuteronomy 23:1, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord."

¹⁹ Elaw's statement that "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty" references 1 Cor. 1:27-29. The entire passage is as follows: "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the

wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (NRSV).

²⁰ Although it may seem that I am making a bit of a leap from enslaved bodies to free blacks, their social statuses were similar as the realities of slavery shaped and vastly limited the freedom of "free" blacks. Moreover, their legal status in the courthouse was similar. According to Hartman, "neither slaves nor free blacks were allowed to testify against whites" (82). Hence, we see that the voices of all black people, whether free or enslaved, were effectively silenced in the courthouse except as proof of black criminality.

²¹ In Chapter XV, "Continued Persecutions," of Jacobs' narrative Dr. Flint offers Linda Brent a home of her own, which Flint represents as a symbol of material and emotional security available only via white domestic space: "Linda, you desire freedom for yourself and your children, and you can obtain it only through me. If you agree to what I am about to propose, you and they shall be free.... I will procure a cottage, where you and the children can live together. Your labor shall be light, such as sewing for my family. Think what is offered you, Linda—a home and freedom" (83)! Similar to Jacob's narrative, the offer Elaw receives from a white gentleman requires economic dependence on white patriarchal domestic space, and also requires her to relinquish control over her labors to meet the needs of this white family, who clearly wish to have unlimited access to Elaw's preaching—her spiritual practice. Although the offer Elaw receives from the white gentleman appears to offer her access to white power and privilege via property ownership, in reality the offer threatens to turn Elaw into property (enslaving her) by bounding her down, holding her in place in order that this white gentleman might have unlimited access to Elaw's "labors."

²² See Equiano's text, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1745), for a parallel example of the seemingly inextricable link between missionary travel and colonization: "Doctor Irving...had a mind for a new adventure in cultivating a plantation at Jamaica and the Musquito Shore; asked me to go with him, and said that he would trust me with his estate in preference to any one. By the advice, therefore, of my friends, I accepted of the offer, knowing that the harvest was fully ripe in those parts, and hoped to be the instrument, under God, of bringing some poor sinner to my well beloved master, Jesus Christ" (153). Here, Equiano's passage illustrates the often overlapping economic practices of colonization (here, specifically slavery) and the spiritual practices of missionaries. By rejecting the suggestion that she travel to Africa to expand her missionary work, Elaw effectively disengages herself from the violence of "slavery's geographic terrain" to use Katherine McKittrick's words (xvii). Furthermore, by choosing an alternative geographic practice (traveling to England rather than Africa to do her missionary work), Elaw engages in an embodied spiritual practice that rejects and critiques an oppressive itinerancy in which colonial domination and Christian conversion go hand-in-hand.

²³ Hannah Arendt argues in regards to the usage of the terms *work* and *labor* that "there is hardly anything in either the pre-modern tradition of political thought or in the large body of modern labor theories to support" this distinguishing between labor and work; however, Arendt chooses to maintain such a distinction because "every European language, ancient and modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words for what we have to come to think of as the same activity, and retains them in the face of their persistent synonymous usage" (80). Even though some scholars, such as Joan Martin and Jacqueline Jones, use the terms *work* and *labor* interchangeably, I, like Arendt, maintain a distinction between the two terms in this section. The word *labor*, as Arendt claims, still retains the original connotation of "toil and trouble" (98). We can see the roots of this definition in the Genesis narrative, where *labor* is the punishment for Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden. Moreover, *labor* functions as the physical marker of humanity's new relationship to God after sin enters the world—that is a condition of alienation and separation from God. Although this punishment is extended to all humanity, within the Western imagination, evil and sin, and by extension this punishment of alienation, are displaced onto the black body. Slave labor, then, becomes the marker for such alienation. Hence, not only is slavery a marker of social death, as Orlando Patterson and other scholars have defined it, but a spiritual death as well. In opposition to slave labor, which lacks meaning and purpose since all the fruits of such labor are owned by and are used to sustain the master, I argue that slaves engage in *work*, which as Arendt and Martin's analyses suggest, is meaningful and enables the creation and sustaining of self and community. Moreover, drawing on Jacqui Alexander's definition of spiritual work as healing work, I define the term *work* as one that enables the slave community to resist oppressive forces and to even reverse the violence of commodification. While this chapter focuses on Smith and her ancestors' engagement in spiritual work as resistance to oppression, in Chapter Four, I will extend this argument about work to consider the spiritual

practices of Nancy Prince and her ancestors, who crossed the Atlantic during the Middle Passage—engaging in the spiritual work of resisting the process of commodification aboard slave ships and in the New World.

²⁴ Jacqueline Jones, in her book *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor*, defines slavery as the “forced labor of one group of people for the profit and well-being of another” (191).

²⁵ In other words, this work has both spiritual and communal value because it sustains self and community. This sustenance is of course physical as it includes meeting the material needs of the body (for instance, food and clothing), but also spiritual as it enables enslaved peoples to act as agents—work that is chosen rather than coerced.

²⁶ Although Martin’s analysis focuses on slave narratives, including Harriet Jacobs’ 1861 narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Louisa Piquet’s 1861 narrative *The Octoroon: or a Tale of Southern Slave Life*, and Elizabeth Kleckley’s 1868 narrative *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, in this section I apply her theory of a communal work ethic to Smith’s autobiography in order to delineate the spiritual practice of her enslaved ancestors.

²⁷ To further clarify Martin’s definition of evil, labor is not inherently evil; rather the human appropriation of labor for oppressive purposes is evil.

²⁸ As I stated earlier, such work meets the material and spiritual needs of others, whether that be through growing extra food to feed others, sewing clothing to keep others warm or aiding others to attain freedom, which as I discuss shortly, Smith’s family continues to do even after attaining their own freedom.

²⁹ Here I read Samuel Berry’s work as both physical and spiritual in nature since such work is rooted in a desire for freedom and in opposition to the violence of the market which defines him and his family as commodities. In this sense, I would like to connect Berry’s work with the spiritual work of Smith’s female ancestors, as both men and women in the community work towards this goal of freedom and asserting their full humanity in response to the force of oppression and evil in their lives.

³⁰ Although Miss Celie’s use of the word *have* implies that she wishes to bestow freedom with no monetary remuneration, the narrative suggests that the word *have* is conditional—meaning that if Samuel saves enough money, he should be allowed to buy his wife and children. The language here also marks the freeing of Smith and her family as a transaction of exchange, in which “Mariam and the children” are treated as objects, who move from being possessed by a white slaveholder to a black patriarch (i.e. husband and father).

³¹ Although no official, legally recognized, crime has been committed here, Mariam appeals to a moral law informed by her own spirituality/faith and Victorian Society. For Mariam, this crime is the invasion of her home and the threatening of her family. It is this intrusion into domestic space, which was a sanctuary for the middle class, which Mariam sees as a crime and violation. Certainly, her appeal to Victorian ideals explains why the “rich respectable people” support her, while incriminating these slave catchers. Also significant, Mariam’s embodied spiritual practice draws a clear distinction between “rich respectable people,” who she aligns her own family with, and this “tribe” of slave catchers. Smith’s use of the term *tribe*, which often refers to a familial group or social group with shared ancestry, customs and beliefs, is also pertinent. Here, the term *tribe* foreshadows Smith’s later ethnographic claims of superiority by aligning black people with Egyptians and creating a spiritual lineage that locates the birthplace of Western Christianity in a black Egypt. Therefore, both Smith and her mother engage in an embodied spiritual practice that strategically aligns black people with Christian principles and moral order, while positioning, quite significantly, slave catchers (and by extension practices of captivity) as alien, foreign, and even antithetical to Western Christian values.

³² Claude A. Clegg defines the courthouse as “a multi-purpose institution that hosted recreational events, religious gatherings, political affairs, and the business of the town commissioners” (54). Further linking the courthouse and the auction block, Clegg later quotes a source that reveals the auctioning of slaves in front of the courthouse: “the county court ordered that she and the other emancipated slaves be ‘exposed to sale to the highest bidder, for ready money, at the courthouse door’” (qtd in Clegg, 57). The quote refers to a slave, named Priscilla, who was ordered to be sold by local courts in North Carolina after her Quaker master, Caleb White, tried to emancipate her along with three other slaves. Though the ruling was eventually overturned in 1778 after White appealed, the incident does prove that courthouses could be utilized as sites of slave auction.

³³ Although the enslaved body was primarily criminalized, this definition also extended to free blacks in many communities, which denied all black bodies (slave or free) the ability to testify against a white person

in court. See the introduction to *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, edited by Kenneth S. Greenberg for an further examples of the kinds of restrictions placed on the freedom of “free” blacks.

³⁴ This equating of freedom with death was a common rhetorical position in anti-slavery literature, for example, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853). For a deeper analysis of this inextricable link between freedom and death in nineteenth-century America, see Russ Castronovo’s *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States*.

³⁵ Later in this chapter, we see Smith positing these values of selfishness and greed as central to Western imperialism and as incompatible with true Christianity.

³⁶ Smith does not state the year of her first husband’s, Calvin Devine’s, death. Offering very few details about this loss, she explains, “After my conversion I continued to live in Columbia, Pa., a year or two; then went to live at Colonel McGraw’s in Lancaster... where I remained some four or five years. In the meantime the civil war had broken out, and my husband, in common with so many others, enlisted and went South with the army, from which he never returned” (57).

³⁷ Smith experiences the loss of four children in her lifetime.

³⁸ See Isaiah 61:10, which states, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robes of righteousness” (Harper Collins).

³⁹ Though the text does not explicitly describe these women’s race, given Smith’s membership in the A.M.E. church, these fellow church members are presumably black women. The text also suggests that these women differed theologically with Smith on the issue of sanctification.

⁴⁰ My thinking here has been shaped by Caroline Haynes’ analysis of Evangelical Christian representations of God, particularly in the person of Jesus, as a “loving partner” (104). According to Haynes, this image was “enticing for the Christian feminists because it offered them an alternative not only to the stern, merciless Calvinist god but also to their demanding and dominating spouses. Thus, these women could bypass oppressive forms of male authority without shirking their Christian true woman image” (104). As we’ve already seen from Smith’s interactions with her husband, James, her belief in God as a faithful partner certainly gave her the confidence to act independently of James’ will.

⁴¹ J.M. Thoburn was a white Methodist minister, serving as a missionary in Calcutta. On May 25th, 1888 he was elected to serve as Missionary Bishop to India and Malaysia by the Methodist General Conference (New York Times). An internationally renowned figure and a man of prominence within the world of missions, having a preface written by Thoburn certainly gave Smith’s narrative a strong endorsement.

⁴² Although Smith’s narrative does not state explicitly who is in the crowd, most likely the audience would have included local Indian inhabitants of Calcutta, white missionaries and spiritual itinerants like Thoburn, and perhaps white tourists as well.

⁴³ In the nineteenth-century, this marketplace, existing both in the U.S. and globally, consisted of “freak” shows, minstrel shows, ethnographic and “tom” shows that featured both black and/or blackened bodies.

⁴⁴ In his socio-historical work *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnums America*, Benjamin Reiss introduces Joice Heth as an old slave woman who P.T. Barnum “acquires” in 1835 from “a hapless itinerant showman from Kentucky named R.W. Lindsay” (1). Marketing Heth as “The Greatest Natural and National Curiosity in the World,” Barnum traveled around the country with Heth on display as the 161 year old “former nurse of the infant George Washington” (Reiss 1). According to Reiss, “crowds flocked to hear her tell stories about how she had witnessed the birth of ‘dear little George’ and been the first to clothe and even breast-feed him... to join with her as she sang the hymns she had supposedly taught him; and to laugh at her impertinent stories about the redcoats.... Her debility was a draw, too, and many came to gaze on—even to touch—her amazingly decrepit body” (2). Even after Heth’s death, her corpse was placed on display at a public autopsy, to which Barnum charged fifty cents admission (2-3). Heth’s story illustrates quite clearly white audiences’ fascination, even obsession, with the black female body and serves as further proof of the ever-present threat of objectification/commodification that awaited any black woman, like Smith, who dared to perform before a white audience.

⁴⁵ Although the U.S. slave trade was abolished in 1808, and the Atlantic slave trade effectively ended by the 1860s, the legacy of three centuries of black bodies circulating as cargo certainly informed how black women travelers were perceived in the latter half of the nineteenth-century when Smith made her voyage. Further linking the passage of slaves with the travel of free blacks across the Atlantic, Charmaine Nelson

affirms that even free black travelers, whose mobile bodies were seen as a threat to white passengers, were subjected to varied attempts at immobilizing the black body while on board: “The experience of travel for free blacks in the nineteenth century was, like the transport of black ‘cargo’ in slavery, structured by the immobilization and deprivation of the black body. The threat of proximity and cross-racial interaction was contained through the invisibility and immobilization of the black body. Already, a ship is a floating space with immediate borders, the breaching of which can trigger death. But within this imposed territory, the black subject experienced yet another level of containment within certain approved and often dangerous places onboard the ship. The enforced racial immobility of the black subject corresponded to his or her immobility within the geographical boundaries of America” (32).

⁴⁶ My purpose here in focusing on black women spiritual itinerants is not to ignore other black female travelers, such as Harriet Jacobs, Ellen Craft, and Edmonia Lewis, etc, who traveled for neither domestic nor spiritual reasons. Indeed, black women traveled for a surprising number of different reasons, including to escape slavery, to further the cause of abolition, to achieve an education, as well as economic advancement. However, my hope is that by broadening the conversation about women’s travel beyond domesticity, the complex motivators for black women’s travel might become more apparent.

⁴⁷ Smith’s travel abroad may alter her own relationship to work, freeing her from oppressive and violating labor in America, but it does nothing to change this reality for enslaved and free black laborers.

⁴⁸ The moment Smith docks in Liverpool, she follows in the tradition of countless nineteenth-century American travelers before her as Liverpool “was the first port of call for most American travelers arriving in England” (Seed Intro vii). Liverpool’s identity in the nineteenth century was a bit of a paradox as it was both a central port in the Atlantic slave trade and, as a shipping center, played a key role in the spread of British imperialism. At the same time, however, Liverpool was also “an important centre for abolition” (Seed xiv). Indeed, Smith’s presence in Liverpool locates her in a long lineage of African American travelers, such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, as well as William and Ellen Craft who “came to Liverpool to pursue different aims all connected with the pursuit of freedom” (Seed xv). Although Smith travels as a missionary after the end of slavery, her brief stop in Liverpool illustrates, like so many African American travelers before her, the comparatively better treatment she receives in England as opposed to America. For a more detailed analysis of Liverpool in the nineteenth-century, see David Seed’s *American Travellers in Liverpool* (2008) and Chapter One of Jacqueline Nassy Brown’s *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool* (2005).

⁴⁹ My use of the term ‘survey’ references Mary Louise Pratt’s seminal work *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, specifically her analysis of surveillance as a central practice of colonial travel and rooted in violence and domination. She asserts, “The ideology that construes seeing as inherently passive and curiosity as innocent cannot be sustained” (67). Although I agree with Pratt’s contention that vision is never passive or innocent, I argue that Smith appropriates this typically oppressive colonial practice and uses it in subversive ways—ironically to undermine Western imperial representations of black people throughout the diaspora.

⁵⁰ Although typically colonial discourse distinguishes between civilized vs. savage people, practices, and countries, in women’s travel writings, Sara Mills asserts that we see a more tenuous and even paradoxical positioning of colonized countries and their inhabitants as both civilized and savage. This tenuous relationship that women travelers have to imperialism and colonial discourse is quite evident in Smith’s narrative. As she shifts between locations abroad, we see her discourse shift as well between language that humanizes the indigenous people she comes in contact with and language that denigrates them.

⁵¹ According to Scott Trafton’s scholarly work on nineteenth-century Egyptology, entitled *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania*, “African American travelers to Egypt were understandably rare, even as late as 1887” (21). His analysis of nineteenth-century African American travelers to Egypt includes David Dorr and Frederick Douglass; however, he does not include black women in his discussion of black travelers to Egypt. Although Trafton does include a quite detailed chapter on Edmonia Lewis’ participation in Egyptological debates, she is the sole black female voice from the nineteenth-century. Smith’s inclusion on a very short list of early black travelers to Egypt illustrates the importance of her narrative, particularly the perspective of a formerly enslaved black woman that her autobiography offers. However, as long as she continues to be excluded from the African American travel writing tradition, Smith’s voice will continue to be silenced in scholarly discussions such as these. My own work on Smith, therefore, seeks to include her unique voice and perspective in the discussion of Egyptology as well as American Colonization, which I address at the end of this chapter.

⁵² Smith's affirmation of racial pride and her lauding of blackness as a privilege echoes the strategy used by David F. Dorr in the preface to his 1858 travel narrative *A Colored Man Round the World*. Like Smith, Dorr appeals to Egyptology in order to prove "the civilization and power of black Africans.... Because of his lineage, with its antecedents in the race that built the Pyramids, Dorr suggests that he can proudly advertise his book as that written by 'a colored man.' Even though being a quadroon is a signifier of severely limited agency, once the racial signifier is let loose from the quantifications of the antebellum South, it can operate differently. Egyptology has resignified what being 'colored' means" (Schueller, U.S. Orientalisms 105). See page 121 of this chapter for a further discussion of Smith's engagement with Egyptology as part of her rhetorical strategy.

⁵³ It is also possible to read Smith's representation of black Egyptian men as participating in the language of the exotic used by white tourists to engage their readers' desire for "a stimulating or exciting difference, something with which the domestic could be (safely) spiced" (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin 94). Revealing, once again, her tenuous rhetorical practice, Smith's words appeal to her white readers' desire for an exotic 'other' even as she critiques traditional colonial representations. Moreover, we might alternatively read Smith's language "fine looking men, black as silk and straight as arrows, well developed" as expressing an (always illicit) desire for the black body. If one of the purposes of exoticism is to make the unfamiliar familiar (see Ashcroft 98), then we could argue that Smith's use of colonial travel discourse becomes a way of appropriating the familiar to engage her audience in a critique of imperial practices.

⁵⁴ The inclusion of Edward Wilmot Blyden in Trafton's list of black intellectuals engaged in Egyptology in the nineteenth-century reminds us that this on-going critical conversation was not contained solely within America but crossed the Atlantic as well. Trafton describes Blyden as a black nationalist who "found an important ally in Afrocentric constructions of the black Orient: by identifying with ancient Egyptians, he was able to claim kinship with the modern inhabitants of the Arab world while asserting his moral, cultural, historical, religious, and racial superiority over them. This would be nothing new in the history of black missionaries, nor in that of black Orientalism. His Afrocentric project used the cultures of Africa the ancient as leverage against the cultures of Africa the modern" (24). Blyden, who was born in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands in 1832, "lived...in Venezuela for two years and in the United States for seven months, but he reacted against the discrimination and disabilities which New World blacks suffered by emigrating to Liberia at the age of eighteen...and dedicated his life to the advancement of his race" (Lynch, Intro xii). For more on Blyden's intellectual career, see Hollis R. Lynch's edited work *Black Spokesman: Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*. Future work on Smith will need to further place her in conversation with black intellectuals, such as Blyden, whose positions on Egyptology and colonization intersect in interesting ways with Smith.

⁵⁵ Unlike those black writers, like David Dorr and Edward Blyden, who appeal to Orientalist claims of racial superiority over Arab peoples in Egypt, Smith strategically avoids negative representations of any modern Egyptian inhabitants by eliding the presence of Arab peoples in Egypt. While the erasure of Arab people in order to imagine a black Egypt problematizes Smith's imperial critique, her rhetorical strategy does enable her to place the origins of Western Christianity in the hands of black people. This strategy would have encouraged Smith's evangelical Christian audience to identify black people as part of the same spiritual lineage, rather than as strange 'heathens.'

⁵⁶ Smith's representation of these Catholic practices expresses an anti-catholic sentiment. However, given the inextricable link between the Catholic Church and the Roman Empire, so central to the formation of Western civilization, Smith's harsh criticism towards Roman priests seriously undermines Western imperialism and deviates from typical representations of Rome in travel writing "as a site of memory and replication" for American and European travelers—a cultural center and the "most popular destination of the cycle of European travel during the mid-to late nineteenth century" (Nelson 3). Clearly, for Smith Egypt trumps Rome and even displaces it as the preeminent site of cultural memory and identification.

⁵⁷ These colonial identifications of the black body were explained and justified by western science, whose "observations of Africa and Africans deployed social, cultural, political, and physical difference as the signs of racial inferiority, pathology, and degeneracy" (Nelson 116). Recognizing the power of western science to objectify and classify the black body as monstrous, Smith launches her own counter-analysis in which she posits alternative identifications for black male and female bodies in diaspora.

⁵⁸ Smith's arguing for the inclusion of black women within the ideal of true womanhood also places her in close company with writer, speaker, and educator Anna Julia Cooper, who published her seminal work *A Voice from the South* in 1892—just one year before *An Autobiography* was published. Like Smith, Cooper

attempts to revalue the black female body by positing the black woman as a “moral force,” one whose “unique position” as both black and female makes her an invaluable resource on all national issues—politics, morality, economics, social reform, etc. Moreover, Cooper creates a list of noteworthy black women whose “work and influence” has helped further the advancement of black people in America (44, 45). Significantly, Cooper includes Amanda Smith on this “list of chieftains in the service,” along with Frances Watkins Harper, Sojourner Truth, and Charlotte Forten Grimké among others. According to Cooper, “[t]hese women represent all shades of belief and as many departments of activity; but they have one thing in common—their sympathy with the oppressed race in America and the conservation of their several talents in whatever line to the work of its deliverance and development” (48). Although it is uncertain whether Smith read Cooper’s book, clearly both women were committed to reclaiming the sacredness of black women’s bodies in opposition to those at home and abroad who would narrowly define them as curious, strange, and those who would even question whether they were women at all.

⁵⁹ Certainly Smith’s negative opinion of Western medicine would have been shaped by the unjust and racist treatment of African Americans by doctors in the U.S. In particular, Western doctors demonstrated a continuing disrespect for the black body through repeated forms of violation and exploitation of black people, including experimenting and performing medical procedures without the expressed consent of black patients, as well as the posthumous theft of black bodies for medical research. These kinds of violations continued as part of standard medical practice in the U.S. well into and beyond the twentieth-century. Perhaps one of the more recent examples is that of Henrietta Lacks (1920-1951), an African American woman from Roanoke, Virginia, who received treatment for cervical cancer at Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1951. During her period of treatment at the hospital, doctors took her cancerous cervix cells without permission; these cells (valuable because of their unique ability to reproduce without end) were eventually mass-marketed by pharmaceutical companies. Although Henrietta Lacks died in 1951, the reproduction and marketing of these cells, commonly referred to as HeLa in the medical community, still continues today as part of a multi-million dollar industry of which the Lacks family has not received a penny. For more on Henrietta Lacks and the intersection of race and medicine in America, see Rebecca Skloot’s biography *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010).

⁶⁰ During her stay in Monrovia, Smith is accosted by the boy’s father who pleads with her to take him and give him a Western education. It’s unclear how Bob receives his name. While Smith refers to him as Bob, his father, called Jack in the text, refers to his son as “my pick’n” (394).

⁶¹ I have borrowed this term “transference” from Mary Louise Pratt’s text *Imperial Eyes*, in which she argues that although colonizers emphasized the acculturation of indigenous peoples into Western cultural practices, this sharing of culture went both ways (Intro 6).

⁶² Smith’s commitment to children’s welfare, her investment in the spiritual and material lives of children of color in particular becomes more apparent after she returns to the United States in 1890. Nine years after her return, Smith opened the Amanda Smith Industrial Orphan Home in Harvey, Ill in 1899. According to biographer Adrienne M. Israel, “[h]er goals were ‘to rescue destitute, needy children, especially those of colored parentage,’ provide them with ‘care, education and industrial training,’ and find them suitable, permanent homes. Child welfare agencies and juvenile courts referred children, but governmental provided no financial support. The children initially attended the local school; but when, for unexplained reasons, they were barred from doing so, Smith employed a teacher. Smith herself conducted most of their religious training” (qtd in Israel 127). Significantly, from Israel’s description of Smith’s goals we see her commitment to providing for both the spiritual and material needs of poor black children. Although religious instruction was clearly of primary importance to Smith (she would never neglect the children’s spiritual growth), she also clearly recognizes the importance of providing for one’s physical needs as well. Hence, her focus on industrial training suggests her desire to provide these children, who otherwise had no economic future or possibilities, with skills and trades that would enable them to find employment and meet the physical demands of their bodies. Smith’s unfailing sacrifice, however, extends beyond teaching and instruction. She also took on the exhausting and daunting work of fundraising to keep the orphanage open, which she continued to labor at until her retirement in 1912.

⁶³ Smith’s use of the term “heathen” in this passage further demonstrates her rhetorical shifting. On the one hand, she seems to support the imperialistic language that her Western audience would have been familiar with. However, her attributing this perception of Bob as a “raw naked heathen” to “they,” (i.e. Western colonists in Monrovia), creates a clear distinction between the Western colonists’ view of Bob and her own view of him as intelligent and capable. We can come to a better understanding of Smith’s use of the term

“heathen” by reading this passage against an earlier description Smith includes of her sister, who she rescues from illegal enslavement in Maryland. Seeing her at work in the fields, Smith states “I don’t think I ever saw a heathen in Africa, that looked so much like a heathen as she did” (52). In both descriptions, I believe Smith wishes to problematize the term so often treated as a natural attribute of blackness and Africaness. In response to the common belief in heathenism as the natural condition of people of African descent, here Smith posits heathenism as an external condition imposed by the West and the racism at the heart of its institutions (imperial and slavery).

⁶⁴ Old Calabar, presently known as Calabar, is located in the southeastern region of Nigeria.

⁶⁵ Mary Kingsley was a British middle class white woman living in London, who after the death of her mother and father, continued the scientific work her father began studying traditional African religious practices. After two voyages to West Africa, Kingsley wrote the book *Travels in West Africa*, which was published in 1897.

⁶⁶ Although I’ve borrowed this list of free black proponents of the ACS from Claude Clegg’s book *Price of Liberty*, he does not include Maria Stewart or any women for that matter in his lineage. My hope is that by inserting Amanda Berry Smith’s voice into this diasporic conversation on colonization, we can broaden our understanding of black writers’ engagement with this issue during the nineteenth-century.

⁶⁷ For an in-depth analysis of colonial representations that posit America as the arbiter of civilization against Africa as a dark and heathen land, see Sylvia Jacobs edited work *Black Americans and the Missionary Movement in Africa*. As I argue above, Smith’s critique of the outrageous racial violence in the U.S., however, complicates this far too simplistic colonial dichotomy that privileges America’s enlightenment and civilization over and above Africa’s supposed ‘darkness’ and ‘barbarity.’

⁶⁸ Nancy Prince published two editions of her narrative—the first edition in 1850 and the second in 1853. All quotations in this chapter come from the 1853 edition of *Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*.

⁶⁹ Here I borrow the term circum-Atlantic from Joseph Roach’s text *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* because it invokes a sense of circulation and movement and better illustrates the non-linear journey that Prince embarks on in her narrative.

⁷⁰ Although there are countless illustrations in the bible referring to the Christian life as a journey, more specifically as a race that must be won, Paul’s command to “let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” in Hebrews 12:1 is perhaps the best example (Harper Collins). Similarly, in Phil 3:12, 14 Paul states, “Not that I have already... reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own... I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Harper Collins). Moreover, Prince’s emphasis on the inherent dangers of this journey echoes Paul’s own spiritual quest, which he describes in 2 Cor 11:25-27, 29: “Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, though many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked... Who is weak, and I am not weak?” (Harper Collins). Here Paul’s repetition of the word danger, from all kinds of people and in every location imaginable, makes clear that escaping such danger is impossible. Nevertheless, in spite of such a perilous journey, Paul celebrates his weakness, exclaiming, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9-10). Hence, as Prince claims in her poem, which I will consider further at the end of this chapter, though escaping all danger and oppression is unlikely, it is possible to find contentment, peace, and even joy amidst such danger.

⁷¹ My thinking about spiritual work as a resistant practice that has been greatly informed by Jacqui Alexander’s work *Pedagogies of Crossing*, in which she defines spiritual work as a kind of *body praxis* “that is central to our mapping of subjectivity” (316). Specifically, the goal/purpose of this praxis is healing. She asserts “[t]o function as an antidote to oppression, healing work, that is, spiritual labor, assumes different forms, while anchored in reconstructing a terrain that is both exterior and interior” (312). Moreover, further claiming the centrality of the body in this spiritual work, Alexander argues, “[i]f healing work is a call to remember and remembering is embodied, then we would want to situate the body centrally in this healing” (316).

⁷² The preservation and nurturing of the sacred was a particularly significant form of resistance as captains and sailors were concerned only with producing monetary value by “deliver[ing] as many live, healthy African bodies as possible to a New World port,” while stripping those bodies of all personhood—most

evident in the slave ship's assault on memory, culture, and community, all of which the captives' collective spiritual practice attempted to maintain (Rediker 285).

⁷³ One of the most famous examples, of course, is Olaudah Equiano's portrayal of the slave ship in his 1789 autobiographical, spiritual/slave narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Equiano's depiction of the slave ship makes evident the intended goal of the ship, which McKittrick describes as "a location of suppression upheld, in part, by black grief and death; it hid and suffocated human cargo and curtailed resistances. [Equiano's] memories of the slave ship suggest that its materiality—above and below the deck—in part disguised human terror" (xi). However, despite attempts by the slave ship to masquerade as a container and concealer of black humanity, we know that this space, too, like that of the auction block and courthouse, is indeed alterable. McKittrick, for example, goes on to claim in her brief analysis of Equiano's narrative that "the slave ship is not simply a container hiding his displacement. It is a location through which he articulates hardship and human cruelty, in part mapping and giving new meaning to the vessel itself" (xii). In short, the bodies and experiences of suffering that the slave ship seeks to conceal and contain, Equiano makes legible through his narrative, which uses the materiality of the ship to express the "inconceivable" suffering experienced by those (often forgotten and unnamed) from the Middle Passage.

⁷⁴ As I will discuss later in this chapter, Prince moves beyond such gendered limitations by inserting herself into the narrative that she retells.

⁷⁵ After escaping from the slave ship, Prince's stepfather, named Money Vose, later became a sailor until he was pressed into service by the British during one of his voyages (7). According to Prince, he never returned home and "died oppressed, in the English dominions" (7). Certainly, Money Vose's experiences complicate the equation of mobility and itinerancy with freedom as his life illustrates, black people were continually exposed to the threat of violence and captivity even while abroad. Prince's own travels, as I will show in my analysis of her journeys abroad, also reveal the tenuous nature of travel as both liberating and dangerous for black people.

⁷⁶ Carla Perterson also attests to the parallel between Prince and Wilson's texts, claiming, "[Prince] suffered under the same kind of brutal labor conditions in domestic service that Harriet Wilson would later 'fictionalize' in *Our Nig*" (94).

⁷⁷ Prince's account illustrates the particular danger of travel for all black people, but especially for black women, as one could easily be "deluded away" as a prostitute, pressed into service on a ship, as Prince's stepfather was, or be captured and sold by slave traders, regardless of one's legal status. Given the close proximity of the publication dates of Prince's narrative (1850/1853) with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, this potential of being "deluded away" would have been at the forefront of Prince's mind and those of her readers as well.

⁷⁸ Although Prince marks this moment as her official conversion, her account of such a significant event is quite distant and formulaic. As I will discuss later, she experiences a much fuller and more compelling spiritual transformation when she is in Russia.

⁷⁹ Significantly, Prince's marriage to a former sailor turned court attendant to the Russian czar suggests that she has not forgotten her ancestral legacy of achieving freedom through mobility. For instance, her narrative chronicles how her step father, grandfather and brother "achieved a tenuous freedom in the Americas through the male occupations of soldiering and maritime life" (Gunning 43). Although as we have already seen, she recognizes the limited access black women have to acquire such a subjectivity, Prince manages to find an alternate route to achieving mobility through marriage. Reflecting on the paradoxical nature and import of Prince's decision, Sandra Gunning asks, "what does it mean that as a black woman Prince had to 'escape' to Europe as the wife of a sailor no less rather than as an entirely unfettered agent? ...Unable to become a sailor, Prince married one to take advantage of the full range of mobility denied to her as a woman. And yet, her decision to reject her country also suggests that, despite the economic hardships suffered by all American blacks in the nineteenth-century, the particular site of the United States could not sustain a viable black female existence in the ways it might (ironically) have enabled a black male one"(43).

Here Gunning clearly asserts the difficulties Prince faced in establishing herself as a free mobile subject within U.S. borders. If the body she inhabits denies her access to the mobility of the ship, as Gunning's analysis suggests, the joining or rather conflation of her body with that of a black man, through marriage, provides her with access to the ship's mobility that she so deeply desires.

⁸⁰ See the previous chapter on Amanda Smith for a deeper discussion of the American Colonization Society and motivations for black emigration.

⁸¹ Cheryl Fish, specifically her work *Black and White Women's Travel Narratives: Antebellum Explorations*, is one scholar who does consider the import of Prince's time in Russia.

⁸² In his work, Blakely constructs a lineage of Russian intellectuals who are fiercely critical of slavery and racial oppression in America. This lineage includes dissenting voices as early as 1790, including Alexander Radishchev, who offers a scathing critique of Europeans who after "having laid waste to America, having watered her cornfields with the blood of her native inhabitants[...]these malicious preachers of meekness and love of mankind, added to their cold-blooded murder[...]the purchase of slaves" (qtd. in Blakely 29). Similarly, nearly 50 years afterwards, Alexander Pushkin would call into question America's "advanced enlightenment" by casting a critical eye on "her disgusting cynicism, her cruel prejudices, her intolerable tyranny[...]Negro slavery amidst culture and freedom; genealogical persecutions in a nation without a nobility" (qtd. in Blakely 30).

⁸³ Although Russia may be free of racial injustice, Prince's account of the ...Revolution in 1826 and the violence and inhumane punishments that the government deployed to end it taints this ideal portrait of Russia as a space of potential freedom for black emigrants or any traveler for that matter. She explains that after the attempted overthrow, "There was a general seizing of all classes, who were taken into custody. The scene cannot be described; the bodies of the killed and mangled were cast into the river, and the snow and ice were stained with blood of human victims...the bones of those wounded, who might have been cured, were crushed"(31). These horrific details of bodies being thrown in the river and the injured being killed rather than saved illustrates a general disregard for the preservation of life on the part of the Russian government. Hence, I read Prince's account quite differently than Cheryl Fish, who claims that Prince identifies with the emperor. Her further description of the punishments given to those who survived offers further support for my reading of Prince's gaze as critical of Russian society. For instance, Prince states, "[a] stage was erected and faggots were placed underneath, each prisoner was secured by iron chains, presenting a most appalling sight to an eye-witness...then fire was set to the faggots, and those brave men were consumed. Others received the knout, and even the princesses and ladies of rank were imprisoned and flogged in their own habitations. Those that survived their punishment were banished to Siberia. The mode of banishment is very imposing and very heart-rending, severing them from all dear relatives and friends, for they are never permitted to take their children" (32-33). These terrifying and "heart-rending" scenes of burning flesh, women being flogged and ripped away from their children—families being torn apart indefinitely, seem eerily familiar. Certainly Prince was well aware of the institutionalized violence used to suppress and subjugate black people in America. Her shock and amazement, as well as her inability to find the words to describe what she witnesses hint at the precariousness of Prince's position as a black woman who flees America to escape its violence and degradation only to be confronted with violence and oppression that appear shockingly the same. Hence, in this moment we see the true power and value of Prince's critical practice—it enables her to see and question oppression and injustice beyond the borders of the nation. And, moreover, here Prince's narrative, chronicling her own failed escape, makes clear that merely fleeing from such oppression is not a viable solution.

⁸⁴ Here I reference Stephanie Smallwood's text *Saltwater Slavery*, where she asserts "that the operative unit of the slave ship was not the individual captive person, but rather the aggregate that formed the "complete" human cargo. The slave ship, then, could not proceed on its way toward America retail markets until its decks were crowded with the requisite number of captives" (68).

⁸⁵ A telling example of such racist ideologies in Russian society is Nicholas Dobroliubov's claim in an 1868 article that "[w]e do not think it necessary to deal with the differences between the skulls of Negroes and of other lower races of man and the skulls of people among civilized nations. Who is not aware of the strange development of the upper part of the skull among these [lower] races...?" (qtd. in Blakely 34).

⁸⁶ For instance, Paul speaks of this spiritual alienation from God that all humanity experiences in a fallen and sinful world. He states,

Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens...and stranger to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups [Gentile and Jew] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the

hostility between us.... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God. (Eph 2:12-14, 19)

Paul's words, though aimed specifically at uniting Gentile and Jewish Christians as one spiritual family, clearly illustrates the goal of salvation through Christ, which is reconciliation. More specifically, Paul's illustration positions Jesus as a literal bridge that connects humanity to God. Hence, although alienation, as I discussed earlier in the chapter, is a kind of death—rebirth and new life are possible.

⁸⁷ Once example of this active resistance that Prince engages in occurs in 1847, when Prince along with fellow members of the black community in Boston work together to expel a known slave catcher from a local home. An eyewitness claims that

One day between eleven and twelve o'clock A.M., there was a ripple of excitement in the rear of Smith's Court. Some children had reported that a slaveholder was in Mrs. Dorsey's. ...Mrs. Nancy Prince, a colored woman of prominence in Boston...with several others, hurried to the scene. Mrs. Prince had seen the kidnapper before. Only for an instance did [her] fiery eyes rest upon the form of the villain, as if to be fully assured that it was he, for the next moment she had grappled with him, and before he could fully realize his position she, with the assistance of the colored women that had accompanied her, had dragged him to the door and thrust him out of the house. By this time quite a number, mostly women and children had gathered near by, whom Mrs. Prince commanded to come to the rescue, telling them to "pelt him with stones and any thing you can get a hold of," which order they proceeded to obey with alacrity. The slaveholder started to retreat, and with his assailants close upon him ran out of the court. (Sterling 222)

Though this event takes place after Prince's return from Jamaica, this key moment further reveals Prince's resistant spiritual practice in opposition to the oppressive forces of slavery, which often extended into the North. Moreover, this aggressive act of physically expelling a slaveholder from a home in the black community, illustrates Prince's willingness to do whatever is necessary to preserve the bonds of community. Here kin does not necessarily mean blood ties but includes all those who suffer from racial oppression and are threatened by a market that consumes all black bodies for profit. Of particular importance, here we see that women and children bond together to remove this threat of violence, exploitation and captivity from the community. Moreover, this profound communal act of resistance demonstrates the preservation and protection of home—the assertion of the black community and the homes within it as safe havens from racial and economic injustice and violence. Significantly, this construction of a space where slavery is outlawed and where supporters of the institution are trespassers, Prince and the women who aid her engage in a spiritual practice that preserves the notion of home (rooted in communal ties and common experience of suffering rather than blood relation) as a refuge. Hence, despite attempts to destroy black homes and kinship ties, as Prince's narrative opening makes clear, here we see her actively preserving these homes and ties against the oppressive pull of the market.

⁸⁸ Here, I have borrowed the term *mobile subjectivity* from Cheryl Fish, which she uses in her work on Prince "[t]o account for the varying relationships that Prince constructs for herself in relation to location, institutions, natives, work, and homespaces" (228).

⁸⁹ See my discussion of Amanda Smith in Chapter Three for more on the influence of Western imperial rhetoric and values on African Americans in the nineteenth-century.

⁹⁰ As in her representation of the violence of Russian society, here too Prince's focus on the violence that undergirds Jamaica, serves as a deterrent or, as Cheryl Fish claims, a warning to potential black emigrants. For a more in depth study of Prince's narrative as a "cautionary tale" for black readers, see Fish's article "Journeys and Warnings: Nancy Prince's Travels as Cautionary Tales for African American Readers," found in Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Ivette Romero-Cesareo's edited work, *Women at Sea: Travel Writing and the Margins of Caribbean Discourse*.

⁹¹ My juxtaposition of metaphor and reality is influenced by Mary G. Mason's article, "Travel as Metaphor and Reality in Afro-American Women's Autobiography, 1850-1972," in which Mason charges Prince with "recasting...the spiritual pilgrimage" (355).

⁹² Cheryl Fish, for instance, claims that “the metaphor of a hiding place is ultimately a heavenly one, suggesting an eternal home in submission and death that promises peace no material existence can provide. The domestic homecoming New England is minimized and elided as she time-travels to imagine the final rest” (*Black and White* 63).

⁹³ Of course, Islam is also problematic as a colonizing force, which the film makes evident through the inclusion of the historical figure Bilal Muhammed—an African captive who was stolen from the Sudan as a boy and brought first to the West Indies and later to the Sea Islands. His narrative illustrates the significant role of Islam in the colonization of Africa.

⁹⁴ In his article, “Repositioning: Center and Margin in Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*,” Brouwer uses the image of the kaleidoscope as a metaphor for Dash’s film. Introducing the kaleidoscope in the early scenes of the film, Mr. Snead marvels at the kaleidoscope as a reflection of Western scientific and creative genius. Mr. Snead explains in precise detail how the kaleidoscope is produced: “If an object is placed between two mirrors, inclined at right angles, an image is formed in each mirror. Then, these mirror images are in turn reflected in the other mirrors, forming the appearance of four symmetrically shaped objects” (Dash, *The Making* 82-83). Building on Brouwer’s claim of the kaleidoscope as a metaphor, I’d like to analyze Mr. Snead’s words more closely in order to arrive at a clearer sense of what this *kaleidoscopic perspective* of the film really means. First, Mr. Snead’s words illustrate the function of the kaleidoscope as taking one object and producing four different images—four distinct ways of seeing that object. Hence, we can infer that this *kaleidoscopic perspective* privileges multiple ways of seeing. But Mr. Snead’s next lines are even more interesting, as he exclaims, quite enthusiastically, “Oh, I think it’s just a wonderful invention. It’s beauty, simplicity and science, all rolled into one small tube. I think the children will enjoy it” (Dash, *The Making* 83). It’s clear from his words that just as there are multiple ways of seeing/viewing through the kaleidoscope, there are also multiple ways of viewing this film. Mr. Snead clearly finds pleasure in the science (knowing how the kaleidoscope works by dissecting it into tiny parts, linguistic and material)—an extremely imperialistic/colonizing gesture that reflects perhaps an ethnographic approach in his photographic documenting of the Peasant family. Dash further reiterates Mr. Snead’s intentions, positioning him “as having a secret mission. He has another agenda. He’s going to take pictures of these very, very primitive people and go back and have a showing of what he’s photographed, you know. For me, he also represents the viewing audience” (*The Making*, 38).

This colonial viewing practice (rooted in a privileging of Western epistemology) is pitted against the children’s way of seeing. Since they would clearly lack access to the science behind the kaleidoscope, their enjoyment must come from the beauty and simplicity of it. Quite distinct from Mr. Snead’s method of viewing, which privileges a kind of totalizing knowledge of the object being viewed, a child’s gaze is quite comfortable with the limits of his/her own knowledge and yet a child who is able to enjoy the beauty of these varied images in spite of such limits. In her representation of both ways of seeing, Dash recognizes the existence of multiple viewing practices in her audience, and she is perhaps also aware that many in the audience may not recognize the cultural practices and images that she portrays on the screen. Nevertheless, the goal for such a film, through its “kaleidoscopic perspective,” is to challenge viewers to see and embrace multiple itineraries and representations of, as well as varied possibilities for, black subjectivity.

⁹⁵ There are many examples of such resistance in the play; however, I would like to focus on Caliban’s memory as critical practice. For example, Caliban resists Prospero’s claim to ownership, his claim to be lord and king, of the island by inserting a counter-memory of his own. Caliban states, “This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother,/ Which thou tak’st from me.../For I am all the subjects that you have,/ Which first was mine own king; and here you sty me/ In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me/ The rest o’ th’ island” (1.2. 331-343). Here we see Caliban claiming the island as his by birthright and blood lineage, a natural inheritance which juxtaposes strongly with Prospero’s illegitimate claim by theft, manipulation and violence. Hence, his counter-memory seeks to undermine Prospero’s power and authority by appealing to alternative ways of knowing—knowledge that Prospero does not control. Not surprising, however, Prospero’s response to Caliban’s counterknowledge is a complete dismissal of this memory. Prospero responds, “Thou most lying slave,/ Whom stripes may move, not kindness. I have used thee/ (Filt with thou art) with humane care, and lodged thee/ In mine own cell till thou didst seek to violate/ The honor of my child” (1.2.344-48). By positing Caliban as a lying, savage, rapist, Prospero renders Caliban’s testimony untruthful, unreliable and without merit. Moreover, Francis Barker and Peter Hulme further claim that “Through its very occlusion of Caliban’s version of proper beginnings, Prospero’s disavowal is itself performative of the discourse of colonialism, since this particular reticulation of denial of dispossession

with retrospective justification for it, is the characteristic trope by which European colonial regimes articulated their authority over land to which they could have no conceivable legitimate claim” (206).

⁹⁶ Quite significantly, Viola’s claim that the Atlantic slave trade continued long after the government ban is further supported by historians, who claim that “On March 2, the United States Congress passed landmark legislation that prohibited the importation of African slaves into any region within the jurisdiction of the United States effective January 1, 1808, and President Thomas Jefferson signed the measure into law. Despite the United States government’s efforts to enforce this measure, violations of this law would occur until the time of the American Civil War” (Rodriguez 30-31). Moreover, J. A. Tillinghast, writing in 1902 (the year in which *Daughters’* takes place), similarly asserts (referencing W.E.B. DuBois as his source) “During the fifties, as Du Bois shows, the trade increased in volume, and thousands of raw Africans were smuggled into the country every year” (103).

⁹⁷ Here Viola’s comment links the South with Africa, demonstrating that this positioning of Africa as godless and heathen extends to all black spaces throughout the diaspora.

⁹⁸ Unlike Viola, who believes that the Mainland offers freedom from the social death of the islands, Nana Peazant’s alternative cultural and spiritual knowledge represents the Sea Islands as sustaining the life of the community. This becomes evident during Nana Peazant’s “Hand” Ceremony in which she creates a spiritual link between the migrating members of the family and the Sea Islands to ensure that they do not lose access to this life-giving place.

⁹⁹ Of course, Yellow Mary’s reverse route in which she travels from the Mainland to the Sea Islands, calls Viola’s spiritual journey into question as her presence in this life-giving place, like Nana Peazant, illustrates the possibilities for wholeness, healing and spiritual transformation that are possible in the Sea Islands.

¹⁰⁰ Yellow Mary and Trula also laugh at Mr. Snead’s description of the kaleidoscope as an invention that displays the dominance and genius of Western science. However, Mr. Snead appears oblivious to the critical nature of their response.

¹⁰¹ The audience in critical black female spectatorship, as the name suggests, focuses on black women as critical viewers, though hooks recognizes that “‘the gaze’ has been and is a site of resistance for colonized people globally” (*Black Looks* 116). Furthermore, Hobson asserts that critical black female spectatorship “hints at the possibilities of interpreting the world, and in this context, the world of cinema—as white identified and male oriented as it often is—through an empowered sense of pleasure and looking. Here the black female spectator repositions herself as a viewer and critic by centering black female subjectivity in the arena of visual pleasure” (54).

¹⁰² Not only does the presence of Bilal Muhammed in the film demonstrate Dash’s desire to show the ways in which black people are connected across diasporic space, but his presence also reveals a connection across time. Her decision to include a historical figure from the century before her film takes place further illustrates Dash’s spiritual practice, rooted specifically in an African cosmology that views time quite distinctly from the Western conception of time. As Smith McKoy notes, “time...in African Diaspora cultures is startlingly different from the ways in which Western cultures construct time” (1). In short, within West African cultures, time is cyclical, rather than linear as in the West, meaning that the past, present and future are not distinct periods but are connected and fluid. Highlighting this cyclical and fluid nature of *Diaspora time*, Smith McKoy further explains, “the roots of limbo time are located in West African belief in the cycle of time. Tradition bonds African culture across space and time to the extent that the living is responsible for answering to their ancestors for their behavior. In essence, tradition binds Diaspora cultures to their African roots across space and time in that the ancestor—the mythical and spiritual embodiment of another time—maintains a constant relationship with the living (2). Certainly we can see what Smith McKoy refers to as *limbo* or *Diaspora time* at work through the figure Bilal, who is indeed an ancestor—“the mythical and spiritual embodiment of another time.” Moreover, his presence in the film helps illustrate the spiritual continuities that persist in the face of the Middle Passage and colonization, which seek to strip black peoples of their spiritual and cultural roots.

¹⁰³ Yellow Mary, for instance, exemplifies the syncretic expression of Christianity in her practice of Santeria, which her St. Christopher charm alludes to. Moreover, in Ch. 3, my discussion of Ironbar’s tenuous and critical performance of Christianity as a way to resist the colonizing force of Christian missions that seeks to fundamentally annihilate his African self, further demonstrates the complex spiritual practices of African-descended peoples.

¹⁰⁴ For an expanded understanding of African cosmologies, see Sheila Smith McKoy's article on Diaspora time, "The Limbo Context: Diaspora Temporality and its Reflection in *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Daughters of the Dust*" (1999). Moreover, Janheinz Jahn's seminal book, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World* (1958) explores the central philosophical concepts of African cosmology, including *Nommo*.

¹⁰⁵ This spiritual knowledge echoes Viola's claim to alternative knowledge in her conversation with Mr. Snead. Both Nana Peazant and Viola resist Western attempts to erase non-patriarchal knowledge.

¹⁰⁶ Albert Raboteau, whose historical analysis of slave religion in the American South focuses on the combined practice of Christianity and beliefs, defines syncretism as the integration, blending and synthesis of different religious traditions (22-28). More specifically, he asserts that syncretism includes a "subtle interweaving of African religious customs with...Christian creed" (28). Providing further support for the syncretic relationship between African traditional beliefs and Western Christianity, theologian Gayraud Wilmore, claims that the syncretism of African and Christian beliefs was necessary for the survival of the slave community and was the source of its resistance to white domination and oppression. He states, "It was from within an African religious framework that the slaves made adjustments to Christianity after hearing the gospel. The influences of the African religious past extended into their new life.... Slavery, as a matter of fact, only served to drive those influences from the past beneath the surface.... But instead of decaying there, the African elements were enhanced and strengthened [and] they arose—time and time again during moments of greatest adversity and repression—to subvert the attempt to make the slave an emasculated, depersonalized version of a white person. Christianity alone, adulterated, otherworldly, and disengaged from its most authentic implication—as it was usually presented to the slaves—could not have provided the slaves with all the resources they need for the kind of resistance they expressed. It had to be enriched with the volatile ingredients of the African religious past" (50).

¹⁰⁷ In Eula's naming of trauma, her monologue draws on the power of the word (*Nommo*) to help facilitate the healing of the community, as Nana Peazant does via the "Hand" ceremony. According to Janheinz Jahn, *Nommo* is "the life force, which produces all life, which influences 'things' in the shape of the *word*... a unity of spiritual-physical fluidity, giving life to everything, penetrating everything, causing everything.... All change, all production and generation are effected through the word" (124-45). This power of the spoken word, so central to African cultures, is similarly privileged and foregrounded in Dash's film. It is the power of the word as pronounced by Nana Peazant that calls the "old souls" to act on behalf of Eli and Eula, and it is *Nommo* that initiates the Unborn Child's entrance into the present. Similarly, later in my discussion of Eula, we see *Nommo* at work again in her re-telling of the Ibo Landing myth that initiates Eli's spiritual trance—his engagement with the ancestors ultimately facilitates his healing. Through this continued representation of the power of the word, Dash once again reveals her rejection of Western epistemology and her alternate embracing of African ways of knowing. Through her embrace of African knowledge and spiritual practice, Dash portrays the black community not as a backwards and primitive (as Mr. Snead imagines them through his ethnographic lens) but as possessing a critical power and knowledge that ensures their survival and wholeness in the face of colonization and the Middle Passage that threaten to tear them apart.

The philosophical concept of *Nommo* has played a key role in critical scholarship about African and African American literature and culture. For a deeper discussion of *Nommo* and African as well African American poetry, see Janheinz Jahn's *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World* (1958). See Angela Davis' essay "Black Women and Music: A Historical Legacy of Struggle" (1990) for more on the role of *Nommo* in the spirituals and the blues. And finally, Debra Walker King's book, *Deep Talk: Reading African-American Literary Names* (1998) discusses the central role of *Nommo* in the naming practices evident throughout the African American literary tradition.

¹⁰⁸ In opposition to a Western linear notion of time, Dash's cinematic practice reflects instead an African concept of time as cyclical and fluid, most evident through the presence of the Unborn Child, who Daddy Mac (Nana Peazant's oldest son) refers to as "our child of the future" (Dash, *The Making* 142). Further revealing the collaborative work of the living, the ancestors, and the unborn across time and space (what Sheila McKoy refers to as *Diaspora time*), the Unborn Child arrives only because Nana Peazant and the ancestors facilitate her movement from a future time and space to the present—exemplifying this cyclical nature of time and space. Further demonstrating the film's deployment of *limbo time*, the Unborn Child's first words in the film are "My story begins on the eve of my family's migration North. My story begins before I was born. My great great grandmother, Nana Peazant, saw her family coming apart. Her flower to

bloom in a distant frontier” (Dash, *The Making* 80). Here this shifting between present tense verbs (begins) and past tense verbs (was born), along with Nana Peazant’s vision of the future separation of her family, serve to reveal *Diaspora* or *limbo time* at work in the film. See footnote 102 for a lengthier discussion of Sheila McKoy’s terms.

¹⁰⁹ Here, again, Dash’s cinematic practice, her embrace of multiple ways of seeing, becomes evident. I attribute the varying ways in which characters in the film interact with the Unborn child as a reflection of these multiple viewing practices and perspectives. Haagar’s lack of awareness of the Unborn Child’s presence, even when she tugs on her dress, demonstrates her rejection of African-derived spiritual practices and knowledge. In opposition to Haagar’s rejection, this self-imposed “blindness,” Nana Peazant and Eula are clearly aware of the Unborn Child’s presence through their interactions with her. Moreover, the children’s ability to see and play with the Unborn Child reflects Dash’s privileging of a childlike perspective that is all-embracing and capable of an unquestioning faith in the face of mystery. See footnote 94 for a deeper discussion of how this childlike perspective illustrates Dash’s kaleidoscopic vision in her film.

¹¹⁰ As with her inclusion of Bilal Muhammed, another historical “inaccuracy,” here Dash displays her employment of *Diaspora time* in the making of her film—revealing the cyclical and fluid nature of the past, present and future.

¹¹¹ Eli’s walking on the water is confirmed unequivocally by the screenplay, which explains that Eli “has come from the graveyard and he is walking on the water. Eli is walking towards the floating, rotting, Figurehead broken off years ago from the prow of a slave ship” (Dash, *The Making* 141). Though *Daughters* represents multiple tellings of the Ibo Landing Myth, including Bilal Muhammed’s claim that the Ibo drowned, which I will discuss later in this section, this simultaneous dramatizing of Eli walking on water with Eula’s recounting of the Ibo Landing Myth challenges us to consider the possibility that the Ibo did indeed walk home.

Here, again, in Eula’s re-telling of the myth, Eula deploys Nommo, drawing on the power of the word, much as the African griot does to remember, recall and recollect the history of the community. However, her words also demonstrate the spiritual force and power of Nommo as they help initiate Eli’s spiritual vision and encounter with the ancestors. In this moment, through these African-derived spiritual practices, the past, present and future intersect as Eula’s recalling of the past and the “old souls” into the present through Nommo (the word) enables Eli to bear witness to this past and to witness the future as well. Dash’s screenplay makes clear that in this experience Eli witnesses the future inside Eula’s womb—seeing that the Unborn Child is indeed *his* unborn child (Dash, *The Making* 142). Hence, the womb and the tomb unite, as Eli’s encounter with those who have passed on and his recognition of the child in Eula’s womb enables a kind of spiritual rebirth for Eli and ensures the possibility of new life—not only for Eli but for the next generation.

¹¹² Here I borrow the term “theoretical stance” from Joel Brouwer, who asserts in his article “Repositioning: Center and Margin in Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*,” that Dash’s technique embraces multiple ways of seeing (10-11).

¹¹³ Not only does this myth highlight the multiple histories and genealogies of black people throughout the Diaspora, but the words that Eula speaks (which Dash borrows from Paule Marshall’s novel *Praisesong for the Widow*) further illustrate an African concept of time in which the past, present and future are linked. For instance, her statement that “It was here they brought them. They took the Ibo off the boats, right here where we stand” shows the ways in which the space of the present is inextricably linked to the past (Dash, *The Making* 141). Moreover, Eula’s words “The minute those Ibo were brought ashore, they just stopped, and took a look around.... And they saw things that day that you and I don’t have the power to see. Well, they saw just about everything that was to happen around here...The slavery time, the war my grandmother always talks about...Those Ibo didn’t miss a thing. They even saw you and I standing here talking” (Dash, *The Making* 141) clearly illustrate a fluidity between the past, present, and future. In Eula’s words, the present and the past are once again inextricably linked as she recollects the “old souls,” who similarly bear witness to Eula and the Unborn Child’s presence (“They even *saw* you and I standing *here*...”). Ultimately, Eula’s ability to call forth the ancestors through her re-telling of the past and the ability of the Ibo captives to see into the future reveals the ways in which the boundaries between the past, present and future are permeable or penetrable.

¹¹⁴ Haagar’s reject of community is both geographical and relational.

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