

Breaking Trances and Engaging the Erotic: The Search for a Queer Spirituality

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This paper considers how queer women who are both constituted in and desire freedom from Christian discourse on sexuality can achieve spiritual transcendence. Utilizing performative writing as a method of inquiry, this paper traces my own journey into a new kind of spirituality by reframing my sexual practice as a queer woman. Because of the unique ways in which women's sexuality is constituted within Christian discourses and the profoundly masculine perspective of both queer and many spiritual discourses, the uniqueness of queer women's spirituality deserves attention. In the end, the essay offers Audre Lorde's notion of the erotic as an alternative way to view and experience queer sexual practice.

Key Words: spiritual transcendence, trance versus no-trance, queer, the erotic

I remember lying in bed beside my best friend in high school during overnight visits. As good Christian girls, we prayed aloud to Jesus before we fell asleep, holding soft hands beneath the covers until we said "Amen." I'd often hold onto her hand a little longer, accidentally let my leg rub against hers, and apologize while giggling. Sometimes we'd cuddle. I'd wrap an awkward arm around her thin waist and she'd lace her fingers through mine as she'd fall into a slumber. Friends who love each other (and Jesus) would do this sort of thing in high school. I could never fall asleep. So wrapped up in the moment, the power of our prayers, captivated by the smells of shampoo and perfume, aroused by the feeling of her skin next to

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my skin, and afraid of where my hands might go as the dreamworld overtook my senses.

Conjuring those memories still provokes pleasure—pleasure located somewhere between the spiritual connection we genuinely shared and the sexual arousal that I experienced. That ambiguous space, constituted by the familiar demand to repress this kind of spirituality/sexuality and the excitement that such repression can incite, is a vibrant space. Of course at the time, the space just seemed awful. As a young Christian woman immersed in a silent struggle over sexuality, I disdained that confusion. Beginning with Paul's letters, within that Christian tradition that insists upon sexual purity, restraint and pro-creative, conjugal heterosexuality, the necessity to remain silent about those erotic experiences, to leave them in the space between the mattress and the sheets, remains stifling and continually repressive. For women this repression is especially stark as the demands for women's chastity and purity always receive far more attention than the demands for men (De la Garza). Moreover, women's virtue has also long connected with their denial of the pleasures of sexuality (Bell).

Of course, women throughout history seldom remain silent on the nature of women's oppression within Christian traditions, perhaps most famously marked by Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 1895 publication of *The Woman's Bible*. Confronting Christian gender and sexuality-based discrimination continues to the present. The much acclaimed and discussed 2007 film, *For the Bible Tells Me So*, marks yet another attempt to confront this Christian tradition by providing a biblical foundation for alternative forms of sexuality, particularly homosexuality for both women and men. This film joins a collection of other texts and resources that argue Christianity and certain alternative sexualities and practices are not incongruous.¹ Such texts necessarily fill a void in people's lives and work against what lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) faith organizations refer to as "spiritual violence" perpetuated by homophobia.

These texts, however, do not speak to everyone. First, they are mostly irrelevant for those queers who are completely uninterested in or have no connection to Christianity. Second, these texts do little for those queer people who are impacted by Christianity but desire a spiritual life outside of it. In my experience reading many of these texts, they also often ignore the specificity of women's experiences with sexuality. While some LGBT or queer people seek connection with Christianity, an increasing number of "ex-Christian" websites, blogs, and social groups have popped up over the past several years. A quick perusal of these spaces indicates that many

¹ See, for example, White (1995, 2006). Websites and organizations include: The Gay Christian Network (www.gaychristian.net), which also houses an online radio station; Soulforce, Inc. (www.soulforce.org) and *Whosoever* online magazine for LGBT Christians (www.whosoever.org). Interestingly, most of these are for the general LGBT community or emphasize male experience specifically. One exception is the online community "Sister Friends" (www.sisterfriends-together.org).

include significant LGBT membership. The categorization of “ex-” suggests that even some of those who no longer espouse Christian values remain at least somewhat tied to the former identity. That tiny, sometimes irritating marker “ex-” indicates the trace of the past that always inscribes the present. One ex-Christian website features “testimonies,” perhaps not-so-ironically appropriating a primary method of Christian community building. LGBT (mostly G) people author many of these testimonies. One man writes of his experience with Christianity, “I was and am gay and had lots of trauma over god hating me for that and for all my masturbating.”² While the remainder of his testimony tracks his journey out of Christianity, he writes nothing of any other spirituality. I can remember being in a place like that. I remember feeling that sense of hatred apparently directed at me by god. I scour the testimonies, and I find few mentions of present spirituality, especially from queer women. I wonder, how can queer people who are both constituted in and desire freedom from Christian discourse on sexuality achieve spiritual transcendence? This paper is a response to this question by utilizing my journey into a new kind of spirituality that reframes my own queer sexual practice. Specifically, it is as a queer woman who now finds spirituality outside of Christianity, I speak to other queer women.³ Because of the unique ways in which women’s sexuality is constituted within Christian discourses and the profoundly masculine perspective of both queer and many spiritual discourses, the uniqueness of queer women’s spirituality deserves attention.

Toward that end, I utilize performative writing as a method for inquiry, weaving theoretical concepts with narrative to create and support my arguments (Pelias). Performative writing provides an alternative mode of developing ideas and reaching audiences. In an attempt to move away from modes of objectivity advocated by positivism, performative writers know “through a reliance on the poetic” (xi). The poetic, while never separate from the demands of verifiability, looks toward “plural truths rooted in the personal” (xi). Performative writing thus centers the self at the same time that the self becomes a site to engage in a dialogue about those forces larger than the self. Here, I propose what I hope to be a coherent, plausible, imaginative, and empathic essay about a particular kind of experience

² see the entry at: <http://exchristian.net/testimonies/2003/10/free-from-christian-mind-control.php>

³ Though I imagine and hope that queer men will also be able to connect with the arguments presented here, because of the nature of my narratives and experiences, and conversations with queer men who find themselves in similar situations as myself in regard to Christianity, I am uneasy about generalizing my experience as a woman to queer people. I also want to note that my usage of the word “queer” refers to practice more than identity. Specifically, I use the word queer to mark solo- and same-sex sexual acts. These acts become especially queer in response to a Christian tradition that condemns both as unnatural.

experienced by a particular kind of person. I hope this essay will offer insight and point toward directions for material action.

The Trance of Christian Discourse

Christianity remains a central organizing feature of many queer and/or LGBT people's spirituality (e.g., Chávez; Goltz; Johnson; Rudy; Russell; Taylor; White; Wilcox). As Jenny Wade notes, while in some historical spiritual practices a strong connection between sex and spirituality existed, over time, the bridge between sexuality and spirituality evaporated. This is evident within Christian traditions dating back to the time of Augustine when framing sex as always potentially evil and wrong becomes part of the Church's discourse. This potential gets actualized in modern times, as Michel Foucault claims, in post-Victorian society, where sexual acts had to be confessed to priests in order for sex to be subjugated at the level of language, and for the "truth" of sex to be discovered. Sexuality thus becomes "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power" (103). While some have claimed that this led to repression, Foucault argues that such enactments of power actually compelled a proliferation of discourse on sex, much of it within the parameters set forth by the Christian church and the medical community. Within the proliferation of discourse, only a very specific kind of talk about sex, however, is considered appropriate. This power primarily aimed at eliminating "deviant" sexual practices and linking sexual control with spiritual health. While Foucault's writing emphasizes a masculine subject, the impact of discourses on women's bodies has always been unique (e.g. Bartky; Bordo; McLaren). Women's bodies get disciplined in ways unfamiliar to men in factors such as comportment, purity, adornment and self-control. Nevertheless, as Foucault and the feminists who critique him maintain about the nature of discourse, it should not be thought of in terms of a binary relation of dominant/dominated, for example, but rather "as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" (100). Even in seemingly repressive times, discourse never entirely serves power.

Contemporary Christian discourse on sexuality is perhaps less controlled than in post-Victorian times, both formally and informally. Not all Christian traditions perpetuate or promote a disconnection between an array of sexual practices and spirituality. Yet, as recent divisions within Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches over the issue of homosexuality demonstrate, even "mainstream" denominations face dilemmas over sexuality. Fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics are among the strongest proponents of viewing non-conjugal sexuality as a potential problem for believers. Kathy Rudy explains that the rise of the Christian Right in the United States since 1980 created an emphasis on so-called "traditional family values" that demands rigorous control over sexual practices in order to remain spiritually pure. This discourse impacts women and men differently, as women have long been

viewed as the keepers and promoters of values. Moreover, while women have rarely been the originators of these discourses or allowed to be public leaders, the demands on their bodies and their actions have always been especially rigorous. Generally speaking, as Mel White writes in his autobiography, the family values discourse continually vilifies all queer sexual practice to the point that many Christian communities chastise and ostracize anyone who desires to be an active Christian and homosexual. This in turn directly correlates with the high rates of suicide among gay and lesbian youth (White 310). Less severely, the virulent anti-queer belief and rhetoric simply keeps many queer people away from Christianity in any form (Wilcox).

Queer and LGBT Christians have responded to this oppressive discourse by creating LGBT-centered churches, actively working for social change within Christian churches, and offering alternative theologies. For example, networks like Soulforce actively challenge the anti-LGBT stances of Christian churches and organizations through civil disobedience, marches, national dialogues, and media campaigns. Soulforce, and others like it, continue to center the experiences of men as few lesbians work at the helm. Queer theologies celebrate the unique spiritual position of queer people, attempt to reframe the way that Christianity relates to LGBT and/or queer people, and “queer” taken-for-granted beliefs about the sacred (Althaus-Reid; Bardella). However, organizations like Soulforce and doctrines like queer theology offer little for those who seek freedom from Christianity, and yet are haunted by its teaching and condemnations. I would argue that this is especially true for queer women as the intertwining impacts of sexism and homophobia rarely get investigated in these “queer” spaces.⁴ Moreover, since women’s sexuality is not the center of many of these discussions, possibilities for understanding the connections between *queer* women’s sexuality and spirituality hardly exist.⁵ With few models available for queer women’s spirituality, especially for those impacted by Christian discourse, what is the possibility for spirituality? I propose that part of the process for such queer women embracing a spiritual dimension

⁴ A search for “sexism” on Soulforce’s website, for example, results in seven hits. An article by renowned theologian Walter Wink notes the patriarchal/sexist assumptions present in the renunciations of male/male sexuality in *Leviticus* (see <http://www.soulforce.org/article/homosexuality-bible-walter-wink>). One article notes in parentheses that sexism and homophobia often go “hand in hand” (see: <http://www.soulforce.org/article/526>). The other articles mention sexism in a list of discriminations.

⁵ Importantly, many non-Christian spiritual traditions emphasize femininity and the power of goddesses. Many of these same traditions also reinscribe heteronormativity by focusing on male/female balance which easily points toward the necessity for male/female relationality and sexuality. A discussion of alternative spiritual traditions and sexuality is outside the purview of this paper. I am particularly interested in reframing sexual practices for those queer women who feel the impacts of a dominant Christian discourse on sexuality.

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in their lives in the midst of adversity requires reframing queer sexual practices.⁶ Rather than submitting to a belief that queer sexual practices are wrong, or are at best issues to remain silent about—which is how I once experienced them—reframing provides an alternative way for knowing experience.

Psychologist Stephen Wolinsky offers a helpful perspective on reframing by comparing Eastern meditation traditions with the perspectives of a Western hypnotherapy on “trance” versus “no-trance” states of consciousness. In conventional thinking about trances, a trance allows people the freedom and clarity to say things they normally would not say, and it is a state one is put into momentarily. As useful tools to gain access to a person’s subconscious or unrestrained self, trances typically imply something other than “normal” or no-trance existence. Wolinsky shifts this conventional understanding to suggest that we *normally* exist within the trances of our lives, and that the no-trance state actually allows us to exist with more clarity. Lucidity characterizes the no-trance state. Individuals who work toward the no-trance state possess an awareness and perceptiveness that offers unique possibilities for understanding and changing behavior. The no-trance state challenges habituation as habits must be reflected upon for their troubling or unhealthy traits. Because of our habituated ways of behaving and viewing life’s occurrences, in the trance state we only utilize those lenses to understand what *happens to us*. In the no-trance state, we create free-flowing experience and we allow meaning to simply come without using our typical frames of knowing. More precisely, Wolinsky concludes:

The distinction between the trance and a no-trance state is, did you create it or did it just happen to you? In a trance state the experience happens to you [. . .]. In a no-trance state, you are aware of yourself as the creator of the experience, which then moves you *beyond* the experience. (49)

The marking of a complete distinction between a trance and no-trance state perhaps raises suspicion in light of post-structuralist claims about the inability to step outside of discursively constituted agency and subjectivity. However, in terms of thinking of spirituality, the language of trance works

⁶ I am emphasizing the practices here more than the identity because in the dominant religious and/or spiritual discourse, it is the practices that are problematic. For instance, most religious organizations that condemn homosexuality or any “abnormal” sexuality are primarily concerned with the practices. This is why organizations such as Exodus International, the group who “converts” homosexuals back to heterosexuality, doesn’t suggest that they make homosexuals back into heterosexuals, rather they get homosexuals to give up their homosexual acts in order to engage in heterosexual ones. Moreover, most religious organizations do not condemn homosexuals who choose to remain celibate or who choose to marry. It is the acts that they have a problem with.

because it marks experience outside of the everyday and points toward “trance-ecstasy.” Moreover, the trance parallels the discursive construction of reality that compels subjects to act in certain ways (Butler *Bodies*). Often people do not question those discursive constructions, assuming that they are the meaning, and that people do not have the agency to alter the discourse, or to find a new discourse. Contrarily, the no-trance state approximates existing in the junctures between discourse (Butler “Contingent Foundations”), where one recognizes that the discourses constitute life experiences, but that subjects have the agency to avoid being constricted by the imposed meaning those discourses possess. Discourses and trances both restrict and produce.

The possibility to function within no-trance states or in the junctures between discourses provides a place for queer women to seek transcendence through the sexual acts they engage in because they can recognize that they are indeed the creators, or at least co-creators of the *meanings*. Though questions over women’s agency long provoke lively and important debate, most agree that women (and subjects generally) have some agency, regardless of from where it emerges (e.g. Biesecker; Butler *Antigone’s Claim*; Butler “Contingent Foundations”; Campbell). Queer women can also acknowledge that discourse refuses complete subservience to dominance and power (Foucault). The experiences and the meaning of those experiences can be reframed so they no longer just happen to people; rather, queer women can move beyond passivity into transcendence.⁷ Without reframing, transcendent, no-trance moments give way back into the harshness of dominant discourse. Reframing requires mindfulness and practice. Habituation is strong; no one gets it right the first time.

On some typical afternoon, alone in my apartment, I pleasure myself to thoughts of two women. Their faces go in and out of my head like a music video as I attempt to bring some cathartic climax. We create poetry with our bodies. We waltz across dark dance floors into vibrant lights onstage. I relax and enjoy the images darting across my mind’s screen in time with the traces of my touch. Now I see three faces. Blue eyes, brown, green. I hear the music of their soft moans, and the vibrations of their loud ones. I feel their hips rocking back and forth with the deep drum beat we’ve begun. I taste their sweet lips and feel their nipples with my sweaty finger tips. Their eyes close and reopen to connect with mine like ecstatic chords burning into my soul. Their mouths open as they get that tense sensation in their clits. I feel them getting close. I too get close. My body begins to quiver, beginning at my toes, shimmering up to my knees and hips. My stomach contracts, and I grab forcefully onto the sheets of the bed. My shoulders convulse, and I feel my pulse in my temples. I lurch my head back; I still see their faces. I hear them and feel them coming onto me, like a cacophonous choir. I come with

⁷ Transcendence is one of the most prevalent concepts in spirituality and theology. Here, I follow Berger’s discussion of transcendence as signs that point beyond the natural toward the supernatural.

them. "Oh, god," I whisper. My body shakes rhythmically as the pleasure pours from me, singing into the air around me. I breathe in and let one slight eruption culminate the experience. Everything pauses as my breathing slows. The tension eases from the tips of my toes.

Whose face do I see now? I've forgotten in the moment as I am engulfed only in the images and touch. My knuckles relax against the sweaty sheets. I exhale. The light pries my eyes open and I'm flooded in an entirely different way: "Should I be pleasuring myself when I am in a relationship? Am I now feeling some sense of shame? Is non-abusive sexual expression ever wrong? Are my fantasies abusive?" In the midst of the climactic exchange with my postmodern, fragmented lover, I felt nothing but the transcendence provided from the playful pleasure. As I lie there naked between my pillows and the ghosts of my fantasy, I catapult back into discourse. In the liminal space of sexual expression, I think I find transcendence, but before and after, I am compelled into the austerity of an all-too-familiar discourse on appropriate sexuality. What could a reframing of the experience and the discourse look like? No one gets it right the first time.

Seeking Transcendence, Breaking Trances

1996. I am making love to a woman for the first time. I feel nervous, but excited. We lie in the top bunk of her dark dorm room on the third floor of Taylor Hall. The moonlight shines a blue aura on our shadowy bodies as the cold winter wind knocks the trees against the window. We try to be quiet, and I am not sure that we are sure what we are about to do. I have no idea what two women even do with each other, but I know I want to figure it out. She's on top of me; all of her clothes are on—thick yellow sweater, faded blue jeans. We kiss intensely, searchingly, uncertainly. I slowly move my hands under her shirt. I massage her soft back. I want to ask her if it's okay, but I can't speak. We breathe heavier. We still try to be quiet. I fumble with the clasp of her bra. I can't believe I'm doing this. I've never felt like this, but what am I doing? The bra gives, and my hands have full range of her back. I tentatively push up her shirt. We roll onto our sides. We keep our eyes closed. Her lips feel funny—there's no stubble. We don't open our eyes or talk. It's as if talking will make real what we are doing. I'm going to have to pray about this. I hope no one finds out. It feels so amazing. My hands feel disconnected from me as I trace her body. I already feel guilty. I don't want to stop. She doesn't seem to want to stop either. We cautiously remove each others' clothes. We lie innocently, exploring each others' bodies with much uncertainty. We finish; I guess. We still can't look at each other. Did we make a mistake? Are we going to hell? We sheepishly put our clothes back on, and I think we are both trapped between what just seemed so right, but what has to be so incredibly wrong. I sheepishly escape back to my dorm room. The pattern quietly repeats for months.

Play marks one sign of transcendence. Confined by oppressive discourses on propriety and sexuality, sexual acts might create pleasure,

but they might not be playful. Historically, sexual acts have often not even created pleasure for women. The need for queer women to experience pleasure and play and the ability to connect sex with pleasure and play suggests a first move toward spiritual transcendence. Peter Berger elaborates this connection between play and transcendence by suggesting that, “Play always constructs an enclave within the ‘serious’ world of everyday social life [. . .] . Joy is play’s intention. When this intention is actually realized, in joyful play, the time structure of the playful universe takes on a very specific quality—namely, *it becomes eternity*” (58). Play can be found anywhere in everyday life, but it signals transcendence because the implicit intention of play points beyond human nature to the supernatural (61). More than silliness or immaturity, play constitutes a particularly powerful resource. María Lugones notes, only when we can be playful, are we truly safe in a space and able to be healthy. In the right contexts and/or with the right partner(s), sexual expression is a playful experience. Sex can be about exploration, child-like discovery, and of course, joy. Our bodies can be naked and vulnerable, yet when the experience is with the self or someone who accepts us fully, sex is fun. Discovering and enacting sexuality can be a playful experience.

The possibility of the experience relies on the frames with which we approach it, and the trances we allow ourselves to break. The trance of the Puritan ethic that calls us to find joy in denying the flesh manipulates the possibilities of play and reifies a spirit/body split. Despite the dogmatic constraint, because of the strong connection between spiritual life and sexual control implied in Christianity, for some, the need to connect spirituality with sexuality exists. Even though the dogma might create a negative association between the two, breaking the habit of connecting them may not be possible or desirable. The meaning attached to the relationship between sexuality and spirituality, however, needs alteration. Robert Solomon writes:

Erotic love is so central to spirituality (although this is precisely what is rejected by some familiar religious traditions) because it is so *exciting*. Spirituality is not merely peace of mind, tranquility, contentment. It is a passion, the passion for life and the world. It is a movement, not a state. Unlike many of the virtues (amiability, trustworthiness, fairness, modesty, temperance), erotic love has its violent aspects. [. . .] Physical arousal, like sex, is morally and hedonically neutral; its role in our lives depends on context, and, in particular, on the emotions that accompany it and the relationships in which it comes to count as expression. (37)

Here Solomon notes that sexual acts do not have to connote a particular dogma as they are in and of themselves neutral. Shifting the meaning of the experience has the potential then to relocate sexual acts as profoundly spiritual.

2004. I am making love to a woman for what feels like the first time. We lie in her bed. It's the middle of the afternoon, and the breeze waves the shutters against the windows. Warm light shines on us. We look at each other. We don't say much yet. We don't have to. We both know what we're there to do, and we both know what we are doing. She's the best kisser I know. Our lips and tongues move against each other in perfect unison. We never close our eyes. We pierce each other with our thoughts and emotions. We make quiet moans and loud ones. I kiss her neck. She tastes sweet like subtle perfume, and she gasps as my mouth searches her shoulders. We wrap our arms around each other. We move across the surface of the bed, back and forth, never disconnecting. Sometimes we laugh when an arm or our hair gets in the way. It never breaks our rhythm. We recognize that what we are doing is so much fun. We slowly strip each others' clothes. We do it purposefully. It's all part of the game. "Do you ever feel like we are in a French love story?" she asks as I stroke her hair and kiss her chest. "All the time," I respond looking playfully into her eyes. "Me too. I love it," she giggles and lies back on her pillow. We caress and pleasure each other all afternoon. Sometimes we stop to talk about something that enters one of our minds. We joyously give and receive orgasms. Our bodies sweat. Her perfume has drifted into the fabric of the sheets. We hold each other close. I map all the contours of her body with my fingertips. We explore each others' bodies with our eyes. We laugh some more. Eventually a growling stomach and an annoying cell phone bring us back. We stand up naked, hug tightly, and she walks into the bathroom to pee. I slowly put my clothes on. She watches me. I watch her watching me. We have so much energy toward life right now. We know the power that we have. We want to embrace and engage that power—politically and poetically.

Many women enjoy queer sexual encounters. The spiritual dimension of sexual expression is not necessary for anyone, and I am sure that queer women experience a spiritual dimension in their sexual expression. However, the many queer women who seek freedom from the dogma of certain kinds of Christianity—those who remain impacted by Christian discourse, and yet desire an active spiritual life—may need such reframing. This work shows that the possibility exists, and if so desired, it should be one that people are able to experience regardless of the stigma spirituality creates for some women who identify as queer. This work invites a new epistemology, a way of preparing for engagement with the world that breaks through the trances perpetuated by a Christian-based sexual ideology. Specifically, I argue that reframing queer sexual practice as potentially transcendent pushes toward viewing the erotic dimensions of our lives as central to our spirituality.

Toward the Erotic

While scholars writing in various spiritual traditions provide some helpful language and tools for thinking of transcendence, Audre Lorde's discussions

of the erotic concretize the type of queer spirituality I work to enact above. The erotic embodies transcendence and subsequently an epistemology for engaging with life that might help queers who are haunted by Christianity to break that trance. Because of oppression, women in particular have been taught to suppress their erotic impulses (53). Men know the power of erotic and “nonrational knowledge.” Fear of feminine energy has historically compelled men (and women) to condemn women to punishment and even death for engaging in “nonrational” practice such as natural healing, midwifery and paganism. Thus, in patriarchal societies, women grow to distrust that power. The woman who refuses to fear the erotic and believe that physical sensation or the “pornographic” closely resembles erotic experience engages “a well of replenishing and provocative force” (54). In patriarchal societies, unattached sensation suppresses the spirituality of the erotic so that the power it possesses becomes similarly suppressed or submerged. In other words, sexual acts lead to physical pleasure and gratification. No emphasis gets placed on the spiritual dimensions of those acts or the possibility to engage in a variety of acts outside of conjugal heterosexuality. If sex and experience more generally do not elicit the kind of powerful energy that can lead to social and personal change, then challenges to the status quo are unlikely. However, acts of sex can be framed in such a way that we recognize the energy that we receive from the connection. That energy then allows us to be alert and ready to engage with the world around us. If women (and men) can take that power and utilize it toward ends outside of physical gratification, people can achieve significant change and deeper meaning in their lives.

Importantly, not all sex is erotic; nor is all expression powerful. Unequal power relationships exist and sexual expression requires a specific context and meaning between people to achieve the power found in eroticism. Therefore, Lorde explains, “When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55). The erotic is thus spiritual, extending beyond sex and into the other realms of our lives. If we accept both our modes of expressing love and the spiritual dimension involved, not only do we access power, but we also have a wider capacity for political action:

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic – the sensual – those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings. (56)

Queer women reared in Christian traditions that condemn sexuality outside of conjugal bonds may lose connection with the erotic. Losing such

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connections may construct frames for behavior and desire that mark them as shameful. Yet, when centering and embracing the erotic, these frames shift. Though many queer women (and people in general of course) are enmeshed in the trances of their past experiences, the erotic enables reframing toward transcendence. Lorde states, "Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy" (56). Much like Berger marks play as a sign of transcendence, the joy of the erotic points toward the supernatural. Accessing the power that joy and play supply requires reframing. Lorde proclaims, "Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama" (59). This reframing indeed helps to break the trance of experiencing erotic expression and allows one to move into a no-trance state where we recognize our agency to create, rather than just to have experiences.

The erotic opens the possibility for a spiritual dimension to queer sexual expression for those who remain troubled by Christian dogma because it provides the clear frame with which to move from the trance to the no-trance state. The erotic offers a new frame within which women whose sexual practices are unintelligible to a dominant society become not only intelligible, but celebrated and powerful. The life force of the erotic also pushes beyond the mind/body/spirit split toward an enriched and holistic space. This enriched space de-centers shame and refuses to submit to dominant discursive power constructs. This process of reframing requires continual work; no one gets it right the first time, or every time.

I'm watching salsa dancing with a group of friends. We are that group of women at a table without men who appear desperate. Ironically, more than half of us are lesbians, and we once again got roped into spending the evening in a heteronormative space. Sometimes I am not sure how I end up in these places. "Two women can dance together here you know," one of my straight friends tells me. She's sincere and yet she doesn't understand the implications of two women who really desire each other dancing in a room laced with machismo and sexual energy. "I know, but I don't really want to dance," I pipe back. I don't want to dance here. I grab my girlfriend's hand and look to the other lesbian couple we sit with. We're hunched over, nursing our beers. "The lesbian bar is just down the street," one of my friends quips. I perk up. "Oh it is?" "Yea, you all wanna go in a bit?" I think for a minute. I feel bad being one of those lesbians who can't handle being in straight spaces. I chuckle a bit as a relay this to my friend. "I know, I feel bad too, and then I think why the hell do I feel bad?" "Good point. Let's go over there." We pick up our jackets and tell our straight friends where we're going. "A few years ago I would've just suffered the rest of that awkward night," I comment as we exit. We get into the lesbian bar and we all begin walking a little lighter. The familiar crowd, the mix of boys with boys, girls with girls and boys with girls soothes. "I needed to wash the straight off me," my friend laughs. "Tell me about it. I'm just glad we left." In a minute

my girlfriend and I step onto the dance floor. I want to dance here. We gaze at each other, wrap our arms around each other, kiss and pull apart playfully. Nobody watches. I feel rejuvenated.

Conclusions

This essay marks my personal shift from a trance to a no-trance state and my attempts to embody Lorde's conceptions of the erotic in my life as a queer woman. This ability to find spiritual transcendence outside of Christian-dominated thought functions at the level of epistemology in providing people with a new way to know the world with which they engage. Being able to know *in* the moment of an experience is central to our ability to maneuver the world. The ability to be conscious of the epistemologies we use to guide us through the everyday is no easy task. If we are stifled in areas of our lives, particularly those central to our ability to be playful (Lugones), then we may not be able to achieve such mindfulness. For this reason, and for those who seek freedom from constraints—spiritual or otherwise—that limit the possibilities of transcendence, explorations such as this one are necessary. The possibility of queer women's spiritual epistemologies mark important ruptures both in spiritual and queer discourses, which so often engender a masculine perspective. The possibility for women to achieve spiritual transcendence within a number of traditions often gets precluded by the failure to view women as fully-spiritual beings (on their own). Moreover, because women's erotic potential conjures fear within sexist societies, women often face significant obstacles in fostering creative spirituality. In homophobic societies, queer women's erotic potential is even more subdued. In this way, offering tools for reframing queer sexual practice as playful, joyful and erotic not only provides avenues for personal transcendence, but also for the possibility of wider social change. It is this latter possibility that Lorde and Lugones point to—a world where women are free to engage their erotic and playful selves without racist, sexist and homophobic restriction.

Spirituality may be an important dimension of social change more generally. Though the dogma and constraint of major religions that are consistently hostile to feminist and queer epistemologies often prevent academics from turning toward the spiritual as a resource for theory or activism, the spiritual should be regarded as ripe with potential. The need to challenge restrictive discourses by enacting their *productive* potential seems to be what the turn to spirit calls for. If transcendence is akin to finding the junctures where discourse is renewed, then spirituality provides a rich discursive tool that holds the possibility for material change. For instance, in Gloria Anzaldúa's discussion of *conocimiento*, or the "aspect of consciousness urging you to act on the knowledge gained" (577), she urges the reader to consider spirituality as a source of that knowledge. She maintains that we reach *conocimiento* through "creative acts" and by acknowledging the personal within a larger frame of experience. In

suggesting the interconnection of all consciousness and existence, Anzaldúa points toward "spiritual activism" both in writing and elsewhere. Spiritual activism requires alternative ways of relating with others and also ourselves. Perhaps the erotic is one such alternative way to reframe and enact spiritual activism. If the erotic is a framework for reframing queer sexual practice, it is also a means to reframe other dimensions of our lives. Performance scholars strive to center the body and obliterate the mind/body dualism, but what about the spirit? Can we nurture our spirits in such a way that we also reframe our work as erotic? Perhaps such a shift in our epistemological orientations sexually, interpersonally, and intellectually provides a rich resource to offer new visions and experiences of our reality. Reconnecting with or recreating pleasurable and playful dimensions of our work and our relationships opens pathways to transcendence in all aspects of our lives, and it is in that transcendence that the possible can become the actual.

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