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# Bodies as Living, Twirling Sacrifices: Performing Black Girlhood, Liturgical Dance, and the Black Church Tradition

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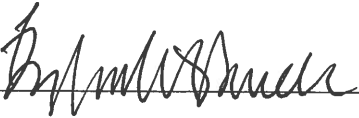
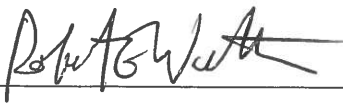
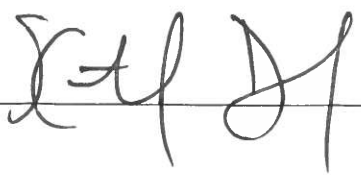
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**Cultural Studies Program**  
**Humanities, History, and Social Sciences**  
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**Bodies as Living, Twirling Sacrifices:  
Performing Black Girlhood, Liturgical Dance, and the Black Church  
Tradition**

**by,**

Brianna Heath

**Capstone Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies**

**Cultural Studies Program  
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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to investigate liturgical dance in the black church tradition as a gendered space. I argue that black girls perform their sexuality as ascribed to hetero-patriarchal ideology—as preached within the black church—through liturgical dance. This ideology akin to politics of respectability separates the sacred from the secular which causes a tension. This tension shows up in the hyper-ness of liturgical dancing. This study discusses this by contextualizing liturgical dance within a history of black concert dance and embodied practices of resistance. This study frames liturgical dance within the black dance tradition, black feminist studies, and womanist theology drawing parallels between the excessive and exuberant expressions within the black worship experience and sexual repression. This study also employs E. Patrick Johnson’s methodology of critical performance ethnography in an interview with the dance ministry leader at Living Word Christian Center as well as an observation of a rehearsal and Sunday morning ministry.

**Keywords:** liturgical dance, black womanist theology, performance studies, dance studies, black girlhood

### Introduction

*I walk out onto the stage(d) pulpit. With head held low, feet prepared in b plus and arms floating by my side, I wait for the music to begin. My heart is racing with anticipation.*

*“Remember to cross Sis. Jackson when you hear the choir say ‘If you will only...’ Don’t mess up. Remember to breathe. Do good! You must do good! He’s watching.” Richard Smallwood’s piano resounds through the sanctuary as I lift my head and open my arms to heaven. With a quick undulation my body is obedient to the Spirit and charges around in a circle. I stop, pump my hands one by one to the sky. I stumble, but quickly recover it with a small shout which invites a “my, my, my!” from the First Lady. She doesn’t notice my mistake and I feel perfect. My breath quickens as I continue on my journey through leaps and shakes until, finally, my body lay still prostrated before God. It is finished and quiet. Then comes a loud hum from the organ and a thunderous praise from the congregation. “Oh you can do better than that, now! Give God praise for these young people. We must train them up! For they will be the leaders, they will be the pastors and evangelists and teachers and preachers when we are gone! For such a time as this!” I feel electric. I’ve done a good job. I am a true worshipper—even if I am not beautiful.*

Liturgical dance, or praise dance as it is commonly known, is a sacred dance practice used as a part of religious liturgies to express and/or offer worship to God. Although, mainly discussed here within the context of the Holiness-Pentecostal church, liturgical dance is a phenomenon that exists as a form within religions around the world; often in ways that share spiritual lessons through scripture with use of music, costume, basic theatrics (facial expressions, simple to elaborate blocking that includes formations and other choreographic tools), and simple to complex choreography.

Within the black church, liturgical dance operates as a part of Sunday morning worship—a part of the program like the reading of a scripture, prayer, and the sermon. It is important to

note that when talking about the “black church” experience I am referring specifically to the charismatic, Holiness-Pentecostal tradition. Beginning where most historians start in the late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition began in the 1890’s with the Azuza Street Revival, a tent revival held in California where local newspapers reported of people—white and black—jumping around, speaking in strange languages, testifying to having received the Holy Ghost, and being baptized anew. The term Pentecostal refers to the account of the Early Church in Acts 2:1-31 in which the twelve apostles, after Jesus ascends into heaven, are given instructions to wait in the city of Jerusalem for the Comforter—the Holy Spirit. The evidence of the apostles having received the Holy Spirit comes when tongues of fire appear above their heads, and each person begins speaking in different languages—able to understand languages not native to their own.

The evolution of the Pentecostal movement begins with white ministers opposing the growth of black parishioners among their predominantly white congregations. Blacks began to outnumber white congregants and, resenting the white domination of church services, began to desire space to worship in ways unique to their own experiences. Following the Civil War, in 1870 the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in separation from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; a decade later, the National Baptist Convention was formed by black members of the Southern Baptist Convention (Synan). However, it would be twenty years until the largest African American Pentecostal bodies would be founded—the Church of God in Christ (COGIC). Founded in Arkansas in 1897 by Charles Mason, the Church of God in Christ is the largest Pentecostal congregation boasting a membership of over 6.5 million in more than 80 countries. Mason, who claimed to be “born again” after attending the Azuza Street Revival and taking part in the phenomenon of speaking in tongues and shouting (Mason came out of the

Baptist tradition which condemned speaking in tongues and shouting as taboo), founded COGIC and kept with the philosophy of Holiness as connecting to a theology of perfectionism in which the receiving of the Spirit—evidenced by “speaking in tongues” (Synan) cited a behavioral change from immoral to moral. That change was often attributed to changes in behavior that adhered to a social moral code—no drinking, smoking, or fornicating, in particular. This moral code was strategically preached by black ministers during Reconstruction to freed slaves as an attempt to subvert racist ideologies formed by whites of blacks being lazy and violent. It was also preached in an attempt to keep a general health among freed slaves who had little to no access to doctors and clinics. The moral code adhered to strict gender roles which evolved out of white supremacist ideologies of black sexuality—equaling black sexuality to promiscuity, bestiality, hyper-sexuality, and violence (read: black male rape of white women). Thus, sexuality has remained a taboo topic within the black church, often leading to unhealthy sexual identities steeped in sexist and racist ideology, affecting, particularly, black women and girls.

Liturgical dance in the black, Holiness-Pentecostal tradition—acts as a gendered space allowing young, black girls to perform hetero-patriarchal ideas of sexuality and gender. Serving as a mirror, the dancers reflect the congregation’s ideas of sexuality and gender back to the congregation; and if they prove to be true physical reflections of the sexist teachings of black respectability politics, they receive the congregation’s approval (i.e. clapping, cheering, standing and singing along, etc.) which is equated to the approval of God. This study frames liturgical dance within the black dance tradition, black feminist studies, and womanist theology drawing parallels between the excessive and exuberant expressions within the black worship experience and sexual repression. This study employs E. Patrick Johnson’s methodology of critical

performance ethnography to conduct an interview of a dance ministry leader at Living Word Christian Center, observe rehearsals and Sunday morning worship.

The anthropological nod to “etic” and “emic” are valuable tools in this study. In studying different cultures, anthropologists use the ideas of ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ to refer to their subject position as insiders (emic) or outsiders (etic) in the space they are studying. Establishing this position helps anthropologists to identify their bias, be open about how much they know about a space (and how willing they are to learn), and also gives room for them to challenge the ideas and discourses presented in a space while still being transparent about their bias—leaving room for those inside the culture to contribute to important discourses. At twenty years of age, I am in a space where I am questioning myself, mama, and God. I grew up in the Church, and—while it would be easier to bash the Church, renounce my connections, and wash my hands of its corruption, I recognize and reminiscence on the love and courage that I experienced in the Sanctuary as well as acknowledging the historical and present relevance of the church and the community within which it exists. This love has helped to ground black people—their past, present, and future. However, when there is no space for honest questioning, especially for younger generations, the Church, like any space, can become a dangerous and confusing space. In my interview my insider perspective or ‘emic’ served to help me break through some theological and cultural language barriers between the dance ministry leader I interviewed and the dancers I observed. To know that I was a fellow dancer and Believer offered a common ground that helped to facilitate conversations and presented me as a non-threat. As a former liturgical dancer, a part of this mini-ethnography was to document how I also submitted and performed in the church space: how my body remembered what to do in church, how to dance in a religious space. The ways that my body performed was similar to the ways the women in the



dance rehearsal performed. Going in to this study, my hope was for this “submission” to help create a sense of trust between myself and those I observed—helping to subvert a “colonial gaze” that can often become the downfall of ethnographies. This study will investigate how black girls perform their sexuality as ascribed to hetero-patriarchal ideology preached by the black church. This ideology separates the sacred from the secular which causes a kind of tension—this tension shows up in the hyper-ness of liturgical dancing. This project will explain this by looking at the history of liturgical dance as based in a history of black concert dance and embodied practices of resistance. This study also engages discourses of sexuality in the black church in order to contribute to healthy sexual discourses—honest, open engagement of sexuality in the black church that contributes to the fight for liberation of black female bodies. We must begin by teaching black girls to have healthy relationships to their sexual bodies past sexual repression.

Presently, there is little written about liturgical dance as an object of study for gender and performance studies, in particular dance studies. Scholars such as Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Thomas DeFrantz have examined the “blood memories” of the black concert dance tradition as being connected to an understanding of body/spirit connection. DeFrantz specifically examines Alvin Ailey’s famous ballet *Revelations* in which DeFrantz discusses Ailey’s reflection on his Pentecostal upbringing in Texas as a part of the crafting of *Revelations*. Further, few studies have used a womanist theological perspective to analyze religious, youth programming and its effects particularly on black girls. Kelly Brown Douglas, makes a significant intervention in womanist theology in *Sexuality and the Black Church* by calling for womanist theologians to engage with ideologies of black sexuality—challenging homophobia and heterosexism in particular—to better offer ideologies of liberation for black women, in particular, be them straight, lesbian,

transgender, etc. Douglas offers an historical and structural analysis of black sexuality framing it within studies on whiteness—white supremacy and the purposeful attack on black sexuality. Douglas offers the common tropes of black femininity—the Jezebel and the Mammy—and shares the story of Sara Baartman as early examples of black femininity being formed to represent the adverse of white femininity. Further, there have been studies conducted on the role of black women in the church to provide examples aimed at addressing sexism in black religious spaces. In her book, *If It Weren't for the Women*, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, discusses the paradox of the role of black women as itinerant preachers before and after Emancipation, and the unequal amount of black women bishops, elders and pastors in large, African American denominations (the A.M.E. church appointed its first female presiding bishop in 2014). Townsend complicates the notion of sexism in black church spaces by discussing a “dual-sex politics”—in which black women while grappling with their complicated relationship to the women’s liberation movement carried power within black religious spaces that resembled West African matriarchal societies.

While these studies employ history and womanist theology to interrogate the sexism inherent in church spaces, this study is interested in how ideas of femininity are formed in the minds of black girls through structures such as the Church through religious youth programming such as liturgical dance, and how this often calls for a performance of black girlhood that is steeped in respectability and heterosexism. How is liturgical dance used as a vehicle for young, black girls to learn about their sexual bodies? Why does sexuality and discourses of the body remain taboo within the black church? What is the history of black women in the Holiness-Pentecostal traditions in the US, and how can these histories be used to subvert sexism in the black church? What are healthy discourses about the body that can be introduced into churches

and their programming? Finally, I do not attempt to have all the answers, but I do propose a few questions in hopes of contributing to the conversations my elders have begun.

### **History of Liturgical Dance**

*That's where I went. That was my place. On the Sundays where I sacrificed my body unto God, I rushed to the back room that lay beyond the fellowship hall and proceeded to unpack my dance garments: a white unitard, a white, long polyester skirt, a purple or gold overlay, and a purple or gold sash. I took off my dress, shoes, and under armor, gently folded them, and laid them to the side. I glanced over at my friends as they got dressed. Their skirts were brand new. Their hair—long and shiny—flowed down their backs. Their skin glowed without any imperfections. Their clothes looked more pressed and newer than mine, and I knew that their boyfriends waited in the crowd, admiring their worship to God. I looked in the mirror displeased at my hand-me-down skirt, my old unitard, my big breasts spilling out of my bra, my scarred skin.*

At the age of 17, I became the dance ministry leader for one of the oldest Missionary Baptist churches in my Metro Atlanta town of Lithonia, GA. I arrived—a new student of modern dance technique, and an old student of Southern, church decorum. The way that my student's bodies stood a point of tension and concern seemed nostalgic. Their former teacher required them to purchase several pieces of garments (at least two white, long-sleeved-polyester dresses, white, long polyester skirts, seven different-colored overlays, an abundance of ribbons, white stockings, and white ballet shoes. Every Sunday morning as they were preparing to lead the congregation in worship, their mothers and grandmothers would storm the dressing room layer them in all their robes and accents, finally unveil their neatly fixed buns, and send them on to me

to be lead into the sanctuary. Every girl looked the same as they lined up against the wall and walked right, left into the sanctuary, colorful flags in hand and a smile on their faces. The congregation at Big Miller Grove Missionary Baptist Church was filled with mostly older men and women who grinned with delight as the girls entered and went to stand in their opening poses. They would smile, wave their hands in worship, laugh with joy, or clap along as the girls undulated their bodies and stomped around in circles as if having received the Holy Ghost. I watched from the sound booth as the congregation stood and gave them a resounding applause, bursting out enthralled in worship.

Liturgical dance, or praise dance as it is commonly known, is a sacred dance practice used as a part of religious liturgies to express and/or offer worship to God. Although, mainly understood within the context of Christian worship, liturgical dance can also be found in religious spaces all around the world performed in religious buildings such as synagogues, churches, temples or in natural, outdoor spaces. They can be community dances or group dances. Men and women can also participate in the dance depending on a dance's meaning and context. In predominantly black, Holiness-Pentecostal churches in the US, liturgical dance ministries usually consist of women and girls. Some more "contemporary," "progressive" churches may have ministries that also include men and boys, but they are most times seen dancing within mime ministries while the women are seen dancing in liturgical dance ministries.

In an article directed toward liturgical dance ministry leaders, dancers, potential dance ministry leaders, or anyone curious about the link between dance and worship historically and its relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Rosalie Bent Branigan—Director of Dance Ministry at Central United Methodist Church in Albuquerque, NM—writes about liturgical dance as forming out of a legacy merging art and religion dating back to biblical times. Offering a biblical exegesis of

several scriptures that sanction dance and the body as a “worthy instrument” of praise. Branigan describes the use of dance as having a place in sacred, social, and secular uses, stating that as Western civilization progressed, the tension between the body and the sacred resulted in a restriction of artistic practices inside of religion—particularly dance—especially within Puritanical religious practices sprouting in the early American colonies which justified the targeting and murdering of innocent women under the guise of cleansing American soil of sexual immorality and demonic practices. While music and other visual arts returned to the Church in the late 1960s, Branigan states that dance remained controversial, only recently seeing a revival in contemporary Pentecostal worship experiences.

Always to be referred to as “ministry” and not “performance”, Branigan argues that liturgical dance is an expression of worship to God in which dancers—whether prima ballerinas or those carrying “two left-feet”—can lead congregations into worship through simple choreography done to scripture read aloud, poetry, or songs offered by the choir or from a recording. Speaking directly to those thinking of starting dance ministries, Branigan suggests choreographing to “active verbs and images that lend themselves to visualization” help congregations—especially those resistant to using dance within church liturgy—connect to understanding dance as an important part of worship.

Within the black church tradition, liturgical dance stands within a long history of musical and physical cultural expressive forms that originate in the slave plantations of the US South. Having roots in embodied practices such as the “ring shout”—a physical practice that involved a shuffling of the feet around in a circle—and the spirituals—songs of Christ coded as signals for those escaping to freedom in the North—song and dance have developed in tandem with each other in the formation of the African American experience and the diaspora. According to

Tammy Kernodle, professor of musicology at Miami University, the use of songs in the black worship tradition were developed out of the use of call-and response. Slaves, sons of slaves, and former slaves who could not read nor write relied on this method to engage in corporate worship. A leader would sing a verse and the congregation would respond with a chorus. The songs drew on “hymns of white Pentecostals in the Second Great Awakening, spirituals that slaves crafted out of their understanding of the Bible and God, and African melodies that had been retained and passed down” (Kernodle). The emergence of the gospel song in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with its focus on the formation of the “choir” as the central worship leader, saw a combination of several musical genres—classical, jazz, rhythm and blues, etc.—into the gospel song (included congregational songs, long meters, anthems and hymns). According to Kernodle where song served as the vocalization of embodied spiritual and resistive practices, dance served as the physical representation. The ring shout a social dance performed by slaves in the plantations of the South, served as an embodied practice of resistance as slaves would gather around stomp in polyrhythmic, circular patterns, and sing songs that spoke of freedom through strategic, dangerous and urgent signals for escape. Slaves used the ring shout as a device to subvert their physical bondage and the system of slavery by embodying the freedom they wished to secure, and actually obtaining it. The evolution of the ring shout, known simply as “shouting” exists as the “embodied response to the movement of the Holy Spirit” and is practiced in black, Pentecostal churches today. The ring shout and shouting evolve out of the practice of African possessive syncretic religions such as vodun, camdumble, and Santeria—the physical embodiment of the spirit. As these possessive rituals were deemed as witchcraft, evil and “devil’s work,” following the formula of representational politics in colonial and imperialistic ideologies, slaves began to syncretize their religious practices from Africa with the slaveowner’s

patriarchal teachings of Christianity. Contrary to popular belief, the slaves retained their spiritual connection to themselves, their people, their history providing them strength through the days of slavery, Reconstruction, and even through today's struggle against state sanctioned violence with Black Lives Matter.

Liturgical dance is an extension of that marriage between music and movement.

Kimberleigh Johnson talks about this marriage further as:

...the historic and continuing power and possibility of black existence through sound, movement, communal and spiritual formation, in the face of long histories of racialized oppressions that have violated black bodies, minds, and spirits (Johnson 37).

She writes that the expressions of black people held in bondage through music and dance in the Americas and Caribbean resulted in a connection to the divine and to each other, not only as a means of survival, but as a means to thrive in the midst of violence and economic disruption due to white supremacy. These embodied practices became a kind of cultural capital, giving identity to a people in a new land, giving them hope that to practice these syncretized dances and sing coded songs structured as a practice of freedom, a hope that liberation would come.

### **A Black Dance Tradition and Liturgical Dance**

*I was learning how to be some[body]. I sung in the choir, danced in the dance ministry, was an usher for all of thirty minutes (I hated how long we had to stand during service so I quit), I gave tiny sermons, and helped organize events for my peers and I to learn God together. I learned to redeem my sinful body in my white ruffled socks, itchy white stockings, pink ruffled chiffon dresses, and pink barrettes in my short, coarse hair. And, when I learned a new task, I practiced it. I woke up early each Sunday morning, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and headed toward the white, wooden closet door. As if I was strategically planning war or*

*observing containers of nuclear waste, I went through each dress in my closet. Examining the fabric, looking for stains, and holding up each one I deemed as worthy in the mirror to imagine myself walking into the church building, shaking hands, being cordial and catching the eye of my crush. If the dress did not pass the test—either because I found a destructive flaw in it or because my mother deemed it scandalous—I would anxiously search for my true match. Sometimes the search would last for hours, and I would get into arguments and almost be “hit into next week” because I made my family late for Sunday School.*

Liturgical dance can also be used to describe the contemporary religious dance form that emerged during the renaissance of black concert dance in the 1970s. The form encompasses other physical forms such as jazz, ballet, modern, and Afro-Caribbean. Liturgical dance within the black dance tradition—women in long, white polyester skirts, white leotards, waving colorful flags and sashes while running back and forth through the aisle in exhortation unto God—began with the emergence of a black, Africanist, modern dance tradition in the 1970s, looking specifically at the emergence of the Alvin Ailey and his dance company—the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in the early 1960s. The quickness and exuberance with which liturgical dancers move can be attributed to movement Ailey choreographed in his famous ballet, *Revelations*, in 1960. Historians also attribute the rise of liturgical dancing in black worship traditions to the emergence of the Sacred Dance Guild and its contact with black congregations in the 1970s. Founded in 1958, the Sacred Dance Guild was influential in inspiring dance to be significant parts of Catholic and Protestant liturgies. During the 1970s and 80s the Guild began to involve other dance practices such as modern dance, African dance among other ethnic dance traditions—many of their members created the first liturgical dance ministries in the black churches (Kernodle).



Contextualizing liturgical dance within a history and tradition of black concert dance in the US, I engage Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Thomas DeFrantz, two of the foremost scholars on black dance studies in the US and abroad, talk about the spirit and soul with which black dancers move, as historically specific and translated onto the concert dance stage. DeFrantz offers a comprehensive analysis on the career of Alvin Ailey: his work and legacy. In his chapter discussing the opening dance of Ailey's most famous work, *Revelations*, DeFrantz describes the invocation of the spirit in the first scene of the dance:

This striking, jagged motion, unlike any preceding it, suggests the piercing arrival of the Holy Spirit in a sudden, collective gasp for breath. The arms move in abrupt lurches, an outward, limb-driven manifestation of the inward-directed torso contraction featured earlier in the piece. The motion captures the overarching movement theme of the split focus: as the arms break through space falling downward, tautly held bodies reach up, with powerfully lifted chests and pained faces focused on the heavens (DeFrantz 6).

Gotschild takes this analysis further by examining cultural history as a “subtext in the script of what we see and experience as African American spirit” (Gotschild 260). She continues to describe how modern dance legend Alvin Ailey choreographed and used “certain movement techniques and motifs to help harbor spirit” (Gotschild 260). One of the movements she describes is the “Horton layout” in which the dancer elongates her torso and stretches her limbs out to counterbalance, as her torso creates a deep arch in her spine “...so that her back is nearly parallel to the floor...[her] chest and face open to the ceiling” (Gotschild 260). Gotschild argues that this movement describes “human longing...for aspirations beyond our means and desires beyond our condition” (Gotschild 260).





**Figure 1. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre performing Ailey's ballet, *Revelations*.**



**Figure 2. Liturgical dancers from Abyssinian Baptist Church performing movements from *Ailey's Revelations*.**

She also describes another “spirit” motif—the torso articulation. This movement is central to Africanist movement aesthetics as well as the “rolling, undula[tion], shaking, circling or rocking” (Gottschild 260) of the shoulders, pelvis, rib cage, etc; and when combined with fast, polyrhythms creates a space for the spirit to enter . This parallels the experience of liturgical dance in terms of movement quality, and historicizes it within a black dance tradition—a tradition that is aware of the kinesthetic importance of the body as a conduit for a collective history and memory—a conduit for the spirit. Contemporary liturgical dance often mirrors these practices, by literally performing excerpts from Ailey’s *Revelations* during Sunday morning worship, and also incorporating movements born out of Africanist aesthetics into choreography. This further mirrors what Kimberleigh Johnson argues in her article “Ain’t Gon’ Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Spirituals as Embodied Acts of Resistance” when she discusses the “ring shout” as “the historic and continuing power and possibility of black existence through sound, movement, communal and spiritual formation” (Johnson 37)—a performance that survived the attack from white culture—an act of resistance.

Thus, in this study I argue that liturgical dance and its movement vocabulary is historically and specifically set within a black dance tradition. However, a separation and restriction of exuberant, “secular” movements from the “pure” and “wholesome” genre of liturgical dance is, thus, a denial of the spirit and soul connected to an embodied practice of resistance in African American culture. Thus, defining liturgical dance as a space to practice socially accepted moral, sexual behavior; a behavior that is heterosexist and based in racist moral codes.

### **The Spirit and Body: Sexuality in the Black Church**

*There's room for everyone in God's house, and I know my place. If you are late (like if the preacher is already preaching, whooping, and sweating) you sit in the back. If you are not a member you are exempt from these rules, you are automatically allowed to sit in the front (whether or not you want to) an usher will graciously guide you to the foot of the Cross. If you are a member whom we have not seen in a while (you know better) you sit in the back. If you are a minister's wife, you sit closest to your husband, among the congregation directly adjacent to the pulpit. The closer a preacher's wife is to her husband, the more effective her prayers are for him during his sermon. If you enter God's house wearing anything too tight, too short, too loose, or too open, you also sit in the back. If you are a minister or elder, you sit in the pulpit, up high and shielded from the rest of us. You are the closest thing we have to God, and we hold you to those standards. If you are singing in the choir, you meet in the choir stand (but if you are late, you are not allowed to sing this Sunday). If you are ushering, you stand at the door guarding God's house from evil and are in charge of keeping the order of power alive and well in the space.*

However, it is also important to frame liturgical dance as a tool integral to the black worship experience—an experience that is queer and based in queer labor. The black church has been a haven and cornerstone of faith for the black community since slavery. James Cone in his book *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* evaluates the presence of the black church in the emergence of black resistance movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and the need for a “black theology”—one that helped to theorize about black liberation as set within the frames of Christianity (Cone 6—a renaissance of blackness to black religion. The black church became a space that actualized the agency of black freedom fighters for those such as Dr. Martin Luther

King, Jr. and others to strategize and organize from the pulpit. However, this telling of history creates the church to be a purely masculine space in which black men alone occupied this community space and led the fight for freedom.

However, the black church is almost entirely operated through the wills of black women and black gay men and women. According to a 2006 study cited in the essay “Tempered Radicals: Black Women’s Leadership in the Church and Community” by Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, et al., whereas black women consist of the majority of congregants in black churches (approximately 70%), they occupy a small amount of significant leadership positions (Ngunjiri, et al. 86). According to E. Patrick Johnson in his essay “Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African American Gay Community,” black gay men and women occupy key roles within the black worship experience including: leading praise and worship, playing the organ or piano, singing in the choir, serving on the usher board, even preaching and teaching as pastors and evangelists. The extent to which the black church depends on the labor of women and queer bodies is extensive and impossible to ignore. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes discusses the role of black women in the Sanctified church as a vital part of black church history, having roots in West African familial power structures in which women held significant power. Gilkes references the church “Mother” figure—often an older black woman who might be the widow of the church’s founding pastor, an evangelist, or senior pastor—she discusses the considerable amount of power they hold as keepers of wisdom and history. “These mothers serve effectively for a very long time and accumulate great prestige and in many cases very real authority” (Gilkes 63). She describes how these women often helped to strategically serve congregations after the death of local and national church leaders, and often hold key positions in political affairs of black communities.

However, unlike the blurring of the line of the sacred and secular with regards to the church's existence as both a "place to worship God and a place to address the social and political needs of its constituents" (Johnson 90), "the church has been less willing to blur the secular and sacred when it comes to sexuality" (Johnson 90). It denies sexuality and heavily preaches against homosexuality by praising "sexual expression between heterosexuals within the institution of marriage" (Johnson 90) while depending and profiting off the labor of queer bodies.

This queer labor is connected to the exuberance and performance of black bodies in the church space. The "feeling of the spirit" described by DeFrantz and Gottschild can be characterized as "bod[ies] that wed the spiritual with the sexual" (Johnson 92) likening the visceral physical expression of "catching the spirit" and the entire black worship experience to a sexual experience.

"Every aspect of the black church service is centered around the preacher's message; and at its height, a preacher's sermon may galvanize a congregation into a state of spiritual ecstasy that coalesces with feelings one experiences during orgasm..." (Johnson 93).

This description includes liturgical dance as a space in which black girl's bodies become sites for the sexual pleasure that the Church teaches against. Their dance is an extension of the repression of sexuality that operates within this dichotomy that splits the body/"flesh" and spirit. Within this dichotomy they practice the repression of sexuality—an "encourage[ment] [of] an unhealthy and unrealistic view of sexuality and the body" (Johnson 93) which further reifies racist and sexist notions of black femininity in which black women are hypersexual, promiscuous, "hoes" and "bitches" that must be controlled. They learn to redeem their bodies through this performance of purity through which they become betrothed to patriarchy within the bounds of heterosexual

marriage. They sacrifice their bodies for the preservation and protection of an authentic blackness that is made to resemble that of the white, middle class, Christian, nuclear family.

In her book, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Kelly Brown Douglas argues that the “exploitation and manipulation of Black sexuality are crucial to the maintenance of White patriarchal hegemony in America.” She further argues that womanist theologians—scholars focused on studying scripture through a womanist perspective in an effort to interrogate Christian ethics and religion through the discourses of race, class, and gender as it pertains to black women—have neglected to engage sexuality (in particular homophobia/heterosexism) as a serious topic for discourse in the fight to liberate black women whether straight, lesbian, transgender, etc. She chooses to intervene in womanist theology to provide questions that help to facilitate a comprehensive questioning of the black church’s “theological silence” (6) on sexuality. Why is sexuality such a taboo topic in the black church? Why were womanist scholars quiet about sexuality and the black church? What kind of discourses and analyses can be talked about to combat unhealthy ideas about the body and sexuality? She argues that the dehumanizing of black men and women included a denigration of their sexual selves—something that she argues is essential to human beings and is a part of how we experience the world.

Rather, while sexuality is not the whole of who we are as human beings, it is basic to who we are. It compels our emotional, affective, sensual, and spiritual relationships. Sexuality does not determine all our feelings, thoughts and interactions, but it certainly permeates and affects them (6).

E. Patrick Johnson highlights how black gay men are reconciling the split between the body and spirit as taught within the black church by moving from the “prescribed place of the black church into the ambiguous “space” of the nightclub (89). He argues that the “place” of the



church allows for “prescribed performance of interpretation” and “highlights the dichotomy of body and soul within the black church, the belief that to be ‘saved’ means not to yield to temptations of the flesh” (88). He further argues that this message, often not followed by the messenger or the congregants, creates for an “unhealthy and unrealistic view of sexuality and the body in general” (89). For both Douglas and Johnson, the discourse of sexual repression operates as a space to push a politics of respectability in which black bodies operating outside of the heteronormative ideology of race and gender are seen as other, deviants, and harmful to the cause for liberation. However, they both reference spaces in which black people are creating spaces inside and outside the church (Johnson mentions nightclubs and Douglas mentions theological scholarship) to fight for healthy discourses of sexuality which involve the rejoining of the sacred and secular.

Liturgical dance operates within an erotic space that calls upon the spirit through the connection of the spirit and body. Thus, to teach black girls to separate their body and spirit, sacrifice their sexual selves in exchange for a heavenly reward, continues the path of “unhealthy and unrealistic view[s] of sexuality and the body in general” (89). Contrary to popular belief, those who are not able to have candid conversations related to sexuality with their parents or trusted individuals, those who are not educated on how to practice safe sex and engage in safe sexual practices are often those who engage in riskier sexual behaviors. At the same time, racial and class discourses about black girl’s sexuality often lead to a reinforcement of heterosexual marriage as the only acceptable form of sexual activity. The call, then, is for the church—as a community space and not the religious institution—to remember its roots in community and love to begin to facilitate and create spaces to have these candid conversations about our sexual

bodies in relation to Christ. Love for people, but also the community that it is based in—that it proclaims to love.

### **Gender and Liturgical Dance**

*My body quakes with adrenaline. We run and run and run. Mother So-and-So is encouraging us to continue in the heat of our dance. Our little bodies, bones hardly formed, thrust through the air. We are smiling. We are balling up our faces. We are shaking our heads. Inviting the congregation to be washed, indulge, and come clean in the tides. We know that sinners have soul too.*

According to Judith Butler in her article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” gender is not a natural phenomenon, but rather a constructed “stylized repetition of acts” (519). Through the learning and repetition of “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds” (519), the body is made into a gendered body. It is then through the performance of these acts that the body is made to mean *male* or *female*. Through the learning and repetition of “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds” (Butler 519), the body is made into a gendered body. While the scene resembles a righteous “church-going saint” lost in worship to God, the surrender apparent in the young, liturgical dancer’s bodies represents the surrender and vulnerability often associated with femininity, positioning the young girls within the patriarchal frame of femininity. The surrender of the girls’ bodies, often a reenactment of “catching the spirit” happens as the girls are dressed as older women, resembling church mothers or slave women who despite their horrible plight are giving God the praise; often done during services of remembrance—a pastor’s pastoral anniversary or church anniversary.

When I was little, my family's COGIC church had an annual service called Back-To-Basics where everyone dressed in "old-time" clothes: overalls, flannel shirts, pants with patches in them, homemade dresses with ruffles, and straw hats. They substituted the organ and drum set with washboards, pots and pans, and wooden spoons to play as instruments. During the service there was a candle lighting ceremony to remember the people who passed on, honor those elders still present, and give encouragement to the young people to "keep on keepin' on." When the dance ministry would be called forth, we would dance in our costumes to some old time song like "There's A Leak in This Ol' Building" and mimic what we thought was shouting and extoling God's presence. We would start out lite coming down the aisle or even sitting among the congregation with our straw hats on, gloves and fans in hand. The music would begin and our fans would go a fannin' high in the sky. We would look over to the other person and nod, then get up and make our way to the front of the pulpit. The movements would get faster with high kicks, quick undulations, and running up and down the aisle. One girl would toss her arms in the air with head splayed back, and then we knew it was time to break out into the finale—the shout. All of our heads would go into our chests, hands grab the sides of our dresses, and/or hold our hats on our heads. We would pick up our feet one by one in a fast pace, shuffling from side to side, front and back, zigzag, even in circles. The congregation would be on their feet, clapping along or laughing. "Y'all betta gon' 'head and dance, now!" "Alright, now!" "Yessuh!" The music would die down and we'd shout out the sanctuary doors as there came a roar of applause from the saints.

During times in the dance when we performed large jumps and turns, and either land on our knees or with our arms and eyes reaching toward the sky, a congregation member or two would stand, applause and raise their hands in agreement with our display of worship. The

response from the congregation is an approval of the girl's surrender to the ideals of femininity which is equated to their surrender unto God. Further, the surrender with which we danced in these services of remembrance is also a performance of the syncretization of Christianity taught to slaves and African religions still present within their bodies and physical memory. Taking the time to remember with displays that reference slave religion come into direct conflict with the acts of respectability apparent in the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition that I grew up in. The evidence of the connection between the body and spirit are apparent, but are considered to be taboo and evil which goes in line with white, European colonial representations of African possessive syncretic religions. Black church spaces, particularly, Holiness-Pentecostal traditional spaces come into this conflict often—with exhibiting fiery Baptist preaching and shouting (a physical embodiment of the spirit), while preaching a social moral code that denies the connection between the body and the sacred. Liturgical dance acts to facilitate this possessive encounter and embodies/reminds the congregation of the ways slaves connected with spirit during slavery, while also acting as a space for control of young black girl's bodies preparing them to understand their bodies through the lens of whiteness—that black female bodies must be controlled.

### **Questioning Mama, Myself and God: A Mini-Ethnographic Study**

As stated earlier, a part of this study was to understand my subjectivity as a black female who grew up in the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition, but is now coming to question the things I was taught. I decided to employ E. Patrick Johnson's methodology of critical performance ethnography to conduct an interview with a dance ministry leader in Chicago, observe a liturgical dance rehearsal, and participate in a technique class. I was interested in going back to my roots—the church. This is where I found dance, and was also introduced to particular ways of

understanding my body in relation to others and Christ. This first attempt at an ethnographic study served as an investigation into how I would perform in this space now that I was “back” in church. I was curious to know how I would feel and how I related to others in the space.

On February 17, 2017, I interviewed Kim Blosser—dance ministry leader at Living Word Christian Center—at a Starbucks in downtown Chicago. We talked for approximately an hour and a half about her experiences as a dancer having been born in New Jersey and growing up in Michigan. She shared her experiences of studying dance at Wayne State University with her mentor and renowned Chicago artist Erica Wilkins Perkins, who introduced her to liturgical dance and a relationship with God. Kim is a white woman who currently leads a group of black women and girls in a liturgical dance ministry at one of the largest congregations in the Chicagoland area. When I first met Kim, I was shocked to find out she was white. All my life, I had rare encounters with white people at church, and even less encounters with white dance teachers. Although Living Word exists with a predominantly black (female) congregation, the pastor and other leaders including Kim, pride themselves in their mission-focused programming and teaching that tries to cater to every demographic and not just black people. During Sunday morning service, lead pastor, Dr. Bill Winston, commented that the church does not speak on elections, or promote one political candidate over another. Considering that this was one month after Donald Trump became president, Dr. Winston told the congregation that they should consider praying for the country’s leader instead of rushing to protest. This statement coupled with Kim’s comments during our interview about “diversity” and how Living Word’s service does not cater to the “majority” at the church (read: black people), is an example of colorblind racism on Kim’s part, and a denial of the history of the black church as a cornerstone in the fight for black liberation. In our conversation, I was continually reminded of my subject position as a

black woman when Kim continued to talk about diversity. She continued to remind me that Living Word was not a “black church”, that even though Dr. Winston grew up in a Baptist church and carried the affects of a black preaching tradition, he did not pastor a black church.

I became curious to how this affected the women and girls who danced in the dance ministry. When I asked one woman about her experiences in the dance ministry, she commented that she enjoyed dancing, that it made her feel free. She smiled with hesitation and said that she enjoyed the ministry. There was no mention of how Kim’s whiteness affected their participation in the ministry. This absence of talking about race or gender from the dancers is a part of this denial and colorblindness that are rules of the space at Living Word. Kim, however, talks to me extensively about race. She tells her story of how she became dance ministry, and how some of the women were resistant to her changes which included dancing to a variety of music during rehearsals and Sunday morning worship outside of gospel music, and her implementation of “technique classes” in dance ministry rehearsals—a request Kim says came from Dr. Winston to see the ministry “go up a level.” This tension is interesting in that it seemed that while Kim does not think that race matters at Living Word, that race plays a role in how the women react to her new leadership role in the dance ministry, and what it brings in terms of doing movement that is outside of their comfort zone, and their personal relationships to their bodies. As a white woman, it is hard for Kim to understand this, as she believes it is just a resistance to her leadership and simple changes. However, it is a resistance to how the movement and knowledge Kim brings as a professional modern dancer relates to their personal bodily experiences as black women—how they have been taught that their bodies can move—especially in a religious setting which is already a space of tension. As a former liturgical dancer, watching and participating in a rehearsal, I was reminded of that tension. I became hyperaware of how I sat in the pew—making

sure my legs were closed. My back sat neatly against the back of the chair. Even as I took notes, I remember feeling rebellious for examining this space from a critical perspective. Was I violating and disrespecting this space in some way?

### **Conclusion**

Questioning is halted. For my thirteen year old body, the build-up of questions combined with confusion surrounding my body and feelings toward the opposite sex, was hurtful. While I was encouraged to pursue my dreams, and charged with the task of developing my own independent thought process, I cried myself to sleep some nights because I did not have anyone to talk to when my crush rejected me. I did not feel comfortable talking about changes in my body or how to deal with my sexual body. Thankfully, I found spaces outside of church where I was able to have conversations about my discomfort and dissatisfaction with my body, dating, safe sex, my dreams (and not sacrificing one for the other). But, I wonder if these conversations can happen within the church, if there is space—as Langston Hughes famously remarked—for “Tom Tom to laugh and cry.” As a child to her grandmother’s lap, I turn to bell hooks for guidance. She suggests in her article “Homophobia in Black Communities” that “to strengthen solidarity between black folks irrespective of our sexual preference must be discussed” (hooks 71). She advocates for conversation and action that affirm different sexualities which takes place in dismantling ideologies based in white supremacy and violence against black sexuality—against black bodies.

Douglas and other womanist theologians offer a “sexual resistance discourse”—a way for church leaders, members, and scholars to convene together for healthy sexual discourses in the church past sexual repression. Jeremy Ayers in his article, “Towards a Eucharistic Politics of the Black Body: Black Sexuality in the Horizons of Christian Theology” problematizes these

suggestions when he suggests a Eucharistic politics of the black body—one in which the black body becomes a part of the body of Christ—his suffering and passion paralleling with that of black people—making black bodies “ordered to divine ends” (Ayers 109). Michael Eric Dyson speaking specifically to homophobia in black theological practices suggests a theology of homoeroticism—a theology that fuses the planes between the divine and the human, “to acknowledge sexuality as a crucial function of human identity” (Dyson 238). All of the aforementioned scholars advocate for a theology that does not separate the sacred and the erotic. They suggest that the two are one, which is a direct contrast to Western ideology. As a student of these scholars, I am often boggled by the question, “what next?” What do we do about these ideologies that exist within the black church, and how do we have conversations that help us to relearn our sexual bodies and their connection to our relationships to Christ. I have found that the hard part of the work is often in talking to family members, friends, old church members, little cousins who have particular ideas about sexuality—their own bodies or the sexual choices of others. I am not suggesting that the work is in changing their minds, but to engage in conversation with them. Ask questions. For when questioning is halted, confusion, separation are able to take root.

*At the end of my performance, I look at the audience, and come down from the pulpit into the congregation. I am crying. There sit my favorite female cousins and play-aunties, little sisters and mama. They are growing up, and questioning on their own. I notice they have gray hair and their face show the passing of time. I remark, “How are you feeling?”*



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Keep the faith!