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“QUEER SOUTHERN BEE-ING”: EXPLORING BLACK SOUTHERN SAPPHICS’

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES IN DR. E. PATRICK JOHNSON’S *HONEYPOT: BLACK SOUTHERN WOMEN WHO LOVE WOMEN*

Abstract

In this thesis I look at E. Patrick Johnson’s *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women* as a primary text that offers a complex, deep understanding of the religious and spiritual lives of Black sapphics in the American South. This discussion is framed by a description of my personal connection with the material; specifically how the book helped me reframe my experience as a Black queer person who grew up in the South. By discussing non-normative scholarly accounts of Black religious experiences, I provide the reader with the necessary background information to acclimate readers to *Honeypot*. I explore the narratives of Alpha, Michelle, Lynn, Darlene, Sangodare, and Nancy and Malu in *Honeypot* to represent the wide range of understandings of sexuality, Blackness and religion showcased in the book. The themes emerging from this exploration are forgiveness, how one’s identity as a Black lesbian can impact their connection with the church, the relationships between African religious practices like Ifá and the Black church in the South, and motherhood as religious. I finally use my analysis of these themes to propose changes the Haverford College Religion Department could make in their program to better support work like *Honeypot*.

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SOUTHERN WOMEN WHO LOVE WOMEN*

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Introduction

In this thesis I look at E. Patrick Johnson's *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*. I first frame my essay by bringing in my personal connection with the material and what drew me to the text. I go on to provide sources that influenced my work and the intellectual pathway I was led down. I then introduce material about the book and background literature that helps acclimate the reader to the text. I move into a discussion of lesbianism and how participants in *Honeypot* understand their own sexuality. Personal narratives around forgiveness are discussed and then the chapter "BLESSED BEE," which is dedicated to religion is brought into conversation with Ifá. I end with analysis of a narrative about motherhood and offer my suggestions about changes that can be made by the Haverford College Religion Department to better support work like *Honeypot*. Ultimately, I look at *Honeypot* as a primary text that offers a new understanding of myself that I hope for the Haverford Religion Department to offer future students. By reviewing literature on non-normative scholarly accounts of Black religious experiences, I challenge monolithic ideas of the religious selfhood of Black Southern sapphics, thus complicating the rigid boundaries of Africana Studies, Queer Studies and Religious Studies and moving them towards a more intersectional view.

Intellectual Autobiography

I approached this topic of Black, Southern, sapphics, by looking at my own experience in the American South. My childhood was distinctly Black and Southern. I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana and moved to metro Atlanta at the age of three. I lived in Atlanta until I was around the age of 10, and then my family and I moved to Arkansas. This is where I lived until I left for Haverford. The South is culturally different from region to

region, but I always lived in the South. When I left for college, I felt at the time that I had a good grasp on truths about the South. Though Atlanta is a mecca for Black gay life unmatched by any other large city, I believed even as a child that the way to be queer was to move out to some big city in the North.¹ In fact I somehow believed that was the *only* way to be gay. That there was something fundamentally incompatible between the South and queerness. I cannot pinpoint when I started believing this, but it deeply shaped my understanding of my own queerness. At that point in my life, I identified as a cis woman who was pansexual. Though my labels have shifted after leaving the South, that idea remained the same.

My family's experience in Black Baptist churches was based in other binaries. My family is not from a big city: my parents are both from small Black farming communities. My dad's side is from a small town called Grand Cane in Louisiana and my mom's side is from Dick Jeter (pronounced Gee-tah) in Arkansas. They both grew up in small family Baptist churches in their respective communities created by their families well over fifty years ago. When we moved to Atlanta, we tried larger congregation Baptist churches, but my religious experience has been overwhelmingly Black and Baptist. When I left for college, I fulfilled my one goal of leaving the South, which I thought was a step towards embracing my queerness, having felt like I had to choose between the South and my lesbianism for my whole life. After leaving and having a chance to see what the North was like, I was shocked that my perception of the South was so full of misconceptions. Only after leaving did, I realize that I had internalized a flawed, monolithic perception of

¹ My understanding of 'the North' was really any region outside of the South, so any part of America not Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Kentucky, and Virginia. Though there are different definitions of what makes up the American South, this is the framework I am working under.

the South. I thought that it was an unspoken rule that Black people went to a church that I would now qualify as belonging to the Black church. The Black church is an already amorphous designation, but there was no specificity in my perception.

I thought my church experience as a queer person was the norm. I believed that queer people could be in the church but only in a secretive manner, where one's queerness is an unspoken secret. This was only solidified by my own experience of having an uncle that brought their "brother in Christ," who seemed to be their romantic partner, to a family reunion. This affirmed that while there might have been older gay people in my family, these queer family members may not be out or name themselves as such. Only after having a discussion with my mother did I discover that my uncle had previously come out in my mom's youth, but had successfully been 'delivered from homosexuality.' This realization about queerness in my family and the refusal of my uncle's gay identity spoke to my upbringing. This anecdote draws out how religion is used to contend with queerness: my uncle felt the need to be delivered due to the social pressures he faced. They caused him to decide that the best course of action was to change who he was. This shows how religion and queerness can be deeply tied. Even the language of "brother in Christ" he used to introduce this man was religious but there had to be a unique relationship to be close enough to bring him to an explicitly family function. Though my uncle's gendered experience as a man is different from what I am interested in studying, the path he chose to take of denying a gay identity or even not seeing gayness as an identity but as a sin he needed to vanquish is what I am interested in. I was in the North trying to discover my Southern queerness without the

misconception of the South and that self-reflection was not found in major but rather *Honeypot*.

Approaching the topic, there was a preconception in my mind about what religion would look like for not just the narratives found in the *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women* but generally for Black people in the South of the United States. I had a preconceived notion that people from the South would be Christian and be involved in the Black church due to my own notion that flattened varied experiences into a singular view of Black people. I was raised to believe that all Black people in the South at least were Christians with few exceptions, and that the Black Church represented all Black Americans. I did not know that I went to Baptist church. I thought that all churches functioned the same as mine, and only during standardized tests did I have to try to designate my religious experience past just the Black Church.

Yet, scholars of Black religion have recently shown this not to be the case. Authors such as Judith Weisenfeld in their 2013-piece *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the great migration*² analyze specific new religious movements and how these movements can have deep ties to the definition of race as well as the transformation of racial identity. Weisenfeld's book helped me gain a more complex analysis of how racial identity or the lack thereof can be deeply tied to religious practices and the monopoly that established Black churches felt they had on the spirituality of Black people. Scholars like Yvonne Chireau push back on this homogenizing view of what African American religion looks. She focuses especially on African-derived religious practices such as hoodoo, through powerful narratives that

² (Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the great migration*)

speak to their root work and non-Christian practices, passed down through generations. Rucker's *Conjure, Magic, and Power*³ offers information that shows the diversity of spiritual practice and shows the interconnectedness of conjure and Black people. I was also influenced by Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religion*,⁴ which expanded my horizons about many of the religious practices of the South and how these religious practices have long standing influence within African American religion today.

The narratives are rooted in history but are in the present so there was a need to bring in more contemporary readings. Though these narratives are being written in the contemporary moment having a background of the early 20th century helped frame the participants relationship with white people and the dangers of their youth being openly lesbian. Works such as James Cones' *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*⁵ discusses the spectacle lynching period, a time of racial terror that penetrated the psyche of Black people in America and helped me understand the fear that many of the participants may have faced and feared. Especially looking at the participants that are seen in the chapter ALL HAIL THE QUEEN (BEE) who are intentionally the oldest people in the book this is a very present fear of their lives. Cones helps to explain some of the participants' aversion to and general distrust of white people. Kelly Brown Douglas' *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*⁶ and *The Black Church Studies Reader*⁷ were useful texts in enriching my background about the Black church. I

³ (Walter Rucker, *Conjure, Magic, and Power*)

⁴ (Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion*)

⁵ (James Cones, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*)

⁶ (Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*)

⁷ (Carol B. Duncan and Alton B. Pollard, eds, *The Black Church Studies Reader*)

learnt about both the early history and how the church has changed in the contemporary moment, especially in the face of queer people who are unwilling to be invisibilized.

These other authors provided more background information for the topic while the authors I am beginning to discuss I approached E. Patrick Johnson's work more recently. He continues to push back against the dominant narrative that queerness of all kinds is incompatible with Christianity and Blackness, instead showing that there is a rich history of stories about Black queer Christian people. Other authors that are pushing back against the idea of queerness and religion being incompatible is Ashon Crawley,⁸ whose approach works well with E. Patrick Johnson's. They both use performance to present their insights about the Blackness, queerness, and Christianity and responses to their critics. Dr. E. Patrick Johnson uses his training as a gospel singer as well as an out Black gay male scholar of religion in his books. He has collected narratives from not only sapphics but has also done similar work for Black gay men in the South in *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*.⁹ This text does not show the influence of Toni Morrison¹⁰ or Saidiya Hartman¹¹ as it is based more in reality than *Honeypot*.¹² *Honeypot* is based in magical realism while *Sweet Tea* lacks these fantastical elements. Johnson's other work, *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: An Oral History*,¹³ is in conversation with *Honeypot* as an earlier work that is collecting the same type of narratives from the same demographic. Greene-Hayes in 'Queering' African

⁸ (Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*)

⁹ (E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*)

¹⁰ (Toni Morrison, *Beloved*)

¹¹ (Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection- Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth- Century America*)

¹² (E Patrick Johnson, *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*)

¹³ (E. Patrick Johnson, *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: An Oral History*)

*American Religious History*¹⁴ offers the troubles with the African American religious studies field as well as Queer Studies and presents an alternative where there is a space for Black Queer studies to flourish. In that space is where E. Patrick Johnson's *Honeypot* fits, as an expansion of the knowledge of queer Black narratives that showcase the history of the group in a too often forgotten region. By analyzing *Honeypot*, I aim to shine light on narratives that showcase the diversity of lived experiences while also showing that these are the words of real living people.

What is Honeypot

E. Patrick Johnson (Dr. EPJ) is the Dean of the School of Communication and Annenberg University Professor of Performance Studies and African American Studies at Northwestern University. He received his bachelors and master's degree from University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and his Ph.D. from Louisiana State University. He is an openly out gay man. Dr. EPJ's 2019 title *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women* is a difficult title to peg down to just one genre. The book is somewhat of a spiritual successor to his 2012 title *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, and it builds off many of the narratives of Dr. EPJ's 2018 book *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: an oral history*. He thinks of *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: an oral history* as a companion text to *Honeypot*. The connection between *Sweet Tea* and *Honeypot* is that they descend from a similar demographic that is based in the same general region, exploring the perspectives of both men and women. Although the causal or thematic connection is clear between *Sweet Tea* and *Honeypot*, the books are written

¹⁴ (Ahmad Greene-Hayes, 'Queering' *African American Religious History*)

in completely different styles. Dr. EPJ values the narrative in these two books, as both books contain extended stories of people within the targeted demographics going through varied experiences. The difference is that *Sweet Tea* is grounded in reality while *Honeypot*'s narrative frame is based in magical realism with poetry.

Honeypot begins in contemporary reality, as its opening is set-in present-day Chicago. But almost immediately the author carries us off to Hymen, a fictitious land of Black sapphics. And to blur the lines between reality and fiction further, it is clear that the people Dr. EPJ meets in fictitious Hymen are real people whom the author had interviewed for his other work, *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.* *Honeypot* begins with Dr. EPJ being visited by Ms. B, a trickster character who takes him on a journey to Hymen. This world of Hymen is based around a bee colony of Black sapphics with drones, or the men of the colony, seen as a necessary evil. There is teleportation and more than real experience all while being based around the actual lived experiences of these Southern Black sapphic in their own words with little directed questioning by Dr. EPJ.

The table of contents is as follows, with the capitalization being in the original text: 1) THE ADVENTURES OF MISS B. AND ME, 2) THE HIVE, 3) BLESSED BEE, 4) HONEYBEE BLUES, 5) HONEY LOVE, 6) BEEBOP AND BEESWAX, 7) ALL HAIL THE QUEEN (BEE), and 8) FLIGHT. "THE ADVENTURES OF MISS B. AND ME" and "FLIGHT" are the introduction and epilogue, respectively. Each chapter details a different set of narratives and different locations within Hymen loosely categorized around a central theme with every chapter title being a play on words that relate back to bees. This play on words through bee puns is used due to this fictional world being a

hive and the title being called *Honeypot*, another word that can refer to a vagina. In the first chapter the audience as well as Dr. EPJ is introduced to Ms. B and the world of Hymen. This chapter serves as a means of introduction to the work that this book seeks to accomplish by telling the story of Black Southern sapphics. The second chapter “THE HIVE” is our first introduction to the participants and lays down the foundation of how these people’s experiences are wildly varied. The third chapter “BLESSED BEE” name is a play on the biblical phrasing from Matthew’s Beatitudes, 5:3-12 (Blessed are the...) and this chapter is the spiritual chapter focused on narratives surrounding spirituality and religion. “HONEYBEE BLUES” revolves around the pain and trauma of these people and has a heavy focus on sexual assault.¹⁵ “HONEY LOVE” is dedicated to the love that many have found as an intentional lighter note than the previous chapter. “BEEBOP AND BEESWAX” is set as a panel and focuses on activism. “ALL HAIL THE QUEEN (BEE)” focuses on queer elders and their stories of being sapphic much earlier than the other narratives of the book. Throughout the text the reader sees not only the varied experiences of the people but also Dr. EPJ as he grapples with his positionality and what does it mean for him to be the one to record and report these people’s stories as a man and an academic.

Examining Character Narratives in Honeypot

Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women is a recent book published in 2019 by E. Patrick Johnson, begins by narrating a visitation to the author

¹⁵ E. Patrick Johnson notes that though sexual violence is in many of these narratives, it should not be used to describe all women, but rather the women that he interviewed. He also directs readers to the companion text *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: an oral history*.

by a mysterious woman named Ms. B who acts as a trickster character. Ms. B also plays the role of guide to show E. Patrick Johnson, or as he is known in the book: Dr. EPJ, the stories of southern women who are sapphic, as it is put in his subtitle, “Women who love Women.” Ms. B barges into his home and takes him to Hymen, a world similar to a bee colony and dominated by women. I refrain from using the word lesbian to respect the personal labels that some of the interviewees hold. Some of the people interviewed preferred to be called “dyke” or “bull dagger” while some seemed to push against the label of lesbian and instead wanting to shed the identity. I relate to the experience of finding what label to best fit my lesbianism especially as a nonwoman lesbian. I would like to draw readers toward the section dedicated to Lori Wilson because she exemplifies this ambivalence and resistance. Lori Wilson has led an exceedingly hard life faced with childhood abuse, teenage pregnancy, domestic violence, as well as addiction. Lives filled with sexual assault and abuse is a common theme among many of the people within this book.¹⁶ When Lori Wilson is asked about her relationship with her Black lesbian identity with this question by Dr. E. Patrick Johnson, “Given everything you’ve been through, how do you feel about the life choices that you made in relationship to being a black lesbian?”¹⁷, Lori responded with the following statement,

“[Long pause.] I know that for me the first thing that I am is just a woman. And how people or why people define me as a lesbian is mostly because of who I sleep with, but who I am throughout the course of my day is that I’m just a black woman in America. I have to acknowledge the black because that’s what people see when they see me.”¹⁸

¹⁶ I refrain from using the term ‘women’ as some have transitioned and are no longer women.

¹⁷ (E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 185

¹⁸ (E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 185

This quote is useful as she makes clear that among the various parts of her identities, she prioritizes her womaness. Her relationship with her gender is her salient identity as well as her Black identity as these are her identities that are visible to those that encounter her. Lori views the most important identities as the ones that are shaped by the gaze of others. She reduces her sexuality to simply who she has sex with, when for many, their lesbian identity can function as an integral part of their lives. These sexualities can be the basis for community and can be a place of great pride for some, especially when recognized by your community. This is an interesting distinction as generally being sapphic does not exclude men entirely as well as those who identify with the term “wlw” (women loving women). Lesbian, wlw, and sapphic are all revolving around the same concept of women that love women but there seems to be an intentional choice to not use the word lesbian in the subtitle. This decision does not end on the cover of the book. For much of the book, women loving women is the term that Dr. EPJ decides to use for the interview questions. Additionally, there does not seem to be an intense keenness by the participants in the book to have a staunch identity as lesbian, though I believe nearly all the participants would not turn away from the other term. I will discuss this further with a quote from Iris. In this quote from Iris she says, “[T]owards the late eighties, mid-eighties, there was a group called Sisters, I believe it was. But they did not identify as lesbian. They made a point of not identifying as lesbian. They were identified as women loving women, much like the subtitle of your book.”¹⁹ This quote is one of the few instances within the book that the specific term that is being rejected is acknowledged. Though this term is being rejected, it is not Iris talking about

¹⁹ (E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 135

their own personal identification with a term, but rather discussing a rejection that they witnessed by other people. This rejection of terms like lesbian may also be due to these people seeing much more of their identity relating to their race, gender, socio-economic class, or the region that they are from rather than being concerned with who they have sex with. Miss Cherry offers another interesting perspective of how lesbianism can be the salient identity for people within the text. Miss Cherry goes on to say, "

My current feelings? [Smacks her lips.] I am a proud black dyke. My feelings about being a dyke, I have no feelings. I have feelings of being human, and when I told you before it's a dangerous thing, right? I am happy with me. I am happy with my wife. My feelings about being a dyke, being a black dyke [giggles], I love me. I love Miss Cherry, you know. I can't say I have any feelings. I can say what I can feel about Miss Cherry, and that's a happy Cherry. That's how I feel about being me but not the other me. "²⁰

Though Miss Cherry proudly claims that she is a "proud black dyke" and how her sexuality and her sense of self are in harmony. Miss Cherry is a perfect example of the Southern charm seen in this book.

The book is full of ~~similar~~ innuendos and sass. Ms. B's personality is distinctly Southern with constant use of Southern phrases and cultural references that make clear her geographical and cultural location. Though this world is fictitious, it is not without adversity. In the first chapter of the book Ms. B talks about "drones." Drones are the males of the hive that are allowed in this society because they are necessary, but Ms. B has an obviously cautious relationship with them. The drones are seen as a necessary evil within the text and seemingly only useful for reproduction. E. Patrick Johnson is

²⁰ (E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 175

playing with established facts about beehives where the only males are the drones and the females heavily outnumber the drones and the drones are only used for reproduction. In a typical beehive drones provide no service to the beehive and are left to die once winter comes. There is a passing remark from Ms. B referencing “ashies” (white people) who Ms. B says sometimes come into conflict with each other. She shows a general distaste for ashies, showing that in the universe, the hive contains only nonwhite people. Later in the book we see a drone attempting to assault one of the members of the hive while at a club. Ms. B speaks about her experience with sexual assault at the hands of that specific drone but opens a conversation about sexual assault in general among the members. Sexual assault and molestation are not unfamiliar topics throughout the accounts of the participants in the novel. Most stories have some aspect concerning sexual assault. Whether that plays a part in the narrator’s sexuality, however, remains unclear. Nevertheless, the narratives make clear that abusive relationships with family members and traumatic sexual relationships with men began for many in their childhoods.

Yet, because the book deals with sexual assault and cases of abuse so often the book is equally full of narratives of forgiveness and a matter-of-factness towards these events. Alpha was born in 1957 and her narrative takes place in North Texas. Alpha’s story is an obvious example of this recurring theme of forgiveness. Alpha states clearly that her mother was abusive and used religion as a means of perpetuating that abuse. She writes, “My [own] mother was mentally ill and she was also a religious fanatic. And we experienced a lot of emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical abuse. So I did

not have a happy childhood.”²¹ Nevertheless, Alpha, as an adult can forgive her mother for her abuse and failings through her own religious experiences. Prompted by Dr. EPJ’s question concerning her relationship with religion growing up (italics indicating Dr. EPJ speaking) Alpha replies:

“Oh, church and religion played a major role in my life. As a matter of fact, my mother was Pentecostal, and we went to church every Sunday. We also went to tarrying. *What’s that?* It’s like in the Pentecostal church, when you spend the entire night praying. You stay up all night just praying. And so, we did that. I hated church because our mother, she used religion to really shame and embarrass us. [. . .] She would always tell us that the devil was in us. I know now that my mother was mentally ill. But growing up as a child, I didn’t know that she was sick. But she used to always tell us that the devil was in us, and the devil made us do this, the devil made us do that. Mom referred so much to the devil that I always said, “If I ever meet that motherfucker in person, I’m going to kick his ass.” [Laughter.] That’s how much I hated the devil, you know.”²²

This abuse at the hands of her mother and the constant shaming of sin had an impact on Alpha as a lesbian. Though she tells the story humorously, the devil seemed like an entity and an unseen force that all her problems could later be attributed to by her mother. Given Alpha’s mother’s religious orientation, when Alpha came out as a lesbian, she was not met with love and compassion. Rather it was initially ignored, and her mother attempted to exorcise her sexuality from her. At age seventeen, Alpha says at this point in her life, due to how she was raised, she assumed her parents were always right. There was a clear hierarchy in her mind that her parents knew better than she did and that she indeed also believed that she was possessed by a demon inside of her that was causing her to like women. This exorcism was not a traditional exorcism. Instead, it was Alpha and her mother in their garden where her mother spoke tongues

²¹ (E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 43.

²² (E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 45.

and attempted to cast the demon out. After the exorcism she expected to become heterosexual as the demon that was causing her homosexuality had presumably been exorcised (though she did wake up still attracted to women).

This exorcism was a deeply traumatic moment for Alpha only furthered by a lack of discussion about why her sexuality, something Alpha feels she has no control over, is morally reprehensible. Eventually Alpha became estranged from her mother and sought reconciliation only on her mother's death bed. The goal of the reconciliation was to have no guilt about their relationship. When going to meet her mother Alpha says she:

“spent probably like an hour, an hour and a half, communicating with God, and just wailing to God, asking him to give me what I needed, to be able to go to my mom's bedside and say the things that I needed to say to her. And I feel that God did empower me with what I needed to do that because I was able to do it, and it gave me such a peace of mind.”²³

This dependence on God's power to help the individual who asks for it, shows that despite Alpha's early exposure to a different kind of religion that did not accept her sexuality, Alpha was able to transcend her childhood experiences. Her relationship with God is not compromised by her sexual identity even though she had been taught that there was something fundamentally wrong with her sexuality to a point that it necessitated an exorcism. Alpha continues to trust in God and pursues an individual based spirituality in which she feels comfortable seeking out help from God as she made a large step towards forgiving her mother for the pain and trauma that her mother caused her. After having a meeting with God, she did get the forgiveness she sought. She was the only one of her siblings to attain forgiveness as well as give out that

²³ (E. Patrick Johnson, *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 48.

forgiveness to her mother as well. Alpha's ability to forgive the unforgivable highlights these characters' yearning to transcend their situation. Alpha's ability to separate her mother's religiosity from her own demonstrates the resilience of certain parts of her religious upbringing, despite her mother's fanaticism.

This notion of forgiveness becomes a leitmotif of the whole book, for many narratives focus on moments of forgiveness and transcendence. It is difficult and shocking to see people not carrying resentment towards those that harmed them. In another narrative, Michelle demonstrates that despite the abusive harm received, she does not feel resentment towards her abusers. Michelle was a victim of sexual assault by her father and went on to become addicted to drugs. She then faced ridicule from her parents for her inability to leave the home and become independent. Michelle, like many others, came to a crossroads about what to do after having a life filled with drugs that, at that point, had caused her to heavily contemplate taking her own life. After having a conversation with God, she chooses to go back to her parents and care for them instead of committing suicide. She makes the decision to go back to the people that assaulted her and ignored her assault when informed, those that ridiculed her, and failed to take care of her, or help her through her own personal crisis because of her unstable place in life due to drug abuse all to ultimately care for them. Michelle even goes on to say, "God put me in that place [her home with her parents] and humbled me so that I could learn how to serve. And I needed to learn how to serve from a place of being violated. I needed to learn how to serve at home so that I could serve his people here and do it with the spirit of God."²⁴ Once again, this feels like a shocking choice and

²⁴ (E. Patrick Johnson, *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 110

use of God's will. Honestly when I finished Michelle's piece, I had no idea how I felt. Is this forgiveness fair? Did Michelle deserve to be humbled and forced to serve those that assaulted her? Michelle certainly believes it is fair, though I do not.

In the second chapter of *Honeypot* "BLESSED BEE" Lynn stands in stark contrast to the other narratives in this chapter. She does not speak about how she is currently engaged in spiritual practice, but rather how she went to many churches and the issues she had with each of them. Lynn is a great example of how all the identities of being Black and Southern and wlw changes your perspective on religious environments. When she left the Black church seeking a queer affirming nondenominational church, she was met with mostly white faces remarking that she felt "like the token Negro in that church."²⁵ Lynn's account illustrates why people may leave the formal religious spaces. Another similar narrative is Darlene's, which acts as an amazing example of a person who is openly sapphic but still wants to participate in church and experience the church as an affirming space. Though Darlene was a well-established choir director and had toured with famous choir directors and choirs, she began to be pushed out of the church. But through her faith in God, she reaffirmed her belief that God loved her in totality.

The descriptions and experiences of religion in *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women* vary greatly. When I first approached the book, I expected most of the narratives to be primarily about Black Christianity due to the book being set in the South. I had a perception that these people's lives would be dominated with

²⁵ (E. Patrick Johnson, *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 64

highly religious families and being outcast from their communities due to their sexual orientation. Yet, what I found was a great diversity in the religious expression in the book. Moreover, even Dr. EPJ highlights these various and different sources throughout the book.

In the chapter “BLESSED BEE” we, as the audience, bear witness to Dr. EPJ contacting the interviewees. The way that Dr. EPJ contacted the people described in this chapter is distinctly different from the way that he met any other participant in his “study.” In the other chapters Ms. B, both led and introduced Dr. EPJ to the person or people that he was interviewing and thus would be exposed to some of their background context before Ms. B teleported or otherwise transported him to the point of contact. In this chapter alone we see a very different kind of connection portrayed between Dr. EPJ and his “subjects,” especially this early into his journey in contacting the people of Hymen. Dr. EPJ’s early relationship is full of skepticism towards Ms. B’s intentions after being spirited away by her and being held hostage, unable to return home until he has finished her task. In this chapter there are no jokes or snide remarks; this is a moment where Dr. EPJ engages most honestly, openly and naturally with his interlocutors.

Only when Ms. B has deemed his journey complete can Dr. EPJ return home. But in this chapter, he displays more personal agency. Here, there is no resistance as he wades into the river named Oshun and delivers his offerings of honey, yam, and oranges.²⁶ Dr. EPJ mentions a river named Oshun in reference to the Yoruba deity

²⁶ (E. Patrick Johnson, *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 55

originating in modern day Nigeria²⁷ who is an Orisha, a type of divinity, one of many that is worshipped in Ifá. In meeting the women who compromise the spirituality chapter of the book Dr. EPJ gives an offering to the river and he experiences something out of the ordinary. Though this book offers many fantastical elements like teleporting this is something different. The participants appear around Dr. EPJ after he offers a dance and a song to make them appear. The stipulations of the song being that the song must be “from the heart and must be from my [Dr. EPJ’s] spiritual tradition.”²⁸ This section of the offering is interesting as it paints Ifá as a non-exclusionary religious tradition due to the river being named Oshun, an orisha or deity of the water. Oshun is one of the main deities of the spiritual practice of Ifá. The emphasis within the text that is placed on Dr. EPJ coming from his own spiritual tradition, rather than focusing on making sure that he is doing the ritual exactly as what would be traditionally done by more traditional practitioners. This shows the flexibility within the ritual. Dr. EPJ is actively combining his Pentecostal background with this ritual as even when he is dancing. He illustrates the rhythm and beat by calling upon many aspects of the African diaspora in his short poem found on page 56²⁹:

dip. drop. kick. gasp. dip. drop. kick. gasp.

stop

shift

clave

²⁷ (*Ifá Divination Among the Yoruba*. Directed by Elizabeth M. McClelland. Royal Anthropological Institute, 2012. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/ifa-divination-among-the-yoruba>.)

²⁸ (E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 56

²⁹ (E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 56

salsa/songo/son salsa/songo/son salsa/songo/son salsa/songo/son

stop

shift

deep house

bounce bounce bounce bounce

bounce bounce bounce bounce

bounce bounce bounce bounce

bounce bounce bounce bounce

stop

shift

holyghostpentecostalwon'tturnmeloose

In this short poem E. Patrick Johnson takes the reader into the movement they are performing in the river as they provide their offering of dance. This poem is already unique since it serves as a transcription of a religious dance ritual. Dr. EPJ transitions through different dance styles from the salsa to the Cuban songo but I think what is especially interesting is the ending line of “holyghostpentecostalwon'tturnmeloose.”³⁰ This last line is very different from the previous lines that illustrate movement in a clear way with clear distinct actions, but the poem culminates in a line that says something deep about his own religious background and through what cultural lens he observes. Not only does this line reflect Dr. EPJ's cultural lens of moving through his spiritual tradition of Pentecostalism but I think speaks to the connections between Pentecostalism and Ifá as spiritual systems that can work together. In being required to

³⁰ (E. Patrick Johnson, HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women), 56

be from his spiritual tradition he is mixing movement from the African diaspora and how the movement becomes a song. Though Dr. EPJ is wading in a river coming from Ifá being combined with Christianity in his song shows that these traditions are not necessarily incompatible and an example of these traditions marrying each other is candomblé.

The histories of Ifá and African American religion as a whole are related. Ifá is a Yoruba religion or practice of divination that began in present day Nigeria. Through the trans-Atlantic slave trade the practices of west Africa became key to many Black people across the diaspora. A clear example of how Ifá changed to suit the needs of the people that practiced Ifá is candomblé. Candomblé³¹ is a religious practice that was created in Brazil and works with Yoruba deities as well as Catholic saints an example of religious syncretism. Faced with being forced to convert to Catholicism, newly arrived Africans in Brazil saw similarities between their deities and the saints who performed miracles. This type of practice was not seen in the United States the same way due to Catholicism not being the dominant form of Christianity. Moreover, Brazil continued importing enslaved Africans for several generations longer than the United States. This continued import of enslaved Africans allowed the original knowledge about Yoruba deities and the religious practices of Candomblé to not be lost in Brazil. In the United States there was a larger push to have the population of enslaved people to be self-sufficient rather than the continued importation of new labor. The lack of continuity or continued contact with new imports cut off US slaves from their past before these practices were well established.

³¹ (Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: a Religious History of African Americans*)

These connections are also made clear in the narratives of other characters in *Honeypot*. Julia (Sangodare) in *Honeypot* much like Dr. EPJ does not see her religious practice of Ifá as being incompatible with her rearing in the church as a child. When asked by Dr. EPJ if she saw “tension between your [Sangodare’s] Christian Protestant upbringing and African cosmology”³² she responded that she believes that instead of a tension she said African cosmology “brings it full circle”³³ and when she discusses her religious beliefs with her father who is a Baptist preacher and comes from a line of preachers, she finds similarities between the teachings. By practicing Ifá and being initiated into the practice Sangodare finds a close connection between her home in the South, and the Caribbean and the African continent. Sangodare talks about this connection on page 66³⁴: “the South feels really connected to both the continent of Africa and the Caribbean, and I feel like African spirituality kind of helps shed more light on that, like so many of the things that we did in church that I wonder about. I’m like, ‘Oh! That’s where that came from.’” Sangodare makes a connection about some of the origins of Southern practice in continental Africa and continues to discuss these similarities with her father. Sangodare recalls a conversation with her father saying “‘Daddy, what do you know about seers and the Bible?’ ‘Well, you know, prophet so-and-so was a seer.’”³⁵ African seers equate to Biblical prophets, they perform the same role. In this quote she shows how these practices overlap, and through these conversations with her family she attempts to open up the possibility of seeing how both religious traditions inform and enhance her family’s understanding of their Christian

³² (E. Patrick Johnson, *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 66

³³ (E. Patrick Johnson, *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 66

³⁴ (E. Patrick Johnson, *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 66

³⁵ (E. Patrick Johnson, *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 66

practices and their African heritage. Sangodare finds specifically Christianity and Ifá so compatible because she links the teaching of Ifá with what she and her family believe the people who wrote the Bible would have been practicing in their day. In this quote she talks about this connection: “finding a direct connection, because Ifá is over six thousand years old, and these sorts of African practices are what the people that were writing the books of the Bible, that’s sort of their history, too, I think. Anyway, it’s a connection.”³⁶ Sangodare finds a connection with antiquity through these practices and sees them as parallel manifestations of the same history. She sees that by practicing what she believes is the ancient religion of Biblical figures gives her and her family more context and a fuller vision of the Biblical teachings. This full vision is the complete circle that Sangodare refers to. This ability to find direct connection and similarities is why she seeks to attempt to remove the taboo around African spirituality and all African practices. Due to being a new initiate to Ifá, Dr. EPJ asks about Sangodare’s experience going through the process of initiation. He knows people who have had a fulfilling time as well as others who were exploited by their spiritual leaders and left the process, keeping only the name. Sangodare replies that her leader is “an out black lesbian, organizer, activist, media mogul.”³⁷ I was shocked that this proved to be another place where lesbian community was formed. Deep community is found across not just religious boundaries but also sexual orientation and I was astonished that this was another area where lesbians have found a community.

³⁶ (E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 67

³⁷ (E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 67

Although the book's setting remains fictitious, this setting works to focus the audience on a journey of discovery. In the narratives described in the first chapter of the book many of the women do not speak much about going to church or being religious. The first real instance of this sort of discussion about the role played by religion in their lives begins with Malu, who is the daughter of Nancy. Both Nancy and Malu are lesbians and Malu's ex-girlfriend, Linda, has a child with her. The child was a result of Linda's relationship with her ex-fiancé, who did not know they were pregnant until after Malu and Linda had been together for a while. Linda had a deep sense of denial of her sexuality due to her family being "very, very conservative and very, very holy".³⁸ This denial of self is prominent in many stories about queer youth being afraid to express themselves and live their authentic selves. This line reminded me of the story of my uncle being 'delivered' from homosexuality. Family was an area where Malu and her ex-Linda had quite a few distinctions. Malu's mother was a lesbian while Malu's ex, Linda, came from a deeply religious family. Though Malu does not say that her mother, Nancy, raised her religiously, Malu does use very religious language to talk about her relationship to motherhood. Malu says "the way I talk about it [motherhood] is that was my first calling, like my first calling from God was to motherhood."³⁹ Malu even goes so far as to say that she "prayed a lot" to seek the correct course of action to take with whether she should be helpful in this child's life as it was a unique situation.

³⁸ (E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 36

³⁹ (E. Patrick Johnson, *HoneyPot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*), 37

Suggestions

When we study religious cultures on an abstract, theoretical level, it can be quite difficult to relate it back to the lived experiences of everyday people. When I first got to Haverford, it was difficult to imagine studying the religious experiences of myself and my family. I initially chalked this up to the culture shock of leaving the South, but I soon realized that there were multiple, intersecting factors at play. *Honeypot* acts as an accompanying text to *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: an oral history*. Both texts are not explicitly about religion but more so the personal journey of the participants. Outside of the dedicated chapter to religion “BLESSED BEE,” the reader often must tease out the spirituality of the participants' and their relationship to organized religion. But there is something special about the power of viewing the everyday religions in the texts. Currently there are no courses offered by the Religion Department at Haverford College that bring to light these forms of everyday religion that are shown in *Honeypot* or an option to read narratives about how people view their religious practices in the mundane. This led me to take courses at Swarthmore College, where I felt better served. We need to ground the lived experiences of everyday people, particularly those folks whose narratives have been erased and ignored at numerous intersections.

I would love if there were courses specifically about Black lesbians, or generally about Black queer people, with authors such as Toni Morrison or Audre Lorde. Though there is already a course on James Baldwin, I would be interested in a more general discussion that also includes Black sapphics. I took an African American religion course at Swarthmore taught by Dr. Yvonne Chireau as there was not a comparable course at

Haverford. I think this is a baseline course required to reach the future I envision for the Haverford Department of Religion. I am interested in courses that explore and describe the diverse culture of the South. There is a rich history in the South related to religion that I think is well worth exploring.

I want to be clear that this is a structural problem, not restricted to just the Religion department. I understand that there is an understaffing and underfunding of both Africana Studies as well as the Women and Gender Studies department at Haverford, so my suggestion is not just to the Religion Department, but to the College. These stories are *worth* documenting and studying, and we deserve to see this work done with care. If our narrative knowledges were respected, institutional priorities would reflect this. I hope that I have demonstrated how textured and valuable this work can be if done properly, as in *Honeypot*.

In addition to restructuring institutional priorities, we can queer the rigid boundaries of Africana Studies, Queer Studies and Religious Studies to encourage the centering of often marginalized and invizibilized voices. I hope to have modelled this more intersectional type of study through my review of literature on narrative accounts of Black Southern sapphics' religious experiences.

Conclusion

As someone who once understood Black Southern religious cultures as a monolith, despite being immersed in them growing up, reading *Honeypot* shifted my understanding of my own experiences, and those of queer folks in the Black Church in

general. I hope to have charted the intellectual lineages that made this paper possible and set the stage for *Honeypot*. The magical realist setting, characters, and play between real-life narratives and storytelling communicate the nuances of how Black sapphics navigate trauma, belonging, family relationships, conversations with God, and the syncretism between African and Christian traditions (as in the case of Candomblé). The great diversity of Black religious experiences in the South, which differ from just being the Black Church, have opened my eyes to the diversity that I formerly was unable to recognize in my home.

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