Christianity and Lesbian Subjectivity in Texts by Alice Walker, Jeanette Winterson & Carla Trujillo

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By Angela Santiago
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Dedication

Wherever you are, it's the people you love who make your world.

This thesis is dedicated to my family: my partner, Lindsay Code, my cat, Mr. Russell, my mom and dad, Suzanne and Jose Santiago and my siblings, Benita, Daniel, Carma, Erica, and Felicity. Each of them has been a source of inspiration to me in some way during my immersion in this project. Their support and undying love has always encouraged me in the pursuit of my goals.

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the ways in which Christianity seeks to limit lesbian subjectivity in three novels: Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982), Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1985) by Jeanette Winterson, and What Night Brings (2003) by Carla Trujillo. Despite variations in place, culture, and belonging, these three novels share a basic Christian ideology that is patriarchal and homophobic, a repressive ideology within and against which each novel's protagonist struggles to assert her lesbian identity. My first chapter, "Redefining the Boundaries of Spirituality: Celie's Discovery of Lesbian Desire as an Alternative Spiritual Path in The Color Purple," explores the way that Celie's conceptualization of God changes from the Baptist model of a punishing white male figure to a more feminine God who parallels her love relationship with Shug. I argue that their lesbian connection is a catalyst for spiritual transformation. My second chapter, "Embracing Forbidden Fruit: Jeanette's Journey Away From God in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit," discusses the Evangelical church's attempts to "cure" Jeanette of her sexual deviance and to force her to suppress her "otherness." I argue that this ultimately leads to rebellion against the church in favour of her lesbian identity. My third chapter, "Away from Anatomy, Towards Desire: Lesbian Yearnings vs. Religious Ideology in What Night Brings," focuses on prayer and confession as they parallel Marci's struggle to come to terms with her "deviant" sexuality. I argue that Marci is able to defy both her family and the Catholic Church in favour of sexual freedom and an intensely personal, individualistic form of spirituality. Throughout the analysis that follows, this thesis shows how each character develops a stable identity beyond the confines of her familial ties to religion and creates a space for herself that promotes new forms of subjectivity and truth.

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Christianity and Lesbian Subjectivity in Texts by Alice Walker, Jeanette Winterson & Carla Trujillo.

> **[Our sexuality] deepens and shapes our power of personal being. Our sexuality represents our most intense interaction with the world. Because this is so, it is also a key to the quality and integrity of our overall spirituality.**
>
> --Beverly Harrison

Introduction

This thesis focuses on the ways in which Christianity seeks to limit lesbian subjectivity in three novels: Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982), Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1985) by Jeanette Winterson, and What Night Brings (2003) by Carla Trujillo. Despite variations in place, culture, and belonging, these three novels share a basic Christian ideology that is patriarchal and homophobic, a repressive ideology within and against which each novel's protagonist struggles to assert her lesbian identity. The Color Purple is set in the American South in the early 1900's where the main character, Celie, is coming to terms with herself in a Southern Baptist religious context. Oranges, on the other hand, is set in a small industrial city in Northwestern England during the 1960's. Its main character, Jeanette, is coming of age in a strict, Evangelical environment. Finally, What Night Brings is set in California in the 1960's where the main character, Marci, struggles with her sexual identity in the confines of a Chicano-

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main character, Jeanette, is coming of age in a strict, Evangelical environment. Finally, What Night Brings is set in California in the 1960's where the main character, Marci, struggles with her sexual identity in the confines of a Chicano-Catholic working-class family. Although the protagonist of each text is socialized within different denominations of Christianity and, thus, experiences Christianity differently, I will argue that each endures a similar struggle to resist the compulsory heterosexuality implicit in that religion. Moreover, each triumphs by abandoning the narrow conceptualizations of God offered by her church and by creating lesbian relationships that are spiritually empowering and rejuvenating. In the process, I suggest that the relationship between Christianity and lesbianism, at least within the confines of these novels, is complex, at best, involving some possibilities for resistance, complicity, and revisionism.

It is important to locate these works in the context from which they emerged so as to illustrate the differences in the social climate with respect to the issue of lesbianism. Walker's text is set in the early 1900's, a time when there was little discussion of homosexuality in general, and quite possibly none about lesbianism in particular. This being said, however, when her text was published in the 1980's, lesbian theories were already being articulated in academic circles. Thus, although issues of homosexuality remained largely silenced during the time represented within the text itself, the social climate in which Walker created the story ensured that she was at least marginally aware of lesbian theory and that it very well could have influenced her work.

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Winterson's text was also published in the 80's, during those years when lesbian theory was first coming to voice. Still, the 1960's setting of her text was a time when lesbianism was only acknowledged in certain social circles, with respect to the rise of feminist issues. Finally, Trujillo's text was published in 2003, well after queer theory had gained some respectability. Although her text is also set in the 1960's Thus, the ideas presented in Trujillo's work address sexuality in a way that it is not addressed in the other texts, obviously reflecting the ideas born out of the 60's as well as those which presented themselves in the field of queer theory. These historical distinctions are particularly relevant here so as to avoid the homogenization of lesbians themselves and to differentiate between lesbian experiences and the social reception of lesbians at various times throughout history.

Background

The issue of homosexuality in the context of Christianity is one that has gained much attention in recent debates. The current discussions concern not only the issue of Christianity as opposed to homosexuality, but also the potential of their coexistence. Thus, the importance of addressing the relationship between homosexuality and Christianity as it is represented in literature, and, more specifically, the manner in which this plays out in terms of the lesbian subjectivity of the protagonists in these three novels cannot be denied. Throughout my research I have found that two separate camps exist within Christianity itself in terms of notions or beliefs about homosexuality. The first,

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and more "traditional" of the two, posits with biblical and doctrinal authority that homosexuality should be condemned and is immoral. One passage that is often employed by this faction is Leviticus 18:22: "You shall not lay with a man as with a woman; it is abomination." Although this passage speaks unambiguously about same-sex acts between men, it is commonly used to condemn *all* homosexual activity. The literal interpretation of biblical passages like this one most often comes from fundamentalist or orthodox groups, but is not limited to them. The second camp has a more liberal approach, which can include a metaphorical re-reading of the Bible in a way that is tolerant of homosexuality and embraces it as a gift from God. The rationale for such metaphorical readings is that many other Old Testament practices concerning diet, dress, and rituals are no longer followed literally. It should be noted that both camps can and do exist simultaneously within congregations and denominations. According to Marcus Borg, "conflict about how to see and read the Bible is the single greatest issue dividing Christians in North America today"
(4). Furthermore, he continues, "separating the groups are two very different ways of seeing three foundational questions about the Bible: questions about its origin, its authority, and its interpretation" (4). Because this is the case, it is fair to say that there is no consensus within Christianity about the nature of homosexuality or policies around gay and lesbian members.

Christianity as a separate religion began with St. Paul; however, Jesus' desire to reform Judaism provided Christianity with its roots. Jesus claimed that

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the entire Jewish law, epitomized by the Ten Commandments, should be replaced with two new commands: Love God and Love your neighbour as yourself. This emphasis on love is more congenial to homosexuality than the "Thou Shalt Not" of the old order. The spread of the early church was largely into Roman domains, among Gentiles who were reassured by St. Paul that faith in the grace of God surpassed any Jewish Kosher requirements. The Roman culture of these Gentiles was not averse to homosexuality; as John Boswell explains, there was "absolutely no conscious effort on anyone's part in the Roman world, the world where Christianity was born, to claim that homosexuality was abnormal or undesirable" (Boswell 19). Despite this fact, however, a shift occurred which rendered homosexual activity unnatural and therefore condemned within the confines of Christianity. Because Christianity has strong Jewish roots, the intolerance of homosexuality present in Jewish culture carried over to Christian tradition (Boswell 20). Boswell posits that within a single century, between "the period of 1250 and 1350, almost every European state passed civil laws demanding death for a single homosexual act" (Boswell 22). Thus, the rise of Christianity brought about intense social change that served to intensify the marginalization of homosexual acts.

Because I consider the variance of religious representation in each novel, a brief description of the main divisions of Christian denominations is necessary to contextualize the discussion of the texts and avoid homogenizing the institution of Christianity. Since the fifteenth century, Christianity has been

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divided into various denominations. From one universal Roman Catholic Church emerged Catholic and Protestant sects, which in turn divided into Orthodox Catholic, Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, Reformed, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Methodist and so on, with further divisions continuing to the present day. According to B.A. Robinson, a simple way to classify these denominations is to characterize them by one of three 'wings': the Evangelical wing, the Liberal wing, and the Mainline wing. The Evangelical wing is defined as "the conservative wing of Christianity, comprising many denominations and faith groups that tightly hold to historical Christian creeds, beliefs and practices" (Robinson par. 4). The evangelical standpoint is strongly rooted in patriarchal discourse where literal interpretations of the Bible are the norm and there is little or no space for deviations from the established heterosexual model. The liberal wing sees the major parts of the Bible as reflecting God's will. Although churches in this faction believe biblical stories are rich with spiritual power, they do not necessarily connect them to actual historical events and there is more space for individual interpretation of scripture. Finally the mainline wing, as the name suggests, consists of churches whose beliefs fall somewhere between the conservative and liberal approaches to Christianity.

Of the three novels under consideration, the predominantly Baptist society described in The Color Purple offers the most open-minded and liberal approach to religion as it is strongly focused on community and seems minimally concerned with Biblical interpretations. Oranges is the most evangelical of the

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three as it includes an intense focus on literal readings of Biblical scripture. Finally, What Night Brings has the most mainline approach of the three novels as the religion represented throughout this text is focused more on community rather than on actual readings of biblical scripture, but the community is closely associated with church activities and attendance. Despite these differences, there are also several similarities across denominations in that the institution itself is deeply rooted in patriarchal discourse. Thus, the struggles faced by Jeanette, Celie and Marci are very similar on several levels and as I will argue, each woman finally reaches a space wherein the narrow conceptualizations of God offered by the Christian tradition are cast off in favour of more feminine-centred approaches to spirituality.

Of all the denominations, Catholicism has most fully engaged in the controversy around homosexuality. Within Catholicism "homosexuality has always been rejected as an unnatural vice" (Baum 8). It is important to note that one reason homosexuality has been such a crucial issue within Catholicism is because of the church's development of monasteries for men and convents for women, a move which clearly established same-sex societies that firmly retreated from interactions with the opposite sex. Without a doubt, the threat of desire in such contexts is enormous.

Certainly in the present-day gay marriage debates, Catholicism is unbending in its "traditional" stance. According to the September 7, 2003 issue of The New Catholic Times, "homosexuality is a troubling moral and social

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phenomenon" (Spurgaitis par. 1) and the Catholic church will do all it can to defend the "dignity of marriage, the foundation of the family, and the stability of society" (Spurgaitis par. 3). As well, in a 12-page document released by the Vatican entitled "Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons," the legal recognition of same-sex unions is rejected. This document declares that: "There are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family. Marriage is holy, while homosexual acts go against the natural moral law" (Spurgaitis par. 1). This document makes clear that there still exists a great deal of homophobia within the Roman Catholic Church and further that it has no intention of changing its traditional teaching in favour of a more inclusive standpoint.

Catholicism's stance on homosexuality reflects what Foucault, in Discipline and Punish, calls the "micro-physics of power" (170). Within this framework "individuals are formed through training, which is conducted by means of three simple instruments, hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and ...the examination" (170). The statement above made by the Roman Catholic Church certainly falls in to the category of a "normalizing judgement" as it renders homosexual acts immoral through a process of judgement. The three instruments outlined by Foucault pervade Catholicism, yet it is important to note, that there are Catholic groups who do support LGBT people (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender). This being said, however, my research is primarily

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concerned with the beliefs and mandates of the high church and how those are disseminated in such a way as to suppress lesbian experiences.

In a news release sent out on July 7th 2003, the Evangelical Church of England called upon all clergy and laity to "uphold the God ordained standard that sexual intercourse belongs solely within the lifelong union of a man and a woman" (Church of England Society Council). Furthermore, the release called on all bishops to "uphold this teaching, to refute those who teach otherwise and to discipline those who will not abide by it." Clearly, this release reveals the church's stance on homosexual unions. Generally speaking, the Evangelical Church of England considers homosexuality a behaviour and therefore they believe that it is a "chosen and changeable preference" (Robinson, para. 2). According to the website Religious Tolerance, a site dedicated to educating people about various religions and their stances on social issues, the Evangelical Church of England believes that homosexuality is unnatural, abnormal and condemned by God. Thus, any attempt to accept homosexuality as a normal, natural orientation is unacceptable to them. Certain factions of the church feel that it will have the undesirable effect of increasing the number of youth who choose the homosexual "lifestyle"" (Robinson, par 6). Although the struggle within the Church of England over this issue has not been as widely publicized in the North American context as the Catholic one has, it is clear that they too remain traditional in their views and continue to uphold strict adherence to literal scripture as the true means to salvation. The price of membership in this

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denomination for LGBT persons, therefore, is silence about gay and lesbian identities. This very fact hinges on one of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's main arguments in Epistemology of the Closet, where she posits that "for many gay people, [the closet] is still a fundamental feature of social life" (49). Sedgwick continues, "there can be few gay people ...fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence" (49).

The debate around same-sex relationships can also be seen within many Southern Baptist circles. In an article entitled, "If same-sex 'marriage' is legalized, why not polygamy?" published in the March 19th 2004 issue of the Baptist Press News Magazine, Michael Foust writes that "the debate over same-sex 'marriage' is the result of marriage being separated from its religious roots and from procreation. If marriage is not tied to childbearing, it literally could mean anything" (Foust par. 2). These same patriarchal ideals are quite readily available for distribution and can be seen in other Baptist publications. The Southern Baptist publication Christian Life Commission for example, has released a pamphlet entitled, "Critical Issues: Homosexuality," within which the commission states that "the many Bible passages that are quoted as condemning homosexuality are valid." The pamphlet continues, "homosexuals can change their sexual orientation" and argues that homosexuals can only lead moral lives by remaining celibate (Robinson par. 6). In October of 1998, the Southern Baptist Convention issued a statement reaffirming that gays and lesbians can be

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converted to heterosexuality thorough belief in Jesus. They proclaimed that "*forgiveness of and freedom from homosexuality* is found in Jesus" (Robinson par. 8). This statement insists that salvation lies in renouncing homosexuality, a stance that mandates the performance of heterosexual identities.

As Judith Butler argues in "Imitation and Gender Subordination," it "is no 'accident' that such theoretical contestations of identity emerge within a political climate that is performing a set of similar obliterations of homosexual identities through legal and political means" (311). Christianity has changed between the time that The Color Purple was published in 1982 and What Night Brings emerged in 2003; however, as evidenced by the above-mentioned information, the patriarchal structures of power at the heart of this religion remain intact. It is important to note that some denominations, such as the United Church, do seem to uphold more liberal views of homosexuality. That being said, however, it is clear that the denominations represented in the novels under study here are, in varying degrees, generally critical of LGBT lifestyles.

I am especially interested in the effects of the specific religious practices in each text under consideration. As well, I look at the ways images of God represented in each novel affect each protagonist's belief in a higher power and explore how these conceptualizations change throughout the course of each text. More specifically, in my first chapter, on The Color Purple, I examine the extent to which the power exhibited by the Baptist church controls Celie's knowledge of herself and limits her subjectivity. I also look at the role race plays in Celie's

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ideas about herself as a woman and a sexual being in the context of the novel. In Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit, I look at how the Evangelical church's attempt to exorcise Jeanette promotes her feelings of abnormality as she is deemed "unnatural". In the third Chapter on Trujillo's novel What Night Brings, I examine the extent to which confession, as practiced in the Roman Catholic Church, encourages Marci's guilt around issues of sexual identity that limit the formation of her authentic self. Furthermore, this chapter addresses issues around what the practice of confession teaches Marci about truth and power. As well, I look at the tradition of confession in a broader sense as a system which is rooted in punishment. I also consider the manner in which confession is used primarily as a tool of coercion that serves to induce Marci's self-hatred regarding her "unnatural" sexual orientation (her "sins"). In all three chapters, I address the role prayer plays in the process of identity formation and the protagonists' ideas about self.

Problem

Issues of religion and homosexuality are central to each of the novels discussed in this thesis. Yet few critics have addressed these issues in great depth. There has been an extensive amount of critical work on The Color Purple since its publication in 1982. Most of this criticism, however, focuses on issues of class and race. Moreover, the criticism that I have encountered which does address religion seems to do so with little discussion of sexuality and lesbian

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identity. Ellen Barker and Jeannine Thyreen, for example, have begun to address religion in this novel but their discussions remain far too general to be valuable with respect to sexuality. Barker does acknowledge the sexual relationship between Celie and Shug, but sees their lesbian relationship as secondary to what she sees as a mother-daughter bond and focuses more intensely upon Shug's "subtly guiding 'mothering' influence" on Celie (55). Jeannine Thyreen, on the other hand, discusses the book's theological element, examining the manner in which "Walker...reveals that misconceptions or corrupted notions of the Divine inevitably and profoundly affect the material world" (50). Thus, in much of the scholarship to date, sexuality has been only marginally considered and the discussions have not explicitly discussed the relationship between lesbian identity and Christianity.

Similarly, Isabel C. Anievas Gamallo and Tess Cosslett address lesbian sexuality in Oranges, but do not provide in-depth exploration of the role of literal interpretations of scripture or patriarchal conceptualizations of God in first subjugating and later inciting the main character to lesbian rebellion. Gamallo, for example, examines the construction of Jeanette's lesbianism through the fantasy and fairytale aspects of the text. Cosslett, on the other hand, examines the intertextuality between Winterson's text, the Bible, Mallory, and Jane Eyre, focusing on several different ways that Oranges can be read. These articles, like most of the other scholarship on this novel, do not give enough consideration to the connection between lesbianism and religion in the text and do not address

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the way that the main character shifts away from her Christian roots in favour of the more fluid spirituality found in her lesbian relationships.

Finally, book reviews of What Night Brings, which was published in April of 2003, are its only critical studies to date and they praise the book as a wonderful Latina novel. Some reviews call attention to the budding lesbianism of the female protagonist and most do discuss the presence of religion in the text, yet they do not examine in detail the underlying religious tension between Marci's lesbianism and the tenets of Catholicism. Fernando Oritz Jr., for instance, points out that "as for what's going on inside her, Marci has no doubt or confusion. She loves women" (Oritz par. 1). Oritz acknowledges the importance of lesbianism in the text, but I would say that he overstates Marci's confidence with regards to her feelings because at many points throughout the text she is confused about her desire for women. In contrast, Carole Goldberg's review outlines Marci's desire to become a boy, but fails to make the connection between this desire and Marci's sexuality. Goldberg's oversight is evident when she states: "In Marci, Trujillo has created ... a girl who is beginning to see that the church, the family, and even the body you're born with can't always give you what you need" (Goldberg par. 3). Goldberg's review misses the fact that Marci's desire to be a boy has more to do with her confusion about her feelings for women, which stems from her Latino/Catholic upbringing, than any real dissatisfaction with her own anatomy. Although some critics speak briefly of

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Marci's liberation, none points out that this liberation follows her abandonment of Christianity and her acceptance of her lesbian sexuality.

Clearly, most of the critical work on The Color Purple and Oranges as well as reviews of What Night Brings avoids in-depth discussions of the way that lesbian subjectivity is directly affected by Christian ideology. This theme is certainly one that I see in all three novels and, although there is variance in place and ethnicity in the stories, this theme is the common thread that brings these novels together. In the following pages, I focus particularly on the way that these texts discuss and describe lesbianism *vis a vis* Christian ideology and how homophobic ideas about sexuality are disseminated both subtly and explicitly through the patriarchal context of Christian churches. In the novels I address here, religion has a critical role in the development of each protagonist's character. Certainly, attitudes around homosexuality that stem from the church will have undeniable effects on LGBT people who come of age in that context. In all three novels this may not pose a problem for people identifying as straight; however, those who are not straight are certainly affected by the attitudes of the church community on this issue. The experiences of both Jeanette (Oranges) and Marci (What Night Brings) illustrate that the stifling silence around homosexuality coupled with an overt condemnation of it when it does arise, infuses each character with a sense of shame and an overriding feeling of isolation.

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I should add that religion is not addressed in all lesbian novels. Indeed, in my research thus far, I have not come across many novels where lesbianism and religion are dealt with simultaneously, nor where there is an obvious connection between the two. Nevertheless, I would argue that the points of tension that arise between sexuality and Christian ideology, such as issues around power and agency with respect to lesbian identity specifically, are aspects which are important and worthy of study. The three novels I have chosen to address deal with religion and lesbian identity in a way that invites an analysis of the relationship between the two. Each of these novels illustrates the struggle of a young woman coming to terms with her identity in a space that is very much influenced by the mandates of Christianity. This thesis, therefore, enhances awareness of the problems posed by the tension between Christianity and homosexuality and explores the literary solutions that are proposed.

Chapter One: Redefining the Boundaries of Spirituality: Celie's Discovery of Lesbian Desire as an Alternative Spiritual Path in The Color Purple

In my first chapter, I explore Celie's relationship with God throughout The Color Purple. In my reading of this text, the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug is not problematized in the same way that I see lesbian relationships problematized in the other two novels. However, it is no coincidence that Celie's socialization in the context of a dominating patriarch teaches her that men are in control and that God is the most powerful man of all. Thus, Celie learns to fear

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men, yet is forced to be dependent upon them as well. Clearly, her conceptualization of God is directly linked to her experiences with men. At the beginning of the novel, for example, Celie talks to God because she believes that He is the only one who will listen to her. As the novel progresses, however, and Celie begins to connect with women, her conceptualization of God changes from the Christian model of a punishing white male figure with whom she has nothing in common, to a broader sense of a higher power at the end of the novel. I will employ Luce Irigaray's theory of the relationship between God and women to analyze the transformation of Celie's conceptualization and to argue that her "God is quite other, as is [her] pleasure" (Irigaray 236). I argue that this shift to a more feminine God parallels her love relationship with Shug and that their lesbian connection is a catalyst for spiritual transformation as Shug emerges as the agent of Celie's salvation.

Chapter Two: Embracing Forbidden Fruit: Jeanette's Journey Away From God in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.

My second chapter focuses on the way that homosexuality is problematized within Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit through the fundamentalist views of the Evangelical church within which Jeanette is raised. I employ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of the closet to examine the way that Jeanette initially embraces her role within the church. It is clear that she closets herself in order to be accepted and feel a sense of belonging within the confines of the Christian community. I also employ Foucault's theory of discipline and

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punishment to examine the use of the Bible as a tool for coercion and control within this text and address Fundamentalist ideology as a "technique of power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (Foucault 170). Moreover, I discuss the church's attempt to "cure" Jeanette of her sexual deviance and to force her to suppress her lesbian identity as efforts to constrain and dominate her "otherness." I argue that this ultimately leads to her rejection of fundamentalist belief and rebellion against the church in favour of her lesbian identity.

Chapter Three: Away from Anatomy, Towards Desire: Lesbian Yearnings v.s Religious Ideology in What Night Brings

My third chapter focuses on the phenomena of prayer and confession in What Night Brings as they parallel Marci's struggle to come to terms with her "deviant" sexuality. Furthermore, I explore the way that confession instills fear in Marci about her own hidden truth. As well, attention is given to an examination of Marci's hope that by praying "every single day" God will make her into a boy. I employ Judith Butler's theory of performativity in order to examine the connection between gender and attraction here. I use this as a starting point from which to address Marci's wish to become a boy so that her desire for girls will be acceptable in the context of Catholic teachings and Mexican-American society at large. Ultimately, I argue that through destabilizing categories of sexual identity, Marci is able to find the strength to defy both her

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punishment to examine the use of the Bible as a tool for coercion and control within this text and address Fundamentalist ideology as a "technique of power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (Foucault 170). Moreover, I discuss the church's attempt to "cure" Jeanette of her sexual deviance and to force her to suppress her lesbian identity as efforts to constrain and dominate her "otherness." I argue that this ultimately leads to her rejection of fundamentalist belief and rebellion against the church in favour of her lesbian identity.

Chapter Three: Away from Anatomy, Towards Desire: Lesbian Yearnings vs. Religious Ideology in What Night Brings

My third chapter focuses on the phenomena of prayer and confession in What Night Brings as they parallel Marci's struggle to come to terms with her "deviant" sexuality. Furthermore, I explore the way that confession instills fear in Marci about her own hidden truth. As well, attention is given to an examination of Marci's hope that by praying "every single day" God will make her into a boy. I employ Judith Butler's theory of performativity in order to examine the connection between gender and attraction here. I use this as a starting point from which to address Marci's wish to become a boy so that her desire for girls will be acceptable in the context of Catholic teachings and Mexican-American society at large. Ultimately, I argue that through destabilizing categories of sexual identity, Marci is able to find the strength to defy both her

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family and the Catholic Church in favour of sexual freedom and an intensely personal, individualistic form of spirituality.

The theorists I have mentioned above provide me with tools to examine the way that the religious aspects of each novel provide a stark contrast to the lesbian identity of the main characters, ultimately lending greater depth to the performances of sexuality within the texts. Furthermore, they inform both my discussions of the impact of religion on conceptualizations of sexual identity and my examination of the integral role that religion plays with regards to the social acceptance of homosexual identities. Throughout the analysis that follows, I hope to convey the extent to which each character develops a stable identity beyond the confines of her familial ties to religion and creates a space for herself that promotes new forms of subjectivity and truth.

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Chapter One:

Redefining the Boundaries of Spirituality: Celie's Discovery of Lesbian Desire as an Alternative Spiritual Path in The Color Purple.

> **Desire, the erotic, seems to me to be the motivating energy of life-- it is about our depths of connection, of pleasure, of satisfaction, of truthfulness. My connection with the trees and the mountains is no less an erotic connection than that with a lover...I can shape my own spirituality ...I am not constrained by anyone else's prescriptions and my spirituality is just about being who I am in as whole a way as I can; and this is a journey which continues, does not come to rest at some point. It has nothing to do with a god who is 'out there'; it is entirely about immanence.**
>
> Paula from Found Wanting.

> **The erotic crosses over among us, moving us to change the ways we are living in relation. Touched by this sacred power, we are never the same again.**
>
> Feminist Theologian Carter Heyward

"You better not never tell nobody but God" (Walker 1). These words commence Alice Walker's novel, The Color Purple. They also immediately establish the premise for Celie's relationship with God and her understanding of

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him, highlighting a primary focus of this chapter. That the above statement is uttered by Celie's father, following one of the many incidents in which he rapes her, is important, as it illustrates the degree to which Celie's compliance with male commands is not only expected, but demanded, thereby serving to shape her subjectivity. This threat is meant to silence her about the sexual injustices she endures; yet it also silences her on many other levels. As I see it, this sentence is key in terms of understanding Celie's conceptualization of God at the beginning of the text, which, as I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, very strongly parallels her relationships with men throughout the novel. It is no surprise that the novel begins with this loaded sentence because it speaks just as much to the oppression that Celie faces as a battered and abused woman in her relations with men, as it does to her subject position as a black woman in relation to a God whom she envisions as "all white...like some stout white man work at the bank" (91).

This story is commonly discussed as a tale about the struggle of black life in the racist American South because issues of race undeniably inform the text and certainly loom large in the story line. Elliott Butler Evans, for example, posits that the novel addresses "broad issues of Afro-American history by a specific feminist ideology largely characterized by images and representations that force the reader to reconsider the plight of the Black woman as oppressed" (Evans 163). There is certainly merit in Evan's assertion about the text because as Audre Lorde points out, "ignoring the differences of race...and the implications

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of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power" (856). Nevertheless, despite Celie's sexual denigration and oppression in the specific context of her racial identity, the primary focus of my discussion is on terms that have been less fully explored -- that is, Celie's struggle to rise up against insidious violence and carve out a space for herself by means of a vision of spirituality that transcends race and is borne out of the sacred power that emerges from the love between women. My analysis will demonstrate the ways in which the development of Celie's woman-centered relationship with Shug Avery is the catalyst for Celie's newfound freedom in both spiritual and emotional terms.

The novel is comprised of various letters, most of which are written by Celie and can be likened to diary entries for the manner in which they catalogue her life. Up until about the middle of the text, these letters are addressed to God. Beyond this point, Celie begins writing to her sister Nettie, a shift that highlights Celie's transition to a more women-centered sensibility. The letters written to God in the first half of the text illustrate the extent to which she internalizes the patriarchal control to which she is subjected and how it touches even the most personal facets of her existence. She takes Pa's command to "never tell nobody but God" (1) so seriously that she in fact speaks to few others and reports only to God about everything from the atrocities she endures to the mundane tasks of her daily existence. Her deepest feelings are written/confessed to a white God with whom the top-down power dynamic

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echoes the only one she sees at work between men and women. It is important to note here that Celie talks to God *because* she is told to and because she knows the consequences of not obeying her father's commands. Her relationship with God in this context is one that has been established as the result of her father's order, not any sense of a divine presence. In fact, that Celie questions God's existence just as much as she questions why she must endure violence is evidenced by the following: "Dear God... Maybe you can give me a sign" (1). This quote reveals Celie's doubt in God and indicates the fact that she does not experience anything indicative of His existence; otherwise, she would not have to request a sign.

Although she writes to God regularly, this activity does not seem to offer her much solace beyond the therapeutic act of putting her feelings on paper, and it certainly does nothing to curb the severity of her material situation. Both the brutality of the abuse that Celie endures and the extent of her feelings of helplessness are aptly characterized in her description of how she is treated by her father:

> He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say you gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. (1)

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The hierarchy of power that is illustrated by this passage is exactly what Michel Foucault refers to in Volume One of The History of Sexuality when he discusses the relationship between sex and power: "power... acts by laying down the rule: power's hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks, and that is the law" (Foucault, 84). Foucault's theory here speaks to Celie's oppression in the sexual arena as she is victimized by Pa's power over her. Celie understands that Pa's word has ultimate power as a "rule of law" and that she must give in to his desire despite the fact that he refuses to consider hers.

In the Christian context, bodily pleasure and sexuality, especially where females are concerned, is often deemed sinful. In discussing the patriarchal and erotophobic framework of most western societies, theology professor Carter Heyward posits that "for many women much of the time and some women all of the time, sex is not fun, it is not pleasurable, and yet it is what we are here to do--provide it for men" (Heyward, 46). Certainly, as exhibited by the passage quoted above, Celie's sexual experiences are not about her pleasure or desire and, in fact, serve to erase both. The manner in which she is treated objectifies her body and is inextricably bound up with the misuse of power and violence. Celie admits that she "don't never git used to it" (1), but she continues to obey her father and write letters to God in hopes that these actions will somehow

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make her life more bearable. Not surprisingly, neither yields positive results in terms of changing the appalling conditions under which she exists.

At the novel's commencement, Celie is just fourteen years old, and her only sexual experience is the abuse she endures by her father. There is nothing to suggest that she has any interest in the opposite sex, yet the heterosexist assumptions/expectations manifest themselves when her father projects that desire onto her. One of the many incidents that attest to this projection is a beating Celie receives when her father thinks she has winked at a boy in church. Celie's response to this marks the first instance in the text when her desire for women becomes explicit: "I may have got something in my eye but I didn't wink. I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them" (5). It is interesting here that Celie's admission of her attraction to women is quickly followed by a reason for it, indicating her awareness of the fact that if her desires are not male-centered, she will need to justify them. Male power denies Celie the right to establish boundaries around her body in a sexual sense and serves to obliterate her own sexual identity. Her father's beating reinforces the fact that he (and, by extension, men in general) is to be the center of her sexual world until he chooses her a husband; it also tells her that she is not allowed to desire, therefore violently interfering with the development of her personal identity. Although her father does not explicitly deny Celie a right to desire women, presumably because such a thing would be unthinkable within his particular world-view, this very fact speaks to the absence of the lesbian

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alternative. Thus, as Adrienne Rich points out in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," the type of behaviour that silences lesbianism is explicitly linked to "the bias of compulsory heterosexuality [wherein] lesbian experience [or desire] is...simply rendered invisible" (Rich 26).

The fact that the beating occurs after what her father sees as an expression of desire in the physical space of the church is ironic, and worthy of discussion. This is important because of the role the church plays in establishing (hetero)sexual mores within society and because, on some level, the beating is representative of the Christian denial of eroticism and bodily desire. In fact, in a Western context, many women are forced to establish their sexual identities within the confines of such Christian ideology, which is extremely patriarchal in nature and frequently refuses to take female desire into consideration at all. Although the link between religion and the desire that her father projects onto her is not made explicit in this passage, the church location suggests that Christian values have had a part in shaping her father's reaction, which is an obvious attempt at maintaining sexual power over his daughter. There are many Biblical examples of justification for male control over women, which epitomize the misogynistic values at the heart of the Christian tradition. This is aptly reflected in the oft cited first Timothy 2:11-12 where it states: "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent". Carter Heyward reiterates this concept when she states:

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> Women have never had a socially established, religiously affirmed, physically safe or emotionally secure sense of our own body integrity. We have not known or loved our bodyselves *as our own,* for we have no control over what passes into or out of us.
> One of the basic historical tenets of patriarchal social relations...is that women's bodies must be controlled in order for the society to function properly (Heyward 25).

Countering the oppressive forces of God and her father is the energy that Celie derives from Shug Avery. The letter immediately following her confession of being drawn to women introduces readers to Shug, the object of Celie's affection. At this point, Celie has not even met Shug; she has only set eyes on a picture of her provided by her mammy, which Celie reports is the first photograph of a "real person" she has ever seen (6). It is clear that Celie is immediately drawn to Shug and that her attraction is based in part on the fact that Shug is female: "Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw" (6). It is not enough simply to see the photo; Celie wants it in her possession and requests that her mammy give it to her, at which point the picture immediately takes on a sort of sacred relic value. The following line evidences this: "An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery" (6). The picture of Shug acts as an icon that immediately becomes an emotional pillar and serves as well, to foreshadow the spiritual impact Shug will have on Celie's life. As Mary Pat Fisher points out, in many religious

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traditions, spiritual icons are venerated as "representations of the reality of the divine world... reported to have great spiritual powers...and transmit the holy presence" (Fisher 318). Shug Avery's presence allows Celie a glimpse into a "divine world" while simultaneously offering her spiritual strength.

As I have already pointed out, Celie has no emotional attachment to the white/Christian God that is forced upon her, in part because she sees that any bond with this God manifests itself in the top-down dynamic. As well, there is no common denominator between Celie and God, a fact that further polarizes her position. In stark contrast, the connection between Shug and Celie sees them sharing many similarities, including the important ones of race and gender, which place the two on similar footing. However, because of Celie's trampled sense of self, resulting from uneven power dynamics in her relationships with men, Celie is not initially able to connect fully with Shug as an equal. This is evident when, while admiring Shug's picture, Celie comments that she is "ten thousand times more prettier than me" (6), a remark indicative of her poor self-image as well as the pedestal on which she places Shug.

It is clear that this low self-esteem is encouraged, even demanded, by debasing comments from her father. When Mr. _____ approaches Celie's father about taking her sister Nettie's hand in marriage, for instance, Pa replies: "I can't let you have Nettie...But I can let you have Celie...She ain't fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled" (7). He then adds: "She ugly. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. [...] You can do everything just like you want to and she

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ain't gonna make you feed or clothe it" (8). Pa's response likens Celie to a piece of trade property while simultaneously echoing conservative biblical sentiments about women. That he essentially offers total control of his daughter to Mr._____ illustrates the extent to which her individual identity is erased in the context of the patriarchal institution. From her father's perspective, Celie is just a female body that exists to serve men. Pa's low opinion of Celie is clearly sexist, reflecting his beliefs about a woman's place in the order of things. Because their relationship is rife with such sexist ideology, her main duty is to remain subservient by pleasing him sexually and providing free physical labour. Celie's connection with Shug bears no resemblance whatsoever to her relationships with men because as black women, both are oppressed in similar ways.

Her fantasies about Shug provide the only space Celie has in which to dream. And she certainly does need the freedom to dream as she endures the trauma of being treated as if she were merely a thing and not a human being at all. This treatment is evinced when Mr.___ approaches Pa to see if he can marry Celie's sister, Nettie. Pa denies his request by saying: "I can't let you have Nettie" [...] "but I can let you have Celie [...] fact is, I got to get rid of her" (7-8). Celie reports that "it took [Mr.___] the whole spring, from March to June to make up his mind to take me" (9), another comment which reflects her knowledge of how little she is wanted, even as a mammy. Celie watches on while Pa and Mr.____ discuss the marriage arrangement as if it were simply an

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exchange of property between men: "next time you come, you can look at her. She ugly. [...] But she'll make the better wife. She ain't smart either...but she can work like a man" (8). Again, Celie is reminded that she is only sought after in terms of her usefulness to men. The next time Mr. ____ comes to view Celie, prior to taking her home, Pa scolds her: "move up, he won't bite" (10). Then he orders her to "Turn around" so that Mr. ____ can get a better look at her (11). This passage calls to mind the trading of slaves between white men as Celie is poked and prodded at and the whole interaction is completed using very cold and business-like language. Clearly, there is no consideration whatsoever for Celie's feelings; thus, this transaction renders her invisible both as a woman and as a sexual agent because Pa and Mr.______ refuse to take her needs and desires into question, yet makes decisions that greatly affect her subjectivity. As Hester Eisenstein points out, in the patriarchal context, "a true or authentic woman [is] a woman who commit[s] herself to a man [and] ...by virtue of becoming an extension of him...she is legitimate...to the extent that she [is his] property" (Eisenstein, 51).

In her essay, "Oppression," Marilyn Frye clearly describes the subject position of many women. I would argue that she aptly characterizes Celie's experience when she states, "One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind – situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, deprivation" (Frye, 2). Because of Celie's experience with

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such extreme oppression, she learns not to fight back or otherwise express dissent explicitly: "I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (17). However, I would argue that her desire for Shug is a form of resistance in itself, as her desire for a woman challenges the male-dominated system from which she emerges and offers her a black woman-centered source of strength and hope. This resistance can be seen following a verbal attack from her father when Celie turns to Shug for spiritual renewal. She reports: "I take out the picture of Shug Avery. I look into her eyes. Her eyes say Yeah, it bees that way sometime" (8). Clearly, although Celie has not yet met Shug at this point, her image alone offers some sort of solace in her struggle and a sense that she is no longer unaided on her journey. The sense of comfort that Celie derives from thinking of Shug can be said to parallel the Christian figure, Mary. As many Christians turn to Mary for support during troubling situations, so too does Celie turn to Shug, whose energy guides her through a series of tragic experiences. It is important to note here that Celie has been writing to God for quite some time before she is even aware of Shug's existence, yet she has a more intense connection to Shug than she does to 'God'. Arguably, this is because she intuitively knows that as a black woman, Shug will understand her plight and respond to her, while the white God cannot even reply to the simple request for "a sign" (1).

Although Celie begins turning to Shug for spiritual renewal, she does not entirely abandon all prior knowledge/understanding of God or the Bible. This is

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evident in a conversation she has with Sofia after Sofia inquires about why she is not mad about the atrocities she endured while living with her family: "I used to git mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn't stay mad at her. Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy...Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what" (41-42). It is interesting here that Celie offers a heartfelt and reasonable explanation as to why she does not remain mad at her mother, yet can only admit that she does not stay mad at her father "cause he my daddy." This illustrates the extent to which she is immersed in patriarchal ideology and how much she accepts that knowledge as normative and consequently uses it as a means through which to view the world. Celie recalls biblical commands, yet it is clear that these are followed merely out of fear and that she does not experience any sort of sacred connection with the material. Clearly, the God that Celie knows at this point is one who would have her respect her father even after he repeatedly rapes and abuses her and instills in her a fear so great that she numbs herself to the extent that she "feel[s] nothing at all" (42). This provides a solid example of Alison Webster's point that "there is...a remarkable correlation between what 'God thinks' and that which is of benefit to men" (Webster, 42). Celie's experiences with oppression are inextricably linked to a system of Christian values, which seeks to control women through the misuse of male power and authority.

This system of power is similarly reflected in Celie's relationship to the church she attends with Mr.___'s children. At church, Celie is looked down upon

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by other women of the congregation and when it is clear that she could use support, they do not offer it: "the women at church sometime nice to me. Sometime not. They look at me there struggling with Mr.___ children ... sometimes they think I don't notice, they stare at me" (43). This passage shows the hypocritical nature of the women from the congregation as they gaze but refuse to reach out to this visibly distressed and overburdened young woman. Celie takes notice of the women's indifference towards her, but does not make any attempts in their direction.

Not surprisingly, however, the situation with the Church's pastor manifests itself in the same hierarchical dynamic that Celie is used to with Pa and Mr.______. Her relationship with the pastor further ingrains in her the notion that men are in power and that as a woman she must silently defer to male-centered notions of power and control. Celie tries her best to please the preacher: "I do a right smart for the preacher. Clean the floor and windows, make the wine, wash the altar linen. Make sure there's wood for the stove in wintertime...I scurry bout, doing this, doing that" (43) while the preacher "talk to the other ladies and they mens" (43). Celie's description of the chores she performs for the pastor comes immediately following her description of struggling with the children and "trying to keep 'em quiet" (43), thus providing a strong juxtaposition illustrating how tiresome it is for her to tend to the children as well as the church chores. In fact, she is probably one of the most overworked members of the congregation, not only at home but also in terms of

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congregational housekeeping. It is clear that she is being taken advantage of, toiling over work that should be shared by other members of the congregation. One would think that someone would at least offer to assist her, but the most she receives is a passing compliment from the pastor telling her that she is "faithful as the day is long" (43). This comment has no real connection to the services she is providing, but sends a strong message reinforcing the fact that to be "faithful" is to serve men, and continue cleaning the church. In this context Celie is again overworked and under-appreciated, and she receives nothing in return for her efforts, not even a response from God.

The situation that Celie enters with Mr.______ is little different than the one she experienced with her father except, perhaps, that now, as a wife, sex is a duty to be performed and not a secret to be kept. Reflecting upon her marriage to Mr._____, Celie states: "Mr.____ marry me to take care of his children. I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don't love Mr.___" (63). The fact that she is required to be with Mr.___ seems to intensify her attraction to Shug: " "Mr._____ clam on top of me, do his business, in ten minutes us both asleep. Only time I feel something stirring down there is when I think bout Shug" (65). In an attempt to combat the suffocating patriarchal ideology Celie is forced to adhere to by being with Mr._____, she calls on thoughts of Shug: "I don't cry...while he on top of me...I think bout Shug Avery. I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him" (12). The thought of Shug enjoying sex moves Celie to touch Mr.___ as if

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the gesture allows her some link to Shug and offers her a way in which connect closely with her. For Celie, thinking about Shug during sex with Mr.___ is as much a spiritual phenomenon as it is an erotic one. She is forced to be physically close with Mr.___ in a way that she obviously desires to be with Shug; however, thinking of Shug while being penetrated by Mr.___ offers her a mental escape. The connection that Celie experiences affords her a sense of peace because she feels that Shug is with her spiritually, and this knowledge helps her make it through such unbearable circumstances.

The spiritual connection that Celie feels towards Shug prior to meeting her is again evident on the day of Shug's arrival at Mr._____'s house. When Celie looks out the window and sees Mr.____'s car approaching, she senses that Shug is inside; it is as though she knows Shug is coming for her, even before Shug does: "my heart begin to beat like fury and the first thing I want to do is change my dress" (42). This is the first time in the text when Celie makes any reference to wanting to look good and this is clearly linked to her feelings for Shug, which push her to become aware of her physicality. As Celie waits for Shug and Mr.____ to pull up to the house, she experiences her very first sensations of falling in love: "I don't know what to do, I'm so beside myself. I stand there in the middle of the kitchen. Mind whirling. I feels like Who Would Have Thought" (44). Celie tries to gather herself for Shug's arrival but when the car pulls to the front of the house, Celie reports: "I think my heart gon fly out my mouth" (45). The physiological symptoms Celie experiences when she sees Shug for the first

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time speak both to the emotional connection that she already feels with Shug and to her physical desire for her. Earlier in the text, Celie admits to living in a state of numbness: "I can't even remember the last time I felt..." (41) – since it is safer for her not to feel at all; however, the arrival of Shug marks the beginning of a whole host of new feelings.

Celie's yearning for Shug is both physical and spiritual as evinced by her interest in Shug's physical body as well as her spirit. When Celie lays eyes on Shug in the flesh, for example, she writes, "she dress to kill" (44), a comment obviously indicating Celie's admiration of her physical appearance. She continues, "she looks so stylish it like the trees all round the house draw themselves up tall for a better look" (44). Celie's reference to the trees here immediately connects Shug to something greater than humanity and suggests the power of her spirit. Shortly thereafter, Celie states, "I need to see her eyes. I feel like once I see her eyes my feets can let go the spot where they stuck" (44). Thus, Celie intuits that the power of Shug's spirit will be manifest in her eyes, which speaks to the notion that one's eyes are the windows to the soul. The fact that seeing Shug's eyes has the power to move Celie attests to the potency of her spirit while also speaking to the divine connection between the two of them. Without a doubt, Shug's presence has brought about a shift in Celie's spiritual landscape, which moves her to become more attuned to spiritual nuances in her midst.

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Many critics have addressed the bond between Celie and Shug, but these critics have downplayed the lesbian aspect of their relationship and have not placed nearly enough emphasis on their spiritual connection. E. Ellen Barker, for example, briefly mentions their lesbianism, but then goes on to discuss Shug as a mother figure for Celie: "through [Shug's] love, all of the necessary stages of the 'mothering' process come into focus" (Barker, 57). Barker even goes so far as to suggest that when Celie experiences an orgasm while making love to Shug it is "a reenactment of the primal pleasure of the child at the mother's breast" (Barker, 61). While I can see merit in suggesting that Shug nurtures Celie, I find it difficult to adopt any suggestion that their love relationship is of a mother-daughter nature, as it so clearly includes a sexual attraction that is not maternal.

Another critic who whose argument I wish to refute at this point is Marc A. Christophe. Christophe does speak to Celie's lesbianism in his discussion of the text, but the point he makes downplays it in a significant way. He states, "Celie's lesbianism is rooted more in the character's search for a role model, a kind of alternative reality" (105). While there is merit in Christophe's suggestion that lesbianism offers Celie an alternative reality, his claim that Celie's sexual desire for Shug is borne out of her desire for a mentor is somewhat disturbing. In fact, it is ideas such as this that invalidate women's desire for other women by negating the sexual nature of the attraction in favour of the safer female friendship model. In a discussion about the sexual politics of black womanhood, Patricia Hill Collins also addresses the text, yet she too leaves out lesbian desire

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in her discussion, commenting only that Celie "finds her own voice" through "forming supportive relationships with other black women" (Hill Collins, 163). While her comments are true on a general level, the absence of dialogue about Celie's lesbian relationship is disconcerting. Moreover, neither Baker, Christophe nor, Hill Collins makes any connection between Celie's lesbianism and her newfound spirituality.

While lesbianism is not openly condemned in this novel the way it is in the other two texts I will address, it is still clear that Celie is very aware of the fact that her physical desire for Shug is taboo within the patriarchal framework represented in the text. As Diane Raymond points out in "Homophobia, Identity and the Meanings of Desire", young people "quickly absorb messages about permissible and impermissible relationships" (Raymond, 120); thus, even if the messages are not overt, they are still consumed by impressionable adolescent minds. When Mr.____ first arrives with Shug; he says to Celie: "you don't want her here, just say so...Won't do no good. But if that the way you feel" (48). Reflecting on this later, Celie recalls that she responded to Mr.___ by saying, "I want her here" and then immediately became aware of her "too quick" (48) response. This indicates Celie's consciousness about the fact that her desire for women is something that should be concealed. Arguably, this knowledge is derived from Celie's consumption of Christian ideology. Although the link is not explicit in the text, it is nonetheless present because, as Carter Heyward points out: "the Christian church plays the central formative role in limiting and

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thwarting our sexual phantasie, or sexual imagination. [...] in the realm of sexual attitudes, Western history and Christian history are so closely linked as to be in effect, indistinguishable" (Heyward, 42). The fact that Celie's knowledge about relationships comes from a Christian (read: patriarchal) system of values is undeniable, placing "primary importance [in] the fostering of true man-woman complimentarity...to confirm God's providential order" (Webster, 10).

Although Celie's desires for Shug have a positive effect on herself, her existence in the heterosexual matrix results in a feeling of confusion because she knows that as a woman she is supposed to desire men. In one instance she states: "If I don't watch out I'll have hold of her hand, tasting her fingers in my mouth" (51). Celie knows that her attraction is taboo and, although it seems to overwhelm her, she remains conscious of the fact that she needs to be careful not to express it too openly. Her desire for Shug is expressed again with an intense air of eroticism; however, this time there is more of an emphasis on her confusion: "first time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples...I thought I had turned into a man" (49). Celie is referring to the sexual attraction she feels when she sees Shug naked, while at the same time acknowledging a sense of conflict between gender and desire. This tension shows up again later in the text when Celie is watching Shug sing at the juke joint and notices the way Shug looks at Mr.____ and wishes that she would look at her that way too. She thinks: "But that the way it spose to be. I know that. But if that so, why my heart hurt me so?" (73). Both of these instances reveal a

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conflict that is unmistakably indicative of what Rich has coined "compulsory heterosexuality". In fact, Celie experiences what I would consider to be a bout of internalized homophobia, as she seems to question the appropriateness of her attraction to Shug *because* they are both women. Still, this inner-conflict is fleeting and Celie does not shy away from cultivating a relationship with Shug. I would argue that the short-lived nature of Celie's bewilderment is directly linked to the fact that her attraction has spiritual dimensions and that she intuitively senses how "right" her attraction to Shug is despite the messages she receives about sexuality.

The spiritual element of Celie's pull towards Shug continues to intensify throughout the novel. At one point, she offers a description of the experience of bathing her: "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short" (50). That she likens touching Shug's body to praying is significant on several levels. Firstly, it is a clear move away from Christian ideology, which emphasizes a strong disconnection between body and soul. Celie obviously experiences an intense union of the two here, as she feels spiritually charged while touching Shug in a way that is clearly erotic. Celie's experience in this passage calls to mind Heyward's discussion of the presentation of "the erotic as [a] sacred power in mutual relation, [and] a source of redemption" (Heyward, 122).

As the relationship between Celie and Shug becomes more intimate, they begin engaging in deeper and more personal dialogues, an element that was

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absent in Celie's interaction with God earlier in the text. In their first discussion about sex, Shug admits that she really enjoys sex with Mr.____ , to which Celie replies that she detests it: "most times I pretend that I ain't there" (77). Shug is horrified by Celie's answer because she says that, for her, sex with Mr. _____ is pleasurable, although she later points out that "what was good tween [them] must have been nothing but bodies" (123). She then informs Celie that if she has never enjoyed sex then she is "still a virgin" (77). Certainly, Shug's conceptualization of virginity is not the norm, a fact that again sets her apart from the men in Celie's life, and emphasizes her woman-centred philosophy. This is a turning point in the text as Shug goes on to tell Celie about her body and the ways in which she can touch herself to experience sexual pleasure. This introduction to masturbation shows Celie a side of herself that has remained unexplored, but more importantly, it teaches her about her capacity for self-love, a lesson which helps her to centre herself and facilitates yet another spiritual dimension. This is a powerful experience for Celie as it marks the beginning of a journey into herself that has endless possibilities: "My life stop when I left home, I think. But then I think again. It stop with Mr._____maybe, but start up again with Shug" (81).

Shug and Celie make love for the first time following a heart-to-heart conversation that the two have while lying in each other's arms. Being intimate with Shug allows Celie to be real with herself too: "seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug arms" (112). Celie reveals her vulnerability to Shug by

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sharing parts of her past that she has kept secret until this point. This is significant because it is the first time Celie has felt close enough to someone to share herself so fully. Shug responds to Celie by "kissing the water as it come down side [her] face" (112) and saying, "I love you, Miss Celie...and [then] kiss[ing] [her] on the mouth" (113). Celie recalls: "Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other" (113). Looking back, Celie recalls: "it feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr. ____ at all" (114). Here again, emotional and spiritual elements are closely linked to erotic and sexual ones. It is significant that Celie and Shug make love after Celie has opened to Shug on an emotional level because it introduces Celie to the importance of sexual behaviour being a free flowing bodily response to an intense emotional connection with another. Sharing herself with Shug teaches Celie that she does have choices, a concept that was foreign to her when Pa demanded that she only share her secrets with God. As well, Celie's opening up to Shug represents a shift away from a male God, as Shug's presence in her life begins to take over His place and makes room for a more female centered approach to spirituality. The exchange between Celie and Shug blurs the line between the spiritual and the sexual and illustrates the two as being inextricably linked. As Beverly Harrison posits, these connections "deepen and shape our power of personal being. Our sexuality represents our most intense interaction with the world. Because this is so, it is also a key to the quality and integrity of our overall spirituality" (152).

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Following her experience of sexual intimacy with Shug, Celie's patriarchal conceptualization of God begins to lose its hold on her. Interestingly, paralleling this shift, Celie finds out about her sister Nettie's Afrocentric spiritual stance as well. This is made possible through Shug who alerts Celie to the fact that Mr.____ has been keeping Nettie's letters from her. Once Shug arranges to return the letters to Celie, she learns of her sister's experiences in Africa, which offer a contrast to her cultural experience in North America. Perhaps more importantly, however, they parallel Celie's spiritual developments as the reader becomes privy to the fact that Nettie is also undergoing inner conflict about Christian ways of knowing. Ironically, these letters provide proof that Nettie's conceptualization of God is changing and that she does not in fact embrace the Christian ways that she is supposedly representing by working on a Christian mission. As Celie reads through Nettie's letters, it becomes clear that Nettie is in Africa so that she can be with Celie's children, who are in the care of Reverend Samuel and his wife, Corrine. Contrary to what some suggest, Nettie is not in Africa because of any deep connection to the Christian faith. This is made clear by the following disclosure: "the reason I am in Africa is because one of the missionaries that was supposed to help with the children" was unable to make the journey. She continues: "so there they were all set to go, with a ticket suddenly available and no missionary to give it to. At the same time, I wasn't able to find a job anywhere in town" (130-131). Essentially, her presence in Africa has more to do with the fact that when she left Mr.____'s house, she was

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stranded and unable to find employment, so she took the first opportunity that came available to her.

Nettie's letters chronicle her fascinating cultural observations overseas, illustrating the fact that the experience is more of an adventure for her than a religious endeavour. Nettie explains to Celie how the Olinka tribe with whom she lives worships the roofleaf, large leaves that cover their huts to protect them from the elements. In a conversation with one of the tribesmen, Nettie learns that the previous (white) missionaries did not allow the Olinka to hold their traditional roofleaf worship ceremonies. It is obvious here that the previous missionaries were threatened by this alternative way of knowing. This fact does not escape the tribesman as he then states: "we know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ but in its own humble way, is it not God?" (154). Nettie tells Celie that following their conversation, she and the tribesman "sat face to face with the Olinka God"...and admits that "all that [he] said makes perfect sense to me" (154). Similarly, in describing her hut to her sister, Nettie says that she has "hung Olinka platters and mats and pieces of tribal cloth" (158) on her walls but that in her trunk she has pictures donated by the missionaries of "Christ, the Apostles, Mary, [and] the Crucifixion" (159). She then admits: "once, when I held them up to my fabric and mat covered walls they made me feel very unhappy, so I took them down" (159). Almost as if to justify herself, she adds that "We of course have all of these pictures hung in the school and many of Christ behind the altar at the church" (159). She then goes on to state her own

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opinion: "That is enough, I think" (159) and further contrasts herself with the other missionaries by saying: "though Samuel and Corrine have pictures and relics (crosses) in their hut as well" (159).

In her analysis of the text, Jeanine Thyreen argues that Nettie chooses not to put up the pictures, "not because she is rejecting Christianity, but because these images seem out of place in the humble African Hut" (Thyreen, 59). A closer analysis however, does reveal Nettie's rejection of Christianity. For example, the fact that Nettie has the pictures hidden away in a trunk suggests her personal disapproval of what they represent. Furthermore, one typically decorates one's space with things that one feels connected to, so Nettie's refusal to display the Christian artifacts seems to represent the larger issue of her disillusionment with Christianity, and her uneasiness with forcing it upon the African community. Nettie's own commentary provides more evidence to support her rejection of Christian ideology as she states:

> God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think that he has to look like something or someone – a roofleaf or Christ – but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like frees us (257).

In this passage, Nettie explicitly separates her own beliefs from the Christian image of Christ, therefore aligning herself against the very heart of Christian ideology.

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on the fact that purple is also a colour associated with gay pride. Jeannine Thyreen, for example states that Celie "claims purple as a colour that reflects her new life" (Thyreen, 64) and although I agree with this assertion, the absence of a link to lesbianism here is problematic.

Marcos Fraile and Maria Ana go one step further and interpret purple in terms of gender. They state, "If we look closely at Walker's simile involving purple and lavender, we become aware of her tour de force. Since lavender is defined as a pale bluish purple, lavender, i.e. feminism, is the marked term, the one lacking in color, while purple is the whole colour, characterized by its deep tone" (113). While these discussions of Walker's use of purple are interesting and speak to Celie's embrace of womanist values and her eventual liberation, they nevertheless leave out the connection between the lesbianism in the text and the colour purple as representative of homosexuality. As Stephen Anderson points out: "the colour purple (or, more accurately, lavender) became popularized as a symbol of pride in the late 1960's; a frequent post-stonewall catchword for the gay community was 'Purple Power' (Anderson, par. 1). This connection is especially relevant to my discussion because it provides a clear reference to the homosexuality that is often downplayed in critical discussions of the text. As well, it provides support for my argument that it is specifically the lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie that offers Celie a spiritual alternative to the rigid confines of Christian thought.

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When Celie is reunited with her sister at the end of the text, she says, "maybe, like God, you changed into something different that I'll have to speak to in a different way" (260). This quotation speaks to the changed woman that Nettie is as the result of her experiences in Africa; but more importantly it provides an example of Celie's new conceptualization of God and spirituality. She now feels that God has changed into something different, something that she can relate to and respect, instead of someone she hates and fears. In a discussion about God in Speculum of the Other Woman, Luce Irigaray suggests that, "if 'God' has been conceived as a perfect volume, a closed completeness, an infinite circle as far as extension extends, it is certainly not as a result of women's imagination" (Irigaray, 237). Her point here aptly summarizes Celie's shift away from the fixed entity of the Christian God ("big and old and tall and graybearded and white" [194]) who is forced upon her, towards an all encompassing spirituality borne out of a fluid emotional and erotic connection with another woman and with herself.

Thus, Celie abandons her male-centered conceptualization of a God who is a "Trifling, forgetful and lowdown" white man to create her own sense of spirituality: "you have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything at all" (197). Her embrace of woman-centred ideals, as seen through her relationship with Shug, parallels the abandonment of this male-centered notion of God and makes space for the creation of a new spiritual consciousness. Celie's journey allows her to leave behind the frightened young girl she was in order to

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become a self-assured woman who understands the importance of a woman-identified existence and is brave enough "to wonder. To ast. [she realizes] ...that in wondering bout the big things and asting bout the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident" (283). One of the final scenes in the text is of Shug laying her head on Celie's breast and letting out a long sigh; following this scene, Celie begins a letter by stating: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything"(285). That this address follows the moment of intimacy between Celie and Shug is significant because it makes a connection between her deep-rooted sense of spiritual oneness and its catalyst: her love for Shug. The shift in Celie's thinking that allows her comfort with both her sexual and spiritual selves is her primary source of strength by the novel's end. This change, which happens gradually through Celie's relationship with Shug is best described in the words of Audre Lorde, as Celie does in fact "touch [her] most profoundly creative source...[by doing] that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society" (Lorde, 153).

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Chapter Two:

Embracing Forbidden Fruit: Jeanette's Journey Away From God in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.

> **Everyone, at some time in their life, must choose whether to stay with a ready-made world that may be safe but which is also limiting, or to push forward, often past the frontiers of commonsense, into a personal place, unknown and untried.**
>
> — Jeanette Winterson in Preface to Oranges are Not The Only Fruit

> **[People] recognize things according to expectation and environment. If you were in a particular place, you expected to see particular things. Sheep and hills, sea and fish; if there was an elephant in the supermarket, [you'd] either not see it at all, or call it Mrs. Jones and talk about fishcakes. But most likely, you'd do what most people do when confronted with something they don't understand: panic.**
>
> — Jeanette Winterson, Oranges are Not The Only Fruit

This chapter is in part about sexual justice. Through examining Winterson's novel Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit I explore the way that the

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Evangelical Church of England shapes and sustains violence against the sexual "other" in the name of God, thereby placing limits on female subjectivity. I also closely examine the way that the violence Jeanette endures at the hands of her church eventually leads her to turn away from organized religion in favour of the spiritual dimensions she uncovers through her sexual and emotional connections with other women.

In her book, Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God, theologian Carter Heyward points out that the prevailing educational system of the Western world is "cemented in assumptions bred in incubators of fear – of difference, unknowness, and change" (5). Heyward also posits that these incubators of fear give birth to the supposition that "there is a single mode of intellectual discourse that corresponds to a uniform set of abstract truths ... in which every person must be schooled in order to be 'well-educated' – about 'sexuality,' 'religion,' or any other issue" (6). In the introduction of the 2001 edition of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, Jeanette Winterson admits that her novel is indeed threatening. One of the chief reasons for this, she posits, is because it "illustrates by example that what the church calls love is actually psychosis and it dares to suggest that what makes life difficult for homosexuals is not their perversity but other people's" (8). As such, the novel illustrates Winterson's desire to challenge the safe, but exclusionary norms established by Christianity.

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One critic, Laura Doan, faults the text for its "unproblematic reversal of binary terms, a strategy that doesn't facilitate an ongoing critique of compulsory heterosexuality or patriarchal control" (Doan 146). My analysis, however, reveals the many ways in which Winterson's text is in fact quite critical of both compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchal institutions. The text examines homosexual desire within the hetero-patriarchal order as well as lesbian identity in the confines of fundamentalist religion. Thus, the novel does indeed illustrate an interweaving of hybrid perspectives. Jeanette's adoption of and struggle with the discourse of Christianity throughout Winterson's novel certainly reflects and simultaneously challenges the "cemented assumptions" of patriarchal discourse. The rigid world view depicted throughout the text is one that can be seen in many facets of Christianity, especially in the Evangelical factions where perfect adherence to Biblical law is upheld as morality. That being said, however, it is clear that one can never quite achieve the impossibly high moral standards prescribed. Jeanette's budding lesbianism poses a specific threat to this school of thought throughout the text because it embodies certain knowledge beyond the confines of Christian 'truth' claims. What follows is a discussion of the power and control exerted by the church as it manifests itself within Jeanette's environment and the interactions that shape her.

The first chapter of the novel is entitled "Genesis" and, as such, it mirrors the first book of the bible, outlining Jeanette's 'creation story' instead of the world's. The first sentence states: "Like most people, I lived for a long time with

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my mother and father" (3), thereby immediately establishing this fact as normative within the context of compulsory heterosexuality and ensuring that those emerging from an alternative background are demarcated as "others." Within her family circle, Jeanette undergoes vigorous daily Bible study and we learn that this is made possible because her mother home schools her. Jeanette's daily regimen consists of strict adherence to the curriculum created by her mother, including rigorous reading of the Bible and Biblical quizzes prior to breakfast each day. Following breakfast, Jeanette works as a scribe, taking important details from the missionary radio show "so that her mother [can] deliver the church report," a responsibility required of her as the church secretary (5). Jeanette admits that this daily event is "a great trial" (5) for her because her midday meal depends on it. That is to say, if it goes well – "no deaths and lots of converts" (5)-- her mother cooks a big meal; however, "if the Godless prove only stubborn," the bible study continues and lunch consists only of boiled eggs and toast (5). The fact that Jeanette's meals are dependent upon something so out of her control is fanatical and certainly negligent on her mother's behalf. As these facts illustrate, Jeanette's life is strictly scheduled around and dependent upon religious activities implemented by her mother, who unmistakably represents the patriarchy and the church throughout the text. In her role as such, Jeanette's mother is in total control of the knowledge her daughter obtains and ensures she has little time to cultivate outside interests, which makes certain that Jeanette has little potential to stray from the Lord.

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Obviously, Jeanette's mother is rigid in her fundamentalist beliefs and, as Jeanette reports, she "never [has] mixed feelings"; she is "in the white corner and that [is] that" (3). She is a religious crusader and is staunch in her perspective, which Jeanette describes as "Old Testament through and through" (4). The implications of this play out throughout the text as Jeanette is continuously contained by her mother's extreme religious positions. Consequently, she has many enemies; among these are "the devil (in his many forms), [and] sex (in its many forms)" (3), both of which are explored at great length throughout the novel. Needless to say, Jeanette's mother is generous when it comes to sharing these views with others, especially her daughter, whom she attempts to mold into a carbon copy of herself. Consequently, as a young child, Jeanette learns never to question her mother, who is her most direct link to the church. Because for much of Jeanette's young life, her mother represents for her the mandates of the church, this translates very early on into the notion that she is also not to question the church or its doctrine.

Because Jeanette's mother is so set in her Christian worldview, there are few people throughout the text whom she does not consider as "others." This issue is explored by Julia Kristeva in an interview with Suzanne Clark and Kathleen Hully, where she posits that "Christians welcome the foreigner only as 'other in the same': only if she or he accepts the moral and cultural codes that make it possible for Christians to say, 'you are like us, we accept you'"(Kristeva 164). Thus, within her Christian community, Jeanette quickly absorbs messages

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that encourage her to view outsiders as problematic and even threatening. Jeanette's neighbours, for example, among many constructed "others" in the text, are only ever referred to as "Next Door". Thus, their subject positions are rejected to the point that they are not even afforded names. This manner of thinking necessarily leads Jeanette's mother into "a tag match against the Rest of the World"(3), which Jeanette, by virtue of being her daughter, is necessarily a part of.

At one point, the neighbours can be heard "fornicating", at which point Jeanette naively reports that "strange noises, like cries for help, [could be heard] coming from Next Door"(51). When Jeanette inquires about what the noise is, her mother "changes colour" and replies in a whisper, "I don't know...but whatever it is, it's not holy" (51). This response sends a clear message that issues around sex and the body must be silenced. Evidently, such issues cannot even be discussed in a regular tone of voice, but must be whispered about, if talked about at all. This aversion to sexuality is aptly reflected in a 1991 statement published in London by the House Of Bishops entitled, "Issues in Human Sexuality":

> Because love making is an authentically ecstatic experience, excluding everything else from consciousness, the Church has tended to see sexual attraction and activity as particularly hostile to God's due place as supreme object of human love

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> and the proper controller of all human thought, feeling and conduct. (House of Bishops 27)

Accordingly, similar sentiments are reflected in Jeanette's mother's belief that sex is the ultimate forbidden subject and her notion that conceptualizing it as such is in accordance with emulating the Christian values of purity and silence.

Since Jeanette lives in a world rife with dichotomous thinking, she tends to become confused when confronted with situations she does not understand. This is further complicated by the fact that when her questions have nothing to do with the Bible or church, she is simply brushed off, or given less than adequate explanations. For example, when Jeanette is invited to the seaside by the lesbian couple who run the paper shop and "don't have any husbands at all" (7), Jeanette's mother says "firmly and forever, no" (7). Jeanette does not comprehend her mother's aversion to these women nor her silence around the issue; yet, when she overhears her mother telling a friend that the ladies deal in "unnatural passions" (7), Jeanette assumes that her mother is talking about "the chemicals they put in their sweets" (7). Jeanette is not told why she cannot accompany the paper shop ladies to the seashore; however, it is clear that she is denied the outing because the couple's lifestyle is in direct conflict with her mother's Christian worldview.

This veil of silence around one example of lesbianism in Jeanette's young life reflects Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of the homosexual closet. In Epistemology of the Closet, Sedgwick asserts that the possibility of same-sex

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desire is repressed in society in favour of a "version of knowledge/sexuality increasingly structured by its pointed cognitive refusal of sexuality between women, between men" (49). The mother's silence is a result of her need to control Jeanette's mind, while simultaneously reinforcing the heterosexual imperative. In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich outlines eight characteristics of male power; one such characteristic includes "withholding [women] from large areas of society's knowledge"(38). I would argue that Jeanette's mother's actions reflect this when she acts on behalf of the heterosexist patriarchy by refusing to be honest with Jeanette about the relationship between these women, thus effectively silencing/closeting the lesbian alternative. Indeed, her mother is merely perpetuating the homophobic silence mandated by the church. Such actions establish the basis for Sedgwick's declaration that the closet is a fundamental part of the lives of most gay people and as such it is a "shaping presence" which ensures that "most gays are deliberately in the closet at some point with someone who is personally, economically [or] institutionally important to them" (46). Sedgwick discusses the closet as a trope; however, I would argue that it is also a performance, or series of performances, maintained by the heterosexist wish for, and enforcement of, homosexual silence and invisibility.

Within the English community where Jeanette is growing up, lesbianism remains closeted to some extent; that is, these relationships are the secret that everyone knows about, yet does not dare discuss. In public space, these women

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"act" straight, presumably due to their fear of retribution from members of the community. In The History of Sexuality, Volume I, Michel Foucault discusses the logic of censorship, a discussion that I see as particularly relevant in the context of Christian power *over* the body and sexuality. In this discussion he states that prohibition generally takes one of three forms: "affirming that a thing is not permitted, preventing it from being said, [and] denying that it exists"(84). He continues, "that which one must keep silent about is banished from reality as the thing that is tabooed above all else" (84). Essentially, he argues that "the logic of power exerted on sex" is generally expressed as "an injunction of nonexistence, non-manifestation and silence" (84). Clearly, these interdictions are similar to those Jeanette experiences through Christian teachings and claims to truth. Although the women who never marry provide Jeanette with an example of same-sex relationships, there is little available to her in terms of discussing lesbian relationships, or even same-sex desire. Jeanette does, in fact, remain unaware of the couple's status as such and ignorant to the possibility of same-sex relationships because these unions are deemed unacceptable within the strict religious context from which she is emerging.

Within "Genesis," readers are also introduced to the theme of demons, a subject which runs throughout the novel and plays a central role in Jeanette's experience with the church. A detailed account of an incident with Pastor Finch, a visiting pastor who is "an expert in demons" (11), marks the beginning of Jeanette's awareness about the possibility of demonic presence in her own life.

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Finch "deliver[s] a terrifying sermon on how easy it is to become demon-possessed" (11) and Jeanette reports that this sermon makes everyone "uneasy afterwards" (11). This scene in the text is the starting point to unveiling the extent to which the church's methodology is fear-based. Clearly the dynamics between the pastor and the congregation are abusive and as Carter Heyward points out, such dynamics "are basic to traditional modes...of religious leadership...(57) and serve only to perpetuate the "traditional arrangement [of] exercising power--over others" (57). Following the sermon, pastor Finch speaks with Jeanette about the possibility that she too could be a "house of demons" because as a seven-year-old, she is blessed, but also cursed, as the number seven itself takes on each of these properties. This experience leaves an impression on young Jeanette, who is being encouraged to doubt herself and to believe that demonic spirits may inhabit her. This passage illustrates the power that the church has over Jeanette's emerging sense of self and demonstrates how this power is used to serve manipulative ends.

As well as having a coercive streak, this demon passage reveals Pastor Finch's blatant sexism while also revealing much about the way that the church views women. The link between sexuality and demons is obvious here, as is the blatant sexism that Pastor Finch exhibits. Addressing the men of the congregation, he warns: "watch your wives" (12) to make sure that they are not "suddenly filled with evil" because, as women, they are much more susceptible to this. Likewise, a comment he makes about the sandwiches Jeanette's mother

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has prepared for the luncheon after church also reflects his misogynistic values: "you can always tell a good woman by her sandwiches" (11). This causes Jeanette to flinchingly reflect upon how horrible he is and wonder how "poor Mrs. Finch" ever married him (13). This thought calls to mind her experience with the gypsy who grabbed her hand, looked at her palm and reported: "you'll never marry...and you'll never be still" (7). As Jeanette begins to think about the concept of marriage in light of her experience with the pastor, she begins to think that the gypsy's fortune "might not be such a bad thing after all" (13).

Although Jeanette does not see any models of happy heterosexual couples in her midst, she knows that marriage to a man is what is expected of her, unless she devotes her entire life to God and "marries" the church. This is one of her mother's expectations as evinced by frequent hints that Jeanette is "dedicated to the lord...and was put down for missionary school as soon as [her parents] got [her] (72). Her mother's reminders do nothing to satiate Jeanette's questioning mind and she continues to wonder about male-female relationships. The relationship between her mother and father is her primary example of marriage, yet the bond between them seems utilitarian, cold, and devoid of love. For example, we learn that Jeanette's adoption is due to her mother's "mysterious attitude toward the begetting of children"; yet, as Jeanette points out, "it wasn't that she couldn't do it, more that she didn't want to do it" (3). Jeanette discusses her mother's bitterness about the Virgin Mary and the Immaculate Conception and outlines her jealousy resulting from the fact that she

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was not afforded the same situation. At one point, Jeanette states: "as long as I have known [my parents], my mother has gone to bed at four, and my father has got up at five" (15). She later says that sometimes she thinks her mother "married in haste" (35).

A page in one of her photo albums entitled "Old Flames" provides a suggestion that Jeanette's observation may hold true and that her mother married a man because it was what was expected of her. This page includes pictures of the men she dated before getting married; yet, as Jeanette notices, "right at the bottom of the page [is] a yellowy picture of a pretty woman holding a cat" (36). When Jeanette questions her mother about this photo, her mother responds feebly by saying that it is "just Eddy's sister" and further that she "[does not] know why [she] put it there" (36); the next time Jeanette looks through the album, the photo has disappeared. This scene in the novel is interesting for several reasons, foremost of which is the fact that it seems to signal her mother's attraction to a woman-- a very plausible explanation for the placement of this picture on the "old flames" page of her album. The fact that the picture is no longer in the album when Jeanette looks at a later time suggests that her mother has moved it intentionally as an attempt to hide something, or erect a 'closet' around herself. Perhaps, she is unwilling to surrender the fact that she also had feelings for a woman, prior to her marrying, an act which now keeps her safely veiled within the "heterosexist presumption" (Sedgewick 46) of the church.

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Jeanette's observations of her parents and her analysis of their relationship sets her on a course in which she observes the many marriages around her and begins to question the validity of such seemingly loveless unions. At the root of these unions is the Christian notion of complementarity, which deems that women and men are made for one another and that the only acceptable sexual relationship between them exists within the context of marriage. The institution of marriage is thus upheld within Christianity as an ideal, even if the relationship itself is empty, as Jeanette's parents' seems to be. The church's influence on marriage as a religious institution is noted by Adrienne Rich in "Compulsory Homosexuality and Lesbian Existence," where she posits that marriage as prescribed by religion is just one of the forms by which male power manifests itself over women. To this end, Rich asserts that "women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components in their lives" (39). This oppression and lack of satisfaction reveals itself in the text when Jeanette begins to observe the heterosexual unions around her with a more critical eye.

One chapter of particular importance in the novel is entitled "Leviticus," after the Old Testament book which describes homosexuality as an abomination (Leviticus, 18:22). The chapter opens with Jeanette's description of a recurring dream in which she gets married. She recalls, "my dress was pure white and I had a golden crown. As I walked up the aisle, the crown got heavier and heavier and the dress more and more difficult to walk in" (69). This dream links directly

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back to the title of the chapter as it symbolizes Jeanette's attempt to conform to Christian doctrine. Yet it reveals her inner turmoil at the prospect of marrying a man. Jeanette reports that her dream is always the same until the priest instructs her new husband to "kiss the bride," at which point her husband is always one of several unappealing characters: "sometimes a pig...sometimes the man from the post office... sometimes my mother... and sometimes just a suit of clothes with nothing inside" (69). Critics do not address this scene, which offers an important element in the emergence of Jeanette's lesbian identity. In my reading of the text, her mother's presence in this dream symbolizes her desire for women, yet simultaneously represses it as it reinforces her mother's link to the church and her presence in Jeanette's life as a quasi-patriarchal figure.

When Jeanette tells her mother about the marriage nightmares, she immediately dismisses Jeanette by telling her that it is because she has "[eaten] sardines for supper" (69). Clearly, the prospect of having to marry a man is causing Jeanette some distress, yet her mother is unable to acknowledge her daughter's fear around the issue. Instead she undermines Jeanette's feelings and continues to uphold the church's heterosexual standard. This is interesting given that she, too, is in an unhappy marriage with a man about whom she seems to care little. This passage reflects Foucault's ideas as outlined by Jon Simmons that "Christian modes of subjectification [are] almost synonymous with self-renunciation or refusal of the self" (Simmons 75). Thus, Jeanette's mother is merely passing the same information to her daughter that she received in similar

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circumstances, namely, to deny yourself in favour of religious mandates. The end result, of course, is that both Jeanette and her mother remain unfulfilled.

In her search for answers about marriage, Jeanette is unable to come up with anything hopeful. When a woman on Jeanette's street tells everyone that she has married a pig, young Jeanette inquires as to why she would do such a thing, and the woman replies that "you never know until it's too late" (69). This becomes a frightening prospect for Jeanette, who is increasingly confused about the relationships between women and men. Likewise, most of the women she speaks to about the subject relay stories that Jeanette finds disturbing. Her aunt, for instance, tells her that she will "get used to [marriage]" and adds that when she got married, she "laughed for a week, cried for a month, and settled down for life" (71-72). Paradoxically, it is the married women and not the lesbians in the text whose messages discourage Jeanette from an interest in the opposite sex.

These hopeless reports about marriage confirm what Jeanette is beginning to realize about herself, namely, that she is not at all interested in cultivating a relationship with a man. When she tells her aunt that she does not think she wants a boy, her aunt merely replies: "there's what we want...and there's what we get, remember that" (72). It is moments like this that, according to Rich, work to "render invisible the lesbian possibility" (Rich 155). Moreover, her aunt's comment also reinforces the fact that as a female, Jeanette must be marriageable in order to fulfill the needs of a man regardless of her own

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desires. Still unsatisfied with what she has found out, she is forced to hide in the dustbin to eavesdrop on some of the neighbourhood women in an attempt to answer her questions. That Jeanette needs to go to such great lengths to receive information on this topic reinforces the fact that there is little effective two-way communication between her and her mother concerning issues of social importance. While hiding in the dustbin, Jeanette soon realizes that these women are not in fact happy with their husbands and that their relationships merely pay lip service to the societal and religious expectation of marriage. She is more confused than ever, and begins to think that "it [is] a good thing [she is] destined to become a missionary" (75). Consequently, she decides to "put aside the problem of men and concentrate on reading the Bible" (75). Thus, the lack of adequate education concerning love and sexuality forces Jeanette into the silence that is expected of her. When questioned about the sexual politics of the text in a 1991 interview, Winterson states, "I think that sexuality, or the versions of sexuality that we are served up from the earliest moments, are prescriptive and in many ways debilitating. People don't get a chance to find out about themselves. They are told who they are, that they fit in to certain patterns" (Barr, 31). Both Winterson's commentary here and Jeanette's experience throughout the novel are reminiscent of Sedgwick's discussion of the closet. Ultimately, Jeanette's confusion leads her to fall back on the Christian framework that she is familiar with, despite the fact that it silences her needs and limits her subjectivity, thereby forcing her into the closet. This fact further illustrates that

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Winterson is clearly not simply reversing binaries, as Doan suggests, but rather deconstructing them.

Her decision to "concentrate on reading the Bible" and, thus, her outward show of enthusiasm for religion are what earn Jeanette a place of belonging within her family and church. Jeanette's efforts to heed the church's wishes ensure that she is accepted within the small, isolated Christian community *because* she adheres to the terms they set. However, after a letter arrives in the mail including notification that Jeanette must commence her studies in the public school system, this sense of belonging is shattered. Jeanette is alienated from her peers because she relates everything back to the only context she knows: a biblical one. Upon reporting to the class about her summer, for example, Jeanette reveals a story about her mother saving someone's life, at which point the teacher inquires about whether or not she is a nurse and Jeanette says plainly, "no, she just heals the sick" (37). This response demonstrates the extent to which Jeanette believes what her mother and the church tell her to be true. As the passage illustrates, most people would not accept such leaps in logic. Inevitably, the sheltered world of Jeanette's upbringing collides with the one beyond the church. This causes Jeanette to develop a sense of cynicism about the public school system, making her decide that her mother's negative theories about the system are in fact correct. At this point, she too views the school as a "breeding ground" (36) for immoral thought and behaviour, a response that is entirely out of touch with the actual conditions of the classroom she attends.

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As the result of her struggle with belonging, Jeanette sees school as a necessary evil; yet because her attendance is mandatory, she tries "to make [her]self as ordinary as possible" (38). She reports that she finds schoolwork less than challenging and begins to despair, as she does not "seem to learn anything" that she considers worthwhile (37). Without a doubt, there is a strong correlation between her difficulty at school and her sheltered home life. After all, her only academic experience to date has been rigidly based on the teachings of the Bible; thus, her dislike of school is due in part to the fact that she feels misplaced in this new context. In sewing class, for instance, when making cross-stitch samplers, the other children create samplers inscribed with such things as "To Mother With Love," while Jeanette's reads "The Summer is Over and We Are Not Yet Saved" (38), a comment no doubt influenced by her mother's involvement in the Glory Crusade, a group traveling the countryside and fiercely attempting convert as many people as possible. Her teacher, Miss Virtue, tries to talk her out of creating the sampler, because she feels that "it might upset the others" (38). As Amy Benson Brown dryly points out, "these needlework samplers, which evoke the historically feminine craft of textiles, are inadequate mediums for Jeanette's self-expression" (239). It is obvious that the total religious immersion she experiences at home is a disservice to her because it manifests itself in bizarre behaviour, inhibiting her from connecting to her peers. Jeanette is unable to make the transition into the secular world and develops an aversion to non-church related activities. This momentarily brings her closer to

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her mother and to the church – an outcome which is favourable in her mother's perspective because it ensures that she has a hand in keeping her daughter's mind focused on what is "holy". At this point then, Jeanette's life continues to be filtered through the Christian system of knowing and although she still has many unanswered questions she silences herself and remains a faithful servant of the Lord – an option which proves less complicated than its opposite.

Despite settling into this silence, Jeanette's questions do not leave her mind for long and she begins again to question religion and the church shortly after she develops feelings for a young woman. Upon their first encounter, which Jeanette initiates by asking Melanie for fish-bait, Jeanette notices that Melanie's "eyes are a lovely grey" (78). After this brief meeting, Jeanette becomes enthralled and is unable to get Melanie out of her head: "week after week [she goes] back there, just to watch" Melanie work (80). That Jeanette's feelings develop quickly is a testament to her repression up to this point and the fact that she finally has an outlet for expression. In between these weekly visits, she welcomes anything that offers her a chance "to think about the fish stall, and Melanie" (80). Up until this point, Jeanette admits that she "assumed the world ran on very simple lines, like a larger version of our church" (27); yet, now that she is confronted by feelings which are in distinct opposition to all she has been taught about the world, Jeanette begins to think that even the church [is] sometimes confused" (27), and she feels that "this [is] a problem" (27).

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Unsure of how to befriend Melanie, Jeanette does the only thing familiar to her and invites her to church. It is no coincidence that Pastor Finch is once again the visiting pastor the week Jeanette brings Melanie, and that the sermon is another on the topic of demons, thus foreshadowing the church's disapproval of their relationship and reinforcing established sexual mores. During this particular sermon, Pastor Finch goes into great detail about "the epidemic of demons spreading through the north west" (83), and then asks the congregation if they have any idea why this is happening. Yet before they have a chance to answer him, he gives them the answer: "Unnatural Passions" (83). The pastor's immediate response to his own question illustrates the extent to which the church exerts power and control over its members. It also reinforces the Christian view of a single truth. Jeanette reports that, "not all of us were sure what he meant, but all of us knew it was dreadful" (83). Clearly, pastor Finch's reference to "Unnatural Passions" here is suggestive of sexual activity and echoes the previous mention of the term when Jeanette's mother denies her the opportunity to go to the seashore with the ladies who run the paper shop because they "deal in Unnatural Passions" (7). Undoubtedly, the church is discussing demons here as a means of controlling the congregation by instilling a sense of fear in them, with the hope that they will not stray from the mandates of church doctrine.

As Jeanette's feelings for Melanie intensify, her mother confronts her about "a boy at church [she] think[s] [Jeanette] is keen on" (84). Not only does

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this illustrate how out of touch she is with her daughter, but it also reinstates the expectation of heterosexuality and reinforces the veil of silence around discussions of the body in the Christian tradition. Jeanette is "completely mystified" (84) by her mother's claim as she is not at all interested in the boy at church; rather, she is preoccupied with her feelings for Melanie, whom she now meets weekly to study the Bible, an ironic closet for their budding lesbianism. Interestingly, critics have not commented on the fact that the very tool used to keep Jeanette from the 'secret' knowledge of sexuality is what brings her and Melanie together regularly.

During one visit, soon after they are finished reading scripture, Jeanette and Melanie express their gratitude for each other's friendship and then Melanie "stroke[s] [Jeanette's] head for a long time" (86). Shortly thereafter, they hug and Jeanette reports that "it felt like drowning" (86). She also admits that she "[is] frightened, but [can't] stop" (86), an unfortunate reaction to her first sexual experience that no doubt results from the fact that she has been taught to deny herself in favour of doing what is considered "holy." Her mother has warned her that she is not to "let anyone touch [her] Down There," while pointing to "somewhere at the level of her apron pocket" (86). Thus, she is feeling a tension between the desire to express herself sexually and the knowledge that doing so is a sin. Jeanette is unquestionably confused at this point, because she is experiencing something that she knows is forbidden, yet finding pleasure in it. As Carter Heyward points out, this perplexity is not uncommon among gays and

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lesbians emerging from a Christian context/closet. Heyward posits that this "confusion is bred into [their] experience of dominant power relations in the church" where they "have been shaped by heterosexist ideology" and "have come to know and recognize [themselves] as either mad or bad in relation to heterosexist assumptions" (32). It is in the awareness of this knowledge that she is forbidden to express her sexual desire for women and is encouraged to feel shameful for the existence of such yearnings.

Jeanette wonders if her feelings for Melanie have anything to do with "unnatural passion," but decides that this can not be the case because what Pastor Finch describes is awful, and what she is feeling is not the least bit unpleasant (86). Still, she feels uncomfortable about the whole situation because although she recognizes that "knowing Melanie is a happy thing" (100), her feelings are becoming more intense and she worries about the prospect of having to tell her mother, another example of the power her mother has in her life. Jeanette describes the feeling inside of her as "something crawling in her belly," and furthers that it is as if she has "an octopus inside of [her]" (86). Clearly, hers is an innocent description of falling in love, yet, because there is so much silence about sexuality, she does not know what to do with the intensity of these emotions. She becomes more and more afraid of what is happening to her, and decides to tell her mother how she feels:

> I explained how much I wanted to be with Melanie, that I could talk to her, that I needed that kind of friend. And...And...But I

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> never managed to talk about ... and ... My mother had been very quiet, nodding her head from time to time, so that I thought she understood some of it" (100). Her mother responds by picking up her Bible and saying "Go to bed now" (100).

It is not surprising here that Jeanette finds it difficult to put her feelings into words or that her mother responds to her daughter's near coming out with more silence, thereby imparting a sense of shame on the already worried Jeanette. This silence is similar to what Foucault discusses as censorship around sexuality and its effect is to render issues of a sexual nature invisible.

The next time Jeanette and Melanie have a sleepover, things between them become more intense, yet Jeanette's fear increases also, as evidenced by the following excerpts: "she smiled at me with those lovely cat grey eyes..."; "we were quiet, and I traced the outline of her marvelous bones and the triangle of muscle in her stomach"; "what is it about intimacy that makes it so very disturbing?" (101). Jeanette's apprehensive response to intimacy in this scene is clearly a result of the cold and detached nature of her Christian upbringing which governs her capacity to act from her heart's desires. Complicating this further, of course, is the fact she is constantly reminded of how sinful it is to succumb to "unnatural passions."

After the discussion with her mother, Jeanette reports that the two "had hardly spoken" (100) and that her mother "seemed caught up in something"(100), yet Jeanette does not mind, as she has "[her] own worries"

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(100). What Jeanette is unaware of is that her mother is busy discussing her confidences with the clergy and seeking suggestions as to how to fix her troubled daughter. She brings the situation to the attention of the church pastor, at which point it is decided that Melanie and Jeanette need to be confronted on their sins. The confrontation comes during the Sunday service and is a surprise to both young women, who, initially, are not even aware that the pastor is referring to them. He begins by stating: "These children of God, have fallen under Satan's spell...these children of God have fallen foul of their lusts...these children are full of demons" (102). As Alison Webster points out in Found Wanting: Women, Christianity and Sexuality, it is in cases such as this that "one's attraction to and sexual intimacy with someone of the same sex [is] the fault of external forces, demons which must be defeated..." (22).

When Jeanette becomes aware of the fact that the pastor is indeed speaking of her and Melanie when she feels "his hand...hot and heavy on [her] neck" (102), at which point she retorts, "I'm not...and neither is she" (102). This response seeks to closet their relationship. The pastor, however, heeds no notice to her pleas and "pointing at [her]" (102) asks: "Do you deny you love this woman with a love reserved for man and wife? to which Jeanette responds: "No, yes, I mean of course I love her" (102), a response that illustrates her own struggle with which *truth* she should be uttering. The pastor continues: "Do you promise to give up this sin and beg the lord to forgive you?" ... "It is not too late for those who truly repent"(103). Jeanette remains steadfast and honestly

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confesses that she does indeed love Melanie at which point she is instructed to go to the vestry where "the elders will...pray for [her]" (103). In this scene, Jeanette is treated as someone who needs to be cured or fixed, her expression of desire is punished, and the ways of the church are forced upon her with no consideration of her needs. As Keryn Carter points out in her discussion of the text, "the potential threat posed by Jeanette's behaviour is what so horrifies the evangelistic community that they cast her in the role of the abject" (Carter 22). Consequently, Jeanette's subjectivity is once again limited as the church's demands take precedence over the development of her sense of self as distinct or separate from the Church body.

In addition to reinforcing the fact that Jeanette is not to establish an identity of her own, this scene also revisits the Christian theory of complementarity. This theory expresses the belief that men and women are created for each other and that anything other than this combination is immoral and against God's plan for the world. Underlying this notion of truth, however, is a patriarchal thirst for control and a resistance to change. This stance necessarily assumes a universality of sexual experience and seeks to repress the existence of alternative ways of being. The response from the pastor and members of the congregation demonstrates how Jeanette's feelings for a woman threaten the very foundation upon which the church's beliefs are built because they trouble the assumption that women must be dependent on men, who are the only ones to be accorded power and control. This offers an example of the

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basis for Zillah Eisenstein's argument that behind the institutions ruled by patriarchal power, such as the church, "is the pinnacle of white male privilege, in which the white affluent male has a natural right to own and define everything from doctrines of divinity to truths about sexuality to bodies of women" (16). Jeanette's experience unmistakably reveals this fact as the pastor exercises power *over* her in order to uphold male-centered notions of truth.

The pastor's exposure of Melanie and Jeanette at the Sunday service is only the beginning of many such incidences, all of which Jeanette is unable to escape. The next prayer meeting for Jeanette occurs early the following morning and does not draw to a close until after ten that night. The assembly consists of the pastor and several elders of the congregation, including her mother, all urging Jeanette to "repent [her] sins before the Lord"(105). This is coupled with the pastor's constant refrain of: "Renounce her, renounce her, it's only the demon," to which Jeanette continually replies: "I can't, I can't" (105). Jeanette admits that throughout it all, she "could only see Melanie's face and Melanie's body," a testament to the sense of comfort this relationship provides her. Moreover, this illustrates how the connection with Melanie helps her to "break out of the isolation imposed by silence and invisibility" (Heyward, 21). The power struggle between the church members and Jeanette suitably illustrates Jeanette's attempt to renounce the church's control over her, while simultaneously demonstrating the amount of effort exerted "in the name of God," to ensure that she will do what is "natural" and turn away from her evil

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ways. The categorization of lesbianism here as innately evil and the relentless promotion of a single way of being aptly conveys just how much effort is required to maintain the so-called truth of heterosexuality, thus paradoxically revealing how constructed it is. The ignorance of the church enables the pastor to assume the universality of what he is saying and perpetuates the lie that a single experience is normative for all people.

Jeanette's resistance to the church's request for surrender is met with more intense intervention, which sees Jeanette locked up without light or food for thirty-six hours in an attempt to weaken her to a state in which she can be dealt with. This idea is born of the pastor who assures Jeanette's mother that "she needs to lose her strength before it can be hers again" (105). The belief that Jeanette's behaviour is misaligned with what is natural "according to God" is employed as the "impetus or justification for reprehensible moral ends" (Heyward 25). The violence she endures is unquestionably homophobic and functions as a symbol of the sense of panic and discomfort around sexuality embedded in the Christian tradition. The behaviour exhibited in this passage by those who call themselves Christians is a blatant form of hate diligently camouflaged as love.

As Jeanette sits in isolation, she questions the accusation that she is inhabited by demons, and thinks to herself:

> I knew that demons entered wherever there was a weak point. If I had a demon my weak point was Melanie, but she was beautiful

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> and good and had loved me. Can love really belong to the demon? ... If I let them take away my demons, I'll have to give up what I've found. (105-6)

Jeanette's thought process here reflects the confusion she feels as she struggles to create an identity for herself while still maintaining her belief in a system that is rejecting her. Although she is isolated and virtually left to starve, she remains true to herself. Her unwillingness to concede defeat is evidence that a certain strength begins to emerge within her because she is reclaiming her subjectivity. As Audre Lorde writes in relation to black lesbians, "we have been taught to fear the YES within ourselves, our deepest cravings" (36). Certainly throughout the entire text Jeanette tries to come to terms with the YES within herself, and is met with powerful forces that seek to repress her. Her strength is remarkable in light of the church's demand that she abandon her desires. Without reservation, the messages she receives from the church are based in the fear of what she represents to them and how that representation challenges their worldview. In other words, they are requesting that she silence a profoundly important aspect of her identity because it points to weakness within the religious and patriarchal institutions from which they emerge.

After her period in isolation, Jeanette decides that she will repent, but reports that she "wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible [as she] hadn't eaten in two days" (107). Although the elders look upon her response in favour, it is clear that she is making the choice more on the basis of hunger than belief,

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because she realizes that she will continue to be held in solitary confinement until she agrees with the terms they have set. In other words, the church is employing coercion in order to ensure that its beliefs are upheld, while simultaneously shaping and controlling people that function via power *over* dynamics, which discourage questioning about "natural" ways of relating.

Following Jeanette's repentance, she contracts granular fever, a condition that the elders deem an act of God cleansing her of all her demons. This, of course, is a clever way to ensure that the "facts" line up with what they preach. While Jeanette is sick in bed, her mother decides to continue with her cleansing by going through Jeanette's letters, cards and "jottings" and burning them in the back yard (110). That this act is reminiscent of clearing evidence from a crime scene is not surprising given the manner in which same-sex love is problematized within the novel. The scene also hints at her mother's own sense of shame around sexuality and the earlier section in the novel where she quickly does away with the photograph of "a pretty woman holding a cat" on the "Old Flames" page of her album. Thus, she treats Jeanette's "evidence" the same way she treated her own, perhaps in an attempt to erect another closet around the issue.

The relationship between Melanie and Jeanette comes to an end shortly after Jeanette's time in confinement, as arrangements are made for Melanie to "go away for a while...to recover" (107). The church is able to win Melanie over and she ends up getting married. Unlike her former girlfriend, she is able to

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relinquish her "unnatural passions." Nevertheless, as Isable Gamallo points out, with the introduction of Jeanette's first love, "Winterson undoubtedly succeeds in subverting heterosexual constructions of sex and gender." Moreover, she continues, "lesbianism emerges as a growing awareness of the sensual power of the female body, and Jeanette's active, intense, and nonapologetic sexual desire becomes integrated as an irrenunciable part of her identity" (Gamallo 125). Accordingly, not too long after her affair with Melanie, Jeanette is able to find a similar solace in her relationship with a new member of the congregation, Katy. Within this relationship Jeanette is able to let go of some of her fear and shame around her sexual self, one of the most probable reasons for her declaration being that she and Katy have the "most uncomplicated love affair" (120). She reports that their relationship has a "genuinely spiritual dimension"(120), an element that clearly offers Jeanette a sense of power with which to combat the church's efforts to render her powerless. Arguably, this sense of spirituality is what enables Jeanette to continue harvesting a spiritual relationship without the limitations placed upon her by organized religion.

Consequently, when the church becomes privy to Jeanette's relationship with Katy, she is once again shunned and the pastor requests that she "give up...any form of influential contact" until he can "arrange for a further more powerful exorcism" (132). This time around, Jeanette refuses to repent or blame herself; she refuses to consider her feelings sinful or herself as evil. Her mother, therefore, asks her to move out, a request that has "the backing of the

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pastor and most of the congregation" (125). Jeanette is accused of making her mother ill and the house ill and for bringing evil into the church (125). This accusation assists in "upholding injustice [by employing] the Bible as a primary resource of fear, sin, hatred and oppression" (Heyward, 82). The construction of Jeanette as "ill" reinforces her otherness and paradoxically serves only to push her farther away from the church. The actions of the congregation continue to uphold dichotomous trends of thinking which place rigid ideas of "normal" and "natural" at the center of debates about sexuality.

By the novel's end, Jeanette realizes that the conflict she encounters with the church "hinges around the fact that [she] loves the wrong sort of people. Right sort of people in every respect except this one; romantic love for another woman [is] a sin" (125). She admits that following the first exorcism, she "tried to replace her world with another just like it, but couldn't" (125). Now, she realizes that she is unable to change herself for the church and begins to accept this. Her acceptance of herself includes her acknowledgment of a need for spirituality, yet she understands that this need is one that will not be fulfilled via organized religion. Although the hostility towards Jeanette displayed by the church is the "kind of violence that leaves no visible mark" (147), she holds firm in the notion that she would not survive with an involvement in the church "because two realities [would be] claiming [her] at the same time...[and] such things are too much" (156). Jeanette begins to conceptualize a new sense of spirituality. This certainly follows Heyward's assertion that "our senses, and the

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feelings that are generated by them become our primary spiritual resources" (Heyward, 94). In considering her feelings on religion, Jeanette admits that she does not believe that God betrayed her, but that the "servants of God did...[and] servants by their very nature betray" (165). In other words, Jeanette sees that the traditional establishment of the Christian Church cannot offer her what she needs, for the simple fact that it is built upon a hierarchy.

Unfortunately, as Isabel Gamallo points out, "the mainstream interpretation of [the text] has insisted on seeing it mainly as a story about a child growing up within an Evangelical set, thus compromising its nonapologetic lesbian content" (Gamallo, 123). It is my hope that my analysis speaks to the issues of lesbianism and spirituality that I believe are at the heart of this text. That Jeanette finds the spiritual connection she longs for within lesbian relationships is exemplified near the end of the novel by the following passage:

> But on the wild nights who can call you home? Only the one who knows your name. Romantic love has been diluted into paperback form and has sold thousands and millions of copies. Somewhere it is still in the original written on tablets of stone. I would cross seas and suffer sunstroke and give away all I have, but not for a man, because they want to be the destroyer and never destroyed. (165)

This passage expresses Jeanette's belief that she can be known by a woman in ways that a man cannot know her. This knowledge provides her with a spiritual

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dimension unrivaled by any other she has experienced, and "One thing is certain; she cannot go back" (155).

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Chapter Three: Away from Anatomy, Towards Desire: Lesbian Yearnings vs. Religious Ideology in What Night Brings

In the conceptual schemes of phallocracies there is no category of woman-identified-woman, woman-loving woman or woman-centered-woman; that is, there is no such thing as lesbian. This puts a lesbian in the interesting and peculiar position of being something that doesn't exist, and this position is a singular vantage point with respect to the reality which does not include her.

— Sarah Hoagland, Lesbian Ethics

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war...perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new separate territory.

— Gloria Anzaldua, La Consciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness.

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Like The Color Purple and Oranges are Not the Only Fruit, Carla Trujillo's premiere novel What Night Brings (2003) exposes the struggle of a young woman attempting to come to terms with her lesbianism against the backdrop of religious and cultural forces which aim to uphold the construct of compulsory heterosexuality. Marci Cruz is a ten-year-old girl growing up in the nineteen sixties in California, coming of age in a working class Chicano family. This chapter will address the ways in which Marci is silenced both by the Catholic Church and by the Chicano culture from which she is emerging.

In Borderlands/ La Frontera, Gloria Anzaldúa addresses the issue of living across borders, or border-crossing, such as between ethnic groups or cultural identities. She discusses the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in existing in a multiplicitious state: the conditions of Chicanos in Anglo culture, women in Hispanic culture, and lesbians in the straight world. Her work is concerned with what she calls the "new Mestiza consciousness," which is essentially an identity typified by hybridity and plurality. Anzaldua explores this concept with a particular focus on *mestizas* (Chicana and Mexican women who have mixed Native American and Spanish heritage) and gays and lesbians. She examines the ways in which those forced to live across borders are forced to live simultaneously in two places, cultures, languages, or realities at once. As her book illustrates, this experience can be isolating and alienating, but it also provides an interesting vantage point from which to examine oppression.

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Anzaldua's work is relevant to my discussion of Marci's experience because as I will demonstrate, Marci too lives in a space where she must straddle borders and deal with the complications that this entails.

The specific religious and cultural intersection in which Marci is situated forces her into a unique set of inner conflicts. One manifestation of this within the text is her repetitive prayers to God to turn her into a boy, the only means she sees of reconciling her feelings for women in the context of her religious and cultural subject position. It is important to note that Marci's request to God hinges on the fact that she is, at first, entirely unaware of a lesbian possibility, which is shrouded in silence, both by her church and by her culture. Indeed, the Catholic Church and Chicano culture share many similarities in terms of their ideas about sexuality and the roles of women. In many instances, as Byrne Fone points out in his book Homo-Phobia, church ideology informs the cultural stance on such issues (410-414). This fact provides an excellent starting point for my discussion about the ways that each of these tremendously patriarchal forces seeks to suppress identities that do not adhere to their male-centered philosophies. Marci's desire for women is rendered invisible by the aforementioned systems of power, which leave her feeling alienated and confused. My analysis reveals how the end of the text reconciles Marci's struggle with her lesbian identity through abandoning cultural and religious conceptualizations of female sexuality. This move away from oppressive and hegemonic systems of power creates space in which Marci is able to find peace

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in a more fluid and woman-centered approach to spirituality. As I will demonstrate, this shift occurs slowly for Marci throughout the course of the novel, yet it truly manifests itself at the end when Marci is able to liberate herself from the stifling values of both the Catholic community and her own culture. Ultimately she does this by finding her voice about her sexuality through a lesbian connection with another woman.

To date, book reviews offer the only discussion of Trujillo's novel. To their credit, they do mention the importance of sexual identity in a general sense, as well as the role of Catholicism in the text. Still, these reviews, mostly affiliated with Curbstone Press, the book's publisher, certainly do not provide much analysis of the text itself as they remain preoccupied with hailing it as an excellent first novel. In one review, for instance, Pablo De Sainz states that "one of the major themes in the book is being a lesbian and the 'consequences' this might bring to a young Chicana" (internet). While De Sainz is correct, the reality of lesbianism for Marci is far more complicated than he suggests. Similarly, when Carole Goldberg reviews the novel, she speaks vaguely of Marci's desire to be a boy, but says nothing of the convoluted cultural and religious influences that have led her to that place. In addition, she does not explore the influence of Catholicism, which can be directly linked to Marci's sense of confusion about her sexual identity. Thus, the role of religion as it affects the development of Marci's sexuality remains largely un-discussed in the reviews on Trujillo's text. This is problematic because Catholicism greatly informs Marci's

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worldview and is inextricably linked to what she has learned about gender and sexuality. Unfortunately, the reviews are far too limited in scope and, while they do speak favourably of the novel, they do not offer much in the way of initiating discussion about the stifling effect of Christianity on the development of Marci's lesbianism, a topic that I see as one of the text's main focuses.

The novel commences with an introduction of Marci's family. The immediate discussion about her father signals her emergence from a macho-ruled household. This fact parallels the observation made by Emma Perez that Chicano "family tradition is anchored in *machismo*" (68), a term denoting the abusive, controlling, and violent behaviour, particularly of men of colour towards women and children. Certainly the fact that Marci introduces her father first is indicative of this cultural hierarchy. The relevance of this pecking order becomes clearer when Marci's story reveals the amount of influence and power her father has: "you can always see him watching you ... and he can whip off his belt faster than you can say son-of-bitch" (2). Marci's comment on her father's omnipresence establishes a parallel between him and God. This parallel continues throughout the text and is based on a certain brand of patriarchal authority that is consistently employed to elicit fear and force compliance. Marci's description of her father offers a frightening dynamic within the household in which his surveillance plays a chief role: "my dad walks around listening and looking for something to happen, something that will probably make him mad" (4).

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Clearly, Marci exists in a culture of fear within her own home; thus, it is not surprising when she admits that "every single day of [her] life [she goes] to bed asking God to make [her] dad disappear" (1). This plea illustrates the intensity of Marci's situation as well as the extent to which she feels suffocated by her father's power and the physical and emotional abuse that she must endure. Marci's fear of her father insists that she remain on guard, constantly wondering "what kind of mood he'd be in" (10). The concentration of her father's supremacy is further reiterated as she admits that "nothing is as scary as my dad getting mad" (11) because he "turn[s] into a monster" (12). The all-encompassing authority disseminated by her father serves to complicate her developing gender identity and greatly informs Marci's experience as a female as she is required to accept the symbolic law of the father. As I will demonstrate later, the church asserts a similar air of authority over Marci's life and in many ways the relationship she has with the church mirrors the one she has with her father. Marci is taught not to question her father in the same way that she is taught not to question the church. Both of these attempts at maintaining complete control are connected to patriarchal ideology.

As the description of her father implies, Marci certainly exists in a space of limited options. Deena Gonzalez discusses the limitations of Chicano culture for women in "Speaking Secrets: Living Chicana Theory," when she points out that "in Mexican societies...femaleness tend[s] to be situated and fixed [as points] on a quadrant within which women's behaviours, attitudes, images, even values and

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beliefs, [are] plotted" (Gonzalez 58). The fact that Marci does not introduce herself until page four of the text, after she has spoken in detail about everyone else in the family, provides a clear indication as to where she feels she belongs in the familial hierarchy. Her experience certainly parallels Gonzalez's theory as Marci is constantly reminded that there are certain parameters within which she must exist. At one point, for instance, her father shouts, "It's about time you started learning things that's gonna do you some good, and that's learning how to cook food a man will eat" (126). This comment is not only blatantly sexist, but it signals Marci's fixed place within the above-mentioned quadrant. Because the quadrant is grounded in heterosexual terms, it leaves no space for her emerging lesbian identity, a fact that only serves to further her sense of alienation and otherness.

Although Marci prays to God to take her father, she admits that this prayer is second to, and less significant than, her prayer in which she asks God to make her into a boy. In her specific cultural context, where being male is synonymous with having power, it is no surprise that Marci prays to become a boy. As Ana Castillo points out in a discussion of desire in Chicana culture, "it is no wonder that from within such a structured cultural context where men alone may desire freely and therefore be desirable, an insightful woman who is coming of age would suffer not a small degree of psychological trauma" (Castillo 147). Certainly Marci's answered prayer would result in a transformation that would move her into a position of power, possibly one in which she would be taken

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more seriously by her father. This request is important throughout the text on many levels as it speaks both to issues around power and gender within Chicano culture as well as the silence around female sexuality and lesbianism in particular. Marci explains:

> I have to tell you what I need from God. I have to change into a boy. This is what I want and it's not an easy thing to ask for... I've been wanting it for a long time. It's not because I think I'm a boy, though sometimes it sure seems like I am. It's because I like girls. I don't know how or when it happened. Maybe I was born this way... I couldn't stop thinking of girls during the day at school, at night in my dreams, and especially when I watched TV. Now *I* know you can't be with a girl if you *are* a girl. So that's why I have to change into a boy (9).

Thus, it is clear that the cultural space in which Marci exists only affords males the power to desire and possess females. Of course, the implications of such a sexist social fabric are particularly devastating for Chicana lesbians.

This passage expresses the extent to which Marci is molded by both heterosexist social and cultural mores, which perpetuate the notion of male/female complementarity, thereby negating the possibility of a lesbian identity. Her request also reflects the internalization of heterosexist ideology, which serves only to heighten her shame, which I would argue is the driving force behind her wish to be a boy. This shame is perpetuated by cultural and

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religious attitudes, which would have her believe that her experience of desire for a woman is abnormal. As a result, Marci is silent about her shameful feelings except when suggesting the "boy" solution to God in her prayers. In an article, "Listening to the Silences in Latina/Chicana Lesbian History," Yolanda Chavez Leyva posits that "for lesbianas Latinas, silence has been an enigma, a survival strategy, a wall which confines us, the space that protects us" (429). The homophobia that Leyva speaks of within her culture is of particular significance in my discussion here, but closeting is certainly not limited to Chicana social mores. Adrienne Rich points out, for instance, that "women of every culture and throughout history *have* undertaken the task of independent, nonheterosexual, woman-connected existence...often in the belief that they were the 'only ones' ever to have done so" (Rich, 143).

This sense of homosexual isolation is what fosters Marci's doubt and perpetuates her silence. Marilyn Frye's essay "Opression" states that if oppressed people comply with the established norms, then they "acquiese in being made invisible, in occupying no space" (2). In a sense, Marci's request to be a boy in order to love girls subscribes to the heterosexist presumption, therefore she effectively suppresses herself and closets her lesbian identity. Obviously, Marci does not lie on purpose, but it plays out this way because she is ignorant about the possibility of women loving women. Despite her silence, however, Marci's desire still serves to weaken heterosexist boundaries. Such transgression is explained in a discussion of lesbian identity when Marilyn Farewell states that, "it

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[lesbianism] exceeds [the] system by being what the system constructs as the ultimate threat: a female body, a woman's sexuality, independent of the male" (Farewell 161). Therefore, regardless of Marci's confusion and her silence around the issue, her desire remains subversive and creates space for alternate ways of being.

Despite Marci's silence about her attraction to girls, and her ignorance about the construct of compulsory heterosexuality, she does possess a strong feminist sensibility that is evident throughout the text. At one point, while reflecting on the TV show "Superman", Marci states that she could play the character better than George Reeves-- "because I'm stronger and smarter" (5). Thus, Marci aligns herself above a prominent cultural icon, signaling her refusal to accept the stereotypical position of the weak female character. This is exemplified again as she admits that she dreams every night about "sav[ing] beautiful girls" and then proceeds to explain that "usually a mean man was hurting the girl. I'd beat the man up, then carry her away. She'd be so happy I saved her, she'd want to marry me. I'd say yes and the dream would end with me kissing her neck and feeling her chiches" (6). Her fantasy about saving girls from mean men clearly reflects her wish that she could save her mother, her sister and herself from her violent and volatile father. This passage also reveals a connection between Marci's emerging lesbian identity and her desire to be free from the constraints of an incredibly patriarchal culture. Although she knows what is expected of her in the context of the heterosexual matrix, this dream

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signifies her rejection of the "ideology of heterosexual romance, beamed at her since childhood out of fairytales, television, films [and]...popular songs" (Rich 153). The dream also signifies her yearning for power and control over her own life, a phenomenon that she witnesses as primarily male. Again, Marci's own feelings are at odds with the media she consumes and she must imagine herself in an inverted version of the scenario. Her feisty personality and strength of character shine through as she imagines herself playing the powerful role, revealing her frustration with feeling powerless at the intersection of her culture/gender/desire.

Marci's attraction to girls finds a clear focus when her family moves to a new neighbourhood. She states that she is happy not only because her new room is bigger, but because she's fallen in love: "the most important reason I was happy, was that I found the girl of my dreams" (26). Raquel is a young woman living in the house next door to Marci's and their meeting is a turning point in the text as it marks Marci's first love. Despite the fact that Marci's feelings for Raquel are unrequited, the space of the relationship nevertheless provides Marci with an opportunity to further explore her desire: "I felt all melty and good when I looked at her, like I'd just eaten two packs of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups" (26). Marci's first interaction with Raquel signals the fact that, for Marci, there is a romantic dimension to this relationship. She describes Raquel as sounding "nice-- like fresh picked flowers" (27), and during their initial

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conversation, her body clearly insists that Raquel is attractive and intensely desirable, Marci is so moved that she becomes speechless.

Furthermore, the interaction with Raquel seems to offer Marci a sense of spiritual renewal much more fulfilling than anything she has experienced in the context of Christianity. Reflecting on a conversation with Raquel, Marci recalls, "I guess I thought I would keep talking, but no words would come out, at least not the words I wanted to say. I could only kneel and look up her face" (27). The Christian diction in this passage suggests that Raquel makes Marci feel the same way she is told she should feel in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Her physical posture, kneeling and looking up at Raquel's face is reminiscent of prayer, indicating that, perhaps, Marci worships Raquel for the emotions she elicits within her. In a single encounter with Raquel, Marci experiences a much more intense and spiritually moving phenomenon than she has ever experienced in church. In fact this experience sharply contrasts with all of those experiences she has at church because the feelings make sense to her. As we shall see, Marci finds many of the church rituals and expectations confusing and rididculous. It is as if for the first time in her young life, something feels right. This feeling intensifies as Marci offers a description of Raquel walking home following their meeting: "she looked like the Holy Spirit floating toward the front door," Marci then reflects, "I liked lots of girls, but not like this" (27).

During her encounter with Raquel, Marci does not mention feeling like she should "be a boy," which suggests that she is comfortable with her feelings and

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with the responses of her body in this context. It is not until later that Marci thinks, "I was starting to get worried, though, about the fact that I was still a girl. I wondered if God was going to come through on his part of the deal" (28). Thus, Marci's awareness of the inconsistency between her gender and desire does not manifest itself until she is away from the situation with Raquel and thinking in society's terms:

> "Okay,God" ... "Are you listening? I need you to hurry up and change me into a boy." ... "I know you probably don't get asked this very much, but I need some help. I like this girl named Raqeul who lives next door. ... I want to marry her, but I think she'll want to marry a boy. This is why I need to get going on this change. I also need a penis ... and no chiches. Do you think you could do this? ... I have to change into a boy. Otherwise, how else can I be with Raquel?" (30).

This signals the fact that, as her feelings for Raquel intensify, so too does her panic about the fact that her desire is in direct conflict with all that she has learned about her gender. Each time Marci becomes anxious about her identity, she turns to God for assistance.

Interestingly, Marci's prayer request is an attempt at measuring up to the gender ideals as codified by Christianity. In "The Miracle of Lesbianism," Sally Gearhart typifies the position of women like Marci when she posits that women

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are channeled into heterosexual relations with men from the moment they are born:

> For the woman,marriage and/or man-relatedness is no choice at all. It is the norm; it is expected. It is in fact the coerced." ... From the moment our sex is announced every mind and every institution in our environment shifts into one exclusive pattern of relating to us. Women are driven mercilessly to prepare ourselves for men's use, to prepare ourselves as vessels that will be "filled" and given meaning by men (127).

This being said, Marci has no template for the attraction she feels for Raquel because her feelings exist beyond the parameters of the heterosexual matrix as propagated by Christianity. Throughout the text she is told repeatedly not to question her authority figures, so, on some level, her pleas to God are indicative of her wish to fit into these very established and equally rigid social systems. From her vantage point, however, she is unable to discern that it is these very systems that have forced her into the dilemma she finds herself in.

As substantiated by the discussion thus far, Marci encounters many contradictions that she is unable to negotiate and it is obvious that much of her confusion comes from the fact that she recognizes a tension between what she is told and what she understands to be true. She is particularly unsettled by the inconsistencies she witnesses through her involvement with Catholicism. Marci finds frustrating the fact that her inquiries are not taken seriously by church

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authorities and her response is to create pockets of resistance by coming up with ways to subvert the system: "I stopped listening to what the nuns said when they wouldn't answer my question about dinosaurs. They told me I need to be quiet and 'rely on faith'"(18). This highlights the expectation of submission and docility inherent in Christian tradition, and reflects a patriarchal hierarchy similar to the one Marci experiences at home.

Her refusal to attend to what is said at church is the reason that she "can't hardly remember anything about Jesus" (18). Indeed, the ideology disseminated through the church is so fundamentally at odds with what Marci knows to be true that she can no longer consume it: "Can't they see I'm a scientist? I already read every kid's book on dinosaurs and knew how the earth was *really* made" (18). Marci's line of thought parallels Sally Gearhart's position that one's relationship with God must come from some sort of internal connection:

> The 'studying of god' has to come out of experience, has to have base or ground. It cannot come out of abstract conceptualizing. Concepts and rational processes will have to wait until we've rediscovered our bodies, our experiences, our histories and our feelings about all these things. Only then can we connect our heads with our experiences as the two have never been connected in Christian tradition (142-3).

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Like Gearhart, Marci is not willing to accept the church's reasoning before she forms her own connections between her thoughts and her experiences. It is precisely because she refuses to be spoon-fed this ideology that she tunes in to the fact that dinosaurs existed prior to the dates Christianity alleges God created the world. Her positions illustrate a general distrust of what she hears at church and her views are admirable because they display a certain level of intellect accompanied by an unwillingness to accept the church's "truth."

Although the discussion in the text is limited to Marci's inquiry about dinosaurs, this scenario forces readers to consider other ways that Christianity makes absolute truth claims which are equally flawed. Specifically, this calls to mind the notion of male/female complementarity which fuels Marci's struggle with her attraction to girls. The more Marci questions, the more she sheds light on the inconsistencies within Christianity and how these are used to control people in order to preserve very specific ways of being. Although Marci's line of questioning is innocent, it provides a space in which Trujillo can display the fallibility of Catholic truth claims and encourage readers to evaluate them with a more critical eye.

When Marci is forced to take up catechism because she is "supposed to start it young" (18), she continues questioning the foundations of the Christian church:

> "I asked Sister 'Lizabeth if we had any proof that Jesus was ever alive.

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"Yes," she said.

"What?"

"Well, the Bible, of course."

"The Bible? But who wrote that?"

"Oh, Marci, you know it was written by a group of different holy "men.""

"You mean God didn't even write it?" (19).

Marci remains unsatisfied with the answers provided by Sister Elizabeth and continues her inquiry:

> "Sister 'Lizabeth, you have to explain to me why the Bible is proof that Jesus was alive."
>
> "Well, Marci, I can't." She looked around the room as if she hoped God would come down and help her. "Pray to God, so that you understand his wisdom and power. Ask Him for guidance. Read your catechism book. Then," she paused and looked me right in the eye, "if that doesn't work, rely on faith. That's what everyone else does."
>
> "But Sister, I'm still trying to figure out how the dinosaurs fit into everything" (20).

This passage demonstrates the extent to which the church expects its teachings to be accepted without question, with "blind faith." In addition, it depicts the occurrence of an interesting power-struggle as Marci's persistent inquiry forces

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Sister Elizabeth to admit that she does not, in fact, know the answers to Marci's questions. In disclosing this, she is confessing that she too, is merely doing what she has been told by the male clergy. Thus, Marci effectively brings to light the issue of male dominance within church discourse. Because her inquiry pushes Sister Elizabeth to admit her ignorance, it also creates a rupture in the hierarchical establishment, weakening its foundation and upsetting its claims.

It is clear that the above interaction, which takes place in front of the entire class, distresses Sister Elizabeth, because later that day Marci is "called out in the middle of class and walked to the Mother Superior's office" (20). The fact that Marci's curiosity calls for punishment speaks further of the rigidity that is maintained within Catholicism in order to uphold control:

> Mother Superior...told me I wasn't allowed to ask any more questions in class, of any kind. Ever.
>
> "Why not?" I asked.
>
> "Marci, you're older than the other children, and your questions tend to be a bit...disruptive."
>
> "They do? I only want to find out why you're saying I have to believe in these things when my science books say something else."
>
> "Marci"[...] "Your questions do no one any good. They only make the other children doubt what we teach them, which makes it much harder for Sister Elizabeth to get through the lesson [...] "And

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> furthermore," she continued, "if you truly believed in God you wouldn't be asking these kinds of questions (21).

The meeting concludes with Mother Superior reiterating the agreement she has established, including a threat to coerce Marci into compliance: "It's a contract with God and you know he'll be watching" (21). This passage demonstrates the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of the church and reiterates the fact that "the very identity of the church hangs utterly upon the maintenance of a vertical power-over order [where] being ruled by someone above us--ultimately God-- is seen as our natural state" (Gearhart, 139).

In a lot of ways Marci's confrontation with Mother Superior is reminiscent of the dealings between her and her father: in both cases the threat of powerful male surveillance looms large and is meant to make her uneasy. Mother Superior's warning is an attempt to ensure Marci's submission and provides an example of what Angela Barron McBride asserts is ever present within Christianity: "it is assumed that woman's subordination to man [is] divinely ordained" (McBride, 142). This very sentiment manifests itself in the text as Marci is reminded that questioning her catechism teachers is synonymous with questioning God, which is the ultimate taboo. The fact that Marci is female renders her questioning even more unthinkable. In accordance with this sentiment, McBride quotes Luther as stating the following: "No dress or garment is less becoming to a woman than a show of intelligence" (McBride, 143). Luther's proclamation demands female inferiority and indicates the premise of

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the punishment Marci recieves. The narrow confines of sexist thought that characterizes Marci's socialization is certainly upheld within Christian ideology, as, for example, 1 Timothy 2:11-15 further indicates: "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent" (NIV). Clearly Marci's "show of intelligence" is challenged because it poses a threat to the ideology that the nuns are disseminating. The chastisement her questioning receives is meant to infuse her with shame in an attempt to restrain her searching mind. Fundamentally, Mother Superior's threat is a response on behalf of masculinist ideology. Despite her subject position as female, she represents the patriarchy in this context. Emma Perez details this phenomenon by stating that "women who accept the symbolic law of the father perpetuate it and, in essence, are male-identified women...affirming men's superiority" (Perez, 60).

Marci's mother plays a role similar to Mother Superior's as she too acts as a gatekeeper for the patriarchy, constantly reminding Marci about the importance of remaining silent. At one point when questioning her mother about a family member, Marci's mother scolds, "it's not polite to ask those types of questions...You ask too many questions! Now go play!" (25-26). Marci notes that such scoldings are merely echoes of her father's perspectives, "whatever [her mother] sees or thinks seems seen or thought by [her] dad first. Anything she says is only what he's said, and that goes for what's inside of her, too" (3). Although this patriarchal mindset is common in several cultures, I am locating this phenomenon in the context of Chicano culture in order to explore the

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particular impact of culture on the characters of Trujillo's text. Aida Hurtado explains that Chicano culture and its accompanying notion of machismo effectively silence women: "a woman's silence is a direct measure of her sainthood...and her capacity to give is infinite, [as] she expects no reward other than seeing her family survive" (Hurtado 400). Thus, it is clear that Marci's mother's response is the result of being socialized within Chicano culture. Hurtado points out, "la familia (the family), which is patriarchal in nature...is the basic unit of the community... La familia es la cuna de la cultura – the cradle where Chicano culture gets reproduced" (Hurtado, 407). This being said, it is clear that, like Mother Superior, Marci's mother is merely following the social arrangements as established by her husband/church/patriarchal ideology, which suggests that women should be silent.

In the context of these hierarchical relationships, Marci's questions are percieved as threats to the order of things. Fortunately, however, the reprimands Marci receives from her mother and her teachers do not see her abandoning her cause. She continues to rebel against their authority by refusing to discard her curious and analytical mentality. These character traits allow her to maintain a subversive presence because her questions serve to deconstruct the symbolic order. Marci is not standing up to men directly; yet, because the women she chooses to confront are male-identified, her actions represent an active stand against the patriarchy.

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Marci's interior monologues reveal her hatred for her father because of the way he treats the family. She is puzzled by the fact that her mother remains in such an abusive situation. Indeed, Marci's mother withstands her husband's abuse, a logical reaction given that the "Indo-Hispanic notion of devotion is equated with obedience" (Hurtado, 400). Throughout most of the text Marci does not dare question her father for fear of retribution, yet she is appalled when her mother exhibits a similar response. At one point, for example, she states, "my mom's smart...but when it's about my dad she's practically retarded...she never remembers what he does to her Corin and me" (10). Marci's commentary reveals how enmeshed her mother is with her father. She continues, "I told Grandma, 'Mom's wearing ear muffs and blinders'" (10). Marci is attuned to the devastating effect her father's control has over her family and she recognizes the fact that her mother looks at her dad "like a scared pup" (11). Yet Marci can not make sense out of why she refuses to leave him. Marci's frustration obviously stems from feelings of powerlessness. Although she gets angry about her mother's complacency, she is equally sympathetic and admits, "it's just that I felt sorry for Mom because she was always trying to make Dad happy" (11). Evidently, Marci is in a double bind here as she feels frustration at her mothers' complacency, while simultaneously experiencing a similar sense of powerlessness that allows her to feel empathetic towards her.

Marci's narrative surrounding her parents' relationship reveals the extent to which their relationship is founded on machismo ideals, which, as Ana Castillo

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points out, impose upon the women of Chicano culture "a sense of submission and docility...[that is] about survival" (Castillo, 132). In order for the family unit to remain intact, Marci's mother must tolerate her subservient position. Socialized in a Chicano environment, it stands to reason that Marci's mother accepts this cultural ideology even as it devalues her and her children. Perhaps the most disturbing facet of the situation is the fact that these values, complicit with female subordination, are passed down to Marci and her sister by their mother and women of the church. The children consequently absorb messages about the conceptualization of women "as not fully human but rather as property" (Trujillo, Chicana Lesbians, 188)[1].

Trujillo explores gender on several levels throughout What Night Brings and frequently uses Marci's experiences to establish the fact that gender is a construct, a social creation employed by society to delegate power in the social fabric of men and women's lives. Although Marci continuously struggles with the dichotomous nature of gender, she does manage, in her own way, to break through established barriers in order to create a space for herself. Certainly her attraction to girls overthrows gender–role expectations because it subverts the heterosexist presumption, but even beyond this example the text presents numerous situations that force the reader to question the validity of these established roles. On one occasion, for example, Marci states, "part of the

[1] Trujillo published Chicano Lesbians in 19 . The text is concerned with the lived experiences of lesbians of Latin American heritage and the ways in which they deal with being oppressed by two cultures. The book includes stories, poems and essays which give voice to Latina Lesbians by offering descriptions that challenge the traditional analysis of Latin American history/culture.

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reason I wanted to be a boy, besides loving girls, was so I could grow big muscles...then I'd be able to beat up my dad" (15). This passage illustrates the rigidity of the gender constructs created by society, but at the same time, Trujillo is encouraging readers to question the establishment. Unlike the reader, Marci is unable to see that she does not have to be a boy in order to "grow big muscles" and that as a woman, it is possible to take a stand against a man.

Although Marci takes note of the power imbalance between her mother and father and seems aware of its link to gender, there are times throughout the text when she nevertheless subscribes to gender stereotyping herself. This is certainly not surprising, considering her immersion in patriarchal culture. Perhaps total avoidance of stereotypes would be impossible. At one point while watching what she describes as a "a big sissy boy" down the street play catch with his father, she thinks,

> How did Randy end up a boy and me a girl? I knew I could throw a ball so hard it would've made his dad's hand sting. But, if Randy ever wanted to be with Raquel, he'd have a better chance than me. Randy dropped a ball that was thrown perfectly into his mitt. I wondered who got to make the choice of what you were when you were born... I didn't think life was fair making me a girl and Randy a boy (32).

Marci's thinking here reveals the extent to which gender is a mere construct, allocating labels of "masculine" and "feminine" according to only a few physical

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characteristics. In theorizing gender, Butler states that categories of gender are "invariable stumbling blocks" that are "sites of necessary trouble" (Butler 308). Butler's assertion provides a point of entry for understanding Marci's confusion. For it is precisely her inability to deconstruct gender that results in her dependence on the binary categories she has been taught in order to make sense of her world.

That Marci situates her struggle with lesbianism in the context of gender roles is understandable given the "extent and elaboration of measures designed to keep women within a male sexual parlieu...[by] rendering invisible the lesbian possibility" (Rich 155). Certainly, as Marci's experience suggests, great effort goes into perpetuating gender norms and the heterosexual imperative. Another of Butler's succinct deconstructions of gender lends itself nicely to this discussion:

> The notion that there might be a truth of sex...is produced through the matrix of coherent gender norms. The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female" (Butler 17).

In lamenting how unfair it is that Randy has a "better chance" with Raquel than she does just because he is male, Marci presents a prime example of "the cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible" (Butler,

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17). As Marci's thought processes reveal, this matrix "requires that certain kinds of 'identities' cannot 'exist' – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender" (17). It is specifically this system of limited options that attempts to negate Marci's desire for women, rendering her subject position invisible.

After perusing a book at the library about "a man that decided he was living in the wrong body and got an operation to become a woman" (29), Marci's thinking shifts and she slowly begins to realize that her true desire is not to become a boy at all: "I didn't want to go to the hospital and have an operation. I didn't even really want a birdy. I just wanted Raquel. Why was everything so hard?" (29). Thus, she is aware that she does not want a penis in and of itself. She is, in fact, happy being a girl. This is further evinced when she states, "If I change into a boy I don't think I want heuvos. Why would I want to go walking around with an Achilles heel right in the middle of my crotch?" (158). Again it is obvious that her desire to be a boy stems from her inability to conceptualize her feelings for girls beyond the context of gender construction and compulsory heterosexuality. The code of beliefs within which she is socialized ensures that desire and anatomy are inextricably linked-- a mode of thought that guarantees male supremacy as it is strictly based upon patriarchal notions of being. Thus, even as she knows that her true yearning is to remain female and be with girls, her unconscious is convinced by the ideology she absorbs and she continues to request the transformation every night: "Please help me be a boy. I love girls so

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much...and I need you [...] to change me [...] I promise to be good so please don't forget me" (31).

Despite Marci's regular pleading and prayers, she remains a girl, a fact that increases her uncertainty about God, as exemplified by the following passage:

> Everyday I woke up, peeked into my pajamas and looked at my cuca. Nothing was happening. Nothing was growing. It was always the same. I wanted to believe that if I wanted something bad enough, God, Baby Jesus, or Mary would help me. I'd been told to trust in God so many times that I *had* to believe it. I couldn't think about staying a girl. It'd make me sad since girls were always in my head. *I* was the one who rescued Judy in *Lost in Space*, or rode with Audra Barkley on horseback rides. And it was *me* who saved other girls from mean men. And, on top of everything, there's a dream girl who lives next door who I know won't give me the time of day unless I turn into a boy. Look at me, God. Are you listening? If you're really all-knowing, like everyone says you are, then how come you don't know about me? (31).

This passage signifies Marci's increasing bewilderment about gender and the fact that her desires do not fit into the heterosexual matrix, which God presumably supports. Even in her consumption of popular culture, Marci imagines playing male roles, but this does not necessarily reflect a genuine

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interest in being male, but rather her yearning to be with women, a role that she sees as being played only by men. Moreover, as well as issues of gender, this passage speaks to Marci's increasing doubts about God. She emphasizes the fact that she *has* to believe in God, yet it is clear that her belief is riddled with doubt and is certainly not the result of choice she has made because of any sort of genuine connection but is instead, an attempt at doing what she is told.

When Marci is introduced to confession she is faced with the fact that the orders she is given not to question the church are one-sided. The representation of confession in the text reveals the degree to which this practice is an attempt to maintain power through instilling guilt. As readers follow Marci through the process of confession, it is evident that the very arrangement of this tradition represents a top-down model of power: "what was scaring me the most though, was going to confession...how was I supposed to trust some man I didn't know...the truth was, I didn't want him knowing the truth" (66). Her plan is to avoid telling the priest her real sin of liking girls and instead to just tell him that she "said some cuss words, hit [her] sister and talked back to [her] mom" (61). Marci is filled with dread born out of the knowledge that her desire for girls is not only wrong, but that it is so bad she can not even mention it in confession.

Including the Catholic tradition of confession in the text offers readers yet another example of how fear is employed as a means to ensure compliance in the context of Christianity. Sister 'Lizabeth reminds the students that "a priest is the closest thing to God...priests are holy men. When we tell our sins to them,

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we are essentially speaking to God" (61). This comment is meant to instill even more fear into the students. It is clear that this strategy is successful as Marci prepares to enter the confessional booth with her hands wet and her legs shaking. She states, "Remember when I talked about being scared of different things and that nothing was equal to how scared I was of my dad? Well, I just found a new kind of scariness: talking to a priest" (68). Marci's alignment here of her father and the priest illustrates the horrific effect this experience has on her. Marci reports, "I was shaking inside, but didn't let anyone see" and then she adds, "I knew how to keep my feelings to myself. You had to, you know, in my house" (68). This passage reemphasizes the parallel between the church father and her dad, revealing the fact that she feels equally afraid in both situations.

Upon entering the booth, Marci provides a detailed description of it, which signals her uneasiness as well as the unpleasantness of the circumstance: " it smelled like BO and Pledge inside. I knelt down on a little wooden platform. The bones in my knees hurt the second they touched it. I looked around to see if I could see anything, but it was too dark" (69). Clearly the physical space is as oppressive as the act itself and is not meant to have a comforting effect. As Marci worries about telling the priest that she likes girls, it becomes evident that much of her anxiety over this issue stems from the fact that she knows her feelings are considered sinful. Her fear turns to panic when she sees the shadow of the priest's face: "my tongue felt weak...and there was a giant heartbeat in

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my head" (69). As he begins to question her, she is overtaken with fear: "I was so scared I could hardly breathe. I had to get out of there" (71). Marci's terror here signals the amount of control that church ideology has over her. In the end, the tradition of confession shows itself to be effective as she states, "it was so bad now that I decided to tell him the truth" (71). The parallel she draws between the feelings her father elicits in her and those she experiences in the confession booth illustrates the fact that fear is the motivating factor in each transaction. Marci's depiction of her experience further reveals the uneven power dynamic at work in this tradition and calls into question both its purpose and its validity.

Marci finally becomes so intimidated by the priest that she gives in and tells the truth about her 'bad thoughts': "Well, wanting my dad to go away, wishing I didn't have Miss Boo-chaump for a catechism teacher, liking girls and wanting to squeeze chiches" (71). Marci's confession to the priest marks the first time that she discusses her desire for women in negative terms, but not because she feels negative about it, rather because she is afraid of the pastor's response. Interestingly, the priest replies to Marci's confession by stating that she must do her best to lead a good and pure life and to have positive thoughts. He then states: "as for liking girls and wanting to squeeze chiches. I don't see a problem with this, except it seems you're still a little young to be squeezing chiches" (72). Of course, Marci is ecstatic and cannot quite believe what she is hearing, until she realizes that because she is in a confessional booth, he can not

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see her, and thinks she is a boy. Once she is out of the booth, she is relieved about having told the truth, but thinks: "I don't know what I would have done if he knew I was a girl" (73).[2]

Marci's situation begins to change rapidly when she realizes that her prayers remain unanswered and that her only recourse is to take matters into her own hands. On many levels she fundamentally disagrees with the church's position on several issues and is absolutely not willing to act in accordance with dogma that subordinates her. She gradually comes to recognize the bigotry inherent in church doctrine and the way it exists to uphold patriarchal systems of power or "brainwash you into believing only the dad side of things" (120). Marci expresses this disbelief in a moment of quiet reflection:

> God was supposed to be up there watching over me. He was supposed to be answering my prayers. But it sure didn't seem like God, Mary or Baby Jesus were doing anything, and that included listening, much less answering (122).

Marci fluently expresses the extent to which she feels the church has misled her. It is clear that, if she previously held out some small semblance of hope that God was listening to her, she now fully abandons that notion. The comments she makes when looking back upon her experiences at catechism provide further

[2] It is revealed later in the text that the priest is having an affair with Marci's uncle. This causes readers to question whether or not he did in fact know that Marci was a girl in confession, adding an element of ambiguity to the text. If he was aware of Marci's gender, his own sexuality would have necessarily placed him in a double bind, because as a priest, he is expected not only to respond on behalf of church doctrine, but also to remain celibate! Learning that the priest is homosexual offers further commentary on the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church, yet it also reveals the fact that he too lives across borders and is constrained by the closet.

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proof of this: "Sister 'Lizabeth seems to think she knows what God is thinking, I don't think she really does. I think she makes up most of what she says about God, just to keep me believing in him. Either that or she thinks I'm really dumb" (141).

From Marci's perspective, much of what she is told at church seems an insult to her basic intelligence if only because it is at odds with what she knows about the world and her own desires. Reflecting with annoyance on the many mixed messages she has received from church, she states, "I could never figure out why God made it so hard for people to tell the truth. If I told the truth, it would be a sin. If I didn't tell the truth, it would be a lie, which was a sin. So either way I sinned" (114). She is beginning to understand the double binds into which Christianity forces her lesbian desire and she slowly begins to discard the ideology altogether. Near the end of the text, the uncertainty Marci has experienced about God manifests itself in a single moment as she states: "I'm starting to think that God is just the air. Sister 'Lizabeth says that God isn't the air because he makes it. But I don't know who God really is anymore...I haven't gotten any proof that God is around like everyone says he is" (222).

As detailed throughout this chapter, Marci's experience with the church and with God is far from divine. The only encounters Marci has that she describes at all in spiritual terms involve her attraction to girls. Throughout the text, it is these interactions that seem infused with sacred energy. In describing her experience of talking to Raquel for instance, she states: "she looked at me

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with eyes that went straight into mine...peeling everything away that I kept hidden" (42). In another example she recounts the way Raquel's "voice got soft and clouds of it started falling around [her]" (42). Marci reports that she feels happy just being in Raquel's presence: "all I could do was look at her and smile like an idiot" (43). It is as if the connection she feels to her makes everything right with the world. Even an offering Raquel gives Marci from her garden seem infused with something special. As she "carefully" places it in the sink to wash it, she notices that it is "so green that it almost sparkle[s] in the light" (44). This joy starkly contrasts Marci's experiences at church where she reports that even when "the priest was talking about the power of love...I didn't feel any" (45). Marci's feelings here are reflective of Sally Gearhart's declaration that while Christianity may pay lip service to unconditional love, it is nonetheless responsible for some very hateful and oppressive sentiments.

> No amount of insistence that Christian love has transcended deuteronomic law can outweigh the tangible evidence of the world's experience of Christianity. "Authority" has long since skipped over the line into "authoritarian." While love may be mouthed from pulpits, law still runs the church. Through the power-over mind-set and the structure of the institution, the priority of law over gospel is unshakably maintained (140).

By the end of the text, Marci has abandoned church altogether because when the priest "talks in Mass he says whatever he wants and tries to make us

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think like him – except I can't because he talks to us like we're stuck in first grade" (238). Marci's comment here illustrates the extent to which the church operates within a rigid hierarchy. Essentially, the "power-over mind-set which sustains--indeed *is* --the church is utterly incompatible with the new forms, forms that allow for love, respect, trust, cooperation and horizontal relationships" (Gearhart 141). Marci admits that she still thinks about God and reflects that "all [she] ever lived for was to be good so [she] could get [her] wishes" (239). She continues: "the more I think about it, the more I think... God himself is just a wish" (239). Consequently she realizes what she seems to know all along: God is an invention by men. As Heyward explains, "men create god to make themselves self-possessed; to give themselves control over chaotic forces of passion, sex and death. This self possession involves controlling others" (Heyward 89).

Marci's shame about her lesbianism disappears after she stops attending church and moves to her grandmother's home, where she meets a girl named Robbie. Marci and Robbie become close immediately, telling each other "secrets [they] promised never to tell" (240). It is in the space of this relationship that Marci is able to come out as a lesbian: "I told her about liking girls. I said I think I was born that way since that's all I thought about for as long as I could remember" (240). Robbie's response is, "I like 'em, too" (241). This response is an affirmation of Marci's gender identity that liberates her from "the isolation, brokenness and despair wrought by abusive power relations in the great and

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small places of [her life]" (Heyward 92). The intimate sharing breaks down walls for both girls and has transformative force, as they are able to reach through fear to one another. In the process they re-create their own spirituality. After Robbie has come out to Marci, she asks: "You think it's a sin?" to which Marci replies: "No, I don't" (241). Perhaps the most powerful moment in the text, this passage illustrates Marci's new found confidence in herself and her rejection of Christianity. Furthermore, in the words of Sally Gearhart, it reveals how "in loving other women she says 'yes' to woman-ness, to herself as a woman. In speaking this yes, she speaks a 'no' to society. She is the woman who has rebelled against the male society's definition of her" (125-26). Marci's courageous assertion of her lesbian identity resists the construct of heterosexuality offered by Chicano culture, and indeed the Catholic Church. Marci finally comes to a place where she recognizes that in the words of Carter Heyward, "the God of Christians evokes shame and fear and then constructs rigid boundaries around us as a means of containing our feelings and our lives" (Heyward 88). Marci is now fully aware that her experience with patriarchal religion was very much based on "practitioners [who wanted] to assume control, by fear or force, of the world itself, including...bodyselves, psyches, and souls" (Heyward 89).

What Night Brings culminates with an erotic exchange between Marci and Robbie. This physical manifestation sees Marci respecting the response of her own honest body for the first time. Thus, it is a profoundly life-saving, self-loving

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move "that felt so good [the consequences] didn't matter" (242). For Marci, lesbianism provides the means through which she interrogates the fundamental institutions of her culture: her family and her church. Her journey includes juggling the dominant ideologies of these institutions and examining their true meanings in order to come to terms with herself. Although she does not abandon her Chicano culture in the same way that she turns away from Christianity, she now understands that she does not have to accept or be limited by its patriarchal traditions. Ultimately she is able to loosen their oppressive grip on her life by creating an alternative for herself that is more authentic than Christianity, which she is unable to accept, in part because of its masculinist ideology. This sounds simple given that I have detailed the complex and intricate maze of issues through which she navigated; yet most of her struggles are inextricably linked to her immersion in the hegemonic value systems of Christianity. Her position at the end of the text is epitomized through the words of Sheila Jeffreys: "Who is in charge of reclaiming and reinventing God? We, the army of lovers in the teeth of patriarchy. The road to heaven is paved with good invention" (Jeffreys 316).

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Conclusion

> **We begin to realize that God moves among us, transcending our particularities. She is born and embodied in our midst. She is ground and figure, power and person, this creative spirit, root of our commonlife and of our most intensely personal longings. ... Through the real, daily presence and yearnings of our bodyselves, this sacred power is involved intimately in the lives of both women and men. God is not, therefore, above sex or gender, but rather is immersed in our gendered and erotic particularities.**
>
> -- Carter Heyward

I would like to start off by saying that although I have done my best to address the issues in this project on as many levels as possible, I am sure that there are many things that I have overlooked and that my own particular subject position has made it impossible for me to see. As Carter Heyward points out "we write of ourselves, however much we may try to veil our particularities by not naming the ways in which they shape our research, interpretations, and presentations" (9). When I began this thesis, I expected that my analysis would reveal a similar pattern of oppression amongst each protagonist and her

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interactions with the Christian church. Now that I am in a position to be offering concluding remarks, I am also in a position to realize how naïve my initial thoughts about this project were. This is not to say that my research proved my hypothesis wrong, but rather that it revealed the extent to which such issues are much more complicated and can not be so simply discussed or easily defined. Because of my specific focus on lesbianism and Christianity, I have not been able to fully address other issues such as race and class, but I have kept these in mind throughout my work and their particular effects have informed my discussions of each text.

The various intersections of Christian denominations, cultural backgrounds and experiences that lent themselves to each protagonist's subject position render sweeping indictments useless here. Nevertheless, there are numerous aspects of each protagonist's experience, which are similar, and it is these facets of similarity that I wish to address now. Despite variance in place, culture and belonging in each text, all three protagonists resist the dominant heterosexist ideology that prevails in their respective Christian contexts by speaking the truths of their lives in spaces where those truths are unwelcome.

In The Color Purple, Celie's mere survival is in itself subversive. Considering her status as a victim of incest coupled with her subject position as a young black woman existing in a terribly violent, demeaning and oppressive space, Celie's will to create a new and better life for herself is nothing short of remarkable. She not only faces sexism, but as a black woman, deals daily with

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the horrors of racism and battles too, a silent contempt for her lesbian identity. In spite of all of this "otherness", Celie emerges at the end of the text with a renewed sense of herself and a newfound spirituality based on woman-centered ideals. This spirituality, whose roots can be found in Celie's love relationship with Shug, allows her to transcend the confines of her oppression. Certainly, it does not allow her to escape her specific context, but offers her the tools to reclaim her whole self and to thrive within the boundaries of an oppressive system that seeks to shape, name and govern her through power-over tactics.

Although a very different story, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit raises some of the same issues as The Color Purple. Within the text, Jeanette struggles to come to terms with her lesbianism against the backdrop of Christian fundamentalist thought which decries homosexuals on the grounds that they are demon-possessed. Jeanette's enmeshment with her mother is one of the reasons why she moves in and out of Christianity throughout the text until she finally finds the strength to abandon its heterosexist ideology for good. She is not able to do this fully until she experiences an alternate source of spirituality that is much more authentic in nature and unlike Christianity, not at all constricting. Jeanette finds this spiritual niche through the power that is born in her intimate connections with other women. Her newfound spirituality affords her the strength to move past the restricting confines of Christian ways of knowing in favour of a much more fluid spiritual experience.

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In What Night Brings, Marci endures a struggle that is similar to that of Celie and Jeanette in many ways. Although her cultural context and familial background is different, she nevertheless experiences great difficulty with the religious prescriptions of her church and is forced to come to terms with her gender and sexual identity in an all but supportive environment. She, too, struggles with feelings that are at odds with social and religious expectations and must stand alone in order to resist the repressive instructions of her church. In the end, Marci's liberation from the oppressive forces of Catholicism is found in her relationship with another woman. This connection offers her a chance for spiritual renewal and reveals to her a more inclusive source of spiritual empowerment.

In a discussion of Christianity, Carter Heyward offers some comments which I see as particularly relevant to my discussion because they are sentiments that are mirrored in each text. She states that, "the Christian church plays the central formative role in limiting and thwarting our sexual phantasie or sexual imagination" (42). My analysis of each novel resonates with Heyward's thesis as Celie, Jeanette and Marci each struggle to come to terms with their sexual identities in the face of powerful religious institutions that seek to suppress their lesbian "otherness" in favour of a traditional hegemonic world-view.

In each text, we see evidence of the fact that "heterosexist theology is constructed on the assumption that male domination of female lives is compatible with the will of God" (Heyward 61). Furthermore, we see how within

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the sexist situation that is the praxis of the church in each novel, "the assumption of a natural order is infused with the corollary presuppositions about gender and sexuality" (Heyward 62). Because this is the case, abusive dynamics are basic factors in the lived experiences of each protagonist as they seek constantly to recreate themselves against the powerful prescriptions of the church. These dynamics, largely disseminated through Christian ways of knowing, shape the way that each woman views herself in relation to the world around her, rendering her eventual liberation remarkable.

The courageous behaviour of Celie, Jeanette and Marci poses a threat to the essence of Christianity by asserting female power while simultaneously refusing to live within the constructs of patriarchal notions of acceptability. Each woman speaks out against the stifling effects of Christianity, revealing the institutions of various churches as constructs that aid in the maintenance and perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality. All three women come to realize that their "senses and the feelings that are generated by them become primary spiritual resources" and that "in knowing one another through senses, feelings and intelligence – [they] come to know God" (Heyward 94).

The ideology disseminated through Christian teachings urges each character at various points throughout the text to abandon the honest responses of their bodies. In discussing the role of Christianity in forcing women to deny their bodyselves, Carter Heyward states:

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> To deny the sacred power of our embodied yearnings is to be pulled away from one another and hence from ourselves. To have our bodyselves trivialized and demeaned is to be snatched out of our senses and alienated from our erotic desires. This process of alienation from our sacred power produces antierotic psyches and lives, in which our bodies and feelings are jerked off by abusive power dynamics: domination, coercion, and violence (95).

It is their refusal to be cut off from their bodies that offers Celie, Jeanette and Marci their greatest challenge and their greatest hope. As Audre Lorde affirms, "once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of" (57).

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