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Spiritual Eroticism and Real Good Loving in Tina McElroy Ansa's *The Hand I Fan With*

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Abstract: By situating herself in the historical dialogue about Christianity, women, and sexuality, the author examines what many may consider an oxymoron—spiritual eroticism. The essay provides a definition of spiritual eroticism, one which takes it beyond intense sexual encounters but instead grounds the idea in the story of Oshun, the African deity of beauty, sensuality, and fertility. Spiritual eroticism is explored in Tina McElroy Ansa's *The Hand I Fan With*.

Keywords: spirituality; Oshun; eroticism; God; Oya; ghost; spirits; honey; storms; caul

I was baptized in a rural Baptist church and came of age in a Pentecostal church, both of which informed my notions of a woman's place and the cost of embracing sexual pleasure. The Bible gave me the Virgin Mary and Jezebel—the saint and the whore. It also gave me a secondary position in the hierarchy. Thus, I learned to silence my voice, reject the sustaining friendship of women who “don't do nothing but stir up trouble”, untrustworthy and unvalued. I was cautioned to keep my dress down and legs closed and to judge women who did not. I heard the whispers of grown women about some little girl who was “fast” and too womanish for her own good. I was not to laugh loud or be rambunctious. Even as a flat-chested little girl, I could not go shirtless like my younger brother whose chest mine resembled or sit wide-legged straddling the chair like him.

Although I was taught the value of being the wife, the Biblical creation story taught me that I am man's side piece, having come from his rib. Then I learned about Lilith, the first woman created by God. Her subsequent demonization and omission from Bible Study taught me she was not to be admired or emulated. This Biblical anctioning of the pious and virtuous woman informed the standard bearing Cult of True Womanhood: “The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power” (Welter 1966).

Consequently, many Black women have internalized the shame of sex and upheld the mantle of chasteness, imposing it like the mother in Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* who teaches her daughter to be a “good” woman and prophesies that she will become “the slut [she] is so bent on becoming” (Kincaid 1978). Having internalized the notion of true womanhood, even enslaved Harriet Jacobs, in her powerful telling of her life story in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), beseeches her reading audience to not judge her harshly: “For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images, and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by grandmother . . . But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood . . . I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong from me” (Jacobs 2014, p. 223). Her grandmother, having embraced this standard, rejects her: “O Linda! Has

it come to this? I had rather see you dead than as you are now Go away . . . and never come to my house again" (p. 235). Likewise, the women who reject this standard are shunned by their community, disowned in their disgrace. The Color Purple's Shug Avery completely embraces her sexuality and enjoyment of love, and life, and sex and is consequently disowned her religious family. Etta Mae Johnson in Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place*, like Shug Avery, embraces the *joie de vivre* and lives life fully while looking for love. She thinks she has found it in the arms of a minister who enjoys her flesh but not her hand. Fortunately, neither Shug Avery nor Etta Mae Johnson allowed the world to impose its chastity belt on their woman selves or their love for life and laughter. Seeing myself in these characters, I felt like maybe I, too, could laugh loud, be rambunctious, and glory in my womanhood.

Then Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, a novel dedicated to the "*all women in the struggle*", told me that "where there is woman, there is magic" (Shange 1982, p. 1), and I exhaled at the literary acknowledgement of my magical self. I witnessed the celebration of Indigo's first menses, described as a "spreading out of her in a large scarlet pool at her feet" (p. 18). Sister Mary Louise praises this moment: "Indigo the Lord's called you to be woman. . . . Indigo fell down on her knees like Sister Mary had. And listened and swayed in her growing scarlet . . ." (p. 18). Ritualizing Indigo's rite of passage, Sister Mary Louise "gently took off Indigo's clothes, dropped them in a pail of cold water. She bathed Indigo in a hot tub filled with rose petals: white, red, and yellow floating around a new woman" (p. 19). Wearing a garland of flowers, Indigo is instructed to go in the backyard: "there in the garden, among God's other beauties, you should spend these first hours. . . . Take your blessing and let your blood flow among the roses. Squat like you will when you give birth. Smile like you will when God chooses to give you a woman's pleasure. Go now, like I say. Be not afraid of your nakedness" (p. 19).

Having been taught that a woman's menstrual cycle was God's curse that rendered us "unclean", I discovered and embraced my woman self as I watched, along with Cypress, "Azure Bosom dance a female dance. A gender dance. A dance of ovaries and cervix uncovered and swelling, menses falling like waterfalls in a gold forest. A dance of women discovering themselves in the universe. She. Her. Hers. Us" (p. 141). Shange told us that we needed a "god who bleeds/spreads her lunar vulva and showers us in shades of scarlet/thick and warm like the breath of her/ . . . /we need a god who bleeds now/whose wounds are not the end of anything" (Shange 1983, p. 15), a god in our image. This god we meet in her choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Unfurled* (Shange 1997). Making Her acquaintance, I laughed, and I danced, feeling like the colored girls as I "found god in myself, and I loved her fiercely!" (p. 64), a god who bleeds and gives life.

Grounded in African spirituality, Shange in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* takes us to an African spiritual *Bembee* where we are introduced to African deities Shango, Oshun, Oya, and Elegua, gods we would have known had "if the white folks hadn't stolen our gods. Made our gods foreign to us" (p. 214). There on the Meeting House on the table was

"Shango's birthday present, a mountain of fresh, unbruised red apples, was in place. An arc of half-smoke cigars smoldered on the ground, a warning or an offering for devotees. In red and white, with elekes or no, the followers added their personal gifts for the deity of the Ax: vials of home-made whiskey, bananas, knives, long-handled axes, brightly covered scarves, shirts, headwraps. Shango was the warrior who protected the New World from marauders, white folks, recidivists. Sassafrass so wanted to be a priestess of Oshun, . . . To heal, to bring love and beauty wherever she went.

Before she went to the *Bembee*, Sassafrass anointed herself with florida water: a dab on the forehead, under each arm, her navel, her pubic hair, behind each knee, under both arches of her feet. She left glasses full of honey and water in every corner of her cabin. She left bluing by the front door, ammonia at the rear, that no evil should enter her house in her absence. She carried wild flowers with her to offer to Oshun, her Mother, in the event that Oshun, as was her nature, grew jealous during Shango's festivities." (p. 215)

If Girl, Shug Avery, and Etta Mae were viewed by their mothers and the community through an African-centered lens, they, like Indigo, Cypress, and Sassafrass, would have been celebrated as daughters of Oshun, African deity of beauty, sensuality, mirrored self-reflection who loves life and laughter, dance and perfume, jewelry and flowers, love, and intimacy. Oshun epitomizes black girl magic, beauty, and power. Significantly, Oshun, unlike Eve, plays a central role in African cosmology, playing a significant role in the creation of the world. Supreme Being Oludumare sent the secondary divinities to make earth habitable. Tasked with ensuring continuity and balance, Oshun was the only female deity sent. Because she was not a male, the male deities dismissed her work. Angered by this, Oshun employed her power and disrupted their work. Puzzled, the male deities consulted Ifa (the spiritual system of divination) and learned that it was because of their exclusion of Oshun that their plans went awry. They had to make offerings to appease Oshun, perhaps originating the idea of flowers and candy as expressions of love and apology.

Oshun is a powerful female deity, whose energy is essential for balance and maintenance of world order. It was Oshun's sweet honey that brought the warrior deity Ogun, god of iron and steel who clears the path, from the forest where he retreated, remorseful for mistakenly killing his followers. His absence created an imbalance in the world. Performing a sensuous dance with honey, Oshun drew Ogun to her from the forest into the clearing. It was also Oshun who captured and defeated the Town of Women when the male deities—Sango, Ogun, Babaluwaye, Egun-Egun—failed as well as the other female deities—Oya and Yemonya. Like Ogun, the women's exclusion of men from their town created an imbalance. It was with her cunning and sweet music that she played on a broken calabash that caused the women to drop their weapons and begin to sing and dance with Oshun and her music (Montgomery 2008, pp. 31–32).

Oshun is indeed “a force of harmony we see as beauty, feel as love, and experience as love” (Ifa Bite 2019). While Oshun is most often viewed as the deity of sensuality, femininity, and fertility, she is also the leader of the Aje (the Mothers), the primordial principle symbolized by the colors red, black, and white, with each color representing the scope of their power and womanhood: Red—passion, fire, capacity for anger and intensity; Black—the earth, mystery, one can never fully know them; White—calm, repelling negative energy. Like a grandmother, they are loving and nurturing but also stern and no nonsense. As the leader of the Aje, Oshun epitomizes each of these characteristics. She hates restriction and can be fickle, vengeful, and jealous. Sometimes referred to as Mami Wata, the water divinities of Africa and its diaspora, Oshun's residence is in the water—rivers, creeks, streams, oceans. With balance a central tenet of Oshun, there is an expectation of reciprocity with Oshun, because one cannot receive without also giving. This expectation, unfortunately, has caused some to mischaracterize Oshun as a prostitute, a term that is both offensive and problematic. It reflects a patriarchal view of women grounded in Eurocentrism. For example, Edwards and Mason (1985) writes in his seminal text *Black Gods: Orisha Studies in the New World*, “Oshun gives psychological and physical pleasures to the senses and mental pleasure and she is a prostitute or harlot who brings physical pleasure...She is also a prostitute in the sense that she does and gives favors for sex” (p. 76). Also, by only equating Oshun with sex because of a limited view of women, many have misunderstood and misrepresented Oshun. As deity of love, maternity, and marriage, Oshun is also storied to have become a prostitute in order to support her children. There is, however, no evidence of this in any of the Odu—sacred stories, verses, and scriptures that provide wisdom and moral guidance—about Oshun.

Echoing an African proverb, “Oshun is my Oludumare”, the beginning and the end, Oshun is too vast for us to comprehend, and thus, difficult to capture or depict all aspects of her. She is, for me, both fire and water, honey and kola, restraint and freedom, nature and nurture, the sweet and the bitter, laughter and tears. However, because my paper is about spiritual eroticism, my focus is primarily on Oshun as deity of sensuality.

Playing a significant role in African cosmology, Oshun as deity of beauty and sensuality spiritualizes lovemaking. Thus, the sexual exchange between two people is a spiritual exchange, a coming together of mind, body, spirit, and soul, an erotic experience. The erotic, unfortunately, has been used against women by men, which, consequently, has caused women to turn “away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information” (Lorde 1981) and confusing it with the diametrically opposed pornography: “But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling” (p. 54). While most equate eroticism with sex, it is, according to Audre Lorde, much more than that. She defines the erotic as “the assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and the use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (p. 54). Eroticism is a spiritual connection between two people and informs the joy experienced through the sharing of one’s self, on all levels, whether “physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual” (p. 56). Spiritual eroticism, an oxymoron for many, is the conscious opening of one’s self to the natural sensuality of a spiritual, intimate, and orgasmic coming together of two people who are connected through mutual desire, respect, and passion that opens each up to joyous freedom, a willing vulnerability, and an ecstatic release. In order to experience this, “we must first reclaim our innocent joy in sensory experience, and get over the idea that physical desires are not spiritual, and that sex is sinful or shameful, but this is just the beginning of accessing the spiritual potential of the erotic” (Anapol 2019).

Writing a novel that epitomizes spiritual eroticism, Tina McElroy Ansa celebrates love, spirituality, eroticism, Oya, and Oshun in her book *The Hand I Fan With*, which tells the story Lena McPherson whose introduction to her spiritual mate Herman, a 100-year-old ghost, is a gentle, orgasmic breeze on her neck. Conjured up by Lena’s anthropologist best friend Sister and Lena, Herman loves Lena to life and connects Lena to her innate spiritual power and (re)introduces her to the beauty and a deepened appreciation for her estate. Under Herman’s loving tutelage, Lena learns to read nature and herself. He advises her “to start payin’ tention to everything you think is important enough t’ give ya some peace or wisdom or some kinda new tack on the world that me be what you s’posed to see” (p. 347). Consequently, Lena becomes more tuned to her caul’s powers. She divests herself of her self-imposed responsibilities, leaving them in the capable hands of her employees. More importantly, as Lena more easily accesses her spirit self, she and Herman have mind-blowing, earth-moving, souls coming together, orgasmic lovemaking, in the house, on the floor, in the stables, by the river, on the ground, on the table, and in the bed. Ghost Herman transforms and transports himself so that he can better learn and love Lena.

Born with a caul, Lena McPherson is successful, wealthy, the baby of the family, and the last living member of the McPherson family. Having everything, she is the “hand” everyone fans with, writing checks, bestowing spiritual blessings—“Lena could not remember when she had first started blessing people’s houses, imparting brief benediction of healing or praise or tears on the inhabitants” (p. 14), serving as godmother of many children and the executrix of multiple estates in Mulberry, and taking care of the homeless girls and boys girls, whom she calls her “children”. Lena’s blessings turned “out to be blessings for everyone. Lena was like that, had always been. The blessings just flowed out from her. She was a blessing to her family, to her friends, and to Mulberry” (p. 15).

As the hand that everybody fans with, Lena spends much of her time and money giving and doing for others. Her gifts and generosity are not fully reciprocated. Recognizing they have little to give to the woman who has everything, the community gives what it can—prayers, cooked dinners delivered to her home in Tupperware, and love. She believes she lives a full and fulfilling life. As the baby of the family, Lena has always had the love of her family and the community. For that blessing, Lena, who has so much, feels compelled to do for others and considers it a blessing to do without any expectation of reciprocity. Having given herself to the community, Lena has nothing left for herself. She has everything but no time to enjoy any of it. She is operating on empty. Consequently, without reciprocity, Lena lives a life of imbalance. Moreover, there is no one to satisfy her yearning for intimacy

and love. Without that love, Lena is not fully alive or living, and thus she is ripe for Oshun's gift of love and balance.

In spite of seeming to have everything, what Lena does not have but wants is a man. Lena's caul has been both a blessing and a curse. Because her modern, new mother Nellie did not perform the necessary rituals to blind her to evil spirits and ghosts, Lena is tormented throughout her childhood and young adult life. Ostracized by her friends, she sees ghosts, spirits use her voice to speak unexpectedly, and she grows up thinking she is crazy: "[Lena] had finally come to the conclusion that she was crazy, truly crazy. [. . .] She just prayed that she could hold on and not do anything too bizarre—not walk the streets talking and arguing [. . .]—until she finished college, got a job, and could pay for some professional help" (Ansa 1989, p. 24). She has, however, been sent several spirit guides to protect and guide her—Rachel, the ghost of an enslaved woman who commits suicide by drowning who teaches Lena she belongs "anywhere she wants to be", Mamie, the only hairdresser who could tame Lena's long, thick, and abundant hair without making her cry and teaches her the art of asking questions, Sarah, "lil' Rough and Ready", her poor childhood friend from across the street who not only introduces her to sex but also gives Lena a glimpse into poverty and the impoverished lives of others, and finally her deceased Grandmother Lizzie's spirit that returns to tell of her destroyed caul and provide comfort to Lena by reminding her that she was not crazy and has never been alone; she encourages her seek out Nurse Bloom, the nurse who helped deliver her and made the caul tea and preserved her caul. Lena, even as child, was able to "put magic on just about anything: a radio, the television, a stuck door [. . .]. Her magic was sometimes only temporary, but it nearly always worked for a time" (p. 53).

At 45, Lena McPherson has mastered her ghosts—"Over the years, she had taught herself to ignore the signs of ghosts as well as the apparitions. She had just made herself go headlong on into any situation, knowing that she would be safe" (p. 47)—and managed to convince herself she is happy and leading a fulfilled life doing for everyone, except herself. She has all of the trappings of wealth but does not have time to enjoy it all. As the hand that everyone fans with, Lena is not allowed to complain or be sad: "Lena, what you got to be all frowned up about? 'they'd want to know. 'Shoot, if I had *yo'* hand, I'd throw mine in!" (p. 15) While she has had many dates, none developed into relationships: "Lena's curse was being able to gaze into another's soul" (p. 46). Just as she puckers her lips to kiss, her caul-informed eyes sees into her date's past, seldom a pretty picture: "It was only when they touched each other intimately or kissed deeply that the man's thoughts and past came creeping out for Lena to hear and see right there" (p. 108). The last man she attempted to seduce with a picnic in her clean, heated stables was offended. Consequently, Sister, not wanting to leave Lena alone and lonely while she went on a year-long sabbatical in Africa, convinces Lena to perform a conjure ritual for a man—"a wonderful man, a sexy man, a wise man, a generous-spirited man, a smart man, a funny man, a loyal man, *her* man" (p. 105). However, the arrival of her conjured-up Herman, first as a seductive breeze on her neck, an earthy man smell in The Place, her inherited bar and grill, then as a vapor, and finally a brush between her thighs, expands Lena's spiritual horizons and opens her heart to love and her legs and mouth to loving. Spirit and flesh, Lena and Herman, who is perfect for her because he is HerMan, reach erotic heights through their profound spiritual connection.

The novel opens with manifestations of Oshun and Oya, deity of change and transition, storms and tornadoes, and guardian to the cemetery. Her presence is appropriate in a novel about Lena's change and growth as well as a ghost who traverses two worlds—the living and the dead. We witness Oya at work when the Ocawatchee River floods; that "miraculous time when the waters of the Ocawatchee River—usually, perennially, historically, almost always a red muddy, sometimes nearly ocher color, ran as cool as the dreams of a drought-stricken people, as clear as a melting glacier . . ." (p. 1). Afterwards, the land was healed and blessed: "Flora and fauna. Not only a record number of Mulberry babies were being created and born, but flowers were growing and pollinating with strange hybrids, forming new creations; long-dead perennials were coming back to life: Early Girl tomato plants grown in the much that under floodwaters bore so much fruit the plants sagged to the ground in home gardens all over town" (p. 2). The flood also allows a glimpse of Lena's unrealized power to disrupt and create.

She caused the river to flood when in anger she spit into the river. It was only the Ocawatchhee's "new reborn waters [that] ... were miraculous waters, healing waters, good for anything that ailed you" (p. 4).

Appropriately, it is through Oya's breeze that Herman introduces himself and the experience reflects Oshun in its eroticism: "But it seemed that the very thought of the warm breathy breeze evoked the wind itself ... And the touch—soft and seductive—Lena flinched sharply, drew her shoulders up by her ears and sucked in her breath suddenly at what felt like the fronts of a feather ... And she let out a small 'Ooo' with her mouth hanging open. She felt her legs fall apart at the knees below her new short satin skirt. Sinking into an orgasmic sensation, she closed her eyes, took both her hands off the steering wheel and began to slip down the back of her sweater on either side of her neck to touch the feather-caressed spot" (p. 10).

Oshun and Oya facilitate another intimate encounter between Herman and Lena as Lena dances by herself in The Place: "As she continued to dance herself around the uncluttered spot in the middle of the bar, she felt almost caught up in a whirlwind. As she continued to spin, she felt herself growing dizzy. Not from the twirling of her lone slow dance, but from the musky scent in the air" (pp. 41–42). When Herman finally makes his appearance—he appears first in Lena's pool named Rachel's Waters, and the watery domain of Oshun—he takes flesh and form, and introduces himself: "I'm Herman. I'm here 'cause you called me up ... I'm a spirit, Lena. Been one fo' most a hundred years. But you called me here and made me real. You did that. And here I am" (p. 155). His ethereal to physical transformation Lena likens to the creation, thinking there should be "Creation music" (p. 155), and evidencing both the power of Lena's spoken word and Oya's presence, "right away, the wind outside began rustling the trees and the heavy metal wind chimes hanging ... " (p. 155). He reminds her of the ritual but noted that the power was not in the ritual; that "just to show you *willin'*. Willin' to the ceremony. It show you believe. But yo' 'ceremony' didn't call me up, Lena. *You* called me up. It was you called me up...*You* invited me in. That's all it took. An invitation from you" (p. 157). More significantly, Herman reminds her of her spiritual specialness and Nellie's devastating action: "Shoot, spirits been watchin' you since ya been born. ... And yo' birth ... it was almost like it shook the whole afterlife world ... and when yo' mama poured out that caul tea ... and yo' protection from mean spirits along wid it. There was noise and disturbance in my world like I had never heard when that happen. Lena, it was like all heaven and hell had been let loose. Oh, the howls and screams and shrieks and yells and lamentations that went up that day" (p. 158). Spending the morning in seeming time-suspended conversation, Lena feels profoundly connected to Herman, like she was "talking to with a trusted friend, not a strange ghost" (p. 162), and she realizes Herman was the "breeze", the "face in the mirror", and the "smell at The Place" (p. 162).

Smelling like "dark rich crumbly earth itself outside her door. He smelled like the dirt she ate as a child" (p. 193), Herman grounds Lena. As they dance, his breath is hypnotic for Lena: "Each time she felt him breathing on her—her neck, her face, her hair—she fell more deeply and more deeply under his spell" (p. 193). Lena's body responds to the sensuous sensations of Herman's body next to hers: "As they rubbed their bodies against each other, Lena felt her clitoris quiver. And she let out a little soft 'uhh' from the pit of her soul" (p. 194). Souls touched, they experience their first orgasm together, "a core-shaking exquisite orgasm, with Herman inside of her and around her and right beside her coming, too, and watching her at the same time" (p. 195). Echoing Oshun who loves honey, Herman calls Lena's vagina her "honey pot" (p. 196). A spirit, Herman transforms himself, touching Lena's mind, body, and soul: "One minute, he was hard and real as the granite of Stone Mountain. She could feel him inside her hard, the veins in his dick throbbing against the walls of her vagina. The next, he was mist, smoke, vapor barely grazing down her breasts, stroking between her legs, seesawing between the folds of her vagina, easing up her back. Then, he would become a man again" (p. 197). Herman's love is eroticism epitomized as he alters his body to please Lena, and she embraces his strange metamorphoses unafraid, "no matter how bizarre and fantastic they might have seemed" (p. 198), a significant fearless embrace since her previous ghosts had appeared in "terrifying form: wolves, cats, and wild dogs;

headless, footless bodies; decaying bodies with heads facing one way, torsos the other; babies who turned to ghoul" (p. 245). As Spirit's gift of giving and loving, Herman goes "deeper and deeper inside her, touching spots and opening doors to room after room that Lena had never opened to opened to anyone. Herman roused emotions she truly had not felt before" (p. 199). Giving herself to Herman, she proclaims, "I decided I *am* your woman" (p. 199). Their coming together is cosmic and profoundly spiritual: "Lena seemed to feel a change in her very blood chemistry. . . . She began to perceive sparks of life all around her. The universe she was sinking into had a wide and complex life. She felt planets spinning by her in their orbits. She saw galaxies form next to her hips. Shooting stars and comets whizzed by her from her vagina toward the top of her head, leaving tails of gold and red down her throat and stars in her eyes" (p. 203). When they make love, which Herman calls "merged" (p. 229), their souls connect. Their orgasms were cosmic: "In the grip of a sweet, soul-rattling orgasm, their eyes met, and they smiled at each other. Then, they fell back to the earth" (p. 324). This spiritual connection allows them to travel inside each other's mind and thoughts "in a way he was never able to achieve when they were just talking or holding hands. But the extraordinary thing was that Lena could do the same with Herman. She, too, entered his ghost's mind when he drifted into her subconscious" (p. 229), and so every gesture is "so intimate, meant just for them" (p. 229). While she sleeps, Herman rides through her dreams, and they would awaken in the middle of the night "to the music of her vagina just humming away" (p. 220). Herman becomes the water in Lena's bath, the lotion she rubs on her body, and realizing that she is slathering Herman all over her body, she drops the lotion bottle in ecstasy. She takes him to heaven and he tells her "you got the keys to kingdom, baby" (p. 251).

Their intense spiritual connection makes magic happen all around them: "If it started to rain while they were out walking down by the river, there would seem to be a bubble around them . . . One minute it was dry and breezy inside the bubble. The next minute it stopped raining outside and only rained inside the bubble" (p. 247). He literally makes the earth shake when Lena orgasm just to hear her say, "yeah, Herman, the earth *did move* for me" (p. 225). Herman's arrival made Lena's whole world shiver and shift. They were connected to one another from the first night they ate, danced, and loved together. This deep connection is manifested in their lovemaking. Not only does Herman make the earth shake, he makes her "pussy *sing*" (p. 247), an expression young Lena heard the women say at The Place. And while she thought she had a clue about what it meant, her body examples it: "At first, she thought it was Herman down there between her legs singing to himself in exhilaration and ecstasy when he kissed and sucked and tickled and licked . . . Then she realized it wasn't Herman's voice she heard . . . Her pussy let out such a beautiful, lilting happy song with no real words" (p. 218). It sang when she was out in public—the grocery store, a meeting, the elevator, and she resigned herself to being embarrassed by the "siren's song, even during Mass when her stuff sang along with the choir" (p. 219).

However, Lena's growth is not just sexual. Herman's loving tutelage caresses Lena's mind, body, and soul, heightening and informing her spiritual growth. Herman increases her awareness of and knowledge about the earth and the sky. He identifies the stars in the sky, "the Drankin' Gourd. There's the Serpent. OOoooo. Is that the Crab? There's the Virgin" (p. 194), advising her to "cherish this piece a' earth we been given" (p. 258). He teaches her how to survive by educating her on the various plants, birds, non-poisonous mushrooms, berries, fruit, edible plants, and vegetables that grow in the wild on her 100 acres of land: "Lena, tie this cotton kerchief 'round yo' mouth when we out walking in the woods . . . so yo' breath don't draw those' squitas and bitin' flies" (p. 260). He shares with her a sweet discovery, appropriately, a beehive, and he gifts her thick dark honey dripping from two fingers that she gladly took in her mouth, relishing the honeyed sweetness, sweet "as cartoon honey", the intensity of which "nearly blew the top of her head off when she smacked her lips" (p. 260). Essentially, Herman helps Lena truly claim her land: "But Herman showed her she really had not really *claimed* it. She could not do that until she *knew* the land and the spirit under it" (p. 345). They wash their hair in hauled in buckets of Clear Flo' water from the streams popping up on her property, a ritual they revel in.

By profoundly connecting Lena to her land, the earth, nature, and her inner spirit, Herman helps her claim her soul. Herman's presence and love activates the childhood power of her caul: "The random voices she heard as a child were now the inner voices that guided her. Now, she put the magic on declining plants and revived them. She began to be able to look at strangers and familiars alike and sometimes read their thoughts and intentions" (p. 354). Becoming increasingly grounded, Lena smells like the earth, like the dirt: "Lena knew she was being drawn closer and closer to the earth, and she knew it was somehow Herman's doing. The further she pulled herself away from the things of the world—her possessions, her businesses, her shoes, her dependents, her visits, even her gifts and acts of kindness—the nearer she drew to the peaceful, serene spirit of the world by itself" (p. 325).

With Herman, Lena's spirituality intensifies as she learns to see God in nature, the woods, the river, not just in church. She has a natural religious fervor that informs her worship and her "Healing and Miracle Ministry" (p. 263). She erects shrines for Rachel, Oshun, Yemonya, and Mary, "her mother, grandmama, Mother Hale, Mother Theresa, and all mothers" (p. 270) throughout her property in celebration of the feminine energy. A practicing Catholic, she performs Mass outdoors, and the "flowers and plants, the bees, birds and bugs all bobbed and danced and bowed in adoration at the Eucharist that Lena performed so sincerely and joyfully" (p. 266) and by midsummer after Herman's arrival, she stopped going to church regularly: "At one altar or another, she celebrated the Eucharist each morning. Alone or surrounded by the spirits of all the loved ones she had lost, she intoned her declaration of faith as she lifted the read and the wine" (p. 270), to which Herman affirms, "It's all communion, baby . . . It's all good" (p. 326).

As Lena grows spiritually, she transforms physically and mentally. Before Herman's arrival, she was becoming thick around the waist; her doing for everyone left no time for much physical exercise. With the spiritual and physical merged into one, Lena's body becomes toned and tight as she rips and runs with Herman exploring her caves, the woods, racing horses, and betting "blow jobs and massages on who would win" coupled with the intense lovemaking: "For Lena, that activity covered everything she and Herman did or planned to do to give each other physical, that sometimes verged on spiritual, pleasure. Fucking, licking, and sucking, scratching, fondling, tickling, holding, biting. All of it meant lovemaking to her. And she had to credit her incredibly strengthened inner thigh muscles as much to riding Herman as to riding horses" (p. 352). Again, she realizes the blessing Herman is to her and for her.

Lena's journey into herself mapped by Herman's arrival retreats her from the community, and she ceases her 24-h availability and accessibility for the people of Mulberry. No longer having her hand to fan with, the townspeople become angry with her. Now completely tuned into her caul's power, Lena can hear their thoughts. Used to being "instantly loved" (p. 397), she is not prepared for the vitriol directed at her: "Lena was cut to the quick when she understood that the people of Mulberry were truly angry with her, talking about committing her, talking about her deserting them, talking about her betraying her family's name" (p. 397). Feeling betrayed by the townspeople's resentment when she overhears their negative thoughts and conversations about her, Lena lashes out: "Shit, I can't believe I've been such a fool. Everybody ain't happy for me. After all I've done for them, they don't really give a damn about me. Herman, they *mad* at me!!!" (p. 397). Gently chastising her, Herman puts her in her place: "You just holdin' up the weight of the world, huh . . . ? Lena, baby, those people ain't in yo' hands. They in God's hands. And you ain't God" (p. 255). Although Herman reminds Lena she caused Cleer Flo', Lena's anger, again, is wreaking havoc on nature. Invoking the energy and power of Oya and Shango, the deity of truth, justice, retribution, and lightning, Lena creates a storm: "A storm had come up suddenly over the Ocawatchee and tall muddy red peaks were beginning to form on the surface as the wind whipped up foam. A lightning bolt struck a tree in Pleasant Hill, melding a baby doll, a brand-new Schwinn bicycle, and a red hairpin to its trunk" (p. 398).

As her Spirit guide, Herman helps abate the storm still raging in Lena by reminding her of human nature: "just people bein' human. You ain't in control, Lena...Doin' fo' people don't make 'em yo's" (p. 402), and he wraps himself around Lena in a "stream of warm loving mist" (p. 403). Evidencing her

spiritual growth and control of her power, Lena forgives folks and herself. In her final release, Lena screams her feelings: “Fuuuuccckkk you” (p. 403) without cussing up a storm. Having forgiven the townspeople, Lena blesses them with thoughtful and loving gifts of forgiveness, which they received with forgiveness. This time she gives because she genuinely wants to, not because she feels obligated to do so. Her final gift is her most generous one—her family home: “the house on Forest Avenue would make the perfect shelter for my children” (p. 408), designed and renovated to meet their needs.

Having divested herself of most of her worldly and unneeded goods, Lena prepares to love Herman for the rest of their lives. Like her previous Spirit Guides sent to guide and protect Lena for a season, Herman came for only a year. His presence saves Lena’s life as she experiences love and loving, joy and happiness, peace and spirituality, lessons and learning. He’s been watching and protecting her whole life, and he tells her, “I had a duty when I come here, Lena, to he’p you along a little bit. Baby, yo’ unhappiness was causin’ such havoc in the otherworld . . . Then, yo’ broken heart start causin’ disturbance in this world, too...Yo’ anger callin’ up storms. Yo’ loneliness extendin’ over the county. Yo’ spittin’ causin’ Cleer Flo’. Like you som’um from the Old Tes’ament, Lena” (p. 450). As he arrived, vapor to flesh, Herman leaves, flesh to vapor, with all of his clothes, even the newly purchased ones vaporize along with him: “Then, right before her eyes, Herman’s clothes began to disappear, dissolving just the way Herman did...They all disappeared” (pp. 437–38). Oya’s breeze announces his arrival; Her storm follows his leaving. While Lena’s anger at the townspeople impacted nature, her devastation at Herman’s departure causes significant destruction and flooding: “Lena cried and carried on for most of the evening, pacing around her house, dark from the storm that was raging like a crazy person outside . . . The fury of the storm raged outside . . . ” (Ansa 1996, pp. 440–41). Lena is oblivious to the havoc she is causing even as she recognizes the storm’s power: “The storm was striding the earth with a vengeance. Ahead, Lena could see the lightning striking the surface of the Ocowatchee River, sending up sparks and electricity into the stormy night air. Thunder cracked all around her” (p. 445).

To assuage Lena’s pain and help guide her to healing, the spirits of Lena’s parents, grandparents, brothers, first-grade teacher Mrs. Hartwick, Dr. Williams, and Nurse Bloom visit her. They bear witness to Lena’s delivering Keba’s foal, a feat she did not think herself capable. Herman whispers instructions and encouraging words: “Then, like a breeze, Herman was right there at her shoulder . . . ‘Take it easy, Lena, baby, take it easy’, his voice whispered in her ear. Then, ‘Shoot, Lena, you can do *this*. Now, you gon’ hafta get her started, but don’t you worry, ‘cause then, Keba gon’ take over and yo’ be almost finished” (pp. 447–48). The ancestral spirits presence celebrates Lena’s acknowledged and embraced powers. A smiling Nurse Bloom tells Lena, “I was there when you were born, Lena, and I’m right here now in case you need me. Kinda feels the same way in here it felt in your delivery room. Things are alive out here at your place” (p. 449). Like Nurse Bloom assisted with her birth and Herman in her spiritual birth and initiation, Lena assists the birth of Keba’s foal. She marvels at this birth but more significantly at her own growth and transformation: “It surprised her just how comfortable she was with all these ghosts appearing and disappearing around her. Some were family. Many were friends. A couple she did not recognize right off, but she was not a bit afraid of or confused by any of them. They all seemed to have a place. And she did, too” (p. 454). After reminding Lena that “I am much in love wid you. I’m still yo’ man”, (p. 455), Herman vanishes. Other spirits visit her, including Mamie who reminds her that Herman’s presence was a gift. Rachel’s ghost smiles and waves, and Lena “could smell the deep, salty ocean scent on her” as she returns to the watery home. Nellie, now on the other side, understands the devastation her dismissal of ritual wrought in Lena’s life, and she apologizes: “And, baby, I didn’t know what I was doing when I poured out your caul water and burned your caul. I just didn’t know. But Mama always loved you” (p. 454). Frank Petersen appears, telling her “Lena-Wena, you done good in there. But then, you been doing good for a while” (p. 454). And finally, Lena’s Grandma Lizzie dispenses her aged wisdom, reaffirming that she will be alright, just as she did on the night of her funeral: “But it’s going to be okay. It’s going to feel okay, too.

It just doesn't seem that way now. But how things *seem* don't mean nothing" (p. 454). She even admits she didn't have a clue while she was alive which allows Lena to accept her cluelessness, too.

After Herman's departure, Lena tries to be angry with him, for loving and then leaving her, for teaching her everything but how to live without him, "without him eating her food, without him eating her pussy, without him taking her hand as they walked through the woods" (p. 457). However, in spite of her missing Herman, Lena can not be angry and knows it is not right being miserable. Still connected to her Herman, Lena hears his voice reminding her "ya gotta do the work you called to, Lena. But you ain't gotta be miserable" (p. 456). Herman was Lena's gift from the Spirit world, a gift that continues to give even in his absence. He speaks to her throughout the day, asking and answering questions, teaching and sharing stories. He was there for her "as mist, as breeze, as a felling, as sunshine, as a hunch, as the Ocawatchee River, but not as a man" (p. 457). Having learned her lessons, experienced love, spiritual eroticism, a deeper connection with her spiritual self, Lena sees her caul as the gift that it is. She is now more profoundly thankful for her life's gifts: "Herman and her ghostly family; her faith and the right she claimed to her own privacy and choices; (p. 455) Forest Avenue and her children; her garden and horses, and the freedom and time to enjoy them" (p. 458). Having surrendered and reveling in her *right now*, Lena is content and moving forward with her life and plans she and Herman made.

Tina McElroy Ansa deliberately wrote a sexy story for Black women that was full of hot, erotic lovemaking, with the sooty and sexy bedroom language to describe the eroticism, the passion, and the ecstasy of it all as a way of freeing us from the throes of Biblically-imposed, church-sanctioned narrow notions of women, to free us to love heartily, laugh loudly, scream in ecstasy, cuss while enjoying, saying what we want and how we want it, and not being ashamed. Appropriately, Ansa channeled the energies of Oshun to show us that lovemaking is indeed a spiritual act. By giving us Lena, Ansa shows us what spiritual eroticism looks like and how it feels. More importantly, she shows how liberating it is. Now balanced in her life and living, Lena's full embracing of her spirit self and her spiritual gifts heals her heart broken from the loss of her parents and her brothers, her blessed but tortuous childhood, the interrupted rituals, and absences in her life. In making her heart and spirit and pussy sing, Herman opens Lena up to the universe, and she opens her arms wide to receive Spirit's gifts. Like Lena, Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo, Shug Avery, and Etta Mae Johnson, we must know that where we are, there is magic. Where we are, there is beauty, and as daughters of Oshun, we are magical, beautiful, sensual, erotic, and spiritual.

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