

My Beloved is a Bass Line: Musical, De-colonial Interventions in Song Criticism and Sacred Erotic Discourse

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Abstract

How might musical settings of the Song of Songs provide critical interventions in the politics of love? This case study builds a womanist intertextual matrix for the Song such that its amatory and horticultural language can be reinterpreted as irreducibly “de-colonial.” Reread through Chela Sandoval’s model of love, Alice Walker’s search for her foremothers’ and foresisters’ gardens, and Toni Morrison’s “commentary” on the Song (*Beloved*), the biblical text circulates de-colonial energies. And, given that music figures centrally in these womanists’ genealogies of love, a de-colonial reading of the Song mandates deconstruction of a subaltern musical archive within the Eurocentric discourse of sacred eroticism, a discourse that the Song sustains as an Ur-text. If the biblical female protagonist’s longing and seeking are reread as de-colonial and trickster-esque, she begets a subaltern musical family tree—audible today in the “Shulammitic” bass playing and protest singing of Meshell Ndegeocello.

Key words

Meshell Ndegeocello; Song of Songs; Bible and music; love; de-colonial theory; Toni Morrison; Alice Walker

Introduction

What meanings might be produced from the Song of Song’s amatory and horticultural language if it is read with a sense of love as irreducibly “de-colonial”? Some of these meanings shall emerge over the course of this article as I re-read the Song of Song’s imagery and its musicality in four phases through womanist intertexts by Chela Sandoval, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Meshell Ndegeocello. I begin with American feminist of colour Chela Sandoval’s model of de-colonial love, because, as I explain momentarily, re-reading the Song of Songs (hereafter Song) through Sandoval’s model of love opens up “eccentric passageways” for Song interpretation, interpretive paths that harness the biblical text and its afterlives to generate a politics of resistance toward hegemonic ideologies of love.

Phase One: Chela Sandoval's Model of De-Colonial Love

Chela Sandoval interconnects eroticism and activism in her de-colonial model of love by placing them along a kind of erotic “continuum” as conceptualized by Audre Lorde (1978). In response to the heated racial and sexual politics of the 1960s and 70s, Lorde defined the erotic more broadly as “a source of power and information ... that rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge” (53-4). It is a power that energises “all our endeavours” (55).¹ The erotic “asserts ... the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55).² It repeatedly grounds and affirms one’s “capacity for feeling,” most especially for feeling and knowing joy (Lorde 1978, 56-7). Re-conceptualized as such, eros fuels de-colonial love—a state of mind and set of insights that have been provoked by political oppression and by the erotic longings (for freedom, justice, collective/self-determination) that the latter produces (Sandoval 2000, 139-50). This de-colonial love, this way of seeing and reading the world, germinates within oppressed subjects due to their hybrid social location—their insider/outsider status within colonial regimes. This status creates “double” or “differential consciousness” (Sandoval 2000 74-8, 83-4). W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, and Paul Gilroy recognized double consciousness as a means of survival among racially-oppressed peoples. Through it, subalterns learned to straddle the hard and fast binaried subject positions that grounded colonial relations. Since the 1990s, third-space feminists³ reread double consciousness as a more supple “differential consciousness.” That is to say, subjectivity and agency were (and are) produced through “webs of differential positioning” (Sandoval 2000, quoting Haraway 1991, 175). These dynamics afford a “tactical essentialism” (Sandoval 2000, 61). A subject asserts a particular political identity to achieve concrete political agency, but occupies the position only as long as it is constructive. The differential consciousness of tactical essentialism accepts and deploys the inherent instability of what had been previously characterised as reified binary subject positions. De-colonial love breeds differential consciousness and tactical essentialism. De-colonial love also

¹ Other feminists of colour have written on the radical interdependence of eroticism and politics, and Sandoval consults them as well; see, for example, Emma Perez, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and Maria Lugones.

² By classical academic standards, Lorde’s reflections on the erotic are not thoroughly or systematically developed. Judith Plaskow’s elaboration of Lorde’s basic ideas as Plaskow attempts to remedy traditional, negative Jewish attitudes toward human sexuality (*yeşer hara*) are constructive: “Lorde defines sexuality as one expression of a spectrum of erotic energy that ideally suffuses all the activities in our lives ... The erotic can be experienced with another in the sharing of sexual passion, but it is not limited to this; it is also present in deep connection over any pursuit ... Indeed, broadly speaking, the erotic is the joy that, every now and then, human beings find ourselves capable of. As such, it is a source of empowerment ... When we turn away from the knowledge the erotic gives us, when we accept powerlessness or resignation, we cheat ourselves of full life ... [W]e cannot suppress our capacity for sexual feeling without suppressing our capacity for feeling more generally” (Plaskow 1991, 196). It is Plaskow who uses the term “continuum” (195-7) alongside that of “spectrum” to harness Lorde’s originary ideas for her own feminist critique of rabbinic understandings of sexuality.

³ Sandoval (2000, Part IV, 139-78) further allies this tactical essentialism with concepts deployed by postmodern theorists such as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Hayden White, Frederic Jameson, Judith Butler, and Donna Haraway.

comprises acts of *falling* in love that induce differential consciousness (Sandoval 2000, 140).

As a particular form of consciousness and perception, de-colonial love unleashes a practice of attention that produces new insights and these constitute new knowledge. New knowledge emerges when subalterns interrogate Euro-American cultural artefacts that fuel inter-locking structures of oppression—artefacts such as soul, love, reason, truth, other, man, and woman (Sandoval 2000, 83-6). The oppressed reconstruct these artefacts in their own hybrid, indigenously-inflected terms. This process of critique and reconstruction at the heart of de-colonial love is known as “tactical sign reading” (ibid.). One classic example would be Sojourner Truth’s blistering redefinition of womanhood.⁴ More recently (and particularly pertinent to Song criticism), post-colonial and postmodern thinkers treat Euro-American models of both romantic love and falling in love as artefacts that serve to preserve an imperial status quo (Sandoval 2000, 81-116).⁵ Sandoval traces this interrogation of love back to Roland Barthes’ critique of normative romantic scripts, and to his reconstruction of love in counter-cultural terms:

The language of lovers can puncture through the everyday narratives that tie us to social time and space, to the descriptions, recitals, and plots that dull and order our senses insofar as such social narratives are tied to the law. The act of falling in love can thus function as a “punctum,” that which breaks through social narratives to permit a bleeding, meanings unanchored and moving away from their traditional moorings—in what, Barthes writes, brings about a “gentle hemorrhage” of being (12). That is why, for Barthes, this form of romantic love, combined with risk and courage, can make anything possible ... It is love that can access and guide our theoretical and political “*movidas*”—revolutionary manoeuvres toward decolonized being. In deed, Barthes thinks that access to the spectrum from which consciousness-in-resistance emanates might best materialize in a moment of “hypnosis,” like that which occurs when one is first overwhelmed or engulfed by love (11). (Sandoval 2000, 139-40; citing Barthes 1978).

I would add here that Lauren Berlant’s later deconstructions of romantic love (2001; 2008; 2012) also constitute an appeal for a practice of attention that might decolonise the “language of lovers”; she extends, and articulates in more politico-economic terms, Sandoval’s and Barthes’ ideology critique of Western romantic love in her study of an American “women’s culture” of romantic novels and films (Berlant 2008; 2012). Several key points she makes are worth including here as

⁴ Sojourner Truth was an African American former slave who addressed a predominantly white audience in Akron, Ohio, in 1851 to protest white women’s unwillingness to ensure that African-American women would also get the right to vote in the ongoing campaign for universal suffrage. The speech, “Ain’t I a Woman,” that Truth gave at the 1851 Ohio Women’s Rights Convention pointed out how European definitions of “true womanhood” were oppressively narrow in both masculinist and racially blind terms (see Painter 1997 164-78).

⁵ Sandoval (2000) cites works of US third world feminists of colour here (Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Maria Lugones, Emma Perez), and prefaces her chapter on love with epigraphs from Fanon and Guevara. I would refer readers to the work of postmodern feminist Lauren Berlant (2001; 2008; 2012) as well.

enrichments to Sandoval's model. For Berlant, Euro-American romantic love has the following effects:

- 1) It incites us to identify with narrow "fantasy forms" as crucial to self-construction and social belonging (2012, 80, 86);
- 2) It thus reduces people's "world building" to the interpersonal space of romance, marriage, reproduction, and "inter-generational family life" (2012, 86-7);
- 3) It falsely promises to organise the chronic instability and ambivalence of desire through the fantasy that "love simplifies living" (2012, 89);
- 4) It is endlessly commodified (via the self-help industry, therapy culture, romantic novels, films, pop songs, and, most recently, "reality TV"). It thus embeds us in a capitalist machine (2012, 97-110); correlatively, it regulates our bodies, predominantly for consumption (108);
- 5) it even warps broader political ideals since the "logic of romance" (i.e. its linear, narrative resolution of desire's ambivalence via the premise that "love conquers all") feeds a liberal, "sentimental" "politics of true feeling" as the primary cure for social injustices (2008, 35). Society will gradually become more humane if citizens simply identify with those who suffer, and thereby experience a change of heart toward them—think *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—even as said suffering is created by the same compassionate citizens' own racial, economic, religious, and national privilege. A politics of true feeling ensures that improving the well-being of the oppressed won't require the dismantling of these citizens' privileges through structural change (2008, 35).

Berlant's critical consciousness, perception, and insights about love cross-fertilise Sandoval's paradigm shift. Lovers smitten by de-colonial love (as differential consciousness and tactical sign reading) apprehend the oppressive historicity lurking underneath falsely metaphysical/universalist amatory discourse. They opt for a different romantic centre of gravity such that "romantic love can access revolutionary love" (Sandoval 2000, 140). Today, such lovers' amatory pursuits of seeing, reading, deconstructing, and reconstructing artefacts compose an interstitial form of agency with which to resist (now neo-colonial) socio-economic domination. For Sandoval, de-colonial *falling* in love is an "eccentric passage" (2000, 140) that triggers counter-normative flashes of insight which puncture consciousness and trigger differential consciousness and dissident knowledge. This eccentric passageway entails its own version of erotic surrender; it requires:

that the oppositional citizen-subject be receptive to the presence of the obtuse third meaning as it shimmers behind all we think we know; that the citizen-subject give up control over meaning in order to perceive the third meaning, relinquish the peace of mind connected to dominant perception—or the third meaning remains invisible: it will not disrupt, will not make

meaning vibrant to break it apart through the trauma, the puncture of love. (2000, 144)⁶

Ultimately, Sandoval resituates such falling in love among a wide variety of de-colonial eccentric passageways:

This book has demonstrated that this “eccentric” passage toward “differential consciousness” is designed in a multiplicity of forms, from revolt to religious experience, from *rasquache* to punk, from technical achievements like the methodology of the oppressed, to Saussure’s sign reading alone; it is a conduit brought about by any system of signification capable of evoking and puncturing through to another site, to that of differential consciousness. According to the Barthes of *Incidents*, *The Pleasure of the Text*, or *A Lover’s Discourse*, that term, puncture, passage, or conduit can be provided by the process of “falling in love.” (2000, 139)

Alongside Barthes, Sandoval consults third-world writers such as Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon, Cherrie Moraga, and Trinh Minh-ha, who politicize more sharply love’s conscientizing effects from their various social locations. They “similarly understand love as a ‘breaking’ through whatever controls in order to find ‘understanding and community’: it is described as ‘hope’ and ‘faith’ in the

⁶ There is considerable discussion surrounding the concept of “third meaning” within Barthes’ work. Graham Allen (2004, 118-32) provides a useful summary of these debates in his primer on Barthes. Barthes posits third or obtuse meanings in contradistinction to the 1) informational and 2) social symbolic levels of meaning that an image, word, or concept might hold. Correlated to this framework are the *studium* and the *punctum*. These are elements in an image that capture one’s attention, but the *studium* conveys a fairly obvious “culturally coded meaning” whereas a *punctum* “lies outside shareable codes and general description” such that the viewer experiences the image or text in unexpected, blissful, rather “incommunicable” ways (Allen 2004, 126-7). The designation of third meanings is therefore meant especially to mark out singular, individual, “unassimilable” experiences or readings of texts/images that go beyond all shared codes and conventions (122). Yet Barthes eventually recognizes that *puncta* and third meanings inevitably become *studia* or shared conventions. And this is why, for him, language has a certain “generalizing violence” at its core that his own theorizing seeks to resist (131). Scholars have pointed out that Barthes manages this impasse by redefining the *punctum* in *Camera Lucida*, not as “a details that shoots out,” but as “time lacerating us with the *noeme* (the ‘that-has-been’)” (130). Photographs puncture us with the reality of death. We capture life and living with photography, but what the photos also tell us is that each referent is dead or going to die. Photos thus (re-)present presence and pastness to us all at once (130-1).

To me, Sandoval complicates this typology by implying that third meanings can be collectively grasped, shared, and deployed for de-colonial political purposes even as they somehow remain “third.” Perhaps she sees them as third because they are *counter-hegemonic*, and therefore less mainstream, interpretations of texts and cultural artefacts. This allows their shock value to fuel political resistance. From my reading, she does not lament the “generalizing violence” to which third meanings or *puncta* inevitably succumb. She applauds the eventual “transcoding” of such differential consciousness and new knowledge that *puncta* trigger. That *puncta* become *studia* is not always experienced as a form of loss, or as inhibiting blissful possibilities.

In all these elements, I think Sandoval’s more “optimistic” rendering of *puncta* and *shared* third meanings constitutes another sense in which, as I said above, she “radicalises” Barthes. In this essay, I adopt Sandoval’s re-appropriation of the terms “third meanings” and *puncta*: particular words and images in the Song “pierce” or “shoot out” at readers who have double or differential consciousness in ways that dramatically shift broader interpretations of the Song’s political, amatory, and theological content or themes.

potential goodness of some promised land” (Sandoval 2000, 139). In her model, Sandoval also integrates ideas from Gloria Anzaldua and Emma Perez who describe de-colonial love’s embrace in terms of rupture and shock: de-colonial love “is defined as Anzaldua’s *coatlicue* state, which is a ‘rupturing’ in one’s everyday world that permits crossing over to another; or as a specific moment of shock, what Emma Perez envisions as the trauma of desire, or erotic despair” (ibid.). Falling in love then, entails political praxis: “These writers who theorize social change understand ‘love’ as a hermeneutic, as a set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen-subjects, regardless of social class toward a differential mode of consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement” (ibid.).

It is likely counter-intuitive to white Western imaginations to portray lovers first and foremost as activist-semioticians. Sandoval has radicalised Roland Barthes’ already counter-cultural notion of falling in love. In her view, Barthes did not sufficiently recognise the concrete glimpses of his utopian vision that were on offer in the activism of third-world liberation movements (Sandoval 2000, 146).

What happens when the Song of Songs is read through these de-colonial lenses? In her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison has already set a precedent for re-reading the Song with such differential consciousness and tactical sign reading. Further incentive to read the Song’s lovers and garden imagery in de-colonial terms arises if we read the Song in concert with Alice Walker’s classic tribute to her foresters’ and foremothers’ songs and gardens. The de-colonial, intertextual matrix that I construct via Sandoval’s model, Morrison’s “commentary,”⁷ and Walker’s metonyms chasten the racial blindness of even the most cutting-edge readings of the Song that have already politicised its content to contest sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, and discourses of sexual “deviance” (e.g. pornography, S-M).⁸ This womanist matrix also creates a certain dissonance around Roland Boer’s “economic” reading of the Song (2009), which construes the material plenitude in the Song as evidence of a “fecund, self-producing world, oblivious to human beings” (11-13).⁹ It likewise complicates Fiona Black’s

⁷ I have placed the term “commentary” in inverted commas here to indicate that Morrison’s commentary on the Song is not a verse-by-verse biblical commentary in the conventional sense of the term. It is a *narrative response* to the Song’s imagery, to its musings on love’s relationship to death, and to its lovers’ appearances and disappearances. Her novel could also be described as womanist midrash on a biblical text; feminist midrash became an important recuperative writing strategy for contesting and expanding the otherwise exclusionary bodies of androcentric interpretation of sacred texts. Morrison’s work is also a commentary in the sense outlined by Aichele and Walsh (2002) in their introduction to a volume of essays on cinematic biblical afterlives: “Each of these cinematic texts offers a rewriting of the Bible that in turn implies a reading or interpretation of the biblical text. In other words, these contemporary rewritings of the Bible produce *commentaries* on the biblical stories and on the culture that produces and consumes both the Scripture and the movies” (ix; emphasis added). Arguably, the novel could also be received as a meta-critical “commentary” on the racial blindness of some Song commentaries.

⁸ See Black (2006), Boer (1999) and (2000), Moore (2000), Moore and Burrus (2003), and the essays in Brenner and Fontaine (2000).

⁹ Boer (2007) recognizes that this “work-free” (13) realm is a human construct—a utopian fantasy or vision (11). And, of course, this vision could certainly be intensely desirable for those enslaved by hard labour. He also acknowledges that the very presence of vineyards in the Song implies that there must be some element of necessary human labour in the text’s “allocatory economics” (8).

construal of the Shulammitte's "blackness" as a *non-racialised* opacity that affords "her" romantic agency (2006, 172-4).¹⁰ While both Black and Boer are actively engaged in furthering post-colonial discursive shifts in biblical hermeneutics,¹¹ the intertextual matrix I propose also undermines any interpretations of the Song that bolster falsely universal, politically-oppressive Western models of love. Further, and of special interest to me, the crucially de-colonial history of Song itself within subaltern interpretive communities, a history which Morrison and Walker take pains to chronicle, pushes us to detect "third," specifically *musical* meanings "shimmering" around the biblical text's status as a song and, by extension, around its Shulammitte-Beloved.¹²

Three more phases shall unfold along this "eccentric" intertextual passageway. In phase two, I shall elaborate the de-colonial meanings of the Song's lovers, its erotic imagery, and its musicality that Toni Morrison's love affair with the Song evokes. In phase three, I will bolster these new valences by considering Alice Walker's love affair with other songs and gardens. In phase four, by adopting Sandoval's, Morrison's, and Walker's de-colonial practices of attention, I shall elucidate a new musical afterlife of the Song that I hear shimmering in singer/songwriter Meshell Ndegeocello's love songs and bass playing. Additionally, this immersion in womanist intertexts around the Song initiates a

As well, Boer's discussion of these economics includes recognition that along with labour, there would have to be some forms of "re-allocation": "Various modes of allocating the produce turn up at various points, such as kinship, or patron-client relations, or the military: according to these modes crops, animals, women and land are allocated and re-allocated" (13-14). Nevertheless, I still wonder if readers of colour would be left with an overriding impression of the Song as evoking a "fecund, self-producing world"; the very words "vineyards," "gardens," and "fields," may trigger politically-loaded counter-images of slave or migrant labour for post-colonial readers, owing to the semantic fields that attach to these otherwise seemingly harmless pastoral mainstays.

¹⁰ Black ingeniously rereads the Shulammitte's speeches—"Do not look upon me for I am dark" (1.6) and "I am a wall and my breasts are like towers" (8.10)—as utterances that allow her to resist being controlled and objectified by her lover, her brothers, and others in the Song: "Whereas Solomon names his woman and calls her his own, the woman refuses to be complicit in his politics of identification. She maintains her independence and sexual autonomy through, I propose, indeterminacy ... Her words tease; they partially reveal and partially conceal. They invite speculation and prevent the full consummation of knowledge. Moreover, I begin to suspect that they find empowerment in what could be traditionally rendered disempowering, or of little value in the Song's sexual economy. In darkness, in the hardened surfaces of walls" (177). Of course, rigorous translation of the Hebrew indicates that there are no racial overtones to the Shulammitte's darkness. Still, womanist readings of the Song, like Morrison's for example, complicate Black's portrait of the agency that darkness affords the Shulammitte, by taking the darkness as a racial marker and considering how a black protagonist's agency would in fact be tortuously achieved in and through such blackness (e.g. by "wearing" white masks on black skin à la Fanon 1967), and this in spite of more lethally-oppressive forms of exploitation and objectification in a white man's world. The complication lies in a readerly resistance to allowing the Hebrew text to have the last word. Womanist readers might also see correlations between darkness and agency in vineyards and fields as having much higher stakes than flourishing interpersonally in "the sexual economy" of a love affair, and this tactical sign reading complicates the politics of love *in se* that de-colonial hermeneutics (or de-colonial love itself as modeled by Sandoval) invite us to interrogate within all white Song interpretation.

¹¹ See, for example, Black (2012) and Boer (2012) in Boer and Segovia (2012).

¹² This essay forms part of a larger project that deploys what are to me queer musical "settings" of the Song to trigger critical interventions in the politics of love as a cultural practice. I have explored musical treatments of the Song by Steeleye Span, the Pixies, Krzysztof Penderecki, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and the more traditional setting found in Waszinski's film *Der Dibbuk*.

specifically de-colonial expansion of the musical, literary, and artistic works that constitute our current sacred erotic archives—a desirable outcome that I also elaborate in the final phase of this eccentric passageway.

Phase Two: Morrison's Beloved as Song "Commentary"

When Morrison fell in love with the Song of Songs, it seems as if its lovers lured her into an anti-pastoral odyssey. It offered her an eccentric passage into the Middle Passage. The Song's waters evoked slave ships and drowned bodies, and these images capsized white Western fantasies of what the waters had to say about love. The dark, comely, vineyard-bound Shulammitte that Morrison encountered in its opening lines conjured intractable correlations among skin colour, racial oppression, and migrant labour—ones that rigorous analysis of the original Hebrew wasn't inclined to support.¹³ Striking for me, and due to her double consciousness and tactical sign-reading, Morrison took the biblical book's status as a song very seriously—she effectively embedded the biblical text within an African American musical archive. Let me offer here a few tastes of her de-colonial reconstructions of the Song's amatory imagery, her reconstrual of the biblical text's significance as a *song*, and her correlated musical inflections of its protagonists.

A. Morrison's Reconstructed Song Fragments

Landscape and Lovers' Movements

In Morrison's counter-pastoral landscape, "going out into the fields" is less a recreational choice than a reference to forced labour (*Beloved* 25-30, 72; Song 7.11). Characters roaming over rocks, hills, cliffs, fields, and into villages (*Beloved* 78; Song 2.8, 24; 7.11) evokes the movement of escaped slaves, chain-gang-prisoners, or migrant workers trying to survive after the civil war.¹⁴ Near the end of the novel, Sethe's locked garden is not safe (*Beloved* 280-6; Song 4.12); it is an anti-social space where a guilt-ridden mother and devouring ghost-daughter starve each other almost to death in their misguided quests for devotion and affection.¹⁵

Love's advances—maternal, familial, romantic—are stolen moments of freedom beneath the relentless surveillance of ubiquitous watchmen (*Beloved* 54, 78, 83, 91, 125-7, 173-85, 191-2, 263-9; Song 3.3; 5.7). The very conditions of possibility for sustained human attachments and mutual care-giving are almost

¹³ For discussions of the more likely range of (cultural) meanings for the phrase "dark and/but comely", see Pope (1977, 307-18, 321-2); Exum (2005, 103-5). See also Landy (2011, 142-52) and Black (2006, 172-4). Postcolonial biblical criticism has forced a reconsideration of the racial implications of these traits, even though the original Hebrew does not support these connotations. And Black's exploration of Caribbean hermeneutics (2012) can be extended to urge a post-colonial re-reading of the Shulammitte's darkness. Reading the Song through womanist texts such as Morrison's and Walker's, especially given their attention to songs and gardens, contributes another important interpretive trajectory regarding the Shulammitte's darkness.

¹⁴ Paul D is the character who drifts and migrates most in the novel, and, of course, Beloved is the ghostly revenant who appears and disappears, seeking love and recognition across a variety of landscapes.

¹⁵ Sethe and her daughters, Denver and Beloved, shut out the world in Part III of the novel as one (ultimately untenable) way of coping with post-bellum trauma, loss, and Jim Crow realities. In doing so, they "locked" themselves into "a love that wore everybody out" (*Beloved*, 286).

wiped out by this surveillance, by the watchmen's beatings (*Beloved* 176; Song 5.7), and by the mental torture of their chattel (*Beloved* 148, 260).¹⁶ Morrison's lovers live and love under the ever-present threat of posse processions—both real (173-4) and hallucinated (308-12)—coming up from the wilderness to re-capture them (Song 3.16). After the war, love's advances—that is, the freedoms to love, to parent, and have a family (all obliterated during slavery; *Beloved* 261)—are still hampered by Jim Crow racial and economic violence (212-13), and by freed slaves' shell-shocked thinking (222, 260-1, 315-18).¹⁷ Scanning the horizon in the hope of a lover's return —“Whither is my beloved?” (Song 6.1)—is fraught with a very different mode of anxious speculation: has the lover been re-captured, re-sold, imprisoned, lynched? (*Beloved* 80-2)¹⁸

Food and Body Parts

In Morrison's *Beloved*, food is rarely if ever an instrument of foreplay as it is in the biblical text. *Beloved* chokes on a raisin and vomits (*Beloved* 79; Song 2.5),¹⁹ and Denver, as a nursing child, “takes her [mother's] milk with” the blood of her murdered sister which drenches Sethe's chest the day the watchmen come to re-capture her (*Beloved* 179, 242; Song 5.1). Nor is there much wooing through the poetic praise of body parts (as in the *wasfs*).²⁰ Instead, descriptive metaphors attach more corrosively to teeth, necks, backs, and throats—all ravaged by the brutalities of plantation economics. Necks are not stately towers (Song 4.4; 7.4), but itemised assets of inventoried property (*Beloved* 498-500).²¹ And they are lynched (73, 104, 222), slit (321), coffled (125) or bridled (82-4) when discipline is called for. Re-read through Morrison's novel, the biblical text's blood red, textured pomegranates (Song 4.3; 6.7) evoke scars rather than rosy cheeks—Sethe's bull-whipped back (*Beloved* 93), brands on human chattel (72), a ghost's slit throat (176, 237). The scar tissue on the revenant *Beloved*'s throat also evokes a rusty latch (*Beloved* 207-8,

¹⁶ For mental torture, the effects of the “scientific” experiments and calculations by Schoolteacher are particularly wounding; Paul D is filled with self-doubt as a result: “His strength had lain in knowing Schoolteacher was wrong. Now he wondered. There was Alred, Georgia, there was Delaware, there was Sixo and still he wondered. If Schoolteacher was right it explained how he had come to be a rag doll” (*Beloved*, 148).

¹⁷ Sethe “becomes a wall” (Song 8.10) to keep love out: “There was no entry now. No crack or crevice available. She had taken pains to keep them out” (*Beloved*, 222). And Paul D drifts constantly—afraid to put down roots that might be wrenched away from him. Sethe is also prone to hallucinations and, of course, deeply haunted by her choice to try to kill all her children rather than see them become slaves.

¹⁸ Sethe waits in vain for her husband Halle, who mysteriously disappears just as they are all planning to escape together. She never learns what happens to him, until Paul D reunites with her and explains his fate.

¹⁹ The original reference in the Song: “I drink my wine with my milk” (5.1).

²⁰ There is, however, a more collectively administered exhortation for slaves to “love their own flesh” (i.e. their hands, faces, feet, backs, shoulders, necks, eyes, livers, wombs; *Beloved*, 104), which is delivered by Baby Suggs as a “sermon on the mount” in the forest clearing (102-4).

²¹ Kitts (2006) masterfully interconnects the song lyrics Morrison invents—“Five-cent nickel/Ten-cent dime”—which she interweaves with snippets of the actual blues songs “Trouble in my Mind” and “Told my Captain,” with Morrison's broader message that slaves thoroughly internalized their sense of themselves and their bodies as inventoried property. See Kitts' longer discussion of body parts as currency (Kitts 2006, 498-500). Kitts cites Trudier Harris: “all of Morrison's characters ‘express their greatest wants in financial terms,’ thereby perpetuating slavery's constructs” (Kitts 2006, 333).

324; Song 4.4-6); it will be pried open in fits and starts as Beloved utters bits and pieces of missing historical information about her mother's desperate acts, and about the whole community's repressed ties to drowned, raped, and starved bodies on a slave ship (*Beloved* 248-52). The voice of this Beloved is a mouthpiece for 60 million others (see *Beloved* dedication page, also 248-52; Song 2.8). As a result, Beloved's teeth are a much unrulier flock (*Beloved* 157; Song 4.2; 6.6). They keep scattering—falling out—to mark a psychic and bodily precarity and imminent self-shattering (*Beloved* 157). But at the same time, and more positively, this bodily precarity flags a shape-shifting trickster mobility²² which allows Beloved/the 60 million to roam (315) and return (324), asking for love, recognition, and acceptance in characters' and readers' historical imaginary. Beloved's lability allows her to move on to haunt other communities and thereby awaken love—luring “amnesiacs” down other eccentric passages into more complex subaltern amatory knowledge and clearer intersectional seeing.

B. Morrison's Perception of the *Song* as Song

Song of Songs crucially animates Morrison's anti-pastoral force field. And I wonder if here the biblical Song's episodic, non-narrative *form* evoked for Morrison a certain subaltern history of music: perhaps the opacity of its poetic fragments in tandem with the opacity of its sexual metaphors reminded her of other veiled codes and archival remnants. Early African American music history is very fragmented—frustratingly incomplete and heavily mediated through the white historiography and archiving that earlier generations of white ethnomusicologists compiled (Kitts 2006, 497). Song lyrics within this archive also contain copious veiled codes, but these served to transmit subversive information among slaves, rather than to seduce and tease a lover (or reader) with erotico-poetic delights. In this subaltern musical economy of meaning, the surface images of songs veil codes of resistance that mock masters and map escape routes. They consolidate energy, not just to synchronise work rhythms, but also to voice collectively a defiant kernel of freedom through their veiled sneers at white stupidity. The existential interpretive stakes in deciphering these veiled references are thus much higher.²³ Such subaltern songs composed a poetics of survival with music as its lifeblood. And the musical practices of Morrison's characters flesh out (and archive in novel form) this poetics.

²² For discussions of Morrison and *Beloved* as tricksters, see Smith (1997). For a more general discussion of the trickster heritage in Morrison's works, see Hallett (2003). For the post-colonial political role that African American trickster heritage has been assigned, see Smith (1997, 10-11), Vizenor (1990), and Gates (1988).

²³ Halle sings a veiled code to cue his family to take flight (*Beloved*, 264), and, after his failed attack on Schoolteacher and his henchmen, while being burned at the stake, the recaptured slave Sixo defiantly sings a cryptic song that indicates he will “survive” through the unborn child (“Seven-O”) that his girlfriend is carrying (266).

C. The Characters' Musicality in *Beloved*

Paul D and Sethe

Paul D is *Beloved*'s central songster. He hums, sings, and hears in his head musical sound bites of field, work, folk and blues songs (*Beloved* 48-9, 128, 310). These "narrate" in their own way his prototypical slave career of forced and migrant labour, but they also flag his enlistment of music as a de-colonial practice of freedom—a means of interstitial agency and a crucible for oppositional consciousness. This is the double-edged "dangerous memory" (Metz 2007) of suffering and resistance that songs communicate and that Morrison foregrounds in her novel.²⁴ Musical memories also keep Sethe alive after she escapes and nearly dies giving birth to Denver on a riverbank; wisps of African song and dance come to mind from her days at Sweet Home plantation as she delivers her baby (*Beloved* 37). Collective suffering and resistance animate slaves' song and dance in a forest clearing as together they exorcise any sense of worthlessness with which slave owners tried to brand them. The preternatural force of other women's singing will later match that of Beloved's as a group of women banish her from Bluestone Road to restore familial and communal equilibrium (303). It takes a singing village to do this precisely because Beloved's musicality is that of a trickster.

Beloved's Musicality

As the most penetrating medium through which to reconnect a mother to the daughter she murdered, and reconnect the novel's freed-slave characters (and readers) to 60 million dead slaves, Morrison's *Beloved* deploys an elegiac lullaby (*Beloved* 207).²⁵ When Beloved hums this intimate, secret song in Part Two of the novel, a song that she had regularly shared with her mother before Sethe slit her throat, she sets a seal on a lethal mother-daughter symbiosis. Its possessive strains ravish Sethe and create such a powerful (yet false) sense of requited love that, upon hearing it, and recognising its provenance, Sethe "ascends the lily-white stairs like a bride" (*Beloved* 208; Song 4.9). Thereafter Sethe (with help from Beloved) makes the house a battlement, complete with a (maniacally-fashioned) garden and locked front door (*Beloved* 282-6; Song 4.12; 8.9-10).

Beyond her humming, Morrison ascribes a liminal musicality to Beloved's speaking voice: "After four weeks, they still had not got used to the gravelly voice and the song that seemed to lie in it. Just outside music it lay, with a cadence not like theirs" (*Beloved* 72). Like her haunting lullaby, the elliptical, stinging questions

²⁴ Kitts' (2006) elaboration of this musical politics of resistance is illuminating: "[Morrison] recalls that the combination of dance and storytelling in African music, which permeated social and religious life, enabled African Americans to resist their dehumanization. All who sang expressed themselves not only in words, but especially in the sounds they produced on and with their bodies. Bodies otherwise disdained thus gained value" (497). More specific references to Paul D's and his chain gang brothers' tactical use of music appear later in her article (504).

²⁵ I hear the lullaby as elegiac because Beloved speaks for the 60 million, now asleep in ocean graves, whose deaths have been forgotten or inadequately honoured by subsequent generations. Beloved's humming of the lullaby triggers for the novel's characters a more intensive phase of reconnection to the past, and their eventual (if only partial) coming to terms with both family trauma, and more collective historical losses.

that Beloved voices are also siren songs (75, 88, 91). They pull Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and readers closer and closer to pharmakon knowledge of her mother's murderous past, and its etiology in wrecked ships and watery mass graves—the economic engine that would govern their lives. In addition to her lyrical “socratic” questioning, Beloved entralls Denver with her mysteriously acquired expertise in African dancing (87). Her winsome movements create the space and fellow feeling that allow others' recovery of dangerous memories. This is especially the case one night when the two sisters are alone together and Denver risks asking Beloved about her scarred neck (87-8).

Beloved is the novel's trickster²⁶ who uses music and dancing (as tricksters often do)²⁷ to lead Sethe, Paul D, Denver, and readers into the arms of de-colonial love as hybrid, dissident seeing, interpreting, and knowledge production. As a trickster, she inhabits two worlds: she lives among corpses in slave ship wreckage, but also with Sethe, Denver, and Paul D at 124 Bluestone Road. And it is precisely this hybrid “social location” that imbues her voice with an *unheimlich* lyricism. Morrison herself has been characterised as a trickster. Her de-colonial “commentary” on the Song playfully adds new indigenous layers of meaning to its Shulammitte Beloved's profile—her erratic appearances and disappearances, her opaque speech, her dancing, her affective ambivalence toward the other characters whom she loves.²⁸ Thanks to Morrison, these enigmatic traits of the Song's female protagonist, previously framed as sexual teasing and/or female agency, may just as easily signify a wandering trickster who appears and disappears across time and space to entangle her paramours in reckonings with the presence of *politically haunted* absences—ghosts evoked in the Song by its textual gaps, its non-narrativity, and, most especially for Morrison, by the Song's implied musicality.²⁹

Additionally, because Morrison interweaves her characters' musicality with warped imagery from the biblical text and with archival musical fragments, she recontextualises the biblical Song within a musical history which gives pride of place to call-and-response fieldwork songs, chain gang and railroad hollers, spirituals, the blues, and African dancing. In effect, Morrison embeds the biblical book along with its female protagonist and her many lovers—sister, mother, mother's lover—within the history of black music. To say the very word “song” conjures this subaltern history where music becomes a metonym for survival. It would seem that the biblical text's formal and literal opacity invited these racialised, musical transpositions of its indirect speech. Much has been written of Morrison's use of music to shape the form and content of her novels. But it may

²⁶ See footnote 22 above for scholarly discussions of Morrison and Beloved as tricksters.

²⁷ Pelton (1989) discusses the African trickster Legba's use of music and dancing to integrate sexuality into “social life” (92). Hodges (2006) chronicles how any escaped slave who was a fiddler in the antebellum south could be regarded as a trickster by whites, “using his music to charm suspicious white audiences to let him pass as free” (244). Morrison is framed as an “author trickster” who continually weaves African American music into the style and content of her novels, not only to celebrate the same, but also to instill more de-colonial consciousness in her readers (see footnote 22 above). See also Smith (2005) who has framed blues musicians as trickster figures within African American history.

²⁸ See Black's different interpretation of these same traits (2009, 186-237).

²⁹ Gordon (1997) and Lowe (1996) also discuss the de-colonial force of these first two literary techniques—textual ellipses and non-narrativity.

also be that for her, the biblical Song seasoned this musical style and sensibility. Beyond serving as a creative muse for her novel, the Song became a metonym for a politically-charged musical history. The book's title in tandem with its image of waters drowning love lured her memory and imagination toward a song tradition that itself began with the Middle Passage.

The further wedding Morrison performs is her connection of the Song, not just to African American music, but to a trickster heritage which has been harnessed more recently for post-colonial pedagogical purposes—to awaken de-colonial consciousness (Harris, 10).³⁰ And, by dispersing Beloved's trickster body at novel's end, Morrison allows her to roam freely again in order to diffuse her de-colonial "Shulammitic" musicality to other soundscapes—a point to which I return in phase four below. With this socio-musical economy of meaning, the novel dramatically shifts the Song's semantic field and the cultural semiotics of its landscape, lovers, and horticultural imagery. Walker too, as we shall see, has an acute awareness of this alternate semantic field.

Phase Three: "My own garden, my very own." Walker's Matrilineal Songs and Gardens

Though her project does not entail deconstructing and reconstructing the biblical text's imagery and meanings via de-colonial narrative, for Alice Walker, songs and gardens trigger haunted longing as much as sensual delight: they are goads to inter-generational remembrance, social rebellion, and public grieving. Like Morrison, Walker (1983) feels the erotic pull of the 60 million upon her, more specifically, the unconsummated artistic longing of its women. She has her own nagging questions about a submerged past: "How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist?" (234). Walker builds a reply from the "third meanings" she detects in contemporary black women's music, art, literature, and poetry. These works constitute the consummation of the unrequited creative loves that tormented previous generations of black women. Through this correlation, Walker "genetically" connects black women's artistic output today to the more interstitial expressive agency of their African American mothers and grandmothers. The rest of the essay serves to honour her foremothers' and foresisters' desires to create art and music by tracing a matrilineal genealogy for black women's own creative output today. In effect, it is an archive of gardens and songs. Through it, Walker leads readers down another eccentric amatory passageway into de-colonial love as new seeing, reading, and knowing, a trajectory that is crafted for us through Walker's own double consciousness, tactical sign-reading and reconstruction of artefacts—that is, her articulation of the subaltern meanings that attend gardens and songs.

³⁰ Smith (1997) mentions especially here the use of trickster figures in novels by Leslie Silko, Sandra Cisneros, Gerald Vizenor, Ishmael Reed, and David Henry Hwang, as well as those by Louise Erdrich, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Toni Morrison (10-11), and she references discussions of the trickster in Gates (1988) and Vizenor (1990).

Walker's appraisal of the material artistic traces that some women managed to leave counters any caricatures of these predecessors as "vacant and fallow as autumn fields" who bequeathed their children a barren wilderness (Walker 1983, 233).³¹ Instead, Walker recognises fragments of creative passion's survival in her foresters' lullabies, and in what today we might call graffiti: "They dreamed dreams that no one knew—not even themselves, in any coherent fashion—saw visions no one could understand. They wandered or sat about the countryside crooning lullabies to ghosts, and drawing the mother of Christ in charcoal on courthouse walls" (1983, 232). Alongside these lullabies and sketches, she places the "songful" poetry of slave girl Phyllis Wheatley (1754–1783). Previously scorned in "Uncle Tom" terms, Walker revalorises Wheatley's attempts to "sing." No matter how infected by white slave-owners' cultural artefacts of beauty and divinity her poems may seem to readers today, Wheatley's poems kept the very possibility of song alive. For example, in one of her poems ("Enclosure"), Wheatley envisions a "goddess" of freedom as having blonde hair, and being clothed in the trappings of white Enlightenment ideals—a figure likely modelled (in part) on one of the white girls Wheatley served as a slave. Walker interjects:

But at last Phyllis we understand. No more snickering when your stiff, struggling, ambivalent lines are forced on us. We know now that you were not an idiot or a traitor; only a sickly little black girl, snatched from your home and country and made a slave; a woman who still struggled to sing the song that was your gift, although in a land of barbarians who praised you for your bewildered tongue. It is not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, *the notion of song*. (1983, 237; italics added)

Walker's next (more cursory) archival entry is black women's singing in church. Such church singing is another filament of a "living creativity" that still reverberates within contemporary black women musicians (and artists) who now enjoy unlimited creative freedom (Walker 1983, 237).³² But by far the most immediate and personal evidence of creative passion's inter-generational survival in Walker's archive resides in her own mother's gardening and storytelling. Both these interstitial creative activities inseminated Walker's later, full-time career as a writer (238-42). Even though her mother's life was consumed with back-breaking labour in the fields, with cooking and cleaning, and with sewing clothes and bedding for her eight children, Minnie Lou Tallulah Grant Walker still found time to tend her own flower garden, and tell vivid bedtime stories to her children. And for Walker, her mother's flower gardens exuded political hues: they actually undermined the oppression that racialized poverty wielded in her family's and

³¹ See, for example, her repeated contestation of Jean Toomer's (1923) ambivalent assessment of black women's artistic legacy in this essay.

³² I should specify that Walker only mentions African American women's church singing in passing, and more as a marker of spirituality than a crucial entry within an indigenous artistic heritage. Nevertheless, it still offers an archival trace of black women's use of music as a means of survival. For Walker, it bore witness to a vital (though sometimes neglected) symbiosis between art and spirituality that she regards as essential to all black women's artistic flourishing (237-8). In Morrison's *Beloved*, the famous forest-clearing scene chronicles instances of such musical creativity and agency.

their neighbours' lives. The power to create beauty in black communities was a defiant material and symbolic practice of freedom in a racist world:

Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees—until night came and it was too dark to see ... Because of her creativity with her flowers, *even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms*—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena ... and on and on ... A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia—perfect strangers and imperfect strangers—and ask to stand or walk among my mother's art. (Walker 1983, 241; italics added)

Walker then returns to women's singing for her next entry. For her, women singing gospel, blues, soul, and R and B songs on the radio evokes double-edged memories of suffering and resistance; they en flesh lost possibility and defiant creativity, intimations of slave labour and indigenous freedom:

Consider, if you can bear to imagine it, what might have been the result if singing too [like reading and writing], had been forbidden by law. Listen to the voices of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, and Aretha Franklin, among others, and imagine those voices muzzled for life. Then you may begin to comprehend the lives of our [*pace* Jean Toomer] "crazy," "Sainted" mothers and grandmothers. (Walker 1983, 234)

To excavate one last artefact, Walker reaches even farther back to Africa. There, prior to the slave trade, she imagines another foremother singing, painting, and telling stories in total freedom; enjoying a place of prestige within her community as a result. This matriarch has no need for the more cramped creative spaces of gardens or hymns:

And perhaps in Africa over two hundred years ago, there was just such a mother; perhaps she painted vivid and daring decorations in oranges and yellows and greens on the walls of her hut; perhaps she sang—in a voice like Roberta Flack's—*sweetly* over the compounds of her village; perhaps she wove the most stunning mats or told the most ingenious stories of all the village story tellers. Perhaps she was herself a poet—though only her daughter's name is signed to the poems that we know. (Walker 1983, 243).

For Walker, Morrison, and other womanists, songs and gardens hold a sharply political, metonymic force overlooked by white imaginations. To sing a song or plant flowers (as compared to cotton, corn, or grapes) not only kept black women's artistic passion alive, it also materially and symbolically sustained de-colonial "matrices of resistance" (Welch)³³ for future generations to inherit and perpetuate.

³³ In *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Welch seeks to redefine "responsible action" over against white American models thereof by consulting third-world writers' and activists' work. For the latter,

Re-read in this context, the Song's lilies, blossoms, shoots, and roses evoke fruits of interstitial agency, veiled yet fragrant codes of defiance. Womanist intertexts thus move the Song along another interpretive trajectory in service to de-colonial love.³⁴ Couched within womanist intertexts, the Song becomes a *punctum* with which to unleash a differential consciousness and to galvanise musically-fuelled matrices of political resistance. As such, the Song's now intersectionally-haunted eroticism can be used to contest rather than support the interpellations of both secular and theological neo-colonial portraits of love and romance that reduce people's world building to "the interpersonal space of romance, marriage, reproduction, and inter-generational family life" (Berlant 2012, 86-7), or portraits that support an excessively sentimental "politics of true feeling" that obviates structural critique and reform (Berlant 2008, 35).

To enhance this new trajectory and to resist these interpellations, I want to revise the role that the Song, and the notions of sacred eroticism that it subtends, play within religious discourse. If the Shulammitte's erotic longing and seeking are re-read as trickster-esque, de-colonial, and musically inflected, the Song's tale of de-colonial love and its subaltern musicality force expansion of the current archive of sacred erotic literary, musical, and artistic works, such that the discourse of sacred eroticism can energise matrices of resistance against now globally-interlocking structures of oppression. Sacred eroticism could be reconstructed in de-colonial terms to become a counter-hegemonic ideal that inspires political resistance. Its literary, musical, and artistic archives—like Walker's gardens and songs, Sandoval's *rasquache* and punk, and Morrison's novels, all of which merit inclusion as intensely "sacred erotic" works—would express this ideal. After all, sacred eroticism is its own Euro-American artifact in need of de-construction and re-construction via differential consciousness and tactical sign reading. Consider the racio-religious hegemonies that spawned any of the following: Bernard's Song sermons, the erotic Christ mysticism of Angela of Foligno, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, or Mother Juana de la Cruz; the Metaphysicals' poetry; Bernini's infamous statue of Teresa; the musical Song settings of Palestrina, Monteverdi, Schütz, Stradella, and Purcell; and Bach's mystical bridal arias and cantatas. To undermine the ideological force of this eurocentric fare, I want to conclude my eccentric amatory passageway through womanist intertexts by inserting another, pointedly de-colonial, entry into this sacred erotic archive. The de-colonial semantic fields and imaginative space that Sandoval, Walker, and Morrison open up around love, songs, and gardens lead me to hear affinities between the biblical text and Meshell Ndegeocello's music and lyrics. To be sure, it is only after

responsible action does not lie in heroic, individualistic, definitively successful corrections of injustice. Rather, it lies in "the creation of a matrix of further resistance. The extent to which an action is an appropriate response to the needs of others is constituted as much by the possibilities it creates as by its immediate results. Responsible action does not mean one individual resolving the problems of others. It is, rather, participation in a communal work, laying the groundwork for the creative response of people in the present and in the future. Responsible action means changing what can be altered in the present even though a problem is not completely resolved. Responsible action provides partial resolutions and the inspiration and conditions for further partial resolutions by others. It is sustained and enabled by participation in a community of resistance" (1990, 74).

³⁴ Additionally, after reading Walker and Morrison, the Song's various references to a woman's own vineyard, and to mother-daughter (and sisterly) bonds begin to shimmer with de-colonial eroticism.

immersion in womanist, post-colonial intertexts—that is, only through a de-colonial falling in love with the Song that affords differential consciousness and tactical sign reading—that these “third meanings” become perceptible in the fourth, musical phase of this eccentric passageway. And I acknowledge that in connecting Ndegeocello and her music to the Song, I make of the Song what George Aichele and Richard Walsh call a “precursor after the fact” (2002, x). But, as Aichele and Walsh also insist, I think that this reversed “hermeneutic flow” has promise for “opening new insights into ancient scripture” (ix) by way of the political ripple effects that the de-colonial resonances permeating Ndegeocello’s lovers, songs, and gardens have upon the Song’s amatory and horticultural imagery.

Phase Four: Meshell Ndegeocello’s Shulammitic, Sacred Erotic Musicality

For Morrison, the Song’s trickster-beloved has always been on the move: first appearing to Morrison on her gazebo as a muse—a pregnant moment that Morrison “husbanded” (*Beloved*, xix); then in the novel, on a stump by the steps of 124 Bluestone Road; vanishing at novel’s end, but still very much alive—haunting the terrain with footprints in mud, and with stirrings of her eerie voice, the latter explained away by locals as wind in the eaves, spring ice thawing; never recognised as a very present absence “clamoring for a kiss” (*Beloved* 324; Song 1.2). *Beloved* re-surfaced for me two decades later, in Lloyd Whitesell’s queer musicology seminar, as a neo-funk Shulammitic—black, comely, bisexual, and wielding an axe—beating back the watchmen gone global with her musical bag of tricks: playing a bass guitar designed after Reverend’s “Thundergun,”³⁵ Meshell Ndegeocello offered me songs of queer, racially-historicized love while the international Watchmen on the Walls coalition defended their cities—Latvia and Sacramento—with hate speech and homicidal violence in the name of God.³⁶ Like Morrison’s *Beloved*, this Shulammitic-beloved embodies certain trickster traits and

³⁵ Reverend is a guitar company based in Detroit, Michigan. Ndegeocello liked the company’s Thundergun model, and used it as inspiration for her own signature bass guitar that Reverend now sells, namely, the Meshell Ndegeocello Fellowship bass guitar.

³⁶ In 2009, I had the privilege of auditing Lloyd Whitesell’s graduate seminar at McGill University while on sabbatical and Ndegeocello’s music formed part of the listening assignments. The Watchmen on the Walls “were” a transatlantic, virulently anti-gay, fundamentalist Christian movement that formed in 2006. Originating in Latvia and Russia, the network eventually extended across the United States (particularly Seattle, Washington, Portland, Oregon, and Sacramento). The Southern Poverty Law Center classified them as a hate group. On July 1, 2007, some of their Russian immigrant members beat Satender Singh to death at a picnic site in Sacramento. WOW leaders included Ken Hutcherson (Seattle), Alexey Ledyayev (Latvia) Vlad Kusakin (Sacramento), Vadim Privedenyuk (Springfield, MA) and their affiliate Scott Lively (founder of Abiding Truth Ministries, 1997). While their website (www.watchmenonthewalls.com) has not been active since 2011, and their last formal event in the US was held in 2010, it is believed that they are still circulating among other groups (or possibly intact overseas). Seattle anti-LGBT pastor Ken Hutcherson died in December 2013 after a long battle with cancer (personal email correspondence with Evelyn Schlatter, SPLC, October 22, 2014).

At the time of the seminar, these “watchmen gone global” had been in existence for three years, and I received Ndegeocello’s albums, especially *Plantation Lullabies*, *Peace Beyond Passion*, *Cookie*, and *The World has Made Me the Man of my Dreams* as timely “replies” to the Watchmen on the Walls (and to religious fundamentalism more generally).

motives. Her constantly shape-shifting genre use and musical personae are deployed to wake up her listening communities to the ongoing history of white oppression on a transnational scale, and to revive a more richly diverse African American musical heritage (reduced by today's media and market forces to rapping and twerking). Correlatively, her music circulates a more de-colonial language of love than pop music offers—one that is hybrid, racially historicised, and therefore haunted. This now *explicitly musical*, flesh-and-blood Siren-beloved invites reconstruction of the biblical Song as a specifically hybrid love song.

Admittedly, such a portrait of Ndegeocello as post-colonial Shulammitte is only perceptible (and plausible) if one adopts the womanist sensibilities and the semantic fields around love, songs, and gardens that Morrison, Walker, and Sandoval promote in their writing.³⁷ I shall build this portrait of Ndegeocello from three sources: the racially re-vamped traces of the Song I hear in her music; the Shulammitic, de-colonial rhetorical force of her bass lines; and the hybrid reconstruction of love songs that the bass lines feed. All these de-colonial, hybridising elements compose a pointedly de-colonial, musical afterlife of the Song that can further shift the content and uses of the sacred erotic toward political resistance. Correlatively, this musical afterlife urges reassessment of previous interpretations of the Song for their positive and negative contributions to the broader politics of love as a cultural practice.

A. Song Fragments in Ndegeocello's Works

The hybrid model of love song mentioned above would not be obvious if we confined our love affair to a torrid one-night stand—revelling solely in the one song out of Ndegeocello's eleven albums that explicitly quotes lines from the Song of Songs. "The Chosen" is on her jazz album, *The Spirit Music Jamia: Dance of the Infidel* (2005) and communicates a rather straightforward tale of erotic longing. But I hear in Ndegeocello's counter-appropriation of pastoral/amatory imagery in her other love songs a critical impulse similar to Morrison's re-working of Song fragments to awaken de-colonial love in her readers.

Body Parts—Hair, Backs, Lips, and Skin

Lovers are held captive by the erotic pull of raven hair in three of Ndegeocello's love songs and the hair shimmers with political overtones, because it serves to celebrate non-eurocentric beauty. Dreadlocks figure prominently in "Picture Show" and "Dred Loc," both on *Plantation Lullabies* (1993). A third song, Ndegeocello's cover of "Black is the Colour of My True Love's Hair," is on her

³⁷ For some readers, the confluences that I perceive between the Song's imagery and personae and those in Ndegeocello's lyrics and bass lines may stretch the Song and/or the neo-funk singer's work too far. In my love affair with Ndegeocello's music, I risk here my own tactical sign reading and dissident knowing in service to de-colonial love. The "story of reading" (Sherwood 2000) I offer here—the fruits, wine, beds, and black love I interconnect with those in the Song—may just not persuade. But the conversation between biblical interpretation, post-colonial theory, and musicology that these constellations initiate here may at least energize more emancipatory reconceptualizations and uses of sacred eroticism, and more pointed considerations of the Song's musicality and its political significance, especially with regard to the institutional work that love does in the public sphere.

tribute album to Nina Simone, *Pour une Âme Souveraine* (2012), and it has a well-known history as a folk song that was re-purposed for identity politics (Elliott 2013).³⁸ This biblically-tinged admixture of love and racio-aesthetic politics is more searing in the *wasf*-like vignettes that shimmer for me in Ndegeocello's cover of Nina Simone's "Four Women." Here, what otherwise might be loving attention paid to the power and beauty of black women's bodies gets strafed with righteous anger. In each verse, two introductory lines provide us with each woman's name and a description of each woman's body, but the two remaining "punch lines" connect each body part to acts of socio-economic, racial violence: Aunt Sarah's long arms and strong back bore a white owner's beatings while she was his beast of burden. Saffronia's exotic cachet—her yellow skin and long hair—are the fruits of her enslaved mother being raped by her master. Sweet Thing's "mouth like wine" and delectable hips equip her for lucrative whoredom. And Peaches' "brown skin" enfolds the rancid fruit of slave-parent roots, namely, inconsolable hatred and rage.

Fruit, Wine and Gardens

In "Mary Magdalene" (*Peace Beyond Passion* 1996), Ndegeocello's celebrated tale of unrequited love, the singer falls in love from a distance with a decidedly unrepentant prostitute.³⁹ The singer pleads with the hooker to lie down with her, to dance for her, and to let the singer feed her choicest fruits. Should any of them taste too "sour," the singer's kisses will "wash away" the bitterness.⁴⁰ Mixing politics and romance by falling in lesbian love with this socially-stigmatised woman, the singer contests the streetwalker's "undesirable" status as well as her commodification by men, and, of course, she sanctifies homosexual love in the process.

Wine and kisses show up on Ndegeocello's album *Bitter* (2003) where she narrates a couple's romantic tug-of-war in the song "Sincerity." The woman is rendered against type as the unfaithful one while he remains loyal and lovesick—"wishing for wine in her empty kiss." The twang of the music's texture and its stagnant harmonies/bass line add a layer of cynicism and irony (or boredom) to the narrator's lyrics, mocking the song's title. Evoking Berlant's ideology critique of romantic love (2012, 89), discussed in phase one above, this album seems to

³⁸ Richard Elliott writes: "In describing the time she spent performing in Greenwich Village, Simone highlights a growing desegregation in musical tastes and crowds [across folk, blues and jazz players] ... Some of the ways in which these worlds came together can be seen by considering the song 'Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair' ... Often described in liner notes as a 'Norwegian folk song', 'Black Is The Color ...' had been part of the American folk repertoire ... It appears in Jean Ritchie's 1965 anthology *Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians*, where it is listed as having been collected by Cecil Sharp in 1916 in North Carolina ... Whatever the provenance of the song, it could not have failed to have other identifications given the racial politics of the time and a sense of identity assertion could be identified here that would find subsequent articulation in the more explicit 'Brown Baby', 'Four Women' and 'Young, Gifted and Black'." Excerpt from Richard Elliott's blogpost, "Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair," on his blog *So Transported: Listening to Nina Simone*, available online <https://sotransported.wordpress.com/2013/05/09/black-is-the-color-of-my-true-loves-hair/>.

³⁹ For other critical analyses of this song, see Mockus (2007), and Burns and LaFrance (2002). These authors do not read "Mary Magdalene" through the Song of Songs.

⁴⁰ Lyrics for this song (and other songs by Ndegeocello) are available online <http://www.metrolyrics.com/untitled-lyrics-meshell-ndegeocello.html>

repeatedly question the fantasy that romantic love “simplifies living,” and thereby resolves desire’s chronic ambivalence.

I will discuss in some detail below the Shulammitic’s migration from her bucolic gardens and fields into an urban jungle on Ndegeocello’s album *Plantation Lullabies*—an album that to me triggers most acutely de-colonial, “third” meanings in the Song itself. Her other garden excursion (*Comfort Woman* 2003) takes us into a dreamy, but *pointedly reggae* soundscape, with all the racio-political resonances that reggae’s cultural semiotics convey. Lovers are invited to smoke her “herb” (Track 2), and bathe in the lover’s “river” (or “milky way”).

Like Morrison’s politics of remembrance in her song commentary, and Walker’s metonymic economy of songs and gardens, when the biblical text is re-read through Ndegeocello’s amatory soundscapes, its songfulness, its gardens, food, and lovers’ bodies acquire racio-political energies (cf. my discussion of *Plantation Lullabies*, Section C below). When they are set within her unconventional love songs, these glimpses of skewed Song fragments serve to give love a social history, and to interrogate love as a white, Euro-American artefact. Beyond these glimpses of the Song’s lovers and images in Ndegeocello’s lyrics, the juiciest vein of her Shulammitic musicality resides for me in her leaping and bounding bass lines, *and* in the de-colonial meanings they acquire after my immersion in womanist intertexts.

B. Shulammitic Bass Lines

The *punctum* that unleashed for me such “third”-meaning construction from purely instrumental performance practices was one particularly tantalising metaphor that Ndegeocello included (among others) to describe the *raison d’être* of her bass playing: she seeks in her playing to provide “a foundation and groove” for audiences and her band members. She craves no virtuoso solo performance space within which to flaunt her technical virility. Rather, in her bass lines she wants to “create a space, *a bed for everyone else to do what they do*” (Ndegeocello, US National Public Radio interview, 2012; italics added). Using her guitar as a vibrant extension of her own body, this beloved’s left and right hands cradle not only strings, frets, and curves of African Korina wood, but also the flesh and sensoria of listeners who recline within the grooved frames she composes.

These funky beds resonate with not only gender political, but also de-colonial meanings. Admittedly, women making beds is a domestic cliché, and black women making beds for others has an ugly history. But master carpenters also make beds, and there are actually parallels to these gendered vocational metaphors in the gendered meanings that attach to female bass players, and to bass playing more generally. Women guitarists are still a minority presence in pop and rock music such that their playing bass guitar imbues them with gender performative “masculine” traits—virility, power, and a certain charisma that attends the dictation of a song’s bottom line. Bass players have been coded masculine, because historically men have predominated as bass players and bass lines are also “male” by virtue of the structural correspondences between the instrument’s low frequency and those of male voices (Clawson 1999, 203). The

instruments are also larger, and heavier to handle, and thus supposedly more suited to men's strength; also, the strings are thicker, and so tougher for smaller hands to play (204). Playing bass, until women entered the mix, has therefore traditionally been one social medium through which to perform and consolidate normatively gendered heterosexual identities. However, as an openly bisexual, female bass player, Ndegeocello, like other female guitar players, disrupts the gendered binary logic, and disciplinary force of this normative musical technique of the self.

But here the plot thickens: bass lines, it would seem, are more "feminine" than we might expect. For, according to one study of the alternative music scene (Clawson 1999), the bass guitar is also regarded by many male and female bass players as the subordinate, supporting instrument in rock band dynamics (Clawson 1999, 201-2). Correlatively, anyone (i.e. even *women*) can "master" its rudimentary techniques (199-200). In terms of subcultural semiotics then, bass playing occupies the subordinate "feminine" position in contrast to lead guitar playing, drumming, or vocals which offer the most potent signifiers of performed (musical) masculinity (201). Even more surprising, female bass players describe themselves as drawn to bass playing because it allows them to exercise their *innate* capacities to be "supportive" and nurturing (204-5). Bass playing also allows them to channel their "naturally" superior—that is, feminine—rhythmic intuition (205-6). However, complicating these gynocentric meanings even further is the pivotal measuring stick of *masculine*-coded virtuoso skill in bass players (204).

In typical trickster fashion—for tricksters are known for their androgynous or shifty gender identities (Smith 1997, 21)—Ndegeocello's musical bed-making exudes all these cultural meanings, especially because her skill at the bass is widely recognised, even if she does not aspire to the showy jazz, hard-rock, or alternative rock virtuosity of other bass players (eg. Jaco Pistorius, Victor Wooten, or even the alternative-masculinist bass virtuosity of Les Claypool; 2012 NPR interview).⁴¹ And so, this queerness of her bass lines, in their queering of gender-performative politics, certainly gives them discursively-political legs. But as I indicated in my preface to phase four, the rhetorical force of those beds takes us beyond the bedroom, beyond, that is, strictly sexual politics insofar as her bass lines are also broader cradles of de-colonial desire.

To be sure, most of the bedframes are built from very conventional bass line idioms—circular and/or descending patterns that are mainstays to pop-song languages of love. Such (harmonic) patterns can articulate erotic obsession or suggestively rock us back and forth.⁴² And very often, the bass lines show up first on the musical scene, and thus organise our desire. As such, the beds made are a kind of foreplay that gives desire a pulse and direction, a spatio-temporal groove. Ndegeocello's hooks, licks, and vamps draw us in, beckon us to open to the beloved, to the song's full-bodied thrall, but crucially, this erotic charm is hybrid: for climbing into these beds, if we really open to the full force of Ndegeocello's

⁴¹ For a fascinating analysis of gender politics and virtuosity in rock n' roll guitar performance practices, see Tuttle (2014). Tuttle analyses the guitar playing of Eddie Van Halen, Tom Morello, Les Claypool, and Ani DeFranco.

⁴² See footnote 43 below for examples of these Shulammitic bass lines.

songs, we are drawn beyond the sensual pleasure of the bass lines' caresses into politicized soundscapes. The standard erotic bass line conventions ignite and undergird more unconventional inter-weavings of romance and protest.⁴³ Beyond their erotic charge then (or precisely thanks to it), the bass lines do double duty as tools of political persuasion. Their rhetorical potency lies in their ability to register so deeply upon the listener; through their synchronic impact upon body, mind, and feeling, they add a holistically registered gravitas to these political messages. In doing so, they also "line out," materialise, and symbolise Lorde's erotic continuum (1978), the inter-animating spectrum of its sexual, political, and affective energies. In short, the bass line beds, whose over-arching banners are subaltern love, become the literal musical vanguards of a de-colonial eroticism—one that is intensely sensual yet politically "haunted." While her bass lines contribute forcefully to a queer sensuality or aesthetic, they also initiate and sustain love songs that appropriate and counter-appropriate romantic/erotic musical conventions for broader political commentary (discussed below). These musico-erotic beds, strewn with stranger hybrid fruit from the biblical text are the generative matrix for specifically hybrid love songs, ones that deconstruct and reconstruct the love song itself in terms that undermine the institutional work that love does in the public sphere.

C. Hybrid Model of Love Songs

Many of Ndegeocello's love songs are hybrid due to her perpetual identification and dis-identification with the artefact of Euro-American love. Through her queer, black, and female social location, her insider/outsider social status, she repeats, but with critical hybrid differences, love's formal and musical conventions. With her differential consciousness and tactical sign-reading, she exploits, through the medium of popular love songs, love's "double-voiced" semantics: she "de-colonises for black purposes a white term [i.e., love] 'by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has—and retains—its own orientation'" (Gates 1988, 50; citing Bakhtin 1973, 156). Ndegeocello voices in her songs the racialized, colonial historicity of love that universalist representations thereof obfuscate. And this double-voicedness colours the traces of Song imagery and themes I hear as well (as did Morrison's double-voiced novel, and Walker's metonymic economy). Such shuttling defamiliarises listeners with love's old guises. It de-naturalises them. And the oscillations *across* songs on any album—between themes of romance and social critique which bleed into each other—also helps to create this hybrid model of love and love songs. To listen to each album is to find oneself ravished by several gorgeous love songs but, like lilies among thorns, these bump up against songs bristling with socio-political critique.

⁴³ Here I would encourage readers to listen to the following: from *Plantation Lullabies* (1993), "I'm diggin' you," "Shootn' up an gettn' high," "Dred Loc," "Untitled" eliding into "Step into the Projects," "Soul on Ice," and "Two Lonely Hearts." From *Peace Beyond Passion* (1996), try "Mary Magdalene," "Make me Wanna' Holler," and, to a slightly lesser extent "Leviticus Faggot" (where the lead guitar has the main hook, but is shadowed by/shares some of its motivic content with a steady bass line). On *The World has Made me the Man of My Dreams* (2007), try "Relief: A Stripper Classic" (though that bed definitely has sharper, more metallic edges). On *Weather* (2011), try "Dead End" and "Dirty World". On *Comet, Come to Me* (2014), "Modern Times."

The most graphic example of this hybridity is the 1993 album *Plantation Lullabies*. Its soundscape condemns the racist, neo-colonial capitalist impediments to de-colonial love's fruition. Here, love's tenacity is historically inflected and articulated through the idioms of soul music—the soundtrack of civil rights—and through snippets of the Song of Songs. Soul music is also recuperated as the superlative metaphor for expressing a beloved's value. Track 2—"I'm diggin' you (like an old soul record)"⁴⁴—weds romance and protest, and sets the political stage; on a now global plantation, race "wars" are still being fought, and "black-on-black love" sustains the warriors.⁴⁵ Beat-down cops are a new strain of watchmen, chasing "brothers" who kill their own pain by "Shoot'n Up and Gett'n High" (Track 4). Track 4 further indicts the white corporate economics that create poverty, drug addiction, and a black self-loathing that manifests in a longing to be white (see also Track 8, "Soul on Ice"). In this landscape, the women are tough and take whom they want as lovers (Track 3, "If that's your boyfriend, he wasn't last night"). And religion-as-opiate reaches a new extreme in Track 4 through its allusions to finding God when he "O.D'd." The album's concrete jungle eclipses the Song's idyllic amatory setting of vineyards and gardens, and yet romantic and familial love still push through the pavement; for, on the inter-connected Tracks 6 ("Untitled") and 7 ("Step into the projects"), Ndegeocello steps *into* the projects to find love. There, the lover's beauty is without question racially inflected—it is composed from black bodies—thighs, hands, skin, and hair.⁴⁶ These two tracks offer a more detailed, composite portrait of project love, one grounded by a double-edged bass line, and by racialized echoes of the Song: "Untitled" describes without melody the unconventional beauty and defiant bonds of love that sustain two lovers. At the heart of this beauty and love is the "unblemished" blackness of the woman and the mutual love and care they share.

This tender *recitatif* is immediately engulfed by its more neo-colonial context when the muted, threadbare, six-note bass line of "Untitled" (Track 6) swells more emphatically as we step seamlessly into the next track, "Step into the Projects." In "Untitled," it is she who cradles him with her hands, and then later in "Step into the Projects," with her thighs. And it is he who enters a troubled dream space in which (as both tracks repeatedly remind us) desire's chronic ambivalence (Berlant 2012) has racio-economic roots: after he rests his head on her "young black thighs" so that their growing fetus will absorb his love along with his tears, he seems to fall asleep and enter a freer realm. But in this plantation lullaby, even that utopian space is haunted by slave history, for the love he finds there has an ambivalent point of reference—its sweetness is like "sugarcane." Desire's ambivalence is also in evidence insofar as his dream includes ambiguous images of him fleeing mother

⁴⁴ Ndegeocello deliberately recuperates funk and soul on this album (and elsewhere) as powerful "archival" signifiers with which to resist the global homogenization of black music. It is easy to forget that funk itself has a political history. James Brown's funky "Say it Loud: I'm Black and I'm Proud" (1968) energized the rise of the Black Power Movement (Brackett, "Funk").

⁴⁵ See Dunning (2005) for a critique of Ndegeocello's seemingly exclusionary (or reverse racist) sentiments here, and their contribution to broader black nationalist themes on this album (234-6).

⁴⁶ See also the preceding Track 5, "Dred Loc," where the singer is entranced by a lover's raven hair and assuages his weariness from "the world of confrontation" by repeatedly running her fingers through them and "rubbing down" his body.

and baby—a project train whisks him away in his shell-toes shoes, as he grooves and moves on, like a jazz singer.

Tracks 9 through 12 seem less eccentric. Ndegeocello leads us through four rather benign romantic forays that promise escape to greener pastures, leisurely pastimes. In “Call Me” (Track 9), a lover invites the beloved to “play house,” then be king and queen for a day. In “Outside your Door” (Track 10), a lovesick soul has time to pine away on a beloved’s doorstep. In “Picture Show,” a “hopeless romantic” implores a beloved to go to the movies and neck in the back row. But these more uptown fantasy spaces are not the album’s ultimate resting place. For on the final track, “Two Lonely Hearts (on the Subway),” our trickster beloved takes flight again and ultimately leaves us in transit. She begins an open-ended search for love on a subway train, and apolitical prospects need not apply: singing in the first person, our siren seeks someone who will sing the blues with her, read Shange or *The Voice*,⁴⁷ and listen to *Strictly Roots*⁴⁸ while they “daydream” together. Her preferred pick-up line/refrain sounds like an activist’s slogan, and perhaps does double-duty as the moral of the album’s story: being black is not easy, but with love, she can “rise above.” It is a love thoroughly saturated with and materialised through protest music and a racial heritage of dangerous memory.

Nine years later, on her album “Cookie: The Anthropological Mix Tape,” Ndegeocello will roam the projects again and sing of love’s hybridity—the inevitable confluence of romance and protest. Accompanied on this journey with vocal samples of famous poets’ and activists’ writings (e.g. Angela Davis, Etheridge Night, Countee Cullen, Gil Scott-Heron, June Jordan), the postcolonial Shulammitic threads her way down “Dead Nigga Boulevard” (Tracks 1 and 17), and into Washington DC’s “Berry Farms” housing project (Track 6). There, she dramatizes the wages of black intramural homophobia: the singer confronts a closeted lesbian who has rejected her by defaulting to a heterosexual liaison, and the jilted singer’s closing sneer about this woman’s superlative skills at cunnilingus speaks desire’s forbidden truth in defiance of systemic homophobia. Refusing to let poverty and homophobia drown love, on the next track, “Trust,” she unpacks this truth in even more detail. The song is an unctuous lesbian hymn to a lover’s body. Here then, a graphically erotic love song feeds the broader critique of interlocking structures of oppression that the whole album anatomises (cf. Mockus 2007).

Conclusion: “I love him because he has a song”⁴⁹

I identify this inter-animation of romance and politics, this de-colonial reconfiguration of love-as-artifact, on all of Ndegeocello’s albums—even those that might seem like purely interpersonal, confessional musings about love’s vicissitudes. Ndegeocello’s oeuvre evokes the profound historicity of love, most especially through her vacillating identification and dis-identification with its

⁴⁷ *The Voice* is a black British newspaper (est. 1982 by Jamaican Val McCalla), which, as its name implies, offers a medium for promoting black culture, politics, and solidarity.

⁴⁸ *Strictly Roots* is a reggae band assembled by white reggae artist and lead vocalist Ras Jahson, originating first in New Mexico, but migrating to Sonoma County in 1986. Jahson died in 1998 after which his son took over the band.

⁴⁹ *Beloved*, 250.

Western romantic conventions. When we climb into her bass line beds, even beyond the queer erotic delights on offer, we are discursively initiated into an amatory habitus of de-colonial consciousness, sign-reading, and knowledge production. Her love songs communicate just how situated, partial, and politico-historically constructed love really is over against songs that rhetorically enforce its allegedly eternal, unconditional, and universal varieties. She charts a different history of romance, in which love is continually threatened by racial terror and inflected by intersectionally-composed sexual and gender differences. Correlatively, her songs highlight how past and present colonial modes of production create and shape love, govern its forms, and its conditions of possibility. She teaches listeners that love and its conventions have a violent social memory, and that because of this, our languages of love are haunted. And through her pungent, decontextualized tastes of the Song of Songs, her Shulammitic trickster pedagogy renders this Song a hybrid love song that can awaken de-colonial love.

Like Morrison's novel, Walker's archive, and Sandoval's methodology, the tales of love that Ndegeocello orchestrates, with help from strategically-excavated protest singers and musical genres, are also meant to offer concrete and imaginative space within which to recall dangerous memories, and mobilise political resistance. These too are the energies of affective resistance, the *hybrid* erotic ache, which her bass lines subtend. Ndegeocello thus grafts Song more resoundingly within a subaltern musical discourse of love as a cultural practice.⁵⁰ Also like Morrison's novel, Walker's archive, and Sandoval's model of love, Ndegeocello's songs and their queered pastoral accoutrements are eccentric passages that afford new ways of seeing, hearing, and understanding amatory themes in Song, and, by extension, the "nature" of sacred eroticism. Including all these works as vital entries within the discourse of sacred eroticism can redirect uses of the [sacred] erotic (to paraphrase Audre Lorde) into de-colonial critiques of love as a Western imperialist disciplinary force.

⁵⁰ It is entirely possible that, as a white Western academic, I have colonized Meshell Ndegeocello (and Morrison, Walker, and Sandoval, for that matter) for professional gain. But here I take heart from an example set by Erin Runions (2006). Runions enlisted the speeches of young black men protesting the prison industrial complex, and the autobiographically-inflected poetry of "now-escaped Black Panther Assata Shakur" to push biblical scholars engaging autobiographical criticism to cultivate a more self-critical awareness of the oppressive, political/hegemonic dynamics that render autobiographical discourse an insidious mode of "hyperreal social control" (2006, 187-9). For Runions, the critical intervention performed by the marginalized African American voices, life stories, and poems that she encountered and shared in that scholarly conversation constituted a form of "guerilla exegesis" (2006, 185, citing Osayande Obery Hendricks' term). It has been my hope to enlist Ndegeocello et al. to do likewise vis à vis particular trends in Song criticism, and those in amatory and sacred erotic religious discourse.

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