Small Movements

Queer Blues Epistemologies in Cherry Muhanji’s *Her*

[Monkey] Dee entered the Chesterfield, went up to the bar for a drink and stood surveying the crowd. Suddenly his attention was attracted by the tip of a silver wing-toed shoe and white silk stockings emptying out from under white satin trousers. But the neck, lifting it like a pink flamingo, dressed as he was in a white coat with a dark pink handkerchief billowing from the breast pocket, a daring silk scarf, with bits of the same pink, draped from his neck. . . . Dee stood . . . forever ready to turn instinctively to him. And only to him.

—*Her* 105–7

In the above excerpt from Cherry Muhanji’s 1990 novel *Her*, a gay male pimp, Monkey Dee, turns his attention to Kali—by day a wife and mother, by night a cross-dressing “gay boy.” Monkey Dee encounters Kali in Chesterfields, the local gay bar where performers sing the blues, a range of sexualities reign, and gender fluidity is the norm. *Her* is set in a working-class African American neighborhood in Detroit in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The novel’s residents are primarily transplants from the rural South, “farmers turned factory workers” who, in the face of segregation and discrimination, have created their own counterpublic spaces, including gay bars where they can practice their newfound Black urban identity.¹ These characters embrace gender and sexual irresolution through the blues, an epistemology that
explores gender identity and gives it meaning apart from anatomy or the expected constructions of “lesbian” and “gay” identities. This is especially evident because the main character’s masculine gender transformation is not attributed to lesbian identification. In Muhanji’s novel, Detroit’s Black queer community enacts a blues epistemology of gender that communicates a collective sense of possibility despite the continued pressure to define one’s gender according to dominant conceptions of the body and identity. In the novel’s descriptions of performance, the blues become an embodied and thus highly mobile and ephemeral archive of Black communal nurturing of and support for sexual and gender transgression, a theme that also continues through the next two chapters.

The bars, portrayed in the novel as blues spaces, are key sites for Kali’s journey from wife and mother to “boy.” Their presence in the text as spaces of queer sexuality and gender transformation also suggests that they are key to a queer understanding of migration. The novel reconsiders the African American Great Migration (1914–45), from the physical movement of southern migrants to northern and midwestern cities to a movement in sexual and (trans)gender possibilities. Her troubles the very categories and assumptions of migration as a geographic phenomenon enacted by normatively gendered subjects. Here African American migration becomes a transformative process representative of Black subjectivity in motion, a process that produces gender- and sexual-variant identities that blossom in the bars. It also presents Black queer kinship networks and communities as survival strategies to negotiate the transition to the industrial North and Midwest. Her’s insistence on the post–World War II Midwest as a site of Black sexual and gender transformative culture also unsettles the historical narrative of Harlem as the privileged center of Black queer culture. Her’s focus on gender as a fluid construct in this midwestern urban setting suggests that gender transformation is a fundamental part of the African American migration experience in general.

The novel’s temporal setting in the late 1950s and early 1960s also produces characters that are invested in the initial formation of a political Black identity based on the demand for civil rights. It portrays the transition from the African American Jazz Age’s expressive insight on race relations to the political terrain of the burgeoning civil rights era, which was dominated by a discourse of rights. Muhanji’s text suggests that the transition from expressive culture to rights-based culture required that Black people put aside the gender play and public sexual fluidity of the previous era in order to consolidate “authentic” and “appropriately gendered” political subjects.

The novel’s plot centers on the “blues people” of an industrial Black neighborhood in Detroit, referenced by its main street, John R. Street. The
main character is Sunshine, a young light-skinned woman who marries into a dark-skinned family and who recently arrived in Detroit from Alabama. Amidst hostility from her female in-laws, Sunshine gives birth to a son but is enticed to the street life by the fast cars, dazzling lights, hustlers, and excitement that she sees unfold every night from her bedroom window on John R. Street. Pushed to rage by the intimidating and antagonistic response she receives from her in-laws, Sunshine leaves her husband’s home, reincarnating herself as an aggressive and trash-talking alter ego named Kali. Local nightclub owner and formerly famous blues performer, Wintergreen, provides a home for Sunshine/Kali and her child. With Wintergreen’s help, Kali begins to explore aspects of gender and sexual play through dressing in men’s clothes in order to participate as a gay “boy” in the night scene along John R. Street. In the end, brutally beaten, Sunshine/Kali escapes and asks for assistance from the women on John R. Street. In the course of helping her, the women demand that Kali strip in order to prove that she is “truly” a woman and therefore one of them. At this point, all gender possibility and multiplicity are collapsed into normative representations in a reenactment of the closing of the archives in favor of respectable genders. In spite of the violent reinstating of normative gender at the end of the novel, Muhanji’s detailed representation of the gender transgression supported in urban blues spaces of the queer Black community makes her novel unique in the history of African American migration narratives, particularly because it allows for a queer revision of the tragic mulatta, one of the genre’s most enduring tropes.

Unsettling African American Migration Literature and Black Queer History

For the African American migrants whom the novel represents, mass migration in the twentieth century came from a political urgency to remove themselves from the oppressive conditions of the South. Popular accounts of African American migrants’ motivations for leaving the South argue that the end of formal slavery ushered in a new phase of rural labor bondage in the form of sharecropping, while severe racist violence, epitomized by lynching, skyrocketed. The rise of violence combined with promises of higher wages and better working conditions elsewhere led to a mass exodus from the South. The period of time from 1914 until the 1930s is known as the Great Migration, but Black settlement in the North, West, and Midwest slowed down during the Depression and then climbed again after World War II.
Muhanji (born Jannette Washington) is an African American lesbian fiction writer and scholar. Her experiences growing up in post–World War II Detroit have been the cornerstone of her fiction, including the collection of short stories that Muhanji copublished with Kesho Scot and Egyirba High titled *Tight Spaces* (1987). In African American literary history, *Her* is part of a larger body of work that represents mid-twentieth-century migration from African American women’s perspectives. Previous post–World War II migration texts by Black women, like Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), depict the city as sexually dangerous for Black women, precluding any prospect of sexual choice or gender play as part of the survival and coping strategies or as a mechanism for creating community. *Her* contributes to migration literature by reformulating the geography of Black South–North migration in terms of gender transformation and experimentation.

Literary critical readings of African American women’s migration novels depend upon a twofold set of assumptions about the Black migrant: that the southern community is the authentic center of Black (women’s) culture; and that the city has a destructive effect on Black domestic, sexual, and working lives. In her 1999 book *Who Set You Flowin’,* Farah Jasmine Griffin discusses the migration novel as split into three stages: flight from the violence of the South, confrontation with the urban landscape, and navigation of the urban landscape. In Griffin’s configuration, the North is hostile and destructive to the Black migrant, leading to decay, alienation, and dissolution. Borrowing from Patricia Hill Collins, Griffin emphasizes the role of creating safe spaces in African American women’s literature as a stand-in for the southern folkways that are invoked through family, the church, and the domestic sphere. The safe space is nurturing, healing, and a retreat—places in the city where “rituals can be enacted to invoke the presence of the ancestor in the North.” In the figurative sense, narrative safe spaces are resistant narrative forms, like songs, food, oral culture, and dream sequences. Griffin configures a dichotomy between the city and the South in a way that genders the two geographies: the North is male—hard, uncaring, and unloving—and the South is female—nurturing, caring, waiting, and open for the migrant’s return.

Other feminist critics have suggested that it is important to acknowledge the elements of the South that are effective and redemptive, along with the elements of the North that are creative and productive in African American migration literature. Feminist literary critic Madhu Dubey argues that African American literature critics’ concerted focus on the southern folk aesthetic brings about a “discursive displacement” of the crisis in the literary representation of the city. She states that “if black community is perceived
to be irreparably fractured in the contemporary city, the folk domain of the rural south” is the only domain where Black community can be validated and legitimized. 16 Ann DuCille has also offered that there are many different ways in which to interpret African American literature, reminding us that folk traditions are not the only authentic source of African American women’s literature or culture. 17

As a migration novel that represents the city as a space of growth and potential for Black women, Her goes against the dominant memory of travel and migration as a Black male phenomenon. Angela Davis argues that “territorial mobility was a normal mode of male existence” in the post-slavery era, but the blues furnishes an affirmation for women to “keep moving” in their own right. 18 The novel’s reliance on a blues epistemology is a reminder of blues women’s legacy of travel, movement, and self-recreation in the North as well as the South.

Her also continues to question the perception that the South is the sole wellspring of Black women’s culture. In fact, a major contribution of Muhanji’s novel is to represent Detroit as a dynamic space for the cultivation of non-normative or non-fixed genders. Several characters are gender variant, from the “passing women” and cross-dressing butch lesbian bar patrons to the transwomen dancing for male patrons. 19 Through the use of the blues epistemology as a source of movement, transformation, and sexual agency, Muhanji’s novel troubles the very categories and assumptions of migration as a geographic phenomenon of normatively gendered subjects moving from South to North.

Leaving the “Beloved Community” for Female Company

As a revision of the traditional African American women’s migration story, Her does not allow for a nostalgic rendering of the South. The novel illustrates the historical literary critical nostalgia for “beloved community” 20 by presenting a complicated narrative of the South and the North that highlights the ambivalence Black migrants feel for each setting. The novel demythologizes the southern rural communities, recognizing that these spaces are rife with internal conflicts and restricted roles for Black women. Her also questions the classic literary gesture of representing Black community in the country while chaos and isolation characterize the city. The text raises issues surrounding the kinds of pleasures that are unavailable in the traditional configurations of southern Black female identity. It also speaks to how the South is unsuccessful in sustaining or taming “unnatural” pleasures. By focusing on these elements, the novel reveals how Black female desires are
circumscribed by the southern legacy of the plantation economy, which relies on Black women’s reproductive labor to sustain itself, even in the aftermath of slavery. As Barbara Omolade observes, “[E]ven after the end of slavery when the white patriarch receded, maleness and femaleness continued to be defined by patriarchal structures.”

Sunshine/Kali’s mother-in-law, Charlotte, leaves her sisters, Lizzie and Laphonya, on the family farm to follow her ill-fated dream of having a singing career. The only sustained memory of the South comes from Lizzie and Laphonya, two of the novel’s secondary characters. Their memories constitute the novel’s only representation of southern blues. Unlike most accounts of northern migration in African American literature, in this story the sisters flee not only racist violence but also patriarchal control of their bodies. The “better life” they seek is contingent not only on jobs but also on the sexual and social company of other women. The novel characterizes plantation production as a destructive and “disfiguring” economic and social structure that warps Black women’s sexualities and stunts gender development. This repression creates a desperate and incestuous relationship between the two sisters. But when Lizzie migrates to Detroit because she cannot bear the shame of her incestuous relations with her sister, Laphonya follows because she cannot bear life without Lizzie. Together, the sisters leave in search of alternatives to a biological destiny of endless physical, emotional, sexual, and reproductive labor. They journey toward female company, companionship, and connection with other Black women.

The sisters are pressured into sexual relationships with brothers from a neighboring farm. Named after the thirteen original states of the United States, the Jones brothers represent the corrupt promise of America as a nation of self-creation. Lizzie, Laphonya, and the Jones brothers inherit a belief in progress through the cultivation of the land, a sentiment reminiscent of the early promise that emancipated slaves would receive “40 acres and a mule” to begin their new lives. Laphonya recollects their southern life as being primarily concerned with maintaining their land inheritance, which becomes synonymous with restoring patriarchal lines of succession. The future of the Jones farm was thrown into crisis by the lack of available women to bear “chil’rens to carry on they names” (69). Laphonya literally bears that burden by giving birth to thirteen children, one by each of the neighboring farm’s thirteen male brothers. Laphonya remembers that “Lizzie and me wadn’t about no marryin’. We was a-bout our farm” (67). Preserving Black economic autonomy and kinship is the primary concern of the sisters.

In their recollection of the South, since slavery had disrupted Black patrilineal inheritance, Lizzie and Laphonya were under family pressure to recuperate patriarchal kinship structures by producing children. However,
Lizzie refuses the patriarchal right to her reproduction and denies “being owned and taken by any man, even if he had black skin.” Lizzie eschews any sexual encounter except as a means to bear a child, eventually choosing New Hampshire to be the father of her child. Black women within the rural Black community often defied the restrictions on their womanhood and sexuality. For example, when her child dies, Lizzie removes her body from an economy of reproduction, stating, “[S]ince the Lord took the onlyest [child] I had. I ain’t gon’ bother no mo’” (68). Laphonya remembers, “Each brotha would go and try to convince Lizzie to change her mind. She say no. And I’d say, ‘That’s my sistah. I’ll blow the first fucker’s balls off who tries to take it’” (69). In fierce protection of her sister, Laphonya submits to populating the farm with workers who will carry their fathers’ names. She becomes the primary sexual sacrifice to the demands of the farm. For Laphonya heterosex is an obligatory act for the purpose of maintaining their way of life; it is devoid of romance and pleasure.

The relationship between Lizzie, Laphonya, and the Jones brothers is the novel’s first depiction of Black collectivity, which is contaminated with a legacy of gender dynamics inherited from an enduring plantation system that reduced Black people to laboring bodies and women to the reproducers of those workers. For biologically female people, this labor process multiplies: they are workers in the field and in the domestic sphere, as well as physical reproducers of the labor force. Instead of a glorious “beloved community,” the sisters recount a grim tale of serial childbirth through breeding. As noted in the previous chapter (and in subsequent ones), the dominant “mode of Desire” is male use of Black women’s bodies sexually, including in the field. There is no room for the sisters to articulate their own pleasure or desire. Laphonya is reduced to the basic physical functioning of her anatomy and the gross mechanics of heterosexual intercourse, while Lizzie cuts herself off from physical intimacy. The demands of the farm lock the sisters into a system of plantation labor in the sense of both the physical work they had to perform and the imperative to produce offspring to cultivate the land. Laphonya recalls how she chose childbirth over farm work, stating, “Farmin’ ain’t no life fo’ no women’s. Plowin’ fields like a damn mule. . . . I ain’t no mule” (68). If she is not a “beast of burden” in the field, her only other option is to be a “mule” of domestic labor. Lizzie and Laphonya continue to operate in a plantation economy where the destinies of their bodies are governed by the dictates of agricultural work. Laphonya’s motivation for heterosexual relations comes from a desire to have extra hands to work the farm, not to have male emotional or sexual companionship.

Cycles of reproduction and production are the options that the South offers the Black female body. The environment of the farm circumscribes
the sisters’ access to other narratives besides work and reproduction. Despite the daunting task of farming alone, the sisters are unwilling to give up the farm: “How could Negroes leave they farm? The onlyest thang to own in the world?” (70). Laphonya asks the rhetorical question, “What was a body to do?” (68). To Laphonya, her body is in service of the land; she becomes like the earth itself, fertile and yielding to the farmer’s hands. She cannot fathom that ownership of her body itself is more precious than owning a tract of land.

Laphonya falls into the same pattern of excessive childbirth that entrapped the Jones family’s mother. In Laphonya’s recollection of the past, she admits to being conscious of her similarity to the Jones family matriarch in her excessive production of offspring, exclaiming, “Well, I be damn! There I was repeatin’ Sarah Jones” (69). However, she is unwilling to change her circumstances, believing it to be her fate, until Lizzie’s planned escape from the farm threatens to leave her as the sole female presence. Desire for a break in gender roles creates a longing for female company. The sisters suffer from isolation—separated from the possibility of women lovers and cut off from heterosexual pleasures. Laphonya remembers that “[no] other women’s would come to where we was stayin’ fo’ no length of time. They would come but none would stay” (69). As the only women in their closed world, the sisters hungered for female companionship.

Trapped on the farm without other women and faced with mechanical and reproductive heterosexual interactions, incest appears as the only viable option to resist their complete disintegration into sexual abjection. While Laphonya gives birth to thirteen children whom she does not care about, Lizzie and New Hampshire’s only child dies at birth. When her breasts are engorged with milk, Laphonya relieves the pressure by sucking out Lizzie’s milk. Lizzie and Laphonya’s encounter is different from the lactation scene in the previous chapter, where the protagonist is invited to join white kinship. In *Her*, the sisters, already isolated, become enmeshed in an incestuous relationship.

Ostensibly, Laphonya sucks on her sister’s breasts because, according to the customs described in the novel, men are not allowed into the birthing house before the quarter moon. For Laphonya the priority is that Black women’s space and culture are preserved as inviolable and sacred. Rural women’s culture (as represented in the novel) becomes the mechanism by which the sisters enter into a sexual relationship. But the erotics of their exchange in the birthing house haunts the sisters years later, as the two women share the same bed from the time they were children and continue to sleep together into puberty and adulthood and across the country from Alabama until the novel opens in Detroit. Lizzie recalls their sexual history
with despair and regret. She accuses Laphonya of never caring “what the Lord say” (73). Laphonya responds by insisting that sisterly bonds supersede the laws of God: “I don’t give two shits ’bout ya” (73).

In an effort to reconcile the experience without shame, Laphonya demands that they review the facts of the evening of the stillbirth:

“What happen when a calf die, Lizzie?” Lizzie didn’t say anything.
“What happen goddammit!”
“You git another calf to suck,” Lizzie said under her breath. (74)

The incident takes place in the exclusive women’s environment of the birthing hut, making a safe space for the two sisters to share erotic intimacy without the interference of men. Laphonya demonstrates her dominant role in the relationship as she badgers Lizzie into admitting that the procedure was necessary. To Laphonya, maintaining the integrity of the women’s space is part of the natural order of things. She uses the example of the calf to illustrate to Lizzie that what they did was not deviant but part of farm life. Lizzie weakly responds that Laphonya could have gotten New Hampshire to suck out the milk. Laphonya challenges Lizzie’s perception that the incident could have been avoided by saying that the birthing house “ain’t no place for mens. . . . How we gon’ act a fool and disregard everything we know” (74). Laphonya maintains the importance of the sanctity of local women’s customs by refusing men’s entry into the birthing haven. Laphonya’s strict reliance on Black women’s traditions is the conduit for her sexual bond with Lizzie. She yells, “You said git another calf to suck not a bull!” (74).

Lizzie’s confession that men are inappropriate in the women’s space and her acknowledgment of the incident directly contradicts her Christian beliefs, positioning Black southern culture as a powerful guardian that Blacks should respect and remember in the North. Women’s folk traditions are no match for the power of Christianity, leaving Lizzie with a sense of debasement and shame. Laphonya reminds her that remaining true to Christian guidelines would have meant working herself to death: “Being good coulda cost ya yo’ life” (75). Being good does indeed cost the sisters many hard and lonely years.

By leaving her children behind and traveling to Detroit, Laphonya escapes the restrictions of motherhood. Lizzie maintains her dedication to maternity, living in shame and regret and mourning the loss of her child, even in the North, where she is determined to deny any sexual feelings and refuses all nonreproductive sex. Laphonya, on the other hand, finally gathers the courage to pursue her own gendered and sexual identity in Detroit. Her moving away from the reproductive imperatives of Black plantation and
patriarchal forces is a signifier for travel as a mode of freedom for a Black female subject.

If the South is a site of foreclosed possibilities, alternatively, the North is set as the opposite, where gender and sexual identities can be created. In *Her*, space explicitly structures social relations. Movement away from the rural South gives birth to the transformation of Black communities from agrarian, plantation cultures mired in the biological function of reproduction, to vibrant communities of people in control of their own sexualities, enjoying their desires and moving with the ability to define their own genders, at least in the closeness of the Black community. In the North, they find a version of blues culture that is distinct from the blues of the South, which Clyde Woods and others describe as being about resisting racial oppression. In the blues spaces of the North, they find a place where non-conforming gender identities are part of everyday Black communal practice.

**Blues Epistemologies of Black Queer Genders**

With the influx of the African American population into already overcrowded urban areas came a rise in white anxiety about Black moral degeneracy. Southern migrants were blamed for a wide variety of ills plaguing northern cities, including alcoholism, venereal disease, crime, and “illegitimate” pregnancies. Scholarship on these northern and midwestern communities labeled Black city inhabitants “immoral” and defined Black communities and families as “pathological.” The toxicity of the city was couched in terms of patriarchal collapse, where Black women develop habits of being too “controlling and aggressive” and Black men are emasculated and absent, which breeds economic failure.

Increasing panic surrounding the “breakdown” of African American families and the rhetoric of family restoration and community building may be part of the reason that representations of African American queer life have been narrowly circumscribed to Harlem and New York and have been set primarily during the period of the Great Migration. The period between the World Wars is also considered to be the peak of the Harlem Renaissance, when a new generation of Black writers and thinkers concentrated on the cultural expression of the bold and unashamed “New Negro” to articulate the terms of social equality. Historians place special emphasis on the 1920s and 1930s in New York as the premier time and location for Black queer life and culture. Because of this historical focus on Harlem blues culture in the 1920s and 1930s, it has come to exclusively symbolize Black lesbian and gender-transgressive cultures transatlantically. *Her* upsets that assum-
tion. While it uses Jazz Age Harlem as an epistemological resource and an inspiration for the continued exploration of Black genders and sexualities, it does not stop there. *Her* goes on to represent interracial bisexual relationships and complicated vectors of gay male desires.

The novel’s post–World War II setting provides the opportunity to investigate the interaction between historical and cultural critical interpretations of queer Black culture, providing a context for the novel’s heavy emphasis on the blues and blues culture. The development of American urban centers is often theorized as a constitutive element in the rise of gay and lesbian subcultures and gender transgression. For Black women, this assertive stance is most frequently epitomized in the recognition of female blues performers. Audacious sirens such as Ma Rainey, Lucille Bogan, and Gladys Bentley enacted their sexual autonomy onstage, deliberately exploding boundaries of acceptable female public behavior by flaunting their sexualities in live performance and recording raunchy lyrics that flagrantly announced their sexual appetites for both women and men.

The expectations of respectable domestic life are discarded in blues lyrics and in the lifestyles of female blues artists. Assumptions that women’s lyrics would be circumscribed to deal mostly with male–female relationships, marriage, child rearing, and romantic love are contested by lyrics and performances that undermine a politics of respectability to make room for the expression of possibility. The queer traditions of great blues artists like Ma Rainey who, with songs like “Prove It on Me Blues,” pushed the heterosexual and gender normative assumptions of the genre. As Angela Davis argues, blues by women and women performers, lyrically and in the performers themselves, presented alternative principles of autonomy and movement. For Black women, freedom of movement had a political urgency given the gendered responsibilities that bound women to the domestic sphere, marking a difference between Black male and female conditions. Demands of family and home coupled with the memory of chained and enslaved ancestors make mobility a prized privilege for Black women.

In *Her*, the blues occasions the creation of autonomous Black queer spaces and allows Black women to enact a politics of possibility through gender transgression. The text highlights the assumptions of “real” forms of gender, commenting on the illusion of “natural” gender before queer theoretical suppositions about the discursive properties of gender emerged in academic settings. A cornerstone of the novel’s theoretical arc is an elaborate description of both male–to–female and female–to–male gender performance. The text not only expands notions of Black womanhood to embrace female masculinity, but it also challenges the reader to understand male–to–female (trans) femininity as an integral part of a constellation of Black womanhood.
The novel’s innovative work of troubling the category of woman invokes the archives of the blues in order to recall the multiply gendered bodies that have existed as constitutive members of Black life.

The reliance on the terms “man” and “woman” for coherence and stability renders Black queerly gendered people virtually untraceable in the traditional archives. Gender-variant people are often misidentified as “lesbian” or “gay,” misnamed according to anatomy instead of identity, or forgotten altogether, making it difficult to reconstruct the presence of gender-nonconforming people. The attention to the vernacular or “grassroots archives” of Black queer memory reacquaints the unintelligible with the intelligible. By this I mean that vernacular archives remind Black people of the structural position of Blackness as irresolvable in relation to dominant gender. The blues is the vernacular archive that the novel writes “with and against,”

41 contributing to an archive of Black lesbian fiction that both preserves and transforms the memory of the Midwest in the 1950s and early 1960s as embracing irresolution and affirming gender transgression.

Of course, the North has its own patriarchal traps and residues of slavery, one of which is the domestic sphere and its expectations of maternal fidelity and sacrifice. Another is the virulent antagonism between Black women based on skin-color hierarchies. The novel situates the blues space as an alternative to the drudgery of the domestic and the concomitant gender binaries in heterosexual and patriarchal structures. It is also a space where Black people can reinvent and heal old wounds of jealousy and hostility structured by racist paradigms that created a light- and dark-skinned split between Black women. The novel suggests that blues is a language and a practice that can facilitate the emergence of Black queer subjectivities and release them from legacies of slavery.

The novel’s main protagonist, Sunshine, wants to break free of her bonds to the domestic sphere—as a wife and the mother of her “pretty brown” son—and enter into the leisure and “play” spaces of urban Detroit. Sunshine was instructed by her mother to reject working-class Black people as beneath her and to aspire to bourgeois status. Sunshine’s first chance of escape came in the form of marrying Brother, the son of former Alabama dirt farmers Miss Charlotte (Lizzie and Laphonya’s sister) and King Solomon. Her mother-in-law, Charlotte, compels her to find satisfaction in her domestic life and be satiated by her wifely duties of reproducing and raising another Ford Motor Company worker. Both options mean she must find pleasure in capitalism, either as the wife of the bourgeois capitalist of her mother’s dreams or as the mother of the factory worker. Sunshine wants to escape the prison of domesticity and maternal obligation, feminine expectations, and matrimonial sex. It is not the rhythm of the Ford factory that propels
her but the beat of the informal economy of the street. Sunshine/Kali is attracted to the bustle, language, tempo, and pulse of John R. Street and away from the deluge of domesticity and reproduction. Neither her worker husband nor her new infant son interests her. She is attracted to those who sell their bodies and peddle hope (numbers runners), to industrial workers like her husband and his family. During the day, Sunshine watches John R. Street bustle with workers still connected to their southern roots, symbolized by a figurative “umbilical cord . . . steeped in memory deep inside the psyche” that acts as symbolic “lashes and other chains” (40), tying these workers to the drudgery of labor. The “dislocated aunts went to the right with their leather shopping bags . . . and store bought shoes with the sides slit to release corns” (40). The men “went to the left, toward the plant. This time it was metal they picked, not cotton” (40). Reeling from the memory of the lash, northern migrants found themselves to be wage-slave laborers in another capacity.

Still trapped in her domestic cell, Sunshine watches the street at night, longing to be a part of the “black velvet star-studded night that ran along John R where the beautiful people lived and played” (36). She desires to be enveloped in Blackness, to walk down John R. Street in total harmony with the rhythm of the street, the flashing lights, and the hustlers. Captivated by the sounds of John R. Street’s more colorful inhabitants, she trains herself on urban gender expression by watching the hustlers on the strip. The lives of the street workers and hustlers coexist with those of the performers and queers. The nocturnal street life seduces Sunshine into a distinctly queer realm. In preparation for her public life, she ventures into the alternative spaces of bars, where the red-light district and the residential areas collide. She watches the prostitutes, hustlers, and pimps on John R. Street, taking in the details of their clothing and mesmerized by the rhythm of their gender expression as well as their language.

Sometimes, after Brother fell asleep and the baby was between pulls at her breast, she rose and looked out the window into the night. The black velvet star-studded night that ran along John R where the beautiful people lived and played. Lavish women in rhinestone face, queen lace stockings, and satin dresses that hugged wonderful asses, were all dressed up with everywhere to go! Some with smooth-talking pimps checking their early evening traps, their bodies silk-suited, hiding jewel-encrusted dicks. (36)

As Sunshine watches, it becomes clearer that in order to be a part of the life of the street, she must also become part of the gender play that she sees. Sunshine wants at once to be one of the “lavish women” and to be a
“smooth-talking pimp.” Her desire to join the displays of urban sexuality that she witnesses from the safety of her home demonstrates how the “ghetto” can be at once a place of violence and exploitation and one of play and pleasure. Muhanji’s Detroit is split between the “respectable” working-class domestic sphere and the public “ghetto” street life. The banality of industrial toil in the motor plants and the drudgery of housekeeping and motherhood are set against the ostensibly shiny and exciting life “in the streets.” The fact that much of the activity at night on John R. Street takes place in the seedy underbelly of the city also makes it removed from sexual and gendered restraints.

_Her_ anticipates transgender identity and drag stage performance as a primary site for theorizing gender, underscoring the illusion of “real” gender in brief depictions of male-to-female performers at a gay night club, a drag king competition, and a night at Wintergreen’s featuring Black queer female attendees. The gay bar is Sunshine’s first stop on her search for a gender identity other than what is available to her in the domestic realm. She uses the male-to-female performers as a model to understand femininity. When she does venture out into the nightlife, she goes to Chesterfield’s, the neighborhood gay bar, wearing the same clothes as the performers in the bar, looking like “a satin doll with a wonderful ass” (38). When she tries to befriend the performers, they look at her with jealousy because their bodies could never be as “real” as hers. But what is an authentic woman’s body, and how do you know it when you see it?

The physical differences between “real men” and “real women” become blurred, and therefore lines are drawn based on gendered practices of looking. What makes the patrons “men” is that they are entitled to penetrate scopically the transfeminine performers. Distinctions between the women that “real men . . . fucked and re-fucked before coming out for the evening” and the (trans)women in the “sculptured asses with the G-strings”(39) they see at the bar melt away as the patrons sexually desire the performers. In Chesterfield’s, straight manhood is an iterative and scopic practice manifested by male patrons looking at the femininity that is produced for their pleasure. Kali’s “wonderful ass” calls attention to the levels of performance and illusion in the seamless and nonqueer heterosexuality performed by the female impersonators and the male bar patrons, and thus the women performers reject her. Sunshine’s time with the male-to-female performers at Chesterfield’s precedes her transition to Kali, so she does not yet have the vernacular syntax to produce the gender expression necessary to become part of the life on John R. Street. Thus, the newly formed Kali (Sunshine’s childhood alter ego) enlists the help of local blues artist Ricky Wintergreen.
Wintergreen becomes Kali’s second mother. She is much more loving and caring than Sunshine’s birth mother, Viola, a light-skinned “Georgia peach” who resented living in the “housing project on the near east side of Detroit” (17). Viola is particularly vigilant of the way Sunshine speaks, berating her daughter for any signs of Black vernacular expression. She screams at Sunshine that “only niggers use be for everything. I be this and I be that. You will not!” (16). By prohibiting Sunshine’s Black cultural expression, Viola forces Sunshine to push her Black consciousness into herself. All the conditions are ripe for a “tragic” tale of mulatta displacement, but instead the story takes an unexpected turn into queer revision.

In her loneliness and pain, the child Sunshine looks into her mirror to find her anger incarnated as Kali, who “spoke from the mirror with a vengeance” (16). In the mirror Sunshine sees an ideal self that is culturally proficient in Black vernacular. Kali ignores Viola’s dictates against Black English and uses it to defend Sunshine and carve a place of belonging in his/her Black community. Without Kali’s ability to manipulate Black vernacular culture, the other children consider Sunshine a “freak” among them. Sunshine’s performance of Kali provides her with the linguistic dexterity to play the “dozens” with her classmates; an act of signifying that eventually leads her to her Black alter ego and to taking on a queer identity. Sunshine’s “mirror stage” of development results in a splitting of her being, and she turns toward working-class Blackness, which she accesses through queerness.

This desire for Blackness is a considerable departure from the assumption that whiteness is the preferred identification for everyone, especially light-skinned Black women. The embrace of Blackness by a light-skinned literary protagonist inverts the representation of light-skinned Black women as self-hating embodiments of successful white identification. Making Sunshine’s ideal image a Black one resists the interpellative process that requires that Black women displace their anger about the hatred they encounter in the world by incorporating it within themselves “like daily bread” and onto each other. According to Lorde, Black women absorb the loathing that comes from external sources. In order to neutralize it within themselves, they enact a “catabolic process . . . that [leads Black women to] shed each other’s psychic blood so easily.” Sunshine’s ability to look within and love the Black self that she sees in the mirror is an important developmental shift that keeps her from destroying herself through a hatred of Blackness.

Sunshine escapes tragedy in two ways: by conjuring an alter ego who is deft at negotiating and navigating Black cultural language, and by finding an alternative light-skinned queer Black “blues” mother who nurtures her Black cultural dexterity and identification. In the novel, gender play is an effec-
tive way for light-skinned women to participate in Black vernacular culture. Sunshine’s search for a place in Black culture becomes synonymous with ambiguous gender identity. She finds sympathy and understanding from an older, light-skinned blues singer, Wintergreen, who remakes Sunshine into her own image, building her into a “boy” and providing her/him with the language of fashion to express her queer gender. By helping to transform Sunshine into Kali, Wintergreen is also resurrecting a lost part of herself, for she too crosses gender and sexual lines. For a second time the protagonist faces herself/himself directly in the mirror: “Kali turned slowly and said, ‘I look like a boy.’” Wintergreen responds, “No, you look like me in Paris in ’24” (92). This comparison suggests that masculine gender genealogies do not necessarily flow from a male “original,” but that gender is always already a copy of a copy, reiterated through various forms of embodiment. Kali is both girl and boy. His/her masculine expression in white satin trousers and matching shirt is a reference to how the masculine is often touched by the feminine but is still legible as masculine, or what I call feminine masculinities. The pronouncement that Kali is “like” a boy suggests that this is not a complete transition from female to male but part of a nomadic expedition that does not have a definite ending. Kali’s transformation into a “boy” is possible through the blues because it provides the cultural code for that gendered possibility, and Wintergreen is the conduit. She supplants the formerly cold and uninviting reception Sunshine had from Black people as a child with the promise of a warm reception of “family”—a term used to signify queer life. Just as Sunshine’s identity is in transition, so are African American culture, community, and family formations.

Wintergreen inaugurates Kali “into the life” (an African American term for street life in general and lesbian and gay culture in particular). “Into the life,” in this novel, specifically means into a blues ancestral line. Wintergreen’s reconstruction of Kali into her own gender and the ambiguous blues performance style of “Paris ’24” exemplify how the novel maintains the blues as the ancestral house of African American queer iconography. Even though the late 1950s and early 1960s inaugurated the rise of the Motown sound in Detroit, the novel’s only musical references are to female blues singers like Big Mama Thorton, Ma Rainey, and Big Maybelle. Wintergreen’s status as a former internationally known blues singer who now lives in obscurity is a reference to the archive. Her “lost” career parallels historical renderings of Black bisexual, lesbian, and gender-transgressive life that exist primarily in recollections of blues singers like Ma Rainey and Gladys Bentley, yet these recollections virtually disappear in discussions of Black life after the 1940s. Therefore, the blues of the 1920s–1940s are the principal mechanisms by which Black gender-variant and female sexually transgres-
sive cultures still exist, but as a singular phenomenon. Thus, as an eruption of queerness, the blues becomes an important iconic reference for Black lesbian, bisexual, and gender-variant culture and communities throughout the diaspora.\(^{50}\)

Not only is Kali’s gender a nomadic expedition into an indeterminate ending, but so is her/his sexuality. Kali’s transformation “into the life” is temporarily rewarded with desire from Monkey Dee in the scene that I quote at the beginning of the chapter. Although Monkey Dee’s desires include unwillingly incorporating Kali into his stable of prostitutes, their connection leads us to consider female masculine identities that are not associated with woman-to-woman sexuality. Monkey Dee’s attraction to Kali gestures toward how gender variance is also a potential challenge to homonormative expectations. Kali and Monkey Dee are a brief but important historiographical commentary on female masculine genealogies that are assumed to be lesbian but that actually elide the cross-queer desires between transmasculine people and gay men.\(^{51}\)

Sunshine/Kali is a vexing figure of gender variance. Having firmly established herself into Blackness, this mulatta figure journeys into a space where racial identification is not the only quandary; gender is another point of border crossing and boundary remaking. *Her* deploys the mulatta figure in order to enact a radical Black renaming at the point of regendering. Sunshine refuses the patronymic, becoming instead that creative figure of self-invention who writes a “radically different text” for Black empowerment with her own imagination.\(^{52}\)

**Bitches Bite Back:**
**Blues Spaces and Performing Black Memory**

Black queer signification converges in the queer ritual of gender performance in a distinctly working-class African American setting epitomized in the novel’s “Bitches Bite” drag performance. Here, the participants comment on and play with the signs of race and gender that delimit and define them. The performers and audience alike—a gathering of femmes, bulldaggers, lesbians, and “passing” women—consciously build epistemological practice based on collective solidarity, mutual recognition, public commentary, and creative remembering. The Black queer signifying in the text does double duty: it is in conversation with queer theory that would suggest that gender is signified through repetition, and it shows that race (and racial belonging) can also be resignified through gender.\(^{53}\) Kali’s search for Black belonging takes her to the queer bars, but Wintergreen, a light-skinned person herself,
recognizes Kali’s attempt to disrupt racial categories through gender. Wintergreen successfully removes herself from the “wasted venom” of dark-skinned women who sneer at the lighter-skinned patrons of her nightclub through her gender-bending blues performance (82). Wintergreen performs as a dandy in masculine clothes with feminine accents:

Some nights she wore a shirt and tie—hair slicked back, cigar lit. Pulling the sleeves of her jacket up, she’d play a Fats Waller piano like nobody’s business. Or she’d sing the Blues, and the diamond cuff links, odd-shaped buttons emphasizing long, slender fingers, dazzled the eyes and picked up the glint from bridgework behind the blue smoke. (82)

Her extraordinariness leaves other Black women feeling lacking but protects her from their jealous pain and anger. Reminiscent of what Sunshine lived through on the playground, the dark-skinned adult women who frequent Wintergreen’s Club and watch her performance with envy “whisper among themselves, turn[ing] their collective bitchery outward, saying things like She thinks she cute or Half-white heifer!” to the light-skinned patrons (82). They do not dare say this to Wintergreen herself, finding safer, less popular targets and thus “echoing once again the division between Negro women” (82).

Wintergreen’s masculinity acts as a protective shield, allowing her to “feel sorry for the hi-yellahs and light browns,” who were “slap[ped] across the face” by color-instigated insults, but she remains separate, convincing herself that “this was not her battle and she would have no part of it” (82).

Wintergreen navigates this morass of color difference through her own queer performance and by facilitating Black queer community formation through female-to-male drag performance. Once a year Wintergreen’s Club is transformed into “Girl’s Night In” where Black women in the neighborhood can perform and critique racial masculinities in the “Bitches Bite” drag king competition. The drag stage performance becomes a primary site for theorizing gender, underscoring the illusion of any so-called real classification. The contestants arrive in the personas of dictators, performers, and male jazz and rhythm-and-blues stars: “Women would line up outside to watch as Julius Caesar, Bo Jangles, Billy Eckstein, Houdini, or Satchmo emerged from sleek cars. The Kodaks went wild” (127). Figures of Caesar and Houdini mock white male power and privilege. The United States is recast as the Roman Empire, and its authority is parodied in the form of Caesar himself, who represents the raw force of American racial dictatorship. The practice of parody also recognizes the limits of white male power. The crux of the competition relies on the performer’s ability to remind the audience of the trope and then to critically comment on it in the performance.
In this way, “Bitches Bite” is a hyperbolic display of masculinity and power that serves to temporarily contain patriarchal domination.

While some consideration is given to the performers’ enactment of race and gender, the bulk of the description is focused on the actions of the audience. It is the speaker or actor himself/herself and his/her ability to manipulate the play of differences between cultural texts that is prioritized. It is this “willful play” that fascinates the audience. As African American musical scholar Samuel Floyd points out, “the how of a performance is more important than the what.” The subversive power of the performance is rooted not so much in what happens onstage as the momentary affinity of the shared experience of the performers and audience, but in the communal agreement that they can all be any gender they want anytime during the evening. The climax of the scene occurs when an impromptu blues performance erupts, indicating that Black gender expression functions improvisationally.

The porous boundary between the audience and the performers creates communal bonds and memories beyond the yearly event. In the world of the novel, blues spaces are the center for Black queer transformation from the South to the North. Because of the isolation and the limited opportunities for queer community, Wintergreen’s Club functions as a “safe space” for a variety of queer folk to live and be remembered in ways that they never could in the rural communities described earlier.

Each fall, Wintergreen’s was the place to be. A place for women who were unable to tell the lyin’ mothafuckahs they lived with—or the women they didn’t—that being who they couldn’t be most of the time felt good . . . Then, too, there was the nightly collection of “blues” women, like Lucille, who didn’t have nobody, didn’t want nobody . . . There was Joey, her bluesy self dressed in three-piece-wool-worsted suits, who placed her pin-striped trousered leg and short leather boots between the unsteady legs and high heels of young girls, turning them on and out. (128)

Wintergreen’s Club is described not by the details of the décor but by recollections of the repeat customers in a litany of personal information. As opposed to the detached voice of history, intimacy is the narrative frame for memory. At strategic points in the novel, such as this one, “woman” is replaced with “blues woman,” summoning multiple racialized queer meanings along with the definition of “woman.” The blues is epitomized in the gender transgression and queer desire of the bar’s patrons. Joey’s three-piece suit is an expression of her “bluesy self” that only has support and dignified meaning inside Wintergreen’s. Muhanji’s use of the term “blues woman” inserts gender as part of the legacy of the blues as an embodied epistemologi-
cal practice. In the safe space of Wintergreen’s, the blues women seek solace and confirmation away from the gendered, sexual, and racial ideologies that degrade, belittle, deny, and reject who they are. In contrast to the biological determinism and desolation that the sisters find on the family farm, the women of Wintergreen’s Club find comfort with each other in a space that they control, even if momentarily. In this way the club is a counterpublic space that “contests the dominant public sphere” and creates another liminal public space where inhabitants can be remembered on their own terms.57

The final performance of the night involves the incorporation of Laphonya, one of the sisters from the rural farm, in a rousing and raunchy impromptu duet with Wintergreen. The “Bitches Bite” chapter actually begins with Laphonya sneaking out of her sister Charlotte’s house to go to the club.

Laphonya was moving down the stairs as quietly as she could, but the stairs . . . signaled Miss Charlotte from her parlor. The light came on so suddenly that Laphonya jumped. “Ya on yo’ way out?” [asked Charlotte] . . . Laphonya’s short hair was brushed back and the overhead hallway caught its hint of red color. Annoyed, she asked, “Come again?” She wore a shirt and necktie, a jacket with a vest underneath, and a chain going in and out of the vest pockets on either side, and a long skirt and high boots. (129)

Dressed in classic butch lesbian attire, Laphonya’s move from Charlotte’s home (a symbol of middle-class domestic propriety) across the street to Wintergreen’s Club (symbolizing Black queer cultural expression and gendered possibility) signals the potential for self-creation that exists in the city. This type of movement, while only across the distance of a city street, recalls the large-scale movement of a mostly rural population to an urban center.

Play and pleasure are incorporated into Laphonya’s life via gender transformation. Wintergreen adds vocals to Laphonya’s music in a dialectical interplay between the two women.

Wintergreen [appeared] upstage in a purple strapless, standing by the piano, smiling . . . Laphonya . . . grabbed the mike. “Now that’s hot!” The crowd whistled and stomped. Then Laphonya, thumping the guitar and keeping time with her right foot, began to sing—making it up as she went along. “Now ain’t that a pussy? Da, da, da, da, da. Now ain’t that a pussy? Da, da, da, da, da.” Wintergreen got in the mood of the thing and seated herself at the piano. Reaching to the side, she picked up the sax
and began trading eights and singing in response: “Now this is a pus-say?
Da, da, da, da, da.” (132)

From the moment Wintergreen steps onto the stage in her “purple strap-
less” dress, the audience, “whistl[es] and stomp[s],” expressing their approval
of her physical presentation as well as their anticipation of the woman-to-
woman sexual tension between her and Laphonya.

The cultural memory of racialized gender signification is produced
through the body, created and witnessed in this novel through the blues
moan, the grunt, and the swerve of the hip. In this scene Muhanji demon-
strates how the blues is “queered” not only by the lyrics, “ain’t that a pussy,”
exchanged by two women, but by the interaction between performers and
audience. Call-and-response operates both from within the music itself
in the form of exchange between performers and between the performers
and the audience. The lyrics “ain’t that a pussy” repeated over and over take
the term “pussy” away from its sexist evocation as a marker of female infe-
tiority (especially as an insult to men) to connote female-to-female sexual
agency and power. The two terms “pussy” and “pus-say” add another layer
of singularly Black queer signification, playing with words and rhythms.
Laphonya’s participation in the duet is also significant, as she represents how
communal practices of the blues can resignify the body. Over the course
of the novel, Laphonya has gone from a woman whose only function is to
grimly reproduce agricultural laborers to a vivacious butch. In the context of
the variety of gender expressions portrayed in the club, from the masculine
“blues women” to Wintergreen’s performance of queer femininity, the lyrics
“ain’t that a pussy” also highlight the limitation of biology to define gen-
der. The “pussy,” although a physical attribute of both the masculine “blues
women” of Wintergreen’s Club and Wintergreen herself, does not determine
their gender identities. Together the sound, music, lyrics, costuming, and
performer–audience interaction create an “intracultural, interdisciplinary
aesthetic communication.”38 This exchange between a performer and audi-
ence members contributes to Black queer aesthetics that become part of
communal memory.

By the end of the novel, however, this different deterritorialization of the
Black body is set aside as the protagonist is hailed back to gender coherence
and stability. Once Kali turns to the collective Black body for support after
she has been raped, the only way for the members of the community to
recognize each other in a collective form is to return to gender conformity.
Kali is forced to strip in front of a room full of Black women to prove that
she is “like them.” This turn in the narrative symbolizes the transition from
African American Jazz Age expressive insight on race relations to the burgeoning civil rights political terrain dominated by a discourse of rights that are dependent on normative genders and sexuality.\(^9\)

**Gender/Sexuality Masking for Political Expediency**

The divisions between Black women dominate the novel’s denouement, but the solution undermines the expansive politics and aesthetics of the rest of the novel. In the novel’s closing pages, the multiple routes of Black sexual and gender identity are shut down or obscured to accommodate a more coherent and accessible narrative of true Black womanhood. In the final scenes of *Her*, the book resurrects a bio-logic of sex and gender that the rest of the novel had destabilized in order to establish the basis for collective action against Monkey Dee. Collective action is initiated through a ceremonious gathering of all the biological female residents of John R. Street. The gender play, ambiguity, and complexity evidenced in the other parts of the novel are suspended, suggesting that it is necessary to subsume difference under racial and gender coherence in order to promote action. This return to standard narratives is also a representation of how the archive closes, filtering out difference in the name of political expediency.

This traditional womanhood emerges in a meeting of the reputable female small-business owners of John R. Street who gather to help Kali. After consenting to be Monkey Dee’s new “boy,” Kali is raped and brutalized as a final act of “breaking” her into his stable of male and female prostitutes. The final scenes find Wintergreen and Charlotte organizing the neighborhood’s women against Monkey Dee on behalf of Kali. Most of the women in attendance are characters new to the novel. Wintergreen personally invites these lower-middle-class pillars of the community to the exclusion of all the others. Gone are the “blues women” from the “Girls Night In” and the female impersonators from Chesterfield’s who challenged, redefined, and exceeded conventional definitions of Black womanhood. In what is a return to a standard narrative, for the first time in the novel, Black women are described in terms of the accepted version of African American migration that the book had previously avoided:

Most of the women here had been part of the first wave leaving the South. They had entered Detroit as young girls, and it disrobed them with cold hands. But they had beat this city at its own game. They owned businesses, some were their own bosses and, each in her own way, took no shit from anybody. (164)
Each lived the American dream, but had “paid the price” (164) through a disavowal of their sexuality. The description of their sexual denial is less than flattering. The narrator describes their sexual isolation and backwardness, chastising them for “languishing” in their respectability and for refusing their own “ripened sexuality buried beneath the eaves of the wall-to-wall urban living” (164). These new characters represent the accepted version of the African American working-class woman’s success story. Within the confines of the story, these women are not asked to awaken their “curled up,” “closed,” and “decaying” (164) sexuality to embrace the gender-variant characters. Instead, Kali returns and must convince them of her/his worthiness.

Charlotte rationalizes the sudden discontinuation of a politics of inclusion and the reassertion of conventional divisions. Her moment of reflection on the need for a conservative approach surfaces when a few young college students arrive at the meeting; they are immediately rejected.

Miss Charlotte watched the young women’s faces as their minds moved toward dismissing the other women in the room. She realized that it would take many more meetings with these students to get them to understand the real history of Negro people. The playin’ the dumb niggah, or the crazy one, or the lazy one, wasn’t always so easy, but each role played bought time for the next generation, hopefully, to move easier in the world. Now here was the next generation with their accusing eyes, asking, “Why didn’t more of you stand up to white folks?” And she had asked the same question of the generations before her. She now knew, unlike these young women, that there were no easy answers. (168)

Charlotte’s inner monologue refers to the practice that Houston Baker has termed the “mastery of form,” a rhetorical and embodied strategy of masking, deployed to promote a palatable face of Blackness to whites. It is a tactic of negotiation for the purposes of survival. Charlotte employs what I call “gender mastery,” a survival strategy that demands, even at the expense of one’s dignity and identity, the erosion of previous commitments to multiplicity and gender variance. Charlotte and Wintergreen find themselves in a “tight place” between gender expectations and the desire to organize politically. They attempt to gain the acceptance and commitment of the other women in the room through a process of gender mastery wherein all gender and sexual differences are masked and subordinated to race. They try what Baker calls “strategies of attraction” to keep the audience “attracted” to Kali’s story by referring to issues they are familiar with and to help them identify with Kali’s plight. Wintergreen tries to gain empathy for Kali by evoking
her/his identity as a mother. However, this only reminds the women that Kali “fell from sugar to shit” (169) through prostitution, further distancing them from her/him. The other women reject Kali and refuse to act on her/his behalf against Monkey Dee.

The women's rejection indicates the limitations of the “safe space,” which turns out to be only conditionally “safe.” Although previously an enthusiastic cross-dressing participant in the “Girl’s Night In,” Laphonya is the first one to use Kali’s gender against him/her. She accuses Wintergreen of fashioning Kali in her own gender-variant image. She says “Ya turned her out, Wintergreen . . . We all know that Kali was in Chesterfield made up to look like ya. Wearin’ yo’ clothes” (169). Her words imply that Kali's male identity outside the confines of “Girl’s Night In” is an act of public gender trespass that deserves the rest of the community’s consternation. In the final instance, the women’s “safe space” is not safe for everyone but merely a method of containment and control of variant identities.

To the women at the meeting, Kali’s “boy” identity and relationship with Monkey Dee means that “she was asking fo’ it” (169). The other women do not see the story of Kali’s abuse as a catalyst for activism. The women use accusations concerning Kali’s fitness as a mother and her respectability as justifications for continued animosity between them and inaction against misogynist violence. The women are satisfied only when Kali reveals the “authentic” womanhood beneath her clothes that her bruised flesh evidences:

She ripped the loose-fitting gown over her head and stood there naked, slowly turning her body around so they could see the black and blue marks that lined her back and buttocks. Then she changed her stance—bending, she stuck her buttocks out at them and rotated her body so they could see the unmistakable initials, M.D., branded on the side of her buttocks. (170)

At this point in the story, Kali epitomizes the vulnerable and violated female. Kali’s gesture triggers another woman, named Mildred, to “remove her own clothes” revealing “small cuts made with curlicues at the ends—healed now into older scars. The letters M.D. were branded in several places down her sides and into her buttocks” (171). Kali and Mildred are branded as Monkey Dee's property, reminiscent of slavery and evocative of the plantation themes of Lizzie and Laphonya's farm. If the Black female body was decoupled from biological destiny in the earlier parts of the book, allowing for a new geography of gender and sexuality to emerge from the devastation of northern relocation, then it is returned to the biological yet again in the last pages of the novel. The ritual of exposure reduces the Black body to its biological
function and returns gender to its biological destiny; Kali is female because she is raped.

With gender ambiguity carefully contained and Kali appropriately remorseful for her transgression, the women engage in a ritual of female bonding. Wintergreen and Charlotte's personal reconnection is the catalyst for the group of identified and identifiable women to collectively stand against Monkey Dee's attack on Kali. But more than an isolated revenge, their meeting is a precursor to feminist organizing and a testament to a new political subjectivity that integrates both gender and race into the goals of political action. The racial and gendered subjectivity inaugurated in their planning meeting requires that parameters for inclusion as a “woman” are firmly set and that the meeting participants are willing to identify with Kali to the extent that they see her as one of them and worthy of communal energy. A series of omissions, exclusions, and reductions are produced in the formation of their group identity and healing.

Triggered by the sight of both Mildred and Kali, the women in the room resolve to collective action based on gender solidarity. They initiate a symbolic ritual of Black womanhood that ushers in their cultural and feminist consciousness. The women evoke the sounds of the calabash, the drum, the “deep hum” and rocking motion necessary to commence their healing. In a highly stylized moment in the text, the Yoruba Orisha (deity) Oshun appears to the women in “a large looking glass [that] appeared in their midst. And, as they gazed into it, they could see a woman wearing yellow with a river threading through her hips” (171). Oshun’s presence is understood because of the yellow in her clothing and the existence of the river—both symbolic of the Orisha.52 “The deity helps the women recognize how their color prejudice has made them untrue to their own African past, as Oshun is depicted as a light-skinned Orisha. The women reevaluate Kali’s body and notice kinship and similarity where they had previously only recognized difference. “All looked long and hard at her pink nipples and understood that those nipples had sucked a black boy, just like theirs had” (172). The women’s gathering births a collective subjectivity that is simultaneously rooted in African cultural formations and in feminist principles.

The end of the novel follows a pattern of strategic forgetting and reduction that parallels the formation of historical versions of the African American past. Squeezed into the tight space between possibility and traditional politics, gender play and sexual ambiguity are replaced by a more traditional rendering of the Black migrant experience framed by a restrictive, exclusive, and legible Black womanhood. Charlotte laments that the “real history of Negro people” relies on a system of tactical camouflage wherein African Americans have to hide behind certain prescribed roles of the “dumb niggah,
or the crazy one, or the lazy one” (168). She contends that “each role played bought time for the next generation, hopefully, to move easier in the world” (168). In the meeting, they too have to master the form of female gender in order to construct alliances with each other. The meeting’s dynamics reveal the narrow story of African American history. First we see the exclusion of people who may disrupt the category of woman on which the meeting is based, and then the tendency to adjust the narrative to accommodate an intelligible representation of Black embodiment and identity, excluding all those who do not fit that criterion.

**Imagining Possibilities**

Muhanji’s creative re-envisioning of the migration novel references the known archive of the blues as a queer art form and places blues women and blues spaces at the center of the migrant Black community. The novel’s blues spaces are locations for male-to-female performers and female drag kings to creatively express gender through performance. As an everyday practice of gender nonconformity and resistance to gender norms, the blues and the spaces in which it is played create a queer Black urban community in the novel. However, the work closes with the requirement that Kali reveal her anatomy to prove she is a woman. This return to biology signals the point at which gender fluidity and openness of the blues space shuts down in order to accommodate a rights-based understanding of what is political.

*Her* presents nonheterosexual and queerly gendered subjects who confound dominant notions of social identity circulated in African American and U.S. cultural formations. The text does so by employing vernacular rhetorical strategies that present possibilities beyond territorialized patriarchal imperatives that map migration as a process of maintaining assumed heteronormative genders and sexualities across space. The novel utilizes the blues as an epistemological practice that offers alternatives to the normative constructions of gender and heterosexuality—the supposedly established truths of African American history and culture. Performance and its spaces support the reconstitution of Black community based on non-normative sexualities and genders, thus facilitating a collective memory of Black queer culture.

The task of making it up or self-invention requires a reimagining of core Black communities. The work of Sharon Bridgforth takes us back to the rural U.S. South, this time with a cast of characters that remake the idealized southern Black community as a queer space. She also turns to the knowledge created through embodied performance to resignify the Black body along irresolute terms.