

Rebecca Jackson and the Problem of Celibacy

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In introducing the collected writings of Rebecca Jackson, a Black Shaker visionary active in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, Jean McMahon Humez describes Jackson's life of celibacy this way: "After breaking with her husband and brother, she lived and traveled throughout the rest of her life in close relationship with a single, cherished, intimate woman friend who shared her religious ideas. Perhaps, had she been born in the modern age, she would have been an open lesbian."¹ Commitment to celibacy flourished among the United Society of Believers, more commonly known as the Shakers, a Christian millennialist group at its largest in the middle of the nineteenth century. But Jackson's collected writings—carefully collected and edited by Humez herself—portray a woman who felt the call to "holy living" (i.e., celibacy) long before encountering the Shakers. Her commitment to celibacy was tested time and again, and she never changed her stance. Humez's interpretation, suggesting that Jackson's celibacy may have been a replacement or cover for Jackson's lesbian orientation, then, should give us some pause. And indeed, Alice Walker, responding to Humez's comment shortly after the publication of Jackson's writings, wonders "why, since Jackson mentions more than once her 'deadness' to sexuality or 'lust,' Humez implies she was a lesbian?"² Walker probes this question to highlight the propensity of white scholars to rewrite Black religious testimony, interpreting it as something else. Walker asks, why not believe Jackson? Walker's question and Humez's assumptions about Jackson's celibacy point to both Western feminists' silencing of Black religious women and the compulsion to render sexuality legible.³

If Humez's move was to identify Jackson's celibacy as a specific, legible sexuality, public intellectuals and scholars today demonstrate an investment in articulating her celibacy as part of a

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larger, liberal project toward liberation. In a May 2022 post on the website Q Spirit, a site dedicated to developing and articulating resources for expansive, queer spirituality, ordained minister and activist Kittredge Cherry describes Jackson's writing as "the first black queer spiritual narrative in American history." Cherry notes that Rebecca Jackson and her long-time companion, Rebecca Perot, "lived together as ministry partners for more than 30 years in a covenanted relationship that has been described as lesbian, womanist, queer, and/or celibate."⁴ Interestingly, Cherry positions Jackson's celibacy as either coterminous with or an alternative to lesbian, womanist, and queer identity. In her positing Jackson as potentially lesbian, Cherry echoes Humez's musing that, were Jackson born today, she might be an open lesbian. Where Humez's conclusions were possible lesbianism, for Cherry, the significance of this definition—Jackson as queer and celibacy as a form of queer sexuality/sociality—comes down to Jackson's disruption of heteropatriarchy. Cherry writes, "[R]egardless of whether the two Rebeccas were lesbians, their defiance of gender norms and theology of gender equality are vital to women and LGBTQ people today."⁵

Cherry's sentiment is compelling. Jackson's consistent privileging of her own call over the authority of the men in her life, and her subsequent commitment to a decades-long relationship with another woman, make her an inspiring figure for religious women and queer people, who have been historically sidelined or banished in religious communities. Engaged in a similar project, Kara French's thoughtful *Against Sex* paints Jackson's celibacy as defiant of racial oppression as well as heteropatriarchy. Addressing what she describes as "a sexual behavior that was demonized" in the nineteenth century, French argues that celibacy "had the power to challenge degrading racial stereotypes, especially when practiced by black women."⁶ French's refusal to see Jackson's celibacy as repression is powerful in its careful attention to the historical realities of a Black woman in antebellum America.⁷ At the same time, French, like Cherry, brings into relief the contemporary urge to render Jackson's celibacy as a kind of nineteenth-century feminist defiance to hegemonic violence.

In Cherry's and French's reads, Jackson's celibacy seems to work as one of many urgently needed attempts to dismantle heteronormativity and its relationship to white supremacist patriarchy, attempts that have historically been built on expanding the variety of normative sex acts and concomitant social relations. As Peter Coviello explains, the contemporary desire to expand modes of sex is an effort to counteract "that great, epoch-making biopolitical seizure of the body and its impulses by something called

'sexuality.'"⁸ In response, scholars and activists have invested "not only in marking assiduously how sexuality came to be 'constructed,' to speak in that maximally 90s-ish idiom, but also in multiplying our visions of what might count as sex, expanding the roster of conceivable pleasures, as well of socialities (or antisocialities) imagined to follow from them."⁹

Painting Jackson as fundamentally defiant, to use Cherry's language, though, threatens to flatten out what was surely the most significant question animating Jackson's life and in particular her celibacy: how might she best serve God? Indeed, Jackson is not an easy symbol of feminism, or even resistance. Jackson's lifelong commitment to celibacy was undergirded by an understanding that this and every life decision was made in obedience to God's commands. Jackson's patriarchy-confounding preaching and celibacy were, in other words, fundamentally acts of submission. Jackson's commitment to obedience points to the limitations of a liberal idea of agency.

Writers across disciplines have long suggested that the secular basis of much contemporary queer and feminist thought limits our ability to understand women's religious participation, particularly for women of color, by coding religious belief and participation as oppressive to women, and by bolstering racial hierarchies.¹⁰ In studies of religious women, this often has the effect of producing what Ann Pellegrini calls a "white genealogy of . . . feminist studies" that "leav[es] to the side the women of color and transnational feminisms whose relationships to religion have historically been far more complex and variegated" than is assumed.¹¹ This limited understanding of religious belief often demonstrates a sort of anxiety about agency: what should be made of religious women who *seem* to give up agency in order to follow God's call? For scholars invested in expanding women's freedoms, religious explanations of purportedly nonagential situations—ranging from religious trances to religiously mandated celibacy—are difficult to see as anything but oppression. Saba Mahmood argues that contemporary Western feminisms understand agency as individual action combined with disruption.¹² In other words, agency is only legible insofar as it is a form of individual resistance. Mahmood insists that this reliance on disruption prevents scholars from recognizing agential possibilities in communities more invested in maintenance than resistance.¹³

For religious women of color, obedience, maintenance, and modesty may mean something very different than for their white counterparts.¹⁴ Writing about sexual conservatism among early twentieth-century Black Holiness–Pentecostal denominations, Dara Delgado explains that modest dress served as a rebuke to racist

tropes of over-sexualization and also to the long history of sexual exploitation of Black women in slaveholding America. Indeed, as Delgado demonstrates, Black religious women's sexual conservatism (from modest dress to sex only within marriage) necessarily has a different meaning and function than that of white religious women. For Black women, religious modesty may serve as a response to what Patricia Hill Collins describes as the ways "women of African descent have been associated with an animalistic, 'wild' sexuality."¹⁵ In her landmark *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Delores Williams proposes a hermeneutical framework that reframes God's activity in the world as aimed not toward liberation but toward the survival and quality of life of Black women. Like Delgado, Williams calls scholars and believers to attend to the limits of resistance as a framework with which to approach Black religious women.¹⁶

Delgado's and Williams's work, like Mahmood's, point to the limits of agency conceptualized as disruption, and Jackson's celibacy points toward an alternative logic and authority than that offered by sexuality. Following Coviello's conclusion that "sexuality" (even when queer) "emerges as a mode of corporeal organization" marked by white colonial pasts and presents, I propose that we read Jackson's celibacy as a mode of obedience to divine authority that is orthogonal to the liberal binary of resistance versus repression.¹⁷ To be clear, despite how antipatriarchal Jackson was, her celibacy does not find an easy home in contemporary politics of liberation, despite our own desires. Her refusal to participate in the patriarchal family structure was undergirded by a deeply submissive relationship to God. It is in this space of seeming contradiction, and in relation to the divine, that Jackson found survival and self-reclamation.

Rebecca Jackson's Adoption of Celibacy

To think through Jackson's approach to celibacy, we need to start with her conversion at thirty-five years of age, a religious awakening that not only pinpoints the beginning of her life in God but also lays bare the consequences of her religious turn and God's saving grace in times of violence. When Jackson's conversion called her to leave her husband for a life of celibacy, Jackson turned to God's protection to take her through her husband's life-threatening abuse.

What we know of Rebecca Jackson's religious growth and biography is, for the most part, given in her spiritual autobiography: a collection of writings based on journals and notes she started keeping after her conversion and likely began organizing around

1843. Her writings had a long path to publication. In 1878, seven years after Jackson's death, Shaker Alonzo G. Hollister began compiling, preserving, and sharing Jackson's manuscript with other Believers.¹⁸ This manuscript was first published broadly in 1981 under the careful editorial hand of Humez; in it, Jackson's writings detail visions and dreams, such that what we know of her biography is overwhelmingly a story of divine revelation. Mixing biographical information with spiritual calling and revelation, Jackson's collected writings consistently emphasize that her earthly life was one punctuated by the divine.

Because Jackson begins her story with her conversion in July of 1830, we know little of her preconversion life. She was born Rebecca Cox, a free Black woman, on February 15, 1795, just outside of Philadelphia. At the time of her conversion, she was married and living in Philadelphia with her husband, Samuel Jackson, her brother, Joseph Cox, and her brother's family. Historical records indicate that Jackson probably divided her time between working as a seamstress and caring for her brother's children. All evidence suggests she and Samuel never had children of their own.

Jackson's story begins by chronicling the hard work of conversion: learning how to hear the voice of God, and the simultaneous journey toward finding God's people on earth. For five years after her initial experience with the divine, Jackson struggled to follow her inner callings while maintaining her relationships with her family. After realizing that her family hindered her ability to hear and act on divine command, Jackson finally left Samuel in early 1836, with the hope of finding God's people. Jackson visited the main Shaker colony of Watervliet in the fall of 1836, and joined them as a Shaker in 1847.¹⁹ Her joy at finding the United Society of Believers was matched in intensity only by her sorrow, then, when she realized a few years later that she had to leave. Tensions with Shaker leadership threatened her ability to follow her own divine revelation, in particular an 1850 call to minister to Black Americans.²⁰ As a result, Jackson left Watervliet in 1851, and was considered an apostate by the United Society, despite her own continued commitment to the Shakers. Between 1851 and 1857, Jackson established a largely Black Shaker community in Philadelphia. Despite the fullness of such a community, Jackson mourned the loss her connections with Watervliet; if her most significant revelation was God's call to follow her inner voice above all else, her second most significant may have been in 1857, when God released Jackson from that very commitment, allowing her to follow the authority of the United Society of Believers. In 1857 Jackson returned to

Watervliet, reconciled with leadership, and brought her Philadelphia colony into the Shaker fold.

The religious drama that unfolds in Jackson's autobiographical writings portrays her struggle toward obedience, and the struggle of others around her to accommodate that obedience. Before her conversion, Jackson, like her brother, Joseph, spent much of her life in a mainline African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. Her conversion and resultant commitment to God changed that. In her description of her conversion experience, Jackson details awakening in terror to thunder and lightning, only to hear a voice declare, "This day thy soul is required of thee." She obeys this voice, spends hours in prayer, and is rewarded with a grace that lights the sky: Jackson writes, "I rose from my knees, ran down the stairs, opened the door to let the lightning in the house, for it was like sheets of glory to my soul."²¹ The pleasure of God's "sheets of glory" comes with a requirement to be radically obedient to God in all situations. Indeed, God calls her never to act without God's call, including in such matters as praying, leaving the house, carrying out some occupation, and engaging in marital relations.

Through her conversion, Jackson was galvanized and transformed, but as God required of her more and more unorthodox behavior—fasting, walking through ice storms to get to prayer meetings, publicly proclaiming her calling by God—her brother rescinded his support. The AME Church, including at times the itinerant preacher Jarena Lee, became suspicious of Jackson's activities and attempted to censure her.²² Her conflict played out at home, too, as her husband began to beat and terrorize her. Jackson attributed her survival and even growth under such difficult circumstances to God's protection, a privilege given to her because of her submission to God's will during her conversion, and her continued obedience after it.

If conversion came with a sense of obedience, Jackson's experience of sanctification on January 29, 1831, fully authorized her work and her life in holiness. Numerous religious autobiographies from the first half of the nineteenth century reflect a similarly transformative experience of sanctification, portraying the believer's spiritual journey as involving the following steps: conviction, wherein they fully recognize their sinful nature and often experience longing and sorrow that they are not yet close to God; justification (often at the same time as conviction), in which the believer experiences a crisis conversion that brings them into God's fold; and, finally, sanctification, in which the Holy Spirit fully cleanses the believer of sin and makes them ready for the work of God.²³ For many white and Black Methodist-inclined (or trained) women in the nineteenth century, sanctification was fundamentally an experience

of authorization by the Holy Ghost, or, as William L. Andrews explains, "a purifying of one's inner disposition to willful sin, a liberation of the soul to follow the indwelling voice of Christ."²⁴ In Anthea Butler's words, sanctification helped Black churchwomen "transcend the physical body and its limitations, and . . . harness spiritual power to change the world."²⁵ Like those of Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and others, Jackson's experience of sanctification authorized her ministry.²⁶ Unlike Lee and Elaw, Jackson's call to holy living included a divine command to be celibate. Jackson explains, "I never had felt so happy in all my life. I then saw for the first time what the sin of the fall of man was, and I thought if I had all the earth, I would give it, to be a single woman. How to return home to my husband again I knowed not."²⁷ In sanctification, celibacy became a core concern of her spiritual growth, driving her to leave her husband and family.²⁸

Jackson's move toward celibacy was marked by her submission to God, and gratitude for God's guidance and protection in the face of violent conflicts at home. The night after realizing she must be celibate, with her husband as witness, she had a religious experience that demonstrated God's protection, given in exchange for complete obedience to the divine. Jackson writes:

My husband went down cellar, got wood, made a fire, left the door open, put the coffee pot on top of the stove. So in my march appraising God, I went from the cellar door to the stove and when I would get to the stove I would lay my hands on the stove and then turn to the cellar with my eyes shut all the while. These two things caused my husband to believe that it was more than nature. He expected every time I laid my hands on the stove to see the skin come off on the stove, and when I went to the cellar door, to see me fall down the cellar. He said it seemed as though I was turned right around. Sometimes I went to the cellar leaping, sometimes in a swift march, and often on the very sill, and the coffee aboiling on the top while my hands was on the stove. He had not power to touch me, and when I was permitted to open my eyes, I saw him sitting on a chair with his two hands under his chin and ashaking like a person under a heavy FIT OF AGUE.²⁹

Jackson's divinely guided demonstrations, clearly for Samuel's benefit, affirm Jackson's new status. The sheer physicality of this experience emphasizes the miracle that her body is protected even from the forces of nature, and now is the province of God, thanks to her (literal) blind faith. In response, her husband sits "ashaking,"

appropriately awed by the authorization she has gained from the indwelling of the spirit.

Despite her strong desire to become celibate, it would take Jackson five more years to fully uncouple herself from her husband and family. Finally, in January 1836, Jackson was ordered by God to tell Samuel that she was done with their relationship. After describing a vision that shows Samuel handing her off to a spiritual man (foreshadowing the Shakers), Jackson writes, "I was commanded to tell Samuel I had served him many years, and had tried to please him, but I could not." Given Jackson's realization of "the sin of the fall of man" and her desire to "be a single woman," her description of serving Samuel indicates serving him sexually, even while also implying a larger sense of being obedient to him.³⁰ In response to this command from God, Jackson tells Samuel, "Now from this day and forever, I shall never strive [to please you] again. But I shall serve God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength and devote my body to the Lord and Him only. And when I have done it, He will be pleased."³¹ Removing her body from her husband's purview is the most concrete action that Jackson describes in this critical moment in which she confirms her obedience to God and her whole-scale denial of any further wifely duties.

Jackson's 1836 withdrawal from Samuel's bed and authority instigated a months-long period of physical terror at her husband's hands. Over two separate passages, Jackson discusses Samuel's violence and the intense ascetic practices she used to gather strength and divine protection.³² Although her narration of leaving Samuel extends over a number of pages, there is but a single brief passage in which she directly identifies the physical violence he used toward her. Jackson writes, "[I]t seemed as though my very life was at stake. To mention all that I passed through would fill this book, but from that time, Samuel sought my life day and night." Instead of filling the book with his abuse, Jackson focuses on how she is protected by God, particularly by divine knowledge. Indeed, she describes her saving grace as "the gift of foresight given to me at the beginning," through which "[she] always was able to know what [Samuel] was going to do before he did himself."³³ Jackson was protected through God's communications to her inner voice, but hearing that inner voice required her complete devotion. In a later passage, "My Release from Bondage," Jackson details the ascetic practices she used to help her endure the "many sorrows and trying scenes" she endured.³⁴ These practices included fasting for three weeks, taking only "a morsel now and then," refusing to speak, and a prayer ritual commanded to her through her inner voice. Protected by virtue of

her ascetic practices, Jackson survived Samuel's abuse and others' condemnation of her celibacy.

Jackson's submission to God not only saved her from Samuel's violent acts but also convinced him to cease terrorizing her. Jackson writes that, "when [Samuel] had tried all ways that was in his power, and found that he failed, he then come out and confessed that he was a wicked man, and asked me to forgive him."³⁵ Samuel, coming to terms with Jackson's holiness, says:

Now, Rebecca, you may sleep at your own house, I will trouble you no more. Go forth and do the will of God. I know that He has called you to do a work and I have tried to hinder you until I have suffered everything but death. Nobody but you knows what I have suffered in this house for trying to stop you. I know you are a woman of God—He has showed it unto me. I am a wicked man, but I will not hurt you now, though I would have done it before. But you need not be afraid of me now, I never will trouble you.³⁶

Samuel's statement provides hints as to the specifics of his abuse of Jackson. Samuel's upsetting concession that Jackson may "sleep at her own house" indicates that Jackson had been sleeping elsewhere for her own safety, or instead that she had been sleepless at their shared house out of fear. Further, his admission that "nobody but you knows" sheds light on the hidden nature of the domestic violence Samuel was inflicting upon Jackson. Finally, though, Samuel's recognition of Jackson's place as a "woman of God" is what ends his abuse.

It is only after leaving Samuel that Jackson visits a Shaker colony for the first time, and discovers what she sees as God's true people on earth.³⁷ In her writings, though, Jackson portrays herself as always already Shaker, emphasizing her sense that the Shakers were truly her people. The narrative structure of Jackson leaving Samuel highlights this: the lengthy passage that precedes "My Life at Stake" details her first visit to a Shaker colony. Chronologically, Jackson visited that Shaker colony in the fall of 1836, approximately nine months after leaving Samuel. Narratively, though, Jackson positions her visit as a precursor to leaving Samuel, suggesting that, though her celibacy was a divine requirement accepted by Jackson prior to her awareness of Shaker tenets, she later saw the mandate as part of God preparing her to meet God's people.

When Jackson visited the Shaker colony of Watervliet, in New Lebanon, New York, in the fall of 1836, she immediately saw a life for herself without Samuel and with a people committed to celibacy. For Jackson, encountering the Shakers felt like finding her true family,

the people she had always been promised. Indeed, upon entering the house, Jackson writes, "I saw an aged man in the front end of the building. My spirit ran to him and embraced him in my arms as a father. I loved him as I loved nobody on earth. And it was said to me, 'These are my people.'"³⁸ Jackson's corporal joy at her spirit leaving her body to embrace the Shaker man highlights the relief she felt at finding her people. That said, Jackson's sense of finding "her people" existed in tension with her commitment to always follow God's commands over earthly rules and desires. Despite sensing that she had finally found her people, Jackson could not immediately join them as she was commanded to first spend time as an itinerant preacher affiliated with a perfectionist community called the Little Band. But throughout her narrative—before this meeting and after—Jackson would always identify the Shakers as "her people."

When Jackson joined the Shakers, she joined an expanding, energized group. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Shakers were at the height of their popularity in the United States. The Shaker tradition had begun in England in the mid-eighteenth century as an offshoot of Quakers; they were originally known as "Shaking Quakers" because of their ecstatic worship style. Guided by visionary leader Ann Lee and in the context of great religious persecution, the Shakers moved to the United States in 1755, where they set up several colonies, and simultaneously attracted interest and hostility. As Stephen J. Stein notes, "Lee was the special target of animosity. She was repeatedly accused of being a witch and a man. She experienced physical persecution, as did others traveling with her who were whipped, stoned, and forced to flee for their safety."³⁹ Indeed, many Protestant Americans violently opposed the Shakers, often because of their "challenge to gender roles and norms" that undergirded a "radical reorganization of society as nineteenth-century Americans knew it."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Shakers experienced great increase during the period of religious revival in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century. By the middle of the century, it is estimated that there were nearly 4,500 Believers, which made the Shakers a small but significant group in the American religious landscape.⁴¹

The growth in the Society of Believers combined two impulses in the United States in the nineteenth century: utopian communal living and millennialism. The Shakers engaged these impulses in ways that challenged mainstream Christianity and larger American values. Louis Kern estimates that there were over one hundred utopian communities in the late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States; a subset of these communities included those that were millennialist, or invested in the end times, with some (like the Shakers) "believ[ing]

that the awesome Second Coming had already occurred and that they were the living incarnation of the glorified Kingdom of God on earth."⁴² Shakers experienced popularity and infamy because they "represented a clear alternative to a number of widely accepted American values" in their ecclesiastical polity and religious commitments.⁴³ Their two biggest areas of heterodoxy also challenged wider American culture by undermining both theological and domestic patriarchy. First, whereas most Protestants believed in a masculine, triune God, Shakers emphasized instead the duality of God, such that God had equal male and female aspects, and, controversially, many Shakers in the mid-nineteenth century "came to think of Mother Ann [Lee] as sharing complete equality with Jesus Christ."⁴⁴ These theological beliefs undergirded their equally radical ecclesiastical policy, which required equal numbers of men and women at every stage of leadership. Second, their most radical stance by far was their commitment to celibacy, which they called "virgin purity." As Katherine Clay Bassard notes, "[O]pposition to the Shakers in America centered less frequently on the 'heresy' of their Four-Part Deity (God, Holy Spirit, Christ, Mother Ann Lee) than on the sense that the doctrine of celibacy threatened the ideology of the family, gender roles, and heterosexual relations, all considered 'natural' by nineteenth-century standards."⁴⁵ Sally Kitch argues that, though there were a number of religious groups in the nineteenth century that emphasized celibacy, few mobilized celibacy toward "egalitarian goals in any domain—family, work, or religion"—as the Shakers did.⁴⁶

Jackson's autobiographical writings limn the radical submission required of her that undergirded actions, like leaving her husband to preach, that some have described as insubordination or resistance.⁴⁷ But as Jackson makes clear time and again, any acts of seeming insubordination were grounded in what she understood as her complete obedience to God. To understand her actions as forms of agential resistance is to flatten Jackson's sense of self in relation to a God who both required her complete submission and also provided for her survival. If Jackson's obedience asks contemporary readers to rethink our commitment to agency, her celibacy challenges us to rethink our desire for sexual legibility, particularly in women who do not conform to patriarchal expectations.

Jackson's Theology of the Body

Shaker celibacy does not fit neatly in either heteronormative patriarchy or models of feminism built on disruption, as Shakers spurned both heteronormative family arrangements and also

celebrations of the body. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the United Society generated backlash in large part because of celibacy. Discussing eighteenth-century Believers, Elizabeth Freeman describes how anti-Shaker writings identified Shakers as unfit “for national belonging,” in part because of their celibacy. Drawing on Henry Abelove, Freeman observes that celibate Shakers “flouted” the eighteenth-century “ideology of production” by cutting out productive sex (i.e., heterosexual genital intercourse).⁴⁸ Catherine Brekus argues that early Shakers went even farther by rewriting maternal and familial arrangements as models for spiritual relations with one another and with God. Ann Lee’s Shaker contemporaries—men and women—were encouraged to conceive, labor, and nurse their souls and the souls of others. Despite offering this alternative to heteropatriarchy, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Shakers were not easy bedfellows with notions of women’s rights; indeed, there was very little celebration of the body or lifting up of women’s roles. Brekus argues that Lee renounced the flesh as vile and disgusting, and seemed to embrace a patriarchal understanding of authority such that women’s leadership roles should be embraced only if there were not any men to do the work.⁴⁹

The Shaker move away from heteropatriarchy, however, has nevertheless led some contemporary scholars to find in Shaker celibacy a renunciation of sex that does not condemn the female body. In her brilliant *Spiritual Interrogations*, Bassard warns that, like eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reactions, we today may be inclined to understand Shaker celibacy as replicating medieval Catholic conversations on celibacy. Bassard argues:

While the Shakers, and other dissenting sects, were often accused of a reactionary Catholicism, it is important to understand the difference between Shaker celibacy and pre-Reformation monasticism. Celibacy in the Shaker sense was not based on the medieval male fear of “contamination” by women, nor were the sect’s celibate women forced into a paradigm of chastity as a prerequisite of “true womanhood.” Rather, it constituted an “ascetic feminism.”⁵⁰

Bassard’s analysis crucially insists that contemporary readers recognize that Shaker celibacy (and religiosity more broadly) is about “social relations of power and dominance.”⁵¹ Echoing Caroline Walker Bynum’s call to understand a text in its time, then, Bassard reminds us to take seriously the coupling of Shaker celibacy and Shaker belief in a four-part God, consisting of Father God, Holy Mother Wisdom, Jesus the son, and Ann Lee the daughter.⁵² Indeed, Shaker celibacy involved rethinking the role of women not just in a

specific religious community organization, but also in the broader story of sin and God's redemption.

Even as Bassard's call to rethink Shaker celibacy helpfully nuances the relationship between bodily theologies and power dynamics, it may be anachronistically hopeful to suggest Jackson's celibacy was about society rather than about the body. More pointedly, Jackson's "ascetic feminism," to borrow Bassard's and Henri Desroche's term, was both a rejection of patriarchal Christianity *and also* a condemnation of the flesh. Perhaps Jackson's condemnation of the flesh is what makes her celibacy hard to stomach by contemporary standards; it might be more comfortable to translate her celibacy into closeted queerness. Nevertheless, it is precisely Jackson's concerns with the flesh that might helpfully challenge contemporary feminists to rethink the relationship between notions of sexual liberation and mechanisms of bodily subjugation. The body figures as a central problem throughout Jackson's Shaker-influenced theology; her meditations on the body in sin and the body in resurrection develop surprising, antiflesh routes to gender equality in the Shaker community and beyond. In meditating on Eve's role in the Garden of Eden and Jesus's experience of spiritual resurrection, Jackson condemns the flesh, but also suggests that women were the original hope for humanity's fight against sin, making possible spiritual and earthly release from bondage, in particular for Black Americans.

Jackson's vision-based theologizing rewrites the familiar Protestant story of original sin by denying that Eve's acquiescence to the serpent in the garden was the moment of original sin. As scholars like Phyllis Tribble have chronicled, long-held Protestant narratives of the garden have served for centuries as justification for subjugating women.⁵³ Although much Shaker theology aims for gender equality, even some Believers held to the idea that Eve was the author of original sin. For instance, according to Shaker Elder Benjamin Youngs' early nineteenth-century articulation of original sin, "the woman was the *first* in the transgression."⁵⁴ Whereas Eve's single moment of sin serves for Youngs and many Protestants as the starting place of sin, Jackson describes sin not as a crisis moment but as a long process of rotting that begins with the original seed of man—Adam. Jackson insists that Adam's line, "the house of Esau," rotted specifically through generation (a Shaker word for sex) and disobedience.⁵⁵ Thus, Jackson writes, the work of God is one of a return to purity, for "in the new heaven and new earth there is no place found for the house of Esau, that is, for the works of generation." That said, Jackson notes that God promises to raise the souls of even Adam's posterity to that state of innocence "in which

Adam and Eve came from the hand of God, for that was lost.⁵⁶ The return to innocence happens through Jesus, through whom the “soul [is] raised out of the nature of the First Adam into the nature of the Second Adam” (i.e., Jesus).⁵⁷ Whereas the First Adam is the origin of the corruption of the flesh through generation, the Second Adam—Jesus—makes possible a return to purity available to all true believers.

Jackson underlines the importance of celibacy to God’s plan by holding Jesus up as the figure and vehicle of redemption precisely because Jesus is the seed of woman alone; he is not created through generation. Because Jesus was conceived without man and without sex, as Mary conceived Jesus in a state of virginity, Jesus is from woman alone, and Jesus’s creation was not defiled by lust and the work of generation. To Jackson, Jesus’s power comes first through his birth from woman and woman alone, and second through his constant obedience to God. About Jesus, Jackson writes, “thus it was by a woman He first entered the world in infancy, and by obedience unto death by the cross, became reconciled in His life to God, from whom Adam and his posterity had become alienated by disobedience.”⁵⁸ Whereas the seed of man embraced disobedience, the seed of woman is defined by both purity and obedience. Jackson thus brings together her core commitments to celibacy and obedience to God, within her theology of the resurrection of the soul, which is possible through Jesus, the undefiled, in contrast to Adam, the root of original sin.

Resurrection, Jackson insists, happens through Jesus because Mary was not touched by the corruption of the flesh. Indeed, for Jackson, resurrection means moving beyond the body, and moving beyond generation to regeneration (a Shaker term for the state of spiritual purity). Jackson emphatically ties the work of resurrection to only the spirit. Defying the Protestant claim that Jesus is always both God and human—the divine living in the earthly body—Jackson insists that Jesus only became the Son after abandoning the body. Jesus’s death and resurrection, then, is fully that divine work of redemption beyond the human body.⁵⁹ Jackson writes, “[Jesus] was not a Son by being born of Mary into this world, but a servant (Heb. 2: 7–9). But by being born from the dead, He became a Son of God forever.”⁶⁰ Even the crucial moment of Jesus’s redemption happens outside of and despite the human body.

Jackson insists that humans, just like Jesus, must strive to shed the trappings of their flesh. In a passage on the meaning of resurrection, Jackson describes a vision of counsel from the Father, who encourages Jackson to “[p]ray to die to thy feeling and rise into your Savior’s feelings, which are heavenly.” The Father then continues to detail the senses that must be shed in favor of the Savior’s senses: “Pray to die

to thy hearing. . . . Pray to die to thy seeing. . . . Pray to die to thy smell" always in order to "rise" in the senses of the Savior.⁶¹ Finally, the Father proclaims, "Oh, be faithful, my child! This is the Resurrection! Thou art in it now. Be sure that thou riseth to the glory of thy God, and that is in obedience to thy Savior in all things."⁶² Jackson echoes a common Protestant sentiment—die to your understanding in order to better embrace Jesus's understanding. But Jackson changes this sentiment by arguing that this combination of dying to the body and obedience is no less than the resurrection itself for humans. Given her Shaker sensibilities about generation and regeneration, her description of the resurrection must be understood not as metaphorical (i.e., try to understand Jesus more), but as a literal call to shed the body in favor of the spirit. As Jackson wrote in an earlier passage, "The carnal life must die, and then the soul is ready to receive the life of Christ, and this is the Resurrection."⁶³

Unlike some of today's powerful feminist theologies that celebrate the flesh as part of God's creation, Jackson strives to become less embodied, in part because, for Jackson and Shakers, resurrection makes possible an escape from the earthly body into the community of Christ and the way of God.⁶⁴ Rather than practicing an "inner-oriented" gnosis that prepared them for meeting Christ in the future, Robley Whitson argues, Shakers believed Christ had already returned to earth as Christ living "in-through-with them," and understood living a Christlike life as "shar[ing] the identity of Christ. . . the Christ living here and now in their tangible lives."⁶⁵ For this reason, Whitson explains, Shakers understood their refusal of the flesh as a "positive commitment." Whitson writes,

[For Shakers,] celibacy was perceived as a positive commitment: to arise from limited, created nature into the very nature of the Godhead opened to us in Christ, to begin the Resurrection Life now in which there is neither marrying or giving in marriage; to live fully the Christlike life, meaning to live in a way capable of embracing all people, not being (properly) preoccupied with one's own spouse and family—to live as Jesus did, a ministering life open in the freedom to love all equally.⁶⁶

For Shakers, and for Jackson, celibacy and the renunciation of the flesh together offered a path to a new heaven and new earth.

For Jackson, regeneration was not just spiritual resurrection, but also the possibility of earthly escape from oppression and bondage. In her theology, Jackson refuses the belief that women are the origin of sin, much as in her own life she articulates that the greatest obstacle to her own Christlike life is not herself but her

husband. Jackson identifies celibacy and obedience as the path to resurrection for all, just as she identifies it as a way to shore up the power to escape gendered subjugation and violence. Just as her theology positions the origins of sin in man, her writings about her life suggest that patriarchal family arrangements and gendered violence are sins that come from man.

Jackson also understood celibacy as a part of spiritual and earthly freedom for Black Americans specifically. To Jackson, regeneration was a spiritual gift that needed to be made possible to Black Americans, and that *must* be offered in conjunction with earthly release from bondage. Jackson discusses racial oppression in a number of instances, but one dream in particular illustrates how, for her, dismantling generation meant also dismantling enslavement and racialized violence. In a dream that Jackson records as happening March 11–12, 1843, Jackson describes being in a house and seeing “armies coming north” under three mountains. Jackson sees that:

the people by the west mountain got up and shook themselves. And I saw that their bed was dirt and their cover dry sods, and it fell all off, and in a moment, as it were, they were all in the west mountain. And it became a baiting house for the poor. And I stood in their midst. And there was an Irish girl about ten years old at teasing them. And they were unwilling to bear with her. I told them to bear it, for her time was short. So they heard me, and I comforted them with the words that was given to me for them. They were all colored people, and they heard me gladly. Their beds were among the graves, though I saw no dead rise. The time had fully come for these to get out of their fallen nature and shake off the dust that blinded their eyes and hid the promise of full salvation from their sight.⁶⁷

In her vision, Jackson describes armies from the south (perhaps anticipating the Civil War), racial animosity between poor Irish immigrants and Black Americans, and Black Americans embracing the truth of salvation. Jackson envisions the end of earthly bondage as happening concurrently with the end of spiritual bondage, suggesting that one was only possible with the other. When Jackson awakes from her dream, she writes that she “found the burden of my people heavy upon me.” Feeling deep despair, she cries out to God about her people (now using it to mean Black Americans rather than the Shakers): “temporally they are held by their white brethren in bondage, not as bound man and bound woman, but as bought beasts, and spiritually they are held by their ministers, by the world, the flesh, and the devil. And if these are not a people in bondage,

where are there any on the earth?"⁶⁸ Jackson sees earthly and spiritual bondage as both requiring dismantling equally, and cries to God to guide her in this work. But, ever obedient, she does not immediately go out and minister to Black Americans, nor does she work explicitly against slavery. Instead, she prays, "Oh, my Father and my God, make me faithful in this Thy work and give me wisdom that I may comply with Thy whole will."⁶⁹

Though Jackson's writings portray her as always already Shaker, her circuitous route from the AME Church to Watervliet to Philadelphia was marked by a tension with religious leadership. Indeed, after living with the Watervliet Shakers for four years, Jackson left as an apostate to start her interracial Shaker colony in Philadelphia. Even when she left Watervliet out of frustration over their lack of ministry to Black Americans, she understood herself to be Shaker. As Bassard notes, "[S]he returned [to Philadelphia] as one even more firmly committed to the doctrine of celibacy and determined to proselytize the Philadelphia Black community to join her lifestyle."⁷⁰ After five years in Philadelphia, Jackson reconciled with the Watervliet leadership and brought her Philadelphia community into the Shaker fold. Jackson's commitments to "virgin purity" and to ministering to Black Americans only strengthened when she separated from the Shakers, and remained strong when, after reconciling with Watervliet leadership, she returned to Philadelphia embraced by Watervliet. Jackson consistently describes the work of saving her people as both temporal and spiritual, and as work that demands her obedience, holiness, and patience. Indeed, Jackson's theological grounding for celibacy is antiflesh in a way that centers women; her life and theology ask us to abandon the language of agency and instead see celibacy as a mode of imbue ment by the spirit, and as the precondition for resurrection.

Epilogue: Bodies, Reconsidered

Jackson's work offers us an opportunity to rethink celibacy and, in turn, to consider our investments in agency and sexual legibility as they relate to rights movements. Having dedicated most of this essay, then, to mining the protection and resurrection possible through Jackson's celibacy, I would like to end by addressing a final key element: pleasure. Jackson's sexuality—her celibacy—may seem to undermine work in Black sexuality studies⁷¹ that prioritizes interiority, pleasure, desire, and connection as a disruption of racial oppression that is "diminishing and limiting."⁷² Recent work in Black sexuality studies emphasizes recuperating the body as a site of

pleasure and connection as a way to mitigate the effects of dehumanizing white supremacy. It is, to use contemporary parlance, an ultimately body-positive position. Rebecca Jackson's writings, though, are distinctly antiflesh. Jackson's celibacy threatens to remove the possibility of a certain kind of bodily pleasure that stands in opposition to racial objectification and violence. But Jackson's writings suggest that such pleasure and desire might come through a celibacy that is undergirded by suspicion of the body.

Jackson's visions might in fact prompt us to consider her celibacy as a reconfiguration of what sexual pleasure means. We might, instead, find sexual-spiritual transcendence through the act of, as Amy Hollywood writes, "subvert[ing] the very distinctions between . . . body and soul."⁷³ Following Constance Furey's related call to rethink sexuality by paying attention to the porousness between and within the physical and spiritual in religious experience, I propose that Jackson's writings limn a celibate pleasure that reconfigures the relationship between the physical and the spiritual.⁷⁴ I do not offer this in an effort to rewrite Jackson's celibacy as "actually sexual"; Jackson is adamantly against lust and sexual gratification. Rather, reading her visions with attention to physical-spiritual delight suggests that Jackson's "virgin purity" is full of joy and satisfaction through which she imagines a new body-in-God. If much of this essay, then, excavated the religious fullness of Jackson's celibate antiflesh theologies, I hope to end by addressing a pleasure that blurs the boundaries between the body and soul. Let me now return to Jackson's last weeks in Samuel's house.

Shortly after telling Samuel she could no longer "serve him," Jackson entered into three weeks of ascetic practices, including praying almost constantly and eating and sleeping very little. These ascetic practices led to a series of visions that she describes as offering courage, safety, and even pleasure in the midst of Samuel's near-constant threats to her life. In a vision she has on the last day of the ascetic practices, Jackson's body changes in response to divine peace and delight. As Jackson prays the Lord's Prayer, she sees her heavenly Father and the Son, and with them "a white ball, the color of a white cloud with the sun reflecting in it, which made it the color of gold."⁷⁵ Jackson writes,

[This ball] came from the right side of the Father and from the left side of the Son, as the Son was on the right side of the Father. This ball seemed to proceed out of them both. And when I repeated that word [the Lord's Prayer], it began to roll from them to me. So when I saw, by the word, "Thy kingdom come," that this ball was coming to me, I kept on saying that, and that only. And it came to me, entered into

my heart. And as soon as it entered it became a man, and my heart became an arch, and a chair in it. He had a mantle on him, He raised himself up three times, wrapping his mantle around him every time. Every time he wrapped his mantle, it caused black specks to rise up out of my heart and pass away into nothing. They were like the cinder of burnt paper, about the size of a mustard seed. And when it was all out, he wrapped his mantle close about him and sat down on this chair, and when he had sat down, my heart and soul, spirit, and all that I possessed, sank into a sea of humility, and my soul was filled with the love of God.⁷⁶

In the midst of Samuel's attempt to violently suppress her celibacy and her call to preach, Jackson envisions a glowing ball entering her heart and turning into a person. Enacting the porousness that Furey identifies, the boundaries of her body admit light, power, and even a human man. Throughout, her heart changes shape and becomes other physical inanimate objects—an arch, a chair—reconfigured to better welcome the man in. Her joy and relief in response to the man confuses a neat division between the physical and spiritual; the mutability of her physical body in response to the divine brings only joy, such that “all that [she] possessed” sank into peace and relief, “filled with the love of God.”

Jackson's theology is antiflesh, but time and again she expresses hope that getting beyond the body is a way to imagine an existence that is not marked by the abuse of physical bodies. That said, Jackson's physical-spiritual pleasure makes clear that her concern is with the fully earthly bodies marked by the crush of heteropatriarchy and the brutality and bondage of enslavement. She hopes that women may be freed from devastating family arrangements, and that Black persons may be freed from captivity and racial tyranny. For Jackson, those kinds of earthly freedoms are imbricated with spiritual redemption, and only the latter makes possible the ecstasy of religious obedience. Celibacy provides an avenue toward personal protection and fullness from the Spirit, but Jackson also has a grander vision, seeing celibacy as a crucial part of the road to a heavenly, blissful earth for all people; a way beyond bodies that are oppressed, controlled, and hurt, and toward expansive, divine joy.

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Notes

¹Jean McMahon Humez, "Introduction," in *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*, ed. Jean McMahon Humez (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 9.

²Alice Walker, "Review of *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*," *The Black Scholar* 12, no. 5 (Sept/Oct 1981): 64–67, especially 64.

³In the United States, the association of celibacy with restriction and oppression may be linked to the contemporary evangelical purity campaigns and their investment in maintaining harmful systems of power. An overview of Sara Moslener's current *After Purity Project* states that "the Evangelical Purity Movement created a sexual ethic rooted in strict gender roles, racial purity, and control over women's bodies beginning in the early 1990s." Hailey Nelson, "Power after Purity," Office of Research and Graduate Studies, Central Michigan University, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.cmich.edu/offices-departments/office-research-graduate-studies/focus-on-faculty/faculty-highlight-stories/power-after-purity>. For an excellent expanded discussion, see Moslener's *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015). The title of a recent memoir by Linda Kay Klein also emphasizes the detrimental effect of abstinence education and purity campaigns specifically on young women: Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).

⁴Kittredge Cherry, "The Two Rebeccas: Queer Black Pair Founded Shaker Religious Community in 1800s," *Q Spirit*, <https://qspirit.net/two-rebeccas-queer-black-shaker/>

⁵Ibid.

⁶Kara French, *Against Sex: Identities of Sexual Restraint in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 71.

⁷French's book is particularly important because of the gap in studies of Black celibate women in the nineteenth century. In studies of the nineteenth century, there has been considerable room and nuance for celibate white women, particularly for white women explicitly engaged in women's rights struggles. As Benjamin Kahan notes, "[B]eginning in the 1840s, celibacy takes shape as a political identity for men and women; nearly all the first-generation American leaders of the suffrage movement—including Margaret Fuller, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Antoinette Brown—took lifelong vows of celibacy." See Benjamin Kahan's fantastic *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 13.

As Kahan notes, only Anthony keeps those vows; nevertheless, the suspicion of marriage “suggests the deep connections between celibacy and the culture of reform.” For more, see Elle Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women’s Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980). Much of the connection between reform and celibacy connected to women’s attempts to resist coverture laws, which meant that once a woman married, she lost all legal and economic freedom. Kahan has a great brief explainer of how coverture affected white, middle-class women. See Kahan, *Celibacies*, 13–17. For more on coverture, see Laura Hanft Korobkin, *Criminal Conversations: Sentimentality and Nineteenth-Century Legal Stories of Adultery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Much scholarship has understood celibacy as strategic for some women in the nineteenth century. For more on mid-century feminist strategies (including celibacy), see Christina Zwarg, *Feminist Conversation: Fuller, Emerson, and the Play of Reading* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995). Nevertheless, this scholarship has almost completely focused on the strategic nature of celibacy for white middle- and upper-class women, particularly those who articulate their celibacy as a political and social decision, instead of a religious one.

⁸Peter Coviello, “The Wild Not Less Than the Good: Thoreau, Sex, Biopower,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 23, no. 4 (2017): 509–32, especially 510.

⁹Like Coviello, “I have no interest in abandoning this tradition.” Coviello, “The Wild Not Less Than the Good,” 511.

¹⁰Ann Pellegrini, charting a genealogy of queer theory, muses, “I have been struck by the way queer studies . . . proceeds through a secular imaginary within which religion, if it is to appear at all, must be made to appear as arch-conservative enemy of progress.” Ann Pellegrini, “Feeling Secular,” *Women and Performance* 19, no. 2 (2009), 207. Tracy Fessenden argues that secular feminism continues to bolster racial hierarchies through “a history of cooperation between movements to expand women’s freedom, on the one hand, and movements to consolidate Anglo-Saxon domination, on the other,” a narrative she insists has been written out of histories of Western feminisms. Tracy Fessenden, “Disappearances: Race, Religion, and the Progress Narrative of U.S. Feminism” in *Secularisms*, ed. Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 139–61, especially 140–41. An earlier, expanded version of this argument appears in Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 161–80. In *Culture and Redemption*, Fessenden argues that Western secularism is so tied to Protestantism that it can

be difficult to see secular forms and ideals as influenced by a particular form of Christianity.

¹¹Pellegrini, "Feeling Secular," 208.

¹²The following discussion relies on Saba Mahmood, *Politics and Piety: Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), especially chapter 1, 1–38.

¹³Mahmood writes that, despite being indebted to poststructuralist debates, "my analysis also departs from these frameworks inasmuch as I question the overwhelming tendency within poststructuralist feminist scholarship to conceptualize agency in terms of subversion or resignification of social norms, to locate agency within those operations that resist the dominating and subjectivating modes of power. In other words, I will argue that the normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion. In doing so, this scholarship elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance." Mahmood, *Politics and Piety*, 14.

¹⁴This misreading of religious Black women is particularly acute when those women's beliefs or practices aren't easily categorized, or when they demonstrate syncretism. Two of the most exciting studies of Rebecca Jackson's work discuss the evidence of Yoruba influences in her visions. See Katherine Clay Bassard, "Rituals of Desire: Spirit, Culture, and Sexuality in the Writings of Rebecca Cox Jackson," in *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 108–25. See also Joy Bostic, "Look at What You Have Done: Sacred Power and Reimagining the Divine," in *African American Female Mysticism: Nineteenth-Century Religious Activism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 95–117.

¹⁵Dara Delgado, "The Practicality of Holiness: A Historical Examination of Class, Race and Gender within Black Holiness Pentecostalism, Bishop Ida Bell Robinson, and the Mount Sinai Holy Church of America," *Pneuma* 41 (2019): 50–65. For an excellent discussion on practices of modesty, see especially 59–64. Delgado engages a number of other excellent works meditating on the meanings of sexual and sartorial modesty for Black women. See especially Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 27.

¹⁶Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), especially 15–33.

¹⁷Coviello, "The Wild Not Less Than the Good," 521.

¹⁸For good information about the composition and publication of Jackson's text, see Humez, "Introduction" and "A Note on the Text," both in *Gifts of Power*, 1–64 and 65–68.

¹⁹In the intervening decade, Jackson worked as an itinerant preacher, for a time preaching and living with a perfectionist utopian community called the Little Band. She left the Little Band because they did not advocate or practice celibacy. See Humez, *Gifts of Power*, especially 157–63.

²⁰In my research, I have found no scholarship on Black Shakers beyond Rebecca Jackson and Rebecca Perot. Archivaly, I have found evidence of one other Black Shaker in Virginia named Anna Middleton, referenced in Cheryl Bauer, *The Shakers of Union Village* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2007). Bauer cites a document from the Edna L. Bowyer Record Center and Archives of Warren County: "The Worley Agreement was signed by Malcolm and his wife, Peggy, Turtle Creek landowners William Wilson and Robert Wilson, and Anna Middleton. Middleton was the second western Shaker convert and a nineteen-year-old former slave from Virginia. Samuel Rollins and Calvin Morrell, early Union Village leaders, witnessed the signings. Middleton could only make her mark at the time, but by the 1820s, night classes for women were held at Union Village to help all members become literate." Bauer, *The Shakers of Union Village*, 12. Certainly, there were more Black Shakers, but probably not many. Elizabeth Freeman's book *Beside You in Time* has an interesting chapter on how anti-Shakers used racialized imagery as a mode of critique. Elizabeth Freeman, *Beside You in Time: Sense Methods and Queer Sociabilities in the American 19th Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 27–51.

²¹Rebecca Jackson, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*, ed. Jean McMahan Humez (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 72.

²²Jackson herself chronicles meeting Jarena Lee. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 262. Katherine Bassard has an excellent read of this exchange. Bassard, "Rituals of Desire," 108–11. For a good introduction to Jarena Lee, see Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), especially 48–50.

²³This structure shows up in well-known and lesser-known religious autobiographies, including those by Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Fanny Newell, and Charles Finney. Jarena Lee, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Revised and Corrected from the Original Manuscript, Written by Herself*, in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black*

Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 25–48; Zilpha Elaw, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour; Together With Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America [Written by Herself]*, in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 49–160; Fanny Newell, *Memoirs of Fanny Newell; Written by Herself, and published by the desire and request of numerous friends* (New York: Springfield, 1833); Charles Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis (New York: Zondervan, 1989).

²⁴William L. Andrews, "Introduction," in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 1–22. Jackson's writings, Humez argues, "are centrally concerned with how religious vision and ecstatic experience functioned for her and other women of her time as a source of personal power, enabling them to make radical change in the outward circumstances of their lives." Humez, "Introduction," 1.

²⁵Butler is discussing women of the Church of God in Christ and, although she is discussing the twentieth century, her emphasis on both the personal and the social-political implication of sanctification helpfully illuminates nineteenth-century Black women's sanctification beliefs and practices. See Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 6.

²⁶See Lee, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*, and Elaw, *Memoirs of the Life*. For good work on Lee and Elaw, see Joycelyn Moody, "Sin-Sick Souls: Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw," in *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 51–75. Also see Nyasha Junior's recent conversation with Catherine Brekus about Jarena Lee. Nyasha Junior, "Jarena Lee as Protestant Icon: A Conversation with Nyasha Junior and Catherine Brekus," November 2020, Harvard Divinity School, lecture, 43 minutes, available on SoundCloud at <https://soundcloud.com/harvard-divinity-school/jarena-lee-as-protestant-icon-a-conversation-with-nyasha-junior-and-catherine-brekus>. Andrews argues that women like Lee and Elaw enacted a "brand of feminist activism within Christianity [that] evolved out of [the] conviction that salvation made possible the gift of spiritual 'sanctification'," an argument that pertains as well to Jackson. Andrews, "Introduction," 4.

²⁷Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 76–77.

²⁸ Although there are connections between Jackson and her contemporary Black women preachers, as Humez notes, Jackson's writings most strongly portray "the conflict a married religious woman felt when her sense of duty as a Christian wife clashed with her need to put herself entirely at the disposal of the inner power than transformed her." Humez, "Introduction," 8.

²⁹ Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 77.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 76–77.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

³² The two passages are separated in Jackson's writings, and are chronologically tangled. The first, "My Life at Stake," describes Samuel Jackson's violent responses, Jackson's divine protection, and Samuel's eventual relinquishing. The second, "My Release from Bondage" describes Jackson telling Samuel she will no longer serve him, obliquely references Samuel's violent responses, and then is an account of her ascetic practices. This section ends with Jackson describing Methodist ministers who also condemn Jackson to death, so persecution by her husband includes persecution by the denomination. See Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 145 and 147.

³³ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 145–46.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

³⁷ In the midst of describing leaving Samuel, Jackson discusses an 1831 vision "of God's true people on earth, who live in Christ and Christ in them." Jackson explains that she first had the vision of God's people when "under great sorrow and suffering about living a holy virgin life, [when] everything seemed to stand in opposition to that life." Mourning being alone in her commitment to celibacy, Jackson has a vision of "flocks of kids" who represent God's people, and whom God promises to unite Jackson with, as long as she is "faithful." In other words, God promises that her reward for obedience and celibacy will be finding a community of God's people on earth. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 136–37.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 138–39.

³⁹ Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 61.

⁴⁰ French, *Against Sex*, 72.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴² Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Durham: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 3–4.

⁴³ Stein, *The Shaker Experience*, 64. They also practiced economic sharing. Upon full entrance into a Shaker community, a believer had to

rescind all goods to the community, and all earnings made by the community went to the community. This was standard practice for a number of communitarian groups but, Stein argues, “the most successful communitarians in the early 19th century were the Shakers.” Stein, *The Shaker Experience*, 57.

⁴⁴Many scholars today take for granted that Shakers believed that Ann Lee was the second coming of Christ. This interpretation assumes a certain amount of theological consistency that just wasn’t present. Stein notes, “Despite its name, the United Society of Believers has never been united in any simple way . . . on the contrary, my reading of the extensive documentary records of the society and of those interacting with its members forces me to conclude that the Shakers were an extremely factious people.” Stein, *The Shaker Experience*, xiv. As with most beliefs, Shakers held to a range of beliefs about Lee’s fulfillment of the return of Christ. Robley Whitson argues that Shakers only believed that Lee was the second coming of Christ for a brief period, from about 1837–1857. Whitson insists that “the period when the exaggerations [about Ann Lee as Christ existed] was very brief, a mere twenty years, and even then the extreme enthusiasts were actually few in number.” Rather, according to Whitson, most believers saw Christ as “*equally* in each and every one united in Christ.” Ann Lee was seen as a spiritual Mother, and Christ’s second coming was in every believer. Robley Whitson, “Introduction,” in *The Shakers: Two Centuries of Spiritual Reflection*, ed. Robley Edward Whitson (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist, 1982), 43–45. Nevertheless, as Stein points out (and Whitson acknowledges), a key 1808 Shaker text—Elder Benjamin Youngs’ *Testimony of Christ’s Second Appearing*—aims to prove that Christ’s second appearing was in Ann Lee. Stein, *The Shaker Experience*, 78–80. See Benjamin Youngs’ theology excerpted in Robley Edward Whitson, ed., *The Shakers: Two Centuries of Spiritual Reflection* (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist, 1983), 225–26. Supporting Whitson’s claim is the contemporary Shaker insistence that they have never believed that Ann Lee was God incarnate. On the website for the last remaining Shaker community, they insist, “Mother Ann was not Christ, nor did she claim to be. She was simply the first of many Believers wholly embued by His spirit, wholly consumed by His love.” “Our Beliefs,” Shaker Village Sabbathday Lake, accessed October 10, 2021, <https://www.maineshakers.com/about/#ourbeliefs>.

⁴⁵Bassard, “Rituals of Desire,” 113.

⁴⁶Sally Kitch, *Chaste Liberation: Celibacy and Female Cultural Status* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 7.

⁴⁷Moody has a helpful discussion of simultaneous submission and insubordination in the works of Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw. See Moody, “Sin-Sick Souls,” 66.

⁴⁸Elizabeth Freeman, *Beside You in Time*, 34, 39. As June Sprigg suggests, “[C]elibacy released Shakers from the demands of conventional marriage and parenthood,” thus situating them outside of the nineteenth-century family. June Sprigg, “Introduction,” in *Shaker Design* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986), 19.

⁴⁹Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 97–113.

⁵⁰Bassard here is building on work by Henri Desroche. Henri Desroche, *The American Shakers: From New-Christianity to Presocialism*, trans. John K. Savacool (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971). Medievalists may dispute Bassard’s characterization of medieval monasticism. For more on medieval sexuality and chastity, see Ruth Mazo Karras, “The Sexuality of Chastity,” in *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 36–77.

⁵¹Bassard, *Rituals of Desire*, 113.

⁵²Bynam’s essay “Why All the Fuss about the Body?” insists that scholars approach medieval understandings of bodies as unfamiliar. Caroline Walker Bynam, “Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective,” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 1–33. Valerie Traub gives a related call to attend to how we study bodies (in particular as related to sex). Valerie Traub, “Making Sexual Knowledge,” *Early Modern Women* 5 (Fall 2010): 251–59.

⁵³In her landmark “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” Phyllis Trible identifies and critiques the omnipresence of the reading of Genesis that “affirms male dominance and female subordination” and places blame in Eve. Phyllis Trible, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41, no. 1 (Mar. 1973): 30–48, especially 35–42. The doctrine of original sin—which declares that Adam and Eve’s actions in the Garden of Eden violated God’s commandment and resulted in all humans being born in a state of sin or separation from God—is almost always attributed to Augustine. Peter Sanlon questions this history. Peter Sanlon, “Original Sin in Patristic Theology,” in *Adam, The Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, eds. Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 85–107.

⁵⁴Youngs in Whitson, *The Shakers*, 225. This specific articulation supports Youngs’ claims that Ann Lee was the second coming of Christ. Youngs’ full statement is, “The woman was the *first* in the

transgression, and therefore must be the *last* out of it, and by her the way of deliverance must be completed.”

⁵⁵Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 199. Kathleen M. Crowther posits that Reformation-era Lutheran exegesis of Genesis 3 was fundamentally about rejecting Catholic celibacy in favor of the patriarchal family. Crowther writes that the sixteenth-century Lutheran telling of the Garden of Eden emphasized “the Lutheran valorization of family life [that] was connection to their denial of the Catholic view that celibacy was spiritually superior to marriage,” and which privileges a family in which the man “wields authority over his wife and children” and the woman “is a docile and obedient wife and a devoted mother.” Kathleen M. Crowther, *Adam and Eve in the Protestant Reformation* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.

⁵⁶Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 199.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 244.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 205.

⁵⁹The contemporary Sabbathday Lake Shakers ascribe to an “adoptionist theory,” which, like Jackson’s theology, insists Jesus was not divine at birth. The adoptionist theory diverges from Jackson’s theology, though, in positing that Jesus’s divinity began at “the occasion of his baptism by John in the Jordan.” Shaker Village, “Our Beliefs,” <https://www.maineshakers.com/about/#ourbeliefs>.

⁶⁰Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 205.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 189.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 190.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 181.

⁶⁴A number of recent theological traditions work to emphasize the love of fleshiness in the Bible, and in particular in the Gospels. For many of these writers, affirming flesh is a path to overcoming patriarchy, white supremacy, fat phobia, and homophobia. For many, too, it is simply a more accurate or appropriate telling of the Bible as one that celebrates in flesh. A number of womanist theologians have insisted that theological understandings of incarnation and the flesh more generally require attention to gender and race. Eboni Marshall Turman limns the relationship between the early Church wrestling with “the apparent illogical *body* of Christ” and the American “crisis of identity that has characteristically fragmented black bodies.” Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4. Relatedly, Anthony Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins’s collection *Loving the Body* asks how body theology might be used toward antiracist ends. Anthony Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins, eds., *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

2004). Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart's collection on Body Theology posits that a key change in the Reformation was in understandings of the body. Isherwood and Stuart write, "The Protestant Reformation actually shifted the emphasis from sensual engagement with God to mental communion through the word of the gospels. . . . The Reformation encouraged people to experiences their minds as separate from and superior to their bodies." Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 12. Isherwood addresses some of the painful results of suspicion of the body in her book *The Fat Jesus: Christianity and Body Image* (New York: Seabury, 2008). Finally, Bynum's essay counters poststructuralist vacating of the body by way of medieval religious writings.

⁶⁵Whitson, "Introduction," 13.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 179–180.

⁶⁸Ibid., 181–82.

⁶⁹Ibid., 182.

⁷⁰Bassard, *Rituals of Desire*, 109.

⁷¹For an excellent primer on Black sexuality studies, see Stacey Patton, "Who's Afraid of Black Sexuality?" *The Chronicle Review*, December 03, 2012, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/whos-afraid-of-black-sexuality/>.

⁷²Celeste Watkin-Hayes in Patton, "Who's Afraid."

⁷³Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 6. Hollywood is writing about thinkers in twentieth-century French intellectual feminism who were drawn to the writings of female mystics. Whereas the mystical figures Hollywood addresses worked within male-dominated religious communities, Jackson insists on operating outside of male domination (with some success).

⁷⁴Furey's writing is specifically about premodern and early modern religious texts, but I think some of her theorizing works beyond that time frame, particularly with regard to mystical texts. Constance Furey, "Sexuality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (London: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 328–40.

⁷⁵Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 148.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 148–49.

ABSTRACT *This paper examines the writings of Black Shaker visionary Rebecca Jackson, who was active in the middle of the nineteenth century. Jackson's accounts of her dreams, visions, and theology repeatedly demonstrate her deep commitment to celibacy and to obedience to God. Recent work on Jackson reads her celibacy as an example of defiance of white heteropatriarchy; this article suggests that reading her celibacy as disruptive flattens the most animating question in her life: How might I best serve God? Using Jackson's writings, including substantial descriptions of visions and dreams, I argue that her celibacy is a piece of her larger obedience to God, obedience that provides protection and fulfillment. Further, Jackson uses explicitly antiflesh theology to first re-center women in the Biblical story of redemption, and second, serve as the basis for her critique of gendered and racialized violence. Finally, Jackson's celibacy undergirds an understanding of pleasure that blurs the lines between the physical and spiritual, and that, for Jackson, makes possible earthly freedom and spiritual joy.*