Women and Migration
Responses in Art and History

EDITED BY
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42. The Sacred Migration of Sister Gertrude Morgan

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Fig. 42.1  Sister Gertrude Morgan, the Bride of Christ, the Nurse for Dr Jesus and the Housekeeper for Dada God, in her Everlasting Gospel Revelation Mission, New Orleans, 1974. Photograph by Guy Mendes, from 40/40–40 YEARS 40 PORTRAITS, Institute 193. All rights reserved.
This chapter focuses on what I call Sister Gertrude Morgan’s ‘sacred migration’, animated by her spiritual ‘calling’ from ‘God’ to ‘Goooo Preacher, tell it to the world’, her journey to New Orleans from Georgia, and her travels outside of and within the city. I also explore the themes of travel and migration that appear within her visual work and on her only recorded album, ‘Let’s Make A Record’ [1970]; her use of a Prayer Room in her final home in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward as a modality for traveling spiritually; her performativity as a street preacher in New Orleans’ French Quarter, Lower Gentilly, Lower Night Ward and surrounding areas; her letter-writing practice as a tool for sending her theological philosophies across the country; and finally my own sonic, visual and performative work (in progress) *Come On In The Prayer Room* inspired by her Prayer Room (as well as the culture of ‘prayer rooms’ within Black American and Black Diasporic religious culture).  

1 Sister Gertrude Morgan recounted in her artwork and personal testimony her 1938 spiritual directive from God that initiated her sojourn from Georgia to New Orleans.  
2 This essay is taken in part from my recent Columbia University African American Studies (IRAAS) Masters’ thesis entitled *Come In My Room, Come On In The Prayer Room: Sister Gertrude Morgan’s Subversive Salvation* under the thesis advisement of Dr Kellie Jones, to whom I owe a debt of great gratitude. I also want to thank Brooke Davis Anderson who was a door opener; William Fagaly who so generously allowed me to interview him and meet with him several times, and who kindly escorted me to the now empty lot covered in four leaf clovers in the Lower Ninth Ward where Sister Gertrude’s Everlasting Gospel Mission formerly stood, and to her grave site, where I was able to leave bouquets of white flowers; Elaine Yau who so generously allowed me access to her thoroughly researched 2015 dissertation *Acts of Conversions: Sister Gertrude Morgan and the Sensation of Black Folk Art, 1960–1982*; Guy Mendes for sharing beautiful personal stories and articles and for taking my favorite photo of Sister Gertrude sitting in her Prayer Room; Alice Yelen, who so generously allowed me to read and make copies from her collection of Sister Gertrude Morgan’s personal letters written to her ‘darling daughter’ Dr Regenia Perry; Dr Regenia Perry who so generously visited my Harlem home in NYC and spent the day with me sharing amazing mementos from her personal archive, memories, insights, assessments and stories about her times with Sister Gertrude Morgan and for gifting me an original ‘Let’s Make A Record’ vinyl album and an original handwritten personal letter from Sister Gertrude Morgan; Dr Deborah Willis for attending my first work-in-progress performance at Park Avenue Armory of my visual, sonic and performative prayer-room installation inspired by Sister Gertrude Morgan’s Prayer Room and for the invitation to be a part of the Women and Migration working group in Florence, Italy to share my research and to perform my second work-in-progress iteration of my prayer-room project. And finally, to Sister Gertrude Morgan herself for calling me to her and to this work of continuing to help spread the ‘good news’ of her life and ministry.
'Go-o-o-o-o-o, Preacher, Tell it to the World'

The adage that ‘the personal is political’ informed my interrogation of Black Southern American visual artist, street preacher, singer, tambourine player, guitar player, pianist and mystic Sister Gertrude Morgan, who lived from 1900–80 and employed the modality of Black sacred testimonial practices in her own life through various artistic and spiritual mediums, which tell of her significant evolution as a spiritual being and a dedicated servant of her God. This motto, ‘the personal is political’, was propagated by the 1970’s Black feminist Combahee River Collective (whose name was inspired by Harriet Tubman’s 1863 rebellious Civil War battle victory there) and was deepened by Kimberlé Crenshaw’s ‘mapping’ of intersectionality.3 These concepts help me to begin to think through how Sister Gertrude Morgan’s ‘personal’ reads politically through the lens of her own intersectionality, spirituality, spatiality, sacred migration and liturgy and the ways in which these ‘tools of her ministry’4 help to translate her actualization of what I am theorizing as subversive salvation, which she practiced specifically within New Orleans’ Lower Gentilly, the French Quarter and the Lower Ninth Ward. My theory of Sister Gertrude Morgan’s ‘subversive salvation’ unpacks and celebrates a particular legacy of Black American sacred practices that include personal direct antiphonal relationships with ‘God’ (the Holy Spirit); prayer, petitioning, improvisation, ‘hearing’ (as in spiritual hearing); divination and prophetic vision: epiphanies, dreams, seeing the past and the future, ‘knowing’; sacred migration; journeying, pilgrimages, maroonage, and fugitivity, each embedded with a nuanced politics of resistance and existence.

In thinking about my theory of Sister Gertrude Morgan’s subversive salvation, it is not that Sister Gertrude Morgan is not religiously conservative in some ways but her actions, liturgy and expression, if explored through a particular lens, indicate a certain radicalism, agency and progressiveness that beg to be acknowledged and honored. This does not mean that her system of belief is without contradictions, yet

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she can still be seen as heretical on many levels. My goal is to place her at the center of a narrative that honors a more radical, progressive vision of her spirituality as well as looking at how she continuously self-identified and reading that tendency through the lens of a womanist theology. I also explore ways to think about her renegade presence in these psychic, artistic, physical and spiritual locales within the context of her sacred migration, and how themes of ‘travel’ showed up in her visual art, music, letters, and liturgical practices.

Sister Gertrude Morgan (née Williams) grew up the seventh child in Jim Crow rural Alabama in a small town named Lafayette. She was forced to leave school in third grade to begin working in the fields. A year after the start of the Great Migration in 1917 she migrated with her family at the age of 17 to Columbus, Georgia. She experienced her first spiritual conversion during this time in Columbus, Georgia’s Rose Hill Memorial Baptist Church. This encounter marks the beginning of her path towards a prophetic transgressive religiosity.

As was the typical condition of many poorer Black American women of this era, due to her lack of other opportunities under an oppressive white-supremacist and capitalist system, Sister Gertrude worked as a domestic and nursemaid in white folks’ private homes. She eventually married at the age of 28 in 1928 to William Morgan. In her mid-30s in 1936 and then again in her late 30s in 1938, she testifies she heard a prophetic voice from what she deemed to be God that eventually compelled her to journey from Georgia and leave her former life behind.

LaKisha Michelle Simmons in her book *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* explores Darlene Clark Hine’s concept of the ‘inner lives’ of Black women and recounts:

> In 1989 historian Darlene Clark Hine asked what noneconomic motives had driven black women to join the Great Migration [...] by looking for the ‘hidden motivation’ in black women’s migrating patterns [Hines] theorized that the greatest factor was their desire to possess rights of their own bodies, fleeing from [...] domestic abuse [...] [and] the struggle for ‘cultural dissemblance’ [...] ‘a self-imposed invisibility’ that gave black women the ‘psychic space’ ‘for mental and physical survival in a hostile world.’

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There is no evidence that Sister Gertrude Morgan’s leaving Georgia and thus her husband after ten years of marriage was related to domestic violence, or if there were other ‘hidden motivations’ for her exodus, but by her own testimony, she heard the ‘voice of God’ in 1938 telling her to ‘Go-o-o-o-o, Preacher, tell it to the world’, which began her sacred migration from Georgia across parts of Alabama, alone, until in 1939 she eventually arrived in New Orleans, which she considered ‘the headquarters of sin’.6 This was a bold example of fugitivity and ‘stealing away’7 for several reasons. Sister Gertrude was raised Baptist at a time when women within the denomination were not allowed to preach; she demonstrated a radical intentionality to follow that ‘voice of God’ and claim her space as a ‘Prophetess’8 of God while embracing the improvisational power of the religious missive to ‘go where I [implying God] send thee’.9

Fred Moten writes in In The Break: The Aesthetic of the Black Radical Tradition (2003), in the chapter ‘Praying with Eric’, about the ‘prophetic’ aspects of improvisation, the sight before sight, as he explains: ‘Improvisation is located at a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between feeling and reflection, disarmament and preparation […] always operates as a kind of foreshadowing, if not prophetic […] Improvisation must be understood then, as a matter of sight and as a matter of time, the time of a look ahead […] The time, shape, and space as a set of determination in and as light, by and through the illuminative event’.10 For Sister Gertrude the ‘illuminative event’ was her embrace of her ability to receive prophetic vision directly from God without an intermediary or outside confirmation, and her embrace of her own ability to be called as a ‘chosed vessel’.11

What boldness for a thirty-eight-year-old Southern Black woman during her era to take off on her own, ultimately land in an urban...

6 Berry et al., The Tools of Her Ministry.
8 This self-identification as a Prophetess is present visually and textually in some of Sister Gertrude Morgan’s visual art, for example her work entitled Prophetess, ca. 1970–79, painted on styrofoam, size 4.5x7 inches (11.4x17.8 cm).
9 Lyric from the African-American spiritual, ‘Children Go Where I Send Thee’.
11 Berry et al., The Tools of Her Ministry.
Southern city known for ‘vice’ including prostitution, gambling, diverse spiritual practices, and one that she even considered to be ‘the headquarters of sin’. If engaging in a facile reading of Sister Gertrude Morgan’s spiritual goals for her arrival in New Orleans, one could possibly misinterpret her actions as self-righteous and even a delusional grandiose missionary project, but upon closer interrogation one understands Sister’s pilgrimage as a transgressive, radicalized act of agency. Unlike her traveling contemporaries Bessie Smith, Mahalia Jackson and other women artists who journeyed as part of their musical work, and even unlike many other Black women who rebelliously migrated because of a desire for safety, work and/or family, Morgan journeyed simply as an amplification of her own agency to choose to be only under God’s authority and direction; this was the only authority she deemed higher than her own. She was working for and with the Lord. I am not sure if she travelled by bus, train, hitch-hiking or perhaps even walking; neither do I know what response she received from her family, husband or community; nor do I know what she carried with her as she traveled from Georgia to parts of Alabama before settling in New Orleans; but I do know the conditions of her spiritual sojourn disrupted the expectations of a married Black lower-class woman of her age at that time.

In 1939 when Sister Gertrude Morgan arrived in New Orleans it was the country’s busiest port town. Along with the import and export of goods and supplies there was also an active ‘underworld’. Herbert Asbury writes about the long history of New Orleans’s notorious red light district, violent street crime, local bordellos and its status as the earliest gambling capital of the US.

Although the bulk of the Black population of New Orleans was economically extremely poor, it was rich in a mostly Black expressive culture and is considered the birthplace of Jazz, and the home of a celebrated brass-brand culture including Second Line parades, Mardi Gras Indians and heavily influenced by the influx of Fon ethnic and linguistic groups kidnapped and forcibly brought to the area during the treacherous Atlantic Slave Trade, bringing ‘voudoun’, a Fon word

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13 Ibid.
meaning ‘spirits’ or ‘gods’. Sister Gertrude found in New Orleans’ rich and eclectic Black spiritual life a syncretic mixture of Catholicism and other diverse Black Diasporic spiritual practices, including the active Spiritual Church Movement. These vibrant streets were the sonic, visual and energetic backdrop against which Sister Gertrude Morgan ministered, preached, prayed, sung, played tambourine and sermonized for several decades, all amplified through her handcrafted paper megaphones.

We know from oral history accounts, her paintings and by her own testimony that for about the first eighteen years of her time in New Orleans (1939–57), Sister Gertrude was involved in a collaboration with two other Black American women who came out of the Holiness Sanctified Black tradition (which places great importance on music, ecstatic dancing, speaking in tongues and prophetic visions). Together, Sister Gertrude, Mother Margaret Parker and Sister Cora Williams founded an orphanage and mission in the rural outskirts of New Orleans in Lower Gentilly, in a home they shared. The orphanage was dynamic and provided shelter to as many as twenty Black orphans, children of working mothers and runaways at any given time, mainly girls.

Funding and sustenance for the orphanage came from offerings raised by the three Sisters, who traveled around New Orleans street preaching and performing sacred music while also growing their own vegetables and raising livestock. During this season of their lives, Sister Gertrude Morgan and her cohort donned Black Robes with white cuffs and waist ties. They held neighborhood feasts, played music and traveled as ‘prophetesses’ to prisons and to revivals and church camp meetings around Louisiana and Texas.14

These women were not formally affiliated with any specific ‘traditional’ institutional church (with the exception of their association with Triumph Church15), which was heretical on many levels (especially in an era when it was common for Black women to build up churches and turn them over to their Black male counterparts to lead16). They

14 Berry et al., The Tools of Her Ministry.
created a community together that could be read as a family system, perhaps even a ‘queered’ family system with an active politics of service that was, in many ways, in direct alignment with other secular and non-secular Black Women’s organizations of the time. According to Tera Hunter in *Survival and the Social Welfare in the Age of Jim Crow*:

Progressive reformers tried to remedy social imbalances produced by industrial capitalism, especially in urban America […]. Whether in cross-class organizations like Neighborhood Union or in groups, black women diligently built clinics, kindergartens, orphanages, and reformatories to meet the exigencies of living in a separate and unequal society.\(^{17}\)

Sister Gertrude Morgan and her ministering cohort could be read in many ways as engaging in a ‘womanist theology’.\(^{18}\) Their labor, which supported and nurtured runaways, throwaways and folks deemed outcast by society, animated the *New Testament* text: ‘For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me’.\(^{19}\)

As well as living out a deep spiritual understanding of service embodied within this aforementioned scripture, there were other things at work including an awareness of her agency. Sister Gertrude in her spiritual sojourn aligned herself with these other women and her adopted community at large. Ashon Crawley in his doctoral thesis, ‘Black Sacred Breath: Historicity, Performance and Aesthetics of Black Pentecostalism’, calls this ‘radical sociality’:

Not only does Spirit give life, but that life is evident in how one leans toward others, how one engages with others in the world. We do not merely share in sociality, but we share in the materiality of that which quickens flesh, we share wind and air through the process of inhalation and exhalation.\(^{20}\)

\(^{19}\) Matthew 25: 35–40.
Sister Gertrude Morgan ‘stealed [herself] away’ from a dominant narrative of spirituality and claimed her place that was in many ways one of her own making. Her identity is multi-layered and contradictions abound, but a facile read of her religiosity would not illuminate the complex nuanced prism of identity embodied by Sister Gertrude Morgan. Through her ever-evolving ministries, she ‘leans toward others’ in body, mind and spirit as a ‘chosed vessel’ of her God.

‘I Got a New World in my View’

As well as claiming her personal power and agency, subverting dominant expectations about what her role as a woman had to be, her good works for her community and the many other ways that Sister Gertrude Morgan expressed her subversive salvation, her ministry came to light even more prominently to a larger audience during the last twenty-two years of her life, from 1957–80. In 1955, her long time spiritual collaborator Sister Cora Williams died, according to scholar Elaine Yau (who unearthed a previously unavailable death certificate and shared its findings in her recent 2015 dissertation ‘Acts of Conversions: Sister Gertrude Morgan and the Sensation of Black Folk Art, 1960–1982’.) 21 Her other collaborator, Mother Margaret Parker, died in 1968 according to art historian William Fagaly, 22 although it seems as if their collaboration ceased around the same time as Cora Williams’ death.

This transition correlated closely with the timeframe of Sister Gertrude’s 1956 spiritual calling to create visual art as a part of her ministry, and in 1957 she received another major revelation. This vision told her she was a Bride of Christ and at this time she began to dress head to toe in all white (a ritual she continued until her death). The wearing of white can be found in many African and African-descended sacred and secular cultural practices. Even within New Orleans, other Black American women mystics (including the ones photographed by Michael P. Smith such as Saint Catherine, Bishop I. Butler, and Reverend Mother Lydia Gilbert) all wore white for various sacred reasons. For Sister Gertrude Morgan her wearing of white was a signal of her transformation into a Bride of Christ.

22 Berry et al., The Tools of Her Ministry, p. 9.
Her agency empowered her to name and claim herself and her own image and she chose how she would represent herself and her body within her artwork. She took up audible space on the streets, using her homemade megaphone to amplify her voice and her message, taking up sonic and psychic space within and above the din of New Orleans’s street culture, and visual space with her artwork and with her ‘performance’ as a street preacher.

Come in my Room, Come on in the Prayer Room

In 1965 when Sister Gertrude (still wearing all white as a self-proclaimed Bride of Christ) named her Lower-Ninth-Ward shotgun-style home ‘The Everlasting Gospel Mission’ and created her ‘all-white Prayer Room’ in the front room, this abode became significant to her creative and spiritual work. She continued to preach in the French Quarter, to perform, teach and preach at Jazz Heritage fest, sell her paintings (with Larry Bornstein, art gallerist and co-founder of Preservation Hall, whom she met in 1961 and who acted as her art-world liaison) and give away her paintings, but her Prayer Room became a centralized location for another phase of her sacred migration; her journeying became fixed in a space of physical stillness. She created several visual works that honor the importance of her Prayer Room to her spiritual evolution, and it was open to the public according to a sign in the front window of the Everlasting Gospel Mission that read: SERVICE IS SUNDAY/THURSDAY. However, she was apparently available any time someone needed prayer or ‘laying on of hands’.

‘Come in my room, Come on in the prayer room’, a visual work made with tempera, acrylic, ballpoint pen, and pencil on paperboard, created by Sister Gertrude Morgan circa 1970, is a colorful visualization of her sitting in her personal Prayer Room in her home. The title, which is part of the written text embedded within the piece, is also the title of a popular Black American early gospel song. The song speaks to the Black American Christian practice of literally and symbolically entering into one’s ‘prayer closet’. This is referenced in Matthew 6:6 which reads, ‘When you pray, enter into your closet [inner room]’. In this painting Sister Gertrude Morgan centers a drawn and painted representation of herself in the middle of the frame. She draws herself in all white, inspired by her 1957 vision that told her she was the
'Bride of Christ' and to wear all white. The central imagery behind this revelation is referenced in *Revelations* 21, which talks about a ‘new heaven and a new earth’ and ‘the Holy City […] coming down out of heaven […] prepared as a bride beautifully adorned for her husband’. After her 1957 vision, this particular text became a very important part of Sister Gertrude Morgan’s iconography and liturgy and was often referenced in her visual work, her way of dressing, her sermons and songs.

She began her letter writing with Dr Regenia Perry while she lived in her ‘mission’ and she recorded her only album there. She wrote in a letter dated 6 September 1972 that ‘God uses me in the prayer room, he give me revelations and a few days later he gives me how’. She relates that God spoke with her in the prayer room about how she was ‘praying on people’s case’. For Morgan, prayer was a way to deal with temporal slippage and this idea of ‘here, now, and there’.

Travel and migration are also themes that feature prominently in her music, sermonizing and visual art. She wrote in another letter to Dr Regenia Perry dated Nov, 1972 ‘You no [sic] traveling is education’. One of her most important catchphrases was ‘Jesus is my airplane’. She created numerous works that featured this motif and her original 1970 vinyl album cover for ‘Let’s Make A Record’ features another artistic representation of it, yet again signaling its importance in Sister Gertrude’s iconography. However, she does not include a version of Mother McCollum’s 1930s song of the same title on her album, although the album features four songs that deal with ideas of sojourn.

Her voice was a strong alto with gruffness and conviction. She used blue-esque melisma akin to a field-holler or shout. She chanted her refrains over and over again with the ever-present sound of the

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23 I accessed a collection of Sister Gertrude Morgan’s personal handwritten letters (1971–74) to Dr Regenia Perry (whom Sister often called ‘my darling daughter’) on 14 January 2016 in New Orleans when art and artifacts collector Alice Yelen generously allowed me to read through copies of her archive of the original letters and also allowed me to make my own copies of the letters.

24 ‘Jesus is my airplane’ is a motif used in numerous of Sister Gertrude Morgan’s painting including: *New Jerusalem with Jesus Is My Airplane*; n.d., acrylic and/or tempera, pencil and ballpoint ink on paper; 18 x 20 inches; Collection of Christopher and Jane Botsford; *Jesus Is My Air Plane*, ca. 1970, tempera, ballpoint pen and ink, and pencil on paper, 18 x 26.3 inches (45.7 x 67.0 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum; *Jesus Is My Air Plane*; ca. 1970, watercolor, ballpoint pen, and pencil with heavy thread and safety pin on paper, 17x4x4 inches, High Museum
rhythmic shaking and slapping of her tambourine skin on the palm of her hand and the energetic clanging of the small tambourine cymbals. Her singing demonstrates what musicologist Eileen Southern describes as ‘typical in African tradition — the singers, singing with all their might and becoming totally involved in the experience’.25 The early gospel classic ‘Precious Lord Take My Hand’ written by Thomas Dorsey appears on her album credited as ‘Take My Hand, Lead Me On’ along with three original compositions ‘Take The Lord Along With You’, ‘New Jerusalem’ and ‘I Got The New World In My View’.

‘I Got The New World In My View’ led me to consider how Sister Gertrude used her religious ideology as a way to talk about time and space in our lives, and that, for her, ‘heaven’ was a radical escape. Dressing in white was a signal of her preparedness ‘as a Bride adorned for her husband’,26 to go ‘home’ to heaven.

Additionally, there has been little written theorizing her public ‘practice’ of street preaching, praying, healing, prayer room services, costuming and singing. These aspects intrigue me deeply as I consider Morgan’s life and work through the lens of performativity. I am also interested in exploring the ways in which her performativity is connected to certain Black religious practices and the happenings of Black American Christian prayer rooms and prayer services, and how all of this might be framed theoretically within the context of performance studies theories and beyond.

I have begun to embody my research within the context of a work-in-progress visual, performative and sonic installation entitled ‘Come On In The Prayer Room’ (formerly entitled Prayer Request), inspired by Sister Gertrude Morgan’s ‘all white’ Prayer Room. I use methodological tools including historical research, oral interviews with people who knew her, analyzing photos of her, meditating on her artwork, listening to her recordings and engaging my own imagination. Sister Gertrude’s home and her self-made ‘all white’ prayer room was a ritual space. A hand-made sign welcomed visitors and passersby that read ‘The Everlasting Gospel Mission’, marking the space as such, perhaps not unlike other spaces of sacred and secular domesticity including the ‘house system’

26 Revelations 21:2.
used in drag-ball culture and the ceremonial houses used within African religions such as Ifa and African-derived religions such as Santeria, Vodoun, Candomble’ and so forth.

I am considering Jonathan Crary’s ideas about sleeping and dreaming from his book 24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep and José Esteban Muñoz’s thoughts about ‘everynight life’, salvation and utopia in his book Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.

José Esteban Muñoz’s book Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity has me thinking about Morgan’s own search for ‘utopia’. Although on first glance she could seem like a conservative Christian evangelical, upon closer reading it becomes clear that she is transgressing many boundaries herself as a Black woman taking up public space on her own terms within New Orleans’s French Quarter.

Reading Fred Moten’s book In The Break led me to think more deeply about conceptual artist Adrian Piper and Black performativity, particularly her 1970s street performance series ‘Catalysis’ and her 1973 ‘Mythic Being’ series where she dressed in an Afro wig and mustache ‘challenging passersby to classify her through the lens of their own preconceptions about race, gender, and class’. Curator Naomi Beckwith cited Mythic Being as ‘a seminal work of self-fashioning that both posited and critiqued models of gender and racial subjectivity’. Thinking about these ideas in relation to Sister Gertrude Morgan led me to ask, what does it mean for her to take up public space as ritual space and as performance space, on the porch of her shotgun house (both African design features), inside her prayer room and on the streets of the Lower Ninth Ward, dressed in all white from head to toe, with her tambourine, her handcrafted fans and her handmade megaphone? How did these strategies of dress, demeanor and amplification project her image and shift the landscape of those spaces of liminality, betwixt and

31 Ibid.
between secular and sacred, in places like the French Quarter and in her own private domicile? Was she engaging in a particular aspect of what Muñoz calls ‘everynight life’ that gestures towards utopia?

Sister Gertrude’s own ‘gestures towards utopia’ are part of an ongoing sacred migration and are embedded within the text of one of her primary theme songs:

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I got a new world in my view
Lord my journey I pursue,
I said I’m runnin, runnin for the city
I got a new world my view
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This ‘new world’ is another reference to Revelations 21, which speaks of a ‘new heaven and a new earth’. It is the primary message of her homily and this speaks to her utopic idea of a ‘new world’. Sister Gertrude sermonizes as follows on her 1970 recording during her song (and possibly in the streets of New Orleans), ‘I Got The New World In My View’:

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21st chapter of Revelation John talking bout the New World, said I saw a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away and there was no mo’ sea. John said ‘I saw new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven prepared as a Bride adorned for her husband. Amen. You know Ye are a city set on a hill, cannot be hid. Certainly a person is a city. Amen. So let us (h)umble ourselves dear on. Get ready for the new world. Prepare yourself to live in that holy city.
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How can we unpack these ‘gestures’ inscribed in Sister Gertrude’s street-preaching, costuming and, for me, most importantly, her prayer work? In his chapter section ‘The Not-Vanishing Point’ from his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz writes: ‘[…] clubs eventually close for the night […] Club kids stumble into taxis in broad daylight […] we also must understand that after the gesture expires, its materiality has transformed into ephemera that are utterly necessary’. If we think of prayer as performance we can understand prayer also as a gesture beyond the ‘materiality’ of the moment. Even after the prayer is done it continues to translate out, representing hyper-presentness, fugitivity and futurity: ‘Speaking it into existence’.

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32 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*. 
In thinking about Crary’s book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* I ask if a ‘dream’ space is a ‘counter strategy’ to capitalism and so forth, as he suggests, what about prayer? Prayer can indeed be described as a waking dream. When in a state of prayer, trance and meditation, one is here but not here. I am reframing the practice of prayer in this way and noting it as a practice that can be a public or private gesture (sometimes at the same time, as within the context of an altar call or a prayer service).

In Ashon Crawley’s 2013 dissertation ‘Black Sacred Breath: Historicity, Performance and Aesthetics of Blackpentecostalism’ (which became his 2016 book *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017)) he explores questions about certain Black religious practices as performance practices, and how they are embedded as an integral part of Black culture in interesting and important ways that are not necessarily religious. He writes: ‘We do not merely share in sociality, but we share in the materiality of that which quickens flesh, we share wind and air through the process of inhalation and exhalation’. In this way, prayer and a prayer service can be one way to represent Crawley’s ‘radical sociality’ as a way one ‘leans toward others [and] engages with others in the world’.

Prayer state is perhaps a liminal space. It is a ‘somewhere’ a transforming of the moment, a temporal slippage betwixt and between.

For my work-in-progress prayer-room installation and performance entitled *Prayer Request* (later renamed ‘*Come On In The Prayer Room*’), I did frame prayer within the context of performance and performance art.

I was seeking to explore how to embody aspects of Sister Gertrude Morgan’s performative legacy as well as wanting to celebrate the Black American traditions of fervent prayer, prayer rooms, prayer lists, prayer meetings and prayer shut-ins. As a child in rural North Carolina, I grew up participating in many aspects of these practices with my family in our small country Missionary Baptist church. I wanted to also bring my southern queered sensibility to my performance.

As I began to conceptualize what my prayer room space and performance would be, I thought about how Black queered night clubs and Black prayer rooms are connected. There is a conversation

33 Crawley, ‘Black Sacred Breath’, p. 97
between these queered night clubs, drag balls, the queer house system and speakeasy spaces. In many scenarios these often continue a Black charismatic religious aesthetic tradition, sharing certain mores and values such as personal liberation, salvation, ‘home’ and ‘heaven’. These secular spaces, these sacred spaces, these fugitive spaces are another iteration of the hush arbors, praise houses, prayer services and so forth that were physical and psychic sanctuaries secretly, intentionally and rebelliously created by enslaved African Americans (queered and otherwise). These rebellious gatherings involve rituals of surrender through music, testimony, dance and aspects of ‘prayer’ as tools towards trance and transcendence, life and liberation. In my artistic exploration of the prayer room, I was exploring how creating a sacred space within a secular setting informs my own quest for liberation as a queered Black woman. Sister Gertrude Morgan was very intentional when she created the Prayer Room in her home. She painted everything in the room white, including the chairs, and used a white Bible and other white artifacts as part of her services. She herself was dressed in all white as a testament
to her vision of herself as the ‘Bride of Christ’. She intentionally named her house the Everlasting Gospel Mission and hung a handmade sign of welcome on one of the front pillars of the house.

In my work-in-progress performance(s) I explore prayer as a ‘dream space’, as an intermediary, an intercession. I think about prayer within the contexts of improvisation, divination, ‘knowing’, petitioning, hearing and also within the context of the history of Black American prayer rooms. I want to amplify Sister Gertrude Morgan’s prayer-room practice while also speaking to the larger cultural context of prayer rooms. The Christian scripture Matthew 6:6 ‘when you pray enter into your inner room [prayer closet]’ is the central text and theme that I conceptualize my prayer-room performances. This verse is very personal for me, as my own late maternal Grandmother Lula would often tell me to ‘go into your prayer closet and pray’ in my times of seeking. Black people often took this missive literally and my Grandmother would gesture to the actual closet in her bedroom. For her, this closest was a ritual space and provided a special access to her divine source. The action of actually going into a space, an inner room, held a particular imaginative power for me. It was a divine serendipity that the room in which I performed at Park Avenue Armory had a beautiful inner closest with a big window. I employed this space during my performance and it became my prayer closet.

As well as identifying the prayer closest, I created the larger prayer-room space by fabricating small altars, providing audience members with plain wooden church fans, setting up candles and flowers, and using my tambourine. I brought in upholstered wooden benches (to represent church pews) and organized the space with benches and chairs on three sides of the room. The color theme I used was a mixture of lavenders, turquoise, rose, greens, hot pink and deep purples.

I wanted the prayer room to have a sonic hum so I created a prayer sound installation that I played within my prayer room during parts of my performance. It was a soundscape that I composed from recordings of individuals praying, which I collected from about thirteen different people of various backgrounds, all whom I knew personally. The sound installation included secular missives, traditional sacred prayers and meditations from different belief systems including Buddhism, Hinduism, Yoruba, Christian prayers, secular humanist thought, pagan and Goddess prayers. I also played Sister Gertrude Morgan’s voice
singing and sermonizing from her only recorded album ‘Let’s Make A Record’.

My performances followed a traditional Black American Baptist order of service for a prayer meeting. I read texts from various secular and sacred traditions, sang songs including African-American Spirituals, invited testimony from audience members and so forth.

My work-in-progress prayer exploration Prayer Request (in a subsequent iteration renamed ‘Come On In The Prayer Room’) also included a durational element. On Saturday night before the Sunday performances, I stayed overnight in Park Avenue Armory inside my prayer room. I had set up an email address: prayerrequestsubmissions at gmail dot com (prayerrequestsubmissions@gmail.com) that was publicized on the Park Avenue Armory’s website and their social media platforms and also on my own Facebook page, Twitter, Instagram, text messages and email lists. I received almost one hundred prayer requests from various folks, including many strangers.

When I first decided to include this element, I wasn’t sure if I should leave the prayer requests unread but then I realized that I should follow tradition, and I stayed up all night and did indeed pray (in Black American church tradition this is called a ‘prayer shut-in’). I literally prayed all night for each of the folks who sent in prayer requests. It was a very powerfully touching experience for me. I didn’t expect it to be so emotional. People who sent in prayer requests shared deep and private things about their lives. Even people that I knew told me all kinds of secrets about which they wanted me to pray. I have never shared with anyone what people wrote to me in those prayer requests, and I do not intend to do so.

As another part of the durational aspect of my performance, throughout the night, every hour or so, I would give an update of sorts on social media. I would post a note that would recount ‘this is what I am doing now...’ and a photo or some type of time stamp so people would understand where I was in the process of my prayer watch. I continued praying throughout the many hours of the evening, ‘til the break of dawn’ the next morning. As the sun began to shine, I ‘woke up’ from my dream state of prayer, from my travel state brought on by my spiritual journeying while praying in my prayer room. Like Sister Gertrude, I had found myself ‘praying on people’s case’.

I felt grateful and humbled by the experience:
'My eyes are open and my ears attentive to every prayer made in this place'. 2 Chronicles 7:15.

In June 2017, it was a joyous honor to be invited to Florence, Italy at Villa La Pietra to commune for two days with some of my creative, intellectual and feminist/womanist heroes as part of the Women and Migration working group conference co-curated by Deborah Willis. I was also invited to perform an iteration of my work-in-progress sonic, visual and performative installation *Come On In The Prayer Room* as the closing event.

This performance (the companion to my paper ‘Come In My Room, Come On In The Prayer Room’: Sister Gertrude Morgan’s Subversive Salvation’ that I also presented an excerpt from as part of the conference) was a continuation of my prayer room/prayer service exploration begun during my Park Avenue Armory Artist in Residency, but I had transformed the title from *Prayer Request* into *Come On In The Prayer Room* as a nod to Sister Gertrude Morgan’s visual work of the same title.
This time, my performance was in a converted high-ceilinged limonaria barn on the Villa La Pietra estate. I requested the limonaria performance space to be organized with the chairs on three sides. I asked that the big double barn doors behind the middle section of chairs to be opened wide and for all of the windows to be opened, to bring in as much breeze and light into the room as possible as the dusk approached. A torrential rainstorm began unexpectedly just before my ritual performance was about to start and this helped to create an even more mystical atmosphere. As guests entered through the side entrance, I greeted each one repeating ‘Come on in my room, Come on in the prayer room’ over and over again as if in a trance. Before arriving, guests had been requested to enter the prayer room in silence to help to create a contemplative space. Unlike the first iteration at Park Avenue Armory, this work-in-progress version was less a prayer service and more a ritual prayer ceremony. Although I was unable to play the prayer sound installation, I used my voice in various extended vocal techniques to bring a strong sonic presence into the room. I played my tambourine, I sang, I chanted and walked around the room weaving throughout the audience while encouraging them to join me in repetitive refrains of sacred text, choruses of African-American Spirituals, scripture, clapping, silences and humming. The ‘Spirit’ was surely present and moving. At the closing of my performance, I walked around the prayer room one final time and whispered into the ears of as many participants as possible, ‘when you pray, enter into your prayer closet; when you pray, enter into your prayer closet; when you pray, enter into your prayer closet’. I shared this mantra with each person as a meditation, as a reminder, as a promise. I thought of Sister Gertrude Morgan as I received hugs and handshakes from many participants from around the globe in the aftermath of my performance. I thought about Sister Gertrude’s dedication to sharing her vision through various mediums and the importance of her prayer practice as part of this missive and I felt blessed to be carrying on aspects of her traveling ministry in my own way.
Conclusion

Sister Gertrude Morgan, born in Lafayette, Alabama in 1900, died in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1980, lived, created and prayed at the intersection of ‘there and here’, ‘betwixt and between’. Her music, liturgy, visual art, sartorial choices, street preaching, poems and letter writing, performativity and prayer-room practice allowed her expansive spiritual access to transform potentially limiting conditions. She was a woman of her own naming and her own making, and she is still reaching many through good works, even now from her heavenly perch, where she has finally arrived home. On her 1970 album ‘Let’s Make A Record’ Sister Gertrude Morgan sang ‘I got a new world in my view’. In her life she created her world anew by rebelliously claiming a powerful agency through self-identification and in her subversive salvation. She claimed herself as one who had a direct relationship with her God by receiving revelations; radically taking up sonic and visual public space during her holy sojourn from Georgia; street preaching and performing in the New Orleans French Quarter and surrounding areas; painting visual works that included Black bodies (including her own) as a part of sacred iconography; claiming futurity and gesturing towards her version of utopia, ‘a new heaven and a new earth’. In these ways Sister Gertrude Morgan perpetuated her sacred migration and shared it in the streets of New Orleans, in her home and with the world.
Bibliography


Morgan, G., *Let’s Make a Record* ([CD]: Preservation Hall Recordings, 2004).


