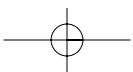
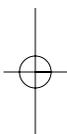
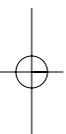


# spirited



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AFFIRMING THE SOUL AND BLACK GAY/LESBIAN IDENTITY

Edited by  
G. WINSTON JAMES  
LISA C. MOORE

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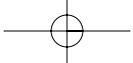
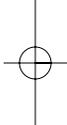
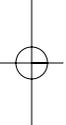
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For my father, John E. Moore; he shows me how to love.  
And to Eunice, who gives me flight lessons.  
Thank you both for continuing to teach me.  
—LCM



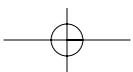
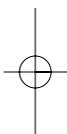
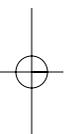
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## Lifting Our Voices

By Rev. Irene Monroe

Finding our spiritual voice has been an arduous journey until this collection of spiritual narratives, *Spirited: Affirming the Soul and Black Gay/Lesbian Identity*. As black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people, we have had no language that adequately articulates the unique embodiment of our spirituality.

However, these spiritual narratives do articulate that very thing, and they function as our talking book, speaking to our social realities. These narratives construct a spiritual vernacular and theology that helps speak for and to black LGBTQ spiritual sensibility. They are representative as a mode of speaking about our personal stories that reinforces spiritual identity, and are also representative as a mode of speaking that affirms our everyday lived experience as LGBTQ people of the African diaspora.

For too long many of us black LGBTQ people have been looking for ways to express the ethos of our spirituality. In so doing, many of us have borrowed language from both white queer and black religious cultures that, at best, have muffled our spiritual reality, and, at worst, extinguished it. With one of the roots of racism planted in American Christianity, LGBTQ Christian activists have an uphill battle when it comes to eradicating the stain of racism from the LGBTQ movement. The inherent racism in both Christianity and in the LGBTQ movement challenges all LGBTQ people, but for LGBTQ people of the African diaspora, racism leaves no space for uncompromised expressions of faith.

The black church muffles our queer spirituality by applauding us in its choir pews on the one hand, yet excoriating us from its pulpits on the other. Our connections and contributions to the larger black religious cosmos are desecrated every time homophobic pronouncements go unchecked in these holy places of worship.

For us, as we straddle both black and LGBTQ cultures, the task has always been to develop a theological language that speaks truth to our unique spirituality. However, housing our spirituality in both religious cultures—white queer, and black—has been one of tenuous residency, that of spiritual wanderers and resident aliens.

As spiritual wanderers in white queer religious culture, we navigate through the dominant queer spiritual lexicon for words to speak truth to our reality. However, we as black LGBTQ people in white churches find that their control and dominance of the lexicon erodes our power and deletes our spiritual expressions. We have found that being subsumed by a queer universality not only renders us invisible, but also renders us speechless.

As resident aliens in black religious culture, we black LGBTQ people speak of a God we know about through heterosexist theological language because sexuality has never been a comfortable topic of discussion in the black community. With the embrace of fundamentalist Christianity that has an asexual theology embedded in its tenets, African-American bodies and sexualities that were once systematically usurped by white slave masters are now ritualistically restrained by the black church and violently policed in the black community. With the Black Church's theological qualifier to love the "sinner" (us), but to hate the "sin" (our sexual orientation), we are permanent souls of the Black Church, but we are never fully permanent souls in it. Consequently some of us have left.

Earthlyn Marselean Manuel, in "Still Waters Run Deep," left not only the Black Church, but also Christianity, for Nichiren Buddhism because it offered a different kind of liberation. Mona de Vestel in "Buddha on the Land" embraced Buddhism because through it she experienced a profound and wondrous connection to the universe.

Natasha Tinsley in "summers & the seven paths of yemaya," and Steven G. Fullwood in "I Hate God," returned to the religions of our ancestors. For Fullwood spirituality began to make sense when he started practicing in the Oshun tradition. And Sharon

bridgforth in “interlude #21: the road to Higher Power,” writes about her deep longing for a oneness with God, and how she was found and was reborn by her spiritual mother, Yemonja.

Some of the contributors found their spirituality by standing alone on their own faith. Tracee Ford, in “Why I Am a Heathen,” is a bisexual who speaks her mind and doesn’t adhere to conventional religious and moral codes. Tonda S. Clarke, in “The Journey to Myself,” chronicles her spiritual path home to herself and how she got sidetracked by religion. Tawanna Sullivan, in “Sufficient As I Am,” warns her readers, “you can’t let other people dictate what your relationship with God is going to be.” And Marvin K. White, in “Who Say Amen Over Me?,” makes it clear that he’ll have the last word.

However, for those LGBTQ people of faith who have stayed connected to the Black Church but have left its homophobic baggage behind, they have done so in a variety of ways, and their stories also speak of a defiant faith. Linda Villarosa found solace worshipping at the Unity Fellowship Church, the only African-American LGBTQ denomination in the country. The Rev. Jim Webb states in his essay, “In Broad Daylight,” that we engage in internalized homophobia and undermine our self-esteem as LGBTQ people when we embrace and financially support churches that don’t embrace us. He encourages us to actively seek solutions within our churches, and assures us that “with every passing day, there are many more courageous spirits” in our church communities who are there to embrace us on our journey toward spiritual and self-acceptance.

In the tradition of many of our Christian ancestors and present-day ministers who discarded all damning and damaging racial references and interpretations of scripture, so, too, do a number of contributors when it comes to homosexuality. In “Regardless of or Despite the Church I Love Myself: One Lesbian’s Opinion,” Diane Foster finds her connectedness to God through the scripture passage John 4:8 that states God is love. In “Spirituality and Sexuality,” Dyan McCray is guided by the scripture passage Mark 12:31 that states “Love thy neighbor

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as thyself.” And the Rev. Wanda Y. Floyd, in “Fearfully and Wonderfully Made,” is affirmed every day as a black Christian lesbian minister by the scripture passage Psalm 139:14 that reads, “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

The stories in this collection are rich and numerous—all of them a must-read. These black LGBTQ spiritual narratives are a way to be visible and to be heard.

For our African ancestors, writing became a subversive tool, particularly in a Western culture that did not value the veracity of their lives, much less their oral tradition. Writing allowed our ancestors to tell and to compile the stories of their lives as a sacred text. Writing makes visible, at least in print, those lives that are too often intentionally omitted. Writing is a political necessity.

For LGBTQ people of African descent, our writings create a counter voice, text and knowledge that become a tool that not only gives us a voice and visibility, but also power.

As LGBTQ people of African descent we write these spiritual narratives because not to write them would cause us to participate in our own spiritual death. We write these spiritual narratives because those who come after us will need them. We write these spiritual narratives and our texts become a canon for survival, our Holy Bible, in spite of the claims that our sexual orientation is both an abomination to our community and God. And we write these spiritual narratives because we know that the holiness of our lives is sacred.

*Rev. Irene Monroe is a professor of religion and associate director of multicultural and spiritual programming at Pine Manor College. She is a Ford Fellow completing her doctorate in the Religion, Gender and Culture Program at Harvard Divinity School. Monroe is a religion columnist who writes “Queer Take” for the online publication The Witness, a progressive Episcopal magazine, and “The Religion Thang” for In Newsweekly, the largest lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender newspaper in New England.*