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Magic City Gospel

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

MAGIC CITY GOSPEL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Ashley Michelle Jones

2015

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Ashley Michelle Jones, and entitled Magic City Gospel, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Campbell McGrath

Donna Aza Weir-Soley

Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 2, 2015

The thesis of Ashley Michelle Jones is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2015

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DEDICATION

for Donald, Jennifer, Monique, Jasmine, and Julian

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FJORDS REVIEW BLACK AMERICAN EDITION (“nem”)

GEOFFREY PHILIP’S LITERARY BLOG (“Teaching J to Read”)

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LUCID MOOSE PRESS LIKE A GIRL: PERSPECTIVES ON FEMININE IDENTITY

ANTHOLOGY (“spinster” and “What It Means To Say Sally Hemings”)

NIGHT OWL (“spinster” and “In The Beginning, There Was A Sound”)

PLUCK! (“Viewing a KKK Uniform at the Civil Rights Institute”)

PMSPOEMEMOIRSTORY (“Birmingham Fire and Rescue Haiku, 1963,” “De Soto Leaves a Negro,” “List of Famous Alabama Slaves,” “Corn Silk Barbie,” “How to Make Your Daughters Culturally Aware and Racially Content During Christmastime”)

VALLEY VOICES NEW YORK SCHOOL SPECIAL EDITION (“Symphony of God – A Hymn to Our Jesus,” “What It Means To Say Sally Hemings,” “Gregory Hines Comes In A Vision,” and “The Ballad of Pearl Bailey”)

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

MAGIC CITY GOSPEL

by

Ashley Michelle Jones

Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

Magic City Gospel is a collection of poems that explores themes of race and identity with a special focus on racism in the American South. Many of the poems deal directly with the author's upbringing in Birmingham, Alabama, the Magic City, and the ways in which the history of that geographical place informs the present. Magic City Gospel confronts race and identity through pop culture, history, and the author's personal experiences as a black, Alabama-born woman. Magic City Gospel is, in part, influenced by the biting, but softly rendered truth and historical commentary of Lucille Clifton, the laid-back and inventive poetry of Terrance Hayes, the biting and unapologetically feminist poetry of Audre Lorde, and the syncopated, exact, musical poetry of Kevin Young. These and other authors like Tim Siebles, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Major Jackson influence poems as they approach the complicated racial and national identity of the author.

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Viewing a KKK Uniform at the Civil Rights Institute

All you can really tell at first
is that it was starched.
Some Betty Sue, Marge, Jane,
some proper girl
with a great black iron
made those corners sharp.
The hood, white and ablaze
with creases,
body flat and open
for husband, brother, son.
Behind the glass,
it seems frozen, waiting
for summer night
to melt it into action,
for the clean white flame
of God to awaken its limbs.
In front of it, you are dwarfed—
you imagine a pair of pupils
behind the empty holes
of the mask.
Behind the stiff cotton,

would the eyes squint
to see through small white slits,
or would they open wide
as a burning house
to hunt you down
until you pooled
like old rope
before them?

nem

pronoun \nem\

1. and them, especially in the American South

a.

You finally get the courage to use the word when you're sixteen. When you finally wear a real bra and can count on your hips to fit into a skirt the right way. Your tongue is a bit looser these days—you even get the jokes when you're talking with your mom and all the women in her family. When grandmother squeals out a dig at someone you don't know, you find something slippery in it and laugh, finally, with the throat of a woman. Someone asks you who you went to the store with the other day. *Mama'nem*, you say. Inside, you tilt with excitement. You light up, a pinball machine of colloquialisms.

b.

At school, you've become a comedian. You're quick with jokes about race—you're the only black girl in most of your classes. It is easy to blend in and stand out. You offer opinions when they are required—during Black History Month, during the unit on the Atlantic Slave Trade, when you and the teacher are the only ones who can name a black poet who is not Langston Hughes. You have perfected what you call "the Klansman:" a short impression you pull out when there's no more conversation amongst your peers. They are impressed with your feigned Southern accent. They are more impressed with

how you wield the n-word. *Me, Billy-Ray'annem gon' round up some niggers, you say.*

You watch your classmates laugh. Their eyes bulge like hot dough.

Addie, Carole, Cynthia, Denise

Amen, Alabama.

Bring in the Dixie sun,

cover us in the

delicate, glassy sunshine

erupting all over.

Find us, fevered, in the

glen, Jones Valley.

Have you seen the churches with windows stained?

Infinite steeples,

just turn any corner. Do you

know how we bleed, like Jesus?

Loud vibrato

melting the Sunday sky,

new mercies exploding, dynamite,

over our brown bodies.

Pretty little ones, dressed in lace, beneath

quivering old ones in hose and hats.

Remember how 16th Street shook,

symphony of fiery coughs

that turned our Birmingham to blood.

Under what God's hand did we die like this?

Villains, victors, what did *you* see?

Wa wa watermelon, a chorus of coons,

X's on the eyes, a grim cartoon?

Y'all come back now, hear?

Zippety do dah till the day you die.

Symphony of God – Hymn to Our Jesus

After the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, Welsh artist John Petts created a stained glass window featuring a Black crucified Christ figure with his hands open and outstretched. The window was sent to the 16th Street Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and was installed and dedicated in 1965.

Oh, God. Let us be loyal
to your emerald-cut face,
give us your facets
in gulping doses, through veins
and the twiggy sparrow's song,
give us your mouth boiling with blood

on the Cross. Holy spittle, holy blood,
Lord, we will wash in you. Our loyal
bathing is a hymn, a baptismal song
for you. Jordan River, steamy Alabama, we face
you in our own watery faces. Palms up, veins
exposed, we are but faucets

awaiting you. We know you, multifaceted:

God of the medicinal blood,
God of the angry and the vain,
God who can pull you up from down low—cast all
your cares upon his glass-cut face
and you'll hear him before long. His song

is power—it is fertile, a womb-song.

There are faces in his facets,
crook-nose, flat-nose, and wide—face
it, children, nothing's certain but the blood,
he is porcelain *and* charcoal, loyal
to all who find him, all who witness his veins

bearing bread and wine. His veins
plucking bass behind a wailing song—

In the Evening, I'll be Loyal,

In the Evening, Precious Lord. In the facets

of a window, he waits for Sunday's blood.

He shakes himself loose into the faces

of worshippers, wills them to face

his Spirit, its trembling, its stinging in the veins,

its *Hallelujah, the Blood, the Blood!*

We will wash in white robes and sway a song
to him, wade our human feet into rivers, facets
of his gemstone grace. We wash, forever loyal.

Our eyes, the color of blood, the water's forceful song.
Under the tide, a face, a force. Our veins
spread and open, facets on our skin. Find us, forever loyal.