

“The World”
Ashon Crawley
ashon.crawley@duke.edu

The following is adapted from a panel conversation of which I was part on May 1, 2012 at Princeton Theological Seminary, produced by the Association of Charismatic and Theological Students (ACTS). There were two panels—one about Homosexuality and Pentecostalism; the other about Gender, the Body, and Pentecostalism—on which I served as a respondent. Following is a summary of my thoughts.

I have a set of inchoate propositions that I will put forward, with hopes that we can work through at least some of them:

[1]

“The body”—as a concept—goes hand-in-hand and, in my opinion, should come before discussions of sexuality generally, homosexuality in particular. On the other hand, I realize that this distinction, given the incarnational nature of Pentecostalism where “the body” is the privileged site for holy behavior—is illusory at best. That is, we are always talking about bodies and their behaviors, the efficaciousness of what they do—through the pleasure they both prompt and receive, through the pleasure about which they both avert and of which they are embarrassed—toward or against ideologies of holiness and righteousness. I want to consider the distinction given —of the body from its behaviors—as being between the distinction of *world*—which indexes the concept of making, of creating—and *earth*, which indexes the concept of that which is given as gift. This distinction is the one between, most fundamentally, body and flesh.

A March 1907 testimony in *The Apostolic Faith* periodical records the following:

‘The Lord is in His holy temple and let all the flesh be silent before Him.’ This quietness will let the Spirit speak out in praises and shouts and song.¹

¹ ‘A Minnesota Preacher’s Testimony’, *The Apostolic Faith* (Los Angeles, CA, 5 March 1907), Feb-March edition.

In this early Pentecostal document about “holy quietness,” the reader is forced to consider the relationship between “flesh” and the word “earth”—and the exchanging of one for the other—in Habakkuk 2:20, which says “the LORD is in his holy temple: let all the **earth** keep silence before him.” “Flesh” comes to stand in for earth in this periodical. What is the efficaciousness of this substitution? Hortense Spillers’s black feminist theorizing marked a distinction between body and flesh: the “body” is defined or informed by its capacity to be capturable and captive, but the “flesh” is defined by its liberational tendency and flesh is “before the ‘body.’”² And ‘*adam*’ in Hebrew means earth, such that the biblical creation story shows us that flesh is earth animated by breath, wind, spirit. So when we consider the fulfillment of Joel, the Spirit “poured out upon all flesh,” thus, on all the earth, we see that this outpouring occurs on that which comes before being claimed by cultural norms that give us the “body” as a concept. Spirit is poured out upon that which has the capacity to enact liberation, that which is grounded in a drive, a dream toward freedom.

The utterance of tongues—a defining performative of Pentecostalism—is a likewise breath, wind, spirit, speaking out from flesh. When the modern Pentecostal movement began, the theology-philosophy of tongues was concerned with a question: are tongues *xenolalia* or *glossolalia*; that is, are tongues the language of the Other or a general, praiseworthy incoherence? If *xenolalia*, what is given is the desire to capture, to seize, to rehearse the Other without being sullied by their knowledge, their worldview. If *xenolalia*, one becomes concerned with the ability to move others to one’s own terrain, one’s own way of life without having to consider the world of others; it is to seek conversion that refuses the affirmation of the life of the one purportedly seeking conversion experience. *Xenolalia*, I argue, is the refusal to affirmation

² Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.

of the life of the one misunderstood, speaking a language only insofar as one will declare that their way of life is in need of change, a conversion therapy for the soul.

If *glossolalia*, which is to say incoherence, one can consider how queer sexualities enliven such notions of flesh. *Glossolalia*, as utterance, is not reducible to linguistic pattern. It is enunciation that is not rational. It is not the rehearsal of a core stability of a meaning sitting at the heart of each vocable. Rather, *glossolalia* is queer, as it is irreducibly incoherent, such that the distinction between body and flesh is likewise a distinction between the Other—whose world in which it is unnecessary to cognize, yet claims to "know" this Other's language, in order to dismiss the Other's potentiality, proliferate—and the incoherent—a world into which one must continually travel.

[II]

I have been attempting to theorize aversion and embarrassment. It appears that the aversion for Pentecostal aesthetics that many popular press periodicals recorded—in the *Los Angeles Herald* and the *LA Times*, and the aversive attitudes toward “lanky black wenches,” black leadership and the interracial, multiethnic sociality, against gesticulations and speaking in tongues until exhausted; and the embarrassment emanating from practitioners regarding those aesthetics such as dancing, speaking in tongues, and loud singing—also operates within and, thus against, the worlds Pentecostals themselves had made (and continue to make). For example, the people in the Azusa movement were lampooned as speaking a “weird babel of tongues.” That which spoke out from flesh—breath, wind, spirit—became a source for ridiculing Pentecostals in mainstream media. Still, a world was made through such inspirited practices, practices that people in other worlds averted, and that some inside the Pentecostal world were embarrassed to claim. Can we consider that a likewise world has been constructed with the physical, visible,

audible presence of queer folks as constitutive of the process of world making, but that such presence was and is averted in the narrative, that such presence was and is a cause for embarrassment?

The question: what kind of world do we want to make? How can we make a world that not only has the presence, but also celebrates the presence, of queerness amongst us? I want to think about the question of the world, the world in which we are making, the world in which we desire inhabitation. The biblical Acts church constructed a world out of having all things common, out of sharing meals and sacrament, out of fellowship and abundant, radical love for one another. They were continually in the process of imagining a new and livable way together with others. This was not predicated upon unanimity but by struggling together to have community. So when we think of our modern era—and the concern regarding sexuality in its generality, and homosexuality in its particularity—within the Pentecostal tradition, we do not need to be concerned with “acceptance” because queer folks are already here, and have always been, within Pentecostalism. Rather than the question “what should we do about queer sexualities in Pentecostalism,” we might pose the following: what kind of world have we constructed through the refusal to see that which helps make our own existence? And how is this refusal contradictory to the radical openness to the divine that Pentecostals generally celebrate?

[III]

What if we explore the *within* of the interstice, opened up by the Fundamental Theorem of Mathematics that says: between any two rational numbers is an infinite set of irreducible numbers, that between 1.1 and 1.2 is a literal world of difference.

1.1
 1.1 – 1.2
 1.1, 1.11 – 1.2
 1.1, 1.11, 1.111 – 1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111, 1.1111 – 1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111, 1.1111, 1.11111 – 1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111, 1.1111, 1.11111, 1.111111 – 1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111, 1.1111, 1.11111, 1.111111, 1.1111111 – 1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111, 1.1111, 1.11111, 1.111111, 1.1111111, 1.11111111 – 1.2

1.1, 1.11, 1.111, 1.1111, 1.11111, 1.111111, 1.1111111, 1.11111111, 1.111111111 – 1.2

The more we dig, the further we delve into the seeming infinitesimal crack between two numbers seemingly “next” to each other, the greater world discoverable. Even represented on the virtual page, we have the movement outward and downward into a realm of the unexplored, pulsating with meaning. The virtual page shows a spatial displacement of the concept of “next,” such that the more we explore between 1.1 and 1.2, and the more we defamiliarize the proximity between the two, the less we understand about such nearness, the less we know. And this *less known* is produced by exploration, not by dismissing the journey. That is to say, when we make easy declarations about the sinfulness of certain bodies producing certain behaviors, it can only arise by assumption of the nearness of certain concepts, of the seeming facile relationship between homosexuality and the body, between homosexuality and sin. But when we dig in, when we go down, when we move further from the surface, we get into a world—an infinite space—of generative trouble. The surface of Pentecostal aesthetics—to any outside world—has a close proximity to the concept of “nonsense” but to abide, to dwell, to move with Pentecostals is to explore a new world altogether.

[IV]

So I ask a seemingly vulgar question, vulgar only insofar as it, on its surface, seems to set forth familiar terminology, and in some ways, “nonsense”: what if we took serious the theological-philosophical force of an implied critique embedded in the word “deliverance”—a word often used against queer folks, telling us that we are in dire need of change? The critique emerges through the defamiliarizing of what the end goal of “deliverance” purports. Between 1.1

as the present moment and 1.2 as the seeming near, approaching, soon to come is the capacity for unknown, infinite change. To give a personal anecdote: it was the notion that I could be delivered that gave me the space to assert two things concurrently: that whatever or whomever I was at that present moment was not necessarily my future; and that my future was wholly undetermined by any present moment. The proximity of 1.1 to 1.2 was set in relief, giving me space to breathe and to consider, to think and to converse; it gave me a world of irreducible depth to explore. “Deliverance” as ideology was generative for the affirmation of life in any “now” moment. Is there a way to mobilize the unfamiliar for our purpose, to allow us to stop with the assumption that we know what sexuality is, that we know what homosexuality is, that we know what queerness is? Can we ask different questions? Can we think about the world that we have, who is constitutive of such a world and how we can ethically include everyone’s talents, passions, and libidinal drives? Finally, what narrative would we need to assert the fundamental value of all persons?

[V]

Pentecostalism is the affirmation of the irrepressibility of life. Thus the praise song, [“Yes, Lord.”](#) The song lingers in the interstice between the affirmative Yes and the object toward which such affirmation is directed, the Lord. Pentecostalism insists that life occurs and in such life there is not mere survival but thriving by remaining unfinished, remaining undone, remaining vulnerable. And thus, we say “yes.” So how can we have an ongoing movement toward affirmation without negating certain forms of incoherent life? Queer sexualities affirm a way of life that is often thought as negational. Queer sexualities are sites of anxiety because of the capacity for *all* of us to have pleasure that is not reducible to the populating of the world but about something more fundamental, something more primal. Queer sexualities are open to

generativity rather than reproduction; queer sexualities are open to seeking pleasure in the face of the violence of the state, and of religion, that would repress the tongue, quell the fire, still the shouting body.