



Honeypot

BLACK
SOUTHERN WOMEN WHO
LOVE WOMEN

E. PATRICK JOHNSON

With a foreword by
ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS

PRAISE FOR E. PATRICK JOHNSON

More praise for *Honeypot*

"In this critically singular work E. Patrick Johnson excavates heretofore unexplored stories of contemporary southern black women whose narratives of loving other women subvert their erasure in queer histories of LGBTQ communities. Gesturing toward black storytelling

traditions within which both myth and fact shape the story,

Johnson values and gives value to black women's understandings of themselves and the transformative power of self-initiated freedoms.

I've never read an oral history as powerful as *Honeypot*."

—Alexis De Veaux, author of *Yabo*

"E. Patrick Johnson's *Honeypot* simmers with delight and insight as black lesbian women share their stories of triumph and horror. Never before have I encountered space ruled by these voices, and never before have they been invited to bare it all unashamedly. It's about time!"

—Daniel Black, author of *Perfect Peace*

Praise for *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.*

"A courageous and eminently readable book that will be celebrated and cherished by a generation of readers inside and outside the academy."

—Nan Alamilla Boyd, San Francisco State University

"An amazing work that reflects Johnson's passion, care for his subjects, sharp analytical skills, and standing in the field."

—Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Spelman College

Praise for *Sweet Tea*

"It's pretty rare to pick up a book, turn randomly to any page, and find such a powerful personal story that you have to close the book for a moment to take it in. But the oral histories featured in *Sweet Tea* . . . cast just that kind of spell." —*The Advocate*

"*Sweet Tea* is an amazing book. Engaging from the very start, it is well written and thought provoking throughout. There were times I simply could not put it down." —E. Lynn Harris

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

“This fascinating . . . oral history subverts countless preconceptions in its illustration of black gay subcultures thriving in just about every imaginable rural and religious milieu in the South. . . . The courage and honesty of Johnson’s interviewees humble, and readers will find much to treasure in the stories.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Performances

“[Johnson] has a poised delivery and can plunge himself into moments of lively theatricality—during the show he sings gospel, executes an infectious ring shout and, in a particularly enjoyable scene, channels the tambourine-waving exuberance of an eccentric pastor. . . .

The show trains its eye far beyond any specific veranda. In one of the play’s particularly moving lines, Gerome, the tambourine-shaking pastor, explains that he has turned his back on narrow perspectives and learned to see creation ‘as a whole picture.’ *Sweet Tea* invites us to gaze at that picture, too.”—*The Washington Post*

“Perhaps the most wonderful thing about *Sweet Tea* is that the artist has achieved the near impossible: [Johnson’s] stories of self do not scream ‘me me me,’ but rather sing of an us that is rarely seen or lauded. As he said after the show, ‘the best autobiographical work is work that opens out.’”—*Indy Week* (Durham, NC)

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS



HONEYPOT

BUY

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**



Duke University Press

Durham and London

2019



DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Honeypot

**BLACK
SOUTHERN WOMEN WHO
LOVE WOMEN**

E. PATRICK JOHNSON

With a foreword by
ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

© 2019 Duke University Press
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper ∞
Cover design by Courtney Leigh Baker
Text design by Aimee C. Harrison
Typeset in Bauer Bodoni, Trade Gothic,
and Whitman by Copperline Books

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data is available
at the Library of Congress
ISBN 9781478007241 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478005902 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478006534 (paperback)

Cover art: Jamea Richmond-Edwards,
Wings Not Meant to Fly, 2012. Ink, acrylic, and mixed
media collage on canvas, 36 in. × 36 in.
© Jamea Richmond-Edwards. Courtesy of the artist.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS



**IN MEMORY OF JOAN GARNER
AND LENORE STACKHOUSE**

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

Contents

Foreword

Alexis Pauline Gumbs

♦ ix ♦

Preface

**YOU CATCH MORE
BEES WITH HONEY THAN
WITH VINEGAR**

♦ xi ♦

Introduction

**THE ADVENTURES OF
MISS B. AND ME**

♦ 1 ♦

Acknowledgments

♦ xvii ♦

One

THE HIVE

♦ 5 ♦

Two

BLESSED BEE

♦ 55 ♦

Three

HONEYBEE BLUES

♦ 69 ♦

Four

HONEY LOVE

♦ 112 ♦

Five

**BEEBOP AND
BEESWAX**

♦ 132 ♦

Six

**ALL HAIL
THE QUEEN (BEE)**

♦ 153 ♦

Epilogue

FLIGHT ♦ 220 ♦

Appendix

LIST OF HONEYBEES

♦ 223 ♦

Notes ♦ 227 ♦

Index

♦ 229 ♦

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

Foreword

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS

For a year, my partner and I lived in an apartment with a brick floor. At least three times that year, I dropped glass jars of honey on that floor and they cracked open. Precious local honey oozed out over my shiny brick floors. Like a message or a meditation. Have you ever seen the way honey works? So thick that it slows down time. So sweet that it convinces you your skin can and should touch broken glass. So golden and brown that it calls the light from all directions.

What E. Patrick Johnson offers here is a work of honey. A time travel testament, a beautiful hexagonal prism, a strategic sweetness that allows us to drink in the painful edges of life in a world that is violent to Black women and even more so to Black lesbians in the South.

In this book, E. Patrick Johnson creates an afro-surreal world for the real-life stories of Black lesbians from and in the South. A world populated by fly (and sometimes actually flying) girls, grown women, grandmas, butch daddies, and dapper self-identified dykes. As we journey with him and the archetypal Miss B., through this world we encounter a queer ecology of witness.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Johnson centers himself as a sometimes uplifted, sometimes conflicted, sometimes reluctant, and sometimes even confused listener. He therefore gives us permission to feel however we feel when we are confronted with the realities of sexual violence enacted on Black girls by the men in their communities and families; the inspiration of the contributions Black southern lesbians have made to their communities through their art and activism; and the drama, excitement, and sweetness of their evolving love lives over time.

Through this work, and through his brave honesty about how the stories affect him, refract his own story, and challenge him on his journey, Johnson models how the life experiences of Black lesbians in the South are relevant to everyone in the world. While as a Black queer woman who grew up mostly in the southern United States I appreciated the reflection I found in stories that resonated with my own life experiences and even learned a new context about the lives of people in my own communities, or whom my partner Sangodare (Julia Roxanne Wallace—who was interviewed for this book) and I met on our cross-country Mobile Homecoming tour of listening to and honoring Black LGBTQ feminist elders, the most revolutionary approach to this book is as a practice of what Audre Lorde called “the creative power of difference.” As you travel on this journey, you will be experiencing a different form of oral history. You will be led to learn from the very different lives of each of the women interviewed. And, most importantly, you will be called on to know yourself differently through the transformative truths of these heartbreaks, adventures, spiritual insights, and resilient examples.

When I think of the impact of this book on the world and our communities, I think not only of the sweetness of honey but also of its medicinal properties. Allow this work to clean you out, awaken your body’s aliveness to the air around you, inspire you to listen deeper, love bravely, and be a part of the buzz that transforms the world.

DUKE

x ♦ Foreword

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Preface

YOU CATCH MORE BEES WITH HONEY THAN WITH VINEGAR

Sitting next to a hive, watching
bees flying in and out, my mind clears
of conscious thought as I enter a deep state of
“bee meditation.” . . . The bees draw us into this
opening heart and welcome us there. It is a
heart filled with great love and great activity.
—Jacqueline Freeman, *The Song of Increase*

If you’ve ever tried to pour honey from a jar or even squeeze it from a bottle, you know that it moves on its own time. Never mind the hot buttered biscuit cracked open, just waiting to be smothered in tawny, gooey deliciousness. Or freshly brewed tea sitting in the sun standing at the ready to get sweetened. Or granddaddy’s whiskey that needs to be cut with something to make the cold remedy go down just a little bit easier. No. Honey will make you wait while it traverses that long and slow trail to the rim of the jar, the tip of the bear bottle, or the edge of the teaspoon before descending into a snail’s free fall, spindling its way over mounds of billowy biscuit innards, dissolving bitterness to sweetness in tea, or joining hands with Jack Daniels and lemon for a sweet hour of prayer. The payoff is worth the wait.

And so it is with this book. I have waited over a decade to write it, finally nudged by my queer sisters who were fans of my previous book, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South—An Oral History*. After reading the stories of black gay men of the South, many black women who attended my book signings or my performances were eager to have their stories collected in a similar fash-

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ion. I believed that someone would collect these stories, but after a decade, no one had seemed to step forward. Then in 2012, I decided that I would travel back to the South of my childhood—again—and bear witness to my sisters telling their tales. This book is the culmination, then, of two years of oral histories I collected from African American women, all of whom express same-sex desire and who were born, reared, and continue to reside in the US South. I found the majority of these women by putting out a call on a few listservs, where the word about this book spread fairly quickly. In fact, while it took me two years to collect seventy-seven narratives for *Sweet Tea*, in fourteen months I conducted the same number of interviews for *Honeypot*. The women range in age from eighteen to seventy-four and hail from states below the Mason-Dixon Line including, Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, Washington, DC, and Maryland. They range in social class from factory workers, local government administrators, entrepreneurs, counselors, professors, librarians, schoolteachers, musicians, writers, community organizers, disc jockeys, truck drivers, and housewives to those who are unemployed. Educational backgrounds also differed, but the majority of the women had completed high school, many had had some college education, and a few had postgraduate and professional degrees. The criteria for being interviewed were that the woman be born in a southern state, meaning a state below the Mason-Dixon Line or a state that had previously been slave-holding, such as Missouri and Oklahoma; be primarily reared in the South for a significant portion of her life; and, be currently living in the South. I made a few exceptions to these criteria if a woman had not been born in the South as I have defined it but had been reared there as an infant or toddler. I also made one exception by including a woman born in the global South, in Puerto Rico, and who identifies as a black Puerto Rican. The women were given the option of remaining anonymous, but most agreed to use their real names. In those instances where the narrator wanted to remain anonymous, I gave them a pseudonym, which is indicated in the appendix by their name. One of the people I interviewed identified as female at the time but now identifies as male and wanted to be included in the book as “Bluhe.”

As anyone who has read any of my other work comes to realize, I am very much invested in playful titles. The title of this book is no different. Like the title for *Sweet Tea*, the title for this book stems from its associations with the South, as well as pejorative, celebratory, and vernacular uses of the word “honey.”

In southern black vernacular among women, “honey” is a term of endear-

ment or expression of sisterhood, as in “Honey, let me tell you what this fool did!”; or, when combined with the word “child” to form “honeychild” or “honeychile,” as in “Honeychild, don’t worry about what people say about you.”¹ One of the more provocative riffs on the word was revealed to me through Michelle, one of the women I interviewed, who spent many of her college years around black gay men who also have a penchant for camping up language, as any episode of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* will attest. In her narrative Michelle playfully draws on black camp culture in her pronunciation of the word as “hunty” (i.e., “honey” plus “cunty”),² fully aware of the sexually explicit connotations of her usage. Moving from the profane to the sacred (depending on one’s perspective), biblical references to honey are widely thought of as positive, as in God promising the Israelites “a land of milk and honey” (Leviticus 20:24). At the same time there are biblical associations of honey with loose and/or untrustworthy women, as in Proverbs 5:3: “For the Lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil.” Moreover, the folk saying, “You catch more bees with honey than with vinegar” equates the “sweetness” of honey with one’s temperament and manners. Finally, the honeycomb’s shape—a hexagon—is the symbol of the heart and represents sweetness of the heart and the symbol of the sun and its energies.

The women of *HoneyPot* have remixed all of these definitions of “honey” by reimagining the negative connotations and highlighting the positive symbols and appropriating them for sexual and nonsexual references. As I spoke with women who shared their stories, I learned that in black lesbian vernacular, “honeyPot” refers to a woman’s vagina. But the reference is not just a receptacle—the women I interviewed designate the honeypot as a space where sexual expression, desire, and power reside. It is no coincidence, then, that honey is also one of the proprieties of the Yoruba deity of love and beauty, Osun. More than a few of the women I interviewed, such as Julia from Gastonia, North Carolina, who was in the midst of her initiation at the time, engage in Yoruba-based practices, and one of the most venerated deities among these women is Osun. Osun is the patron deity of the Osun River in Nigeria, which bears her name-sake, and is why she is associated with fresh water. She also symbolizes sensuality, divine beauty, fertility, luxury, and abundance of all kinds. Through these literal and figurative associations of honey with spirituality, sexuality, and desire, it is apropos, then, that I use the term in the title to capture its symbolism for these women.

As I began to realize the importance of these metaphors to these women, it struck a deep personal chord, and I reflected on my own childhood and my fascination with bees. As a child, my friends and I used to “borrow” my

mother's mason jars and, as a game, see how many bees we could catch. It was often a dangerous adventure (which made it even more thrilling) as we stalked, lionlike, our beautiful prey as they danced on summer dandelions. Honeybees were fine, but if we caught a larger bumblebee, which we called "blackjacks," we got extra points—and if we got stung by a bumblebee it was that much more painful than a honeybee. The snuff that Mama Kate, my godmother and sometimes babysitter, mixed with her spit to make a salve for the sting was sometimes enough of a deterrent for me not to catch bees for at least a few days, since I hated the smell and look of snuff. And yet, there was something beautiful about the bees all collected together with broken dandelions we had dropped into the jar. We were beekeepers in the making since we also somehow knew to "smoke" the bees by lighting matches, blowing them out and dropping them into the jar to calm them. Back then I had no idea that we could not survive without bees, for they pollinate flowers, plants, and trees that produce our fruit and vegetables. They are the only insects that produce food—honey—that humans eat. Now, as I consider the importance of bees—to the South of my childhood and to humanity in general—I want to draw parallels between what Sue Monk Kid calls the "secret life of bees" and the not-so-secret lives of black southern women who love women.³

One of the most interesting things about the life of bees is that their colonies are essentially female-dominated communities of "worker bees," so called because they maintain the colony by flying off to collect pollen and nectar for the hive, keeping the hive clean, building the honeycombs, storing the food, nursing and feeding the larvae, and making honey. Given the history of slave labor in the South in particular, where women worked both in the fields and in the plantation home, bore and nursed her master's children and her own, and did so with dignity and pride, it is not a stretch to make an analogy to the work of female bees. Indeed, metaphors about the industriousness of bees or sayings such as "busy as a bee" apply to the lives of black women who, as fiction writer and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston suggests through the wisdom of her character Nanny, are the "mules of the world."⁴ And, according to one group of scientists, it is likely that honeybees all had one common ancestor in Africa.⁵ Thus, the connection between the history of black women—of any sexual orientation—and bees abounds. Even the designation "bee charmer" is a southern slang term for lesbians who are particularly adept at seducing other lesbians!

Male bees, called "drones," are fewer in number. They are larger and wider than female worker bees and do not contribute to the maintenance of the hive—that is, cleaning, foraging for food, production of honey, and so on—

beyond reproduction. They hang together in a group called a “scarp,” where they detect queen bees in flight. A drone competes for copulation rights, and if he wins those rights, he injects his sperm into the queen’s abdomen while mounted to her and flying in midair, his penis and other abdominal tissue ripped from his body after copulation. He then dies, while the queen continues on in search of more drones to mate with. If a drone does survive copulation and returns to the hive, or if he never mates with a queen and never leaves the hive, the worker bees eventually push him out—typically in autumn before the hive goes dormant for the winter—because he is of no further use to the hive. The connections between drones and men in general, and black men specifically, are not as obvious, and those comparisons that might be made run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes of black men as lazy and promiscuous. For example, over 80 percent of the women I interviewed recount stories of sexual assault at the hands of male relatives.⁶ But it would be unfair to make an analogy between black men and drones in this regard because the sex between drones and queen bees is necessary and solicited by the queen bee in order to populate the hive, and is not the same as sexual assault. In *Honey pot*, then, the drones represent not so much a direct analogy to the role that they play in a real hive but represent more a composite of the male behavior described by the women I interviewed, some of which includes sexual assault, misogyny, and sexism, as well as protectors, confidants, and lovers.

All of these parallels between the life of bees and the life of the women I interviewed inspired me to think more creatively about how to represent their stories in addition to a traditional “academic” text. In the process, I was challenged to think differently about false distinctions we make about myth and truth, since many of us—and especially those who are marginalized—are constantly compelled to prove the validity of our experiences or the stories we tell about them. And, in any event, myth, lore, and story create the foundation of what maintains a culture’s past, present, and future, and African American culture is no exception—and in this instance, black southern women who love women aren’t either.

What I offer here, then, is the vision that came to me as these stories flowed—like honey—over me. What emerged was a character named “Miss B.,” who functions as a liaison between the world of black southern women who love women—a hive—and me. Perhaps it was pure serendipity that this bee first appeared in the epilogue of a draft of my book *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.—An Oral History*,⁷ which is drawn from the same oral histories as this book but presented in a traditional academic format. But as I made the decision to write two separate books based on the same source material—one aca-

demic, and one creative—the bee decided that she wanted her own story. In the tradition of many African oral traditions, Miss B. is a trickster figure that is both of this world and outside it. She blurs the line between the sacred and the profane; she exists in the past, present, and future, transcending time and space. She is a composite of many black southern women I know, who, much like my grandmother, cursed like sailors out of the same mouth that they praised Jesus—women for whom this contradiction spoke to their humanity rather than to what some might deem hypocrisy. She is also a composite of the women I interviewed for this book, some of whom were open to sharing their stories while at the same time understandably cautious about relaying some of the most intimate details of their lives to a male listener. Miss B. is often crass but never cruel; confident but also vulnerable; a chain smoker despite knowing it's bad for her.⁸ She's that family member who gets on everyone's last nerve with her antics but whom no one could imagine the world without. What she is ultimately—bee, human, ancestor figure—is left to the reader, but for me, Miss B. serves both as my guide and my conscience about what it meant for me to bear witness to these stories. She is also what Jacqueline Freeman refers to as an “Overlighting Being,” a bee who is “the representative of the hive and at the same time has the responsibility to the bee kingdom . . . the repository of the hive's history and the emissary who speaks on their behalf.”⁹

Bees are a part of the insect order Hymenoptera. I find it productive, then, to allegorize the root name of the order—“hymen”—as the name of the hive over which Miss B. presides. In *Honeypot*, Hymen is located in the nether regions of the South under which a massive river flows. Miss B. is both the keeper of the word and protector of Hymen. No one may enter without her blessing. Along our journey in this otherworldly place, Miss B. and I engage in conversations about life, love, politics, and her sisters. Though it is she who chooses me to collect these stories, she reminds me of the stakes and responsibilities of bearing witness to another's humanity. As we reveal ourselves to one another—and to ourselves—so do the women whose stories buzz in the sacred space of the hive.¹⁰

DUKE



Acknowledgments

This book willed itself into existence. It all started with a pesky bee(ing) who decided that she warranted her own book. So, my first “thank you” is to Miss B. who knew that these stories deserved more than one way to exist in the world. To my husband and mate for life, Stephen J. Lewis, you are always my biggest fan. Thank you for being the first reader of this manuscript and for helping me strengthen the book in important ways. To D. Soyini Madison, to whom I’ll forever be indebted for introducing me to oral history, ethnography, and poetic writing, thank you for reading a very early draft of this manuscript—twice!—and encouraging me to trust my instincts. Thanks to other colleagues who gave me valuable feedback on drafts of the manuscript: Marlon M. Bailey, Stephanie Batiste, Lauren Berlant, Martha Biondi, Joanne Braxton, Sharon Bridgforth, Jennifer Brier, Cedric Brown, Chris Cunningham, Nicole Fleetwood, Kai M. Green, Trudier Harris, Dwight A. McBride, Daniel Alexander Jones, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, Ramon Rivera-Servera, and Deborah Thomas.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge all of my colleagues around the country who have supported this work through encouragement or inviting me

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

to give talks at their institutions. They include Tami Albin, Renee Alexander-Craft, Juan Battle, Katie Batza, Karen Baxter, Lauren Berlant, Robin Bernstein, Joanne Braxton, Daphne Brooks, Ashley Coleman, Tommy DeFrantz, Jill Dolan, Alexis De Veaux, Lisa Duggan, Jackie Goldsby, Gayatri Gopinath, Kai M. Green, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Michael Hanchard, Trudier Harris, Jaime Harker, Holly Hughes, John L. Jackson, Jr., Jajuan Johnson, Kareem Khubchandani, Susan Lanser, Bill Leap, A. J. Lewis, Jeffrey McCune, Leisa Meyer, Gregory Mitchell, Kathy Peiss, Della Pollock, Joseph Roach, Patricia Rose, Barbara Savage, Elmo Terry-Morgan, Deborah Thomas, Emilie Townes, Valerie Traub, Red Tremmel, Sherrie Tucker, Mary Helen Washington, Heather Williams, Eldie Wong, Michelle M. Wright, Vershawn Young, and Barbie Zelizer.

Thanks to my graduate research assistants who did dramaturgical research on bees, Yoruba spiritual practices, and who copyedited versions of the book: Julian Glover, S. Tay Glover, Jonathan Magat, Gervais Marsh, Shoniqua Roach, and Cinnamon Williams.

I received financial support from the Sexualities Project at Northwestern (SPAN) for two grants without which this research could have never taken place.

Miss B. first came to life in Oakland at the dining room table of Cedric Brown and Ray Pifferrer. I thank them for providing that space to write and imagine otherwise. Miss B. was further developed at the dining room table of Nicky Solomon and Glen McGillivray, in Sydney, Australia. They have welcomed me into their home for over sixteen years. Thank you for allowing me to escape to the other side of the world and for always providing me inspiration, great food, and an opportunity to cook!

To my editor, Courtney Berger, thank you for not only taking a chance on this manuscript but also for believing in my ability to make it work. You will never know how much I appreciate your candor, support, and friendship. And, as always, the folks at Duke University Press know how to make beautiful books. This time was no exception.

And, finally, to all of the women who invited me inside the hive to listen and bear witness, I say keep on buzzing about. Keep on telling your tales. Know that the beekeeper is always on duty.

DUKE



Introduction

THE ADVENTURES OF MISS B. AND ME

Some dreams you want to remember—and don't want interrupted. Flying dreams. Food dreams. Fuck dreams. Dreams that propel you into suspenseful delight to see what's going to happen next—from up above, in your mouth, to the body beneath you—or on top of you. And then there are those other dreams. You. Alone. In the dark. And whatever that something is, is chasing you. No one hears your scream, and your feet seem to be stuck in quicksand as the whatever your unconscious has unleashed on you devours every last bit of hope you had of escaping. You awaken. Heart racing and brow beaded with sweat. You realize it was just a dream. Comforted, you adjust your pillow and your body position (Mama always told you it was bad luck to sleep on your back!) and drift back off to sleep—only for the dream to pick up where it left off. The whatever it is, is on your heels. Damn.

And then there are the in-between dreams. Neither hopeful nor nightmarish, but nonetheless curious. You want to see and hear more, but you have a reticence. Will it turn nightmarish? Will it just be boring? Is it worth stay-

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ing asleep for? You won't be too disappointed if you are awakened by your alarm clock music of Jill Scott singing, "Is it the way you love me baby?" or by finally noticing that your lover's side of the bed is cold—and empty. But you also wouldn't mind staying in this dreamscape to prolong the inevitable—the drudgery of the day's dilemmas: What am I going to wear today? What are we having for dinner? How many emails do I need to return? When is that essay due? How many more letters of recommendation do I have to write? The in-between dream sounds like a much better choice, so you stay asleep. Suspended. Waiting. Until you're awakened from the in-between dream by a knock at the door.



My dog, Bailey, is barking and scratching at the bedroom door. He is ready for his morning walk, pee, and poop. "Is the doorbell broken?" I mumble to myself as I stumble out of bed, grabbing my jeans and shirt from the floor. Whoever is at the door is going to be knocked out by my bad morning breath, but it serves them right for waking me up just when my dream was about to get good. I push Bailey back from the bedroom door and close it behind me, as I run down the stairs, trying to zip up my jeans and button up my shirt. It's Monday morning, so I know it's not Jehovah's Witnesses. The knocking turns to pounding, and I become worried that something has happened to Stephen. I notice I'm barefoot as I reach to turn the lock. Before I can get the door fully open, she blasts past me talking a mile a minute.

"Whew! I thought you were never gonna open that damn door! Don't you know it's cold out there? This is Chicago and I really ain't got no business being here this time of year anyway. I hibernate in the winter."

Adjusting what looks like a scarf draped around her neck, she pauses, briefly, realizing that I'm standing with my mouth agape and wondering who this person is who has just barged into my house. "Oh, baby, I'm sorry. Where are my manners? I just buzzed in here without greeting you properly. I'm Miss B."

She extends her hand. I do not return the courtesy, confused by what is happening. Seeing my confusion but still annoyed that I don't extend my hand to shake, she drops her hand to her side, only to place it on one of her hips.

"Hmmp. And you supposed to be a southerner. Could've fooled me." She begins to dig into what seems to be a purse, but looks more like a gold basket. The word "PANNIER" is embossed in all caps on the lower right corner in black letters. She starts a long string of almost inaudible non sequiturs: "I thought I

had my card down in here somewhere . . . I bet you one of those drones been digging around in my . . . Lord, who done took my last c—.”

We both feel the whip of cold air from the front door being left ajar. She finally looks up from her . . . purse. “Well, ain’t you going to close the door? You letting all the heat out. And it sounds like that dog is about to lose its mind with all of that barking.” I move to close the door while she removes her hat, scarf, and gloves and parks herself on one of our living room chairs. I want to run upstairs to calm Bailey, and take him out for his walk, but he’ll have to wait. I need to attend to the business at hand.

“Ma’am, I think you’re lost. Who are you looking for?” I say in my most respectful voice, but notably tinged with impatience.

She laughs. “Oh, I’m in the right place alright. And if you had a semblance of anything that looked like manners, you would have offered me some tea with a little honey.”

I stare at her with even more disbelief.

“I’ll take organic dandelion if you have it. And put the honey on the side. And that should be organic, too. So many pesticides and chemicals are used these days. It’s scan’less.” She fumbles some more with her purse.

“I don’t have organic dandelion tea. The only organic tea I have is green tea. Would you like some of that?” I say, pinching myself to awaken from what must be a dream.

“From the looks of this house, I thought you were a bourgie Negro, but you can’t be bourgie and ain’t got no organic dandelion tea! Green tea is so last year. But if that’s all you got.” Her side eye is stunningly arrogant.

I make my way to the kitchen and open the cabinet where we keep the tea. I scan the two shelves of tea and there, on the bottom shelf, is a collection of teas in silver tins that I purchased in Portland, OR while visiting some friends. Well, I’ll be damned. Organic dandelion.

I hear a low buzzing sound and then quiet. Buzzing. Quiet. Buzzing. Quiet. Surely, a fly has not survived the winter. I’m almost afraid to peek around the corner to see what she’s doing in the living room. Instead, I focus on the task of preparing this dandelion tea that I didn’t even know I had and trying to find my “bourgie” honey from Whole Foods. Luckily, there is still a little left in the jar in the refrigerator, but it has coagulated from the cold. I scoop a little out and put it in a ramekin and place it in the microwave for a few seconds. The tea has steeped long enough, so I pour it into a proper china teacup and place both on a tray and head back to the living room.

“Here’s your *organic* tea and honey,” I say, sitting the tray down on the coffee table.

She picks up the ramekin of honey, studies it for a minute before sticking the tip of her tongue into it very lightly. “Not bad. And by the way, you need to invest in a good fly swatter. You got bluebottles flying everywhere. You know they say that cleanliness is next to godliness, so I’d say you have a ways to go to get . . . godly,” she says, not looking at me and taking another sip of tea. I say nothing but stare at her with all of the incredulity I can muster. Paying me no mind, she continues, “Okay, so now that we have the pleasantries out of the way, why don’t you run on up and put on some shoes while I enjoy my tea so that we can go?”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Okay. Sit down and let me explain to you how this is going to go.”

“Uh, no. *You* are going to stand up and get out of my house.”

The house goes quiet.

Without saying a word, Miss B. stands up and begins to gather her things. She slips on her gloves and then slowly, methodically, wraps her scarf around her neck, winding it round as if she’s stuck in slow motion. It is at this moment that I get a closer look at her face. It is heart shaped. Her eyes are as dark as night, but rather than absorb the light, their glossiness seems to reflect it. Their blackness is a beautiful contrast to her tawny skin tone. On each of her cheeks is a small cluster of moles, similar to the ones on my mother’s face, that resemble constellations on a clear night. Her hair looks as if she stuck her finger into an electrical socket—a blowout kit gone wrong. And to be cute, she has twisted two small bunches of the electrified hair on either side of her forehead such that they drape down toward her eyes to resemble tendrils. Tragic and fly all at the same time. She puts on her coat just as methodically as she did her scarf before bending over to slip on her shoes. I clutch my pearls when I notice that she doesn’t shave her legs. Black mossy patches of hair extend up to her knees. It is then that I catch sight of her ass, which seems to blossom from her body, extended out far beyond any ass I have ever seen—including my own. She squishes her ill-fitting hat on top of her head, adjusting it on either side while pretending to look into an imaginary mirror. After she adorns herself in her outerwear, she takes one last slurp from the tea and moves silently toward the door. My dog’s barking has reached a fever pitch, as if he senses that something is off.

“I hope that you find the person you are looking for, Miss B.,” I say, wrapped in a bouquet of condescension.

She turns and extends her hand—again. This time I oblige. As our hands meet, she says, “I already have.” And with that we are off.

Notes

PREFACE

1. The female hip-hop artist Nicki Minaj has also made the word famous by referring to young singers as “honeychild.”

2. This derivative of the word “honey” comes from drag culture and has been made popular by the black drag star RuPaul and his show *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. The term also has derogatory connotations, since it riffs off of the misogynist word “cunt.”

3. See Kid’s novel *The Secret Life of Bees* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

4. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper & Row), 14.

5. See “Out of Africa: Scientists Uncover History of Honey Bee,” *ScienceDaily*, October 27, 2006, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/10/061025181534.htm>.

6. I should note that while the violence the women experience at the hands of men is a feature of the majority of the stories I collected, these stories should not be taken as representative of all black queer women in the South, but rather as a reflection of the specific sample of women I interviewed. Further, sexual trauma caused by men should not be read as an explanation for why these

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

women express same-sex desire. Indeed, many of these women had positive romantic relationships with men after their experiences, and many of them state explicitly that their sexual abuse did not turn them toward women.

7. For readers who are interested in a more traditional rendering of oral histories, replete with descriptions of actual towns, interview settings, and the women themselves, see *Black. Queer. Southern. Women—An Oral History*, which is meant as a companion text to *Honeypot*.

8. I should also note that beekeepers use smoke to calm bees.

9. Jacqueline Freeman, *The Song of Increase: Returning to Our Sacred Partnership with Honeybees* (Battle Ground, WA: Friendly Haven Rise Press, 2014), 39.

10. The narratives included in this book are only excerpts from the longer interviews. They have been heavily edited for clarity and brevity. I have also taken creative license with the context under which the interviews were conducted to reflect the fictional world of Hymen.

CHAPTER ONE THE HIVE

1. The waggle dance is a behavior used to describe the movement of a honeybee in the hive through which it shares the direction and distance to food sources, such as flowers with pollen and nectar, and water sources, such as streams and rivers.

2. Mason, carpenter, miner, and ashly miner are all types of bees.

3. The ashly mining bee is a European species, widespread throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland.

4. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, “In the Morning” (New York: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2017), 226–27.

5. Dunbar, “In the Morning.”

CHAPTER SIX ALL HAIL THE QUEEN (BEE)

1. Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1975), 11.

2. I have not been able to locate this image of Evers in *Jet Magazine* or find any other references to it.

3. Pseudonym.

4. ZAMI was a multiracial lesbian activist group founded in Atlanta in 1995.

5. The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of Black Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 235–36.

DUKE