

## 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-

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.”<sup>1</sup> 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”),<sup>2</sup> 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 namesake, 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.<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup> And, according to one group of scientists, it is likely that honeybees all had one common ancestor in Africa.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 *Honeygot*, 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*,<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>