BLACK RELIGION AND AESTHETICS

RELIGIOUS THOUGHT AND LIFE IN AFRICA AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

Edited by

ANTHONY B. PINN

Black Religion and Aesthetics

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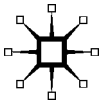

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Dedicated
to
The Ancestors

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Introduction

The Black Labyrinth, Aesthetics, and Black Religion

Anthony B. Pinn

> All the world knows beauty
> but if that becomes beautiful
> this becomes ugly.
>
> Lao Tzu[1]

> If there is anything universal about human beings, it is that given a largely identical biology, they will represent the world differently from stage to stage of the histories in which they participate.
>
> Arthur C. Danto[2]

This volume is an effort to examine religion and religious thought in a way that recognizes cultural movement—an arrangement that connects North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. And it does so by moving beyond strict attention to doctrinal considerations as the proper cartography of shared religiosity, and without the assumption that religion within this expansive cultural arena means the proliferation of a particular religious tradition.[3] In a general sense, the essays are shaped by a sense of the aesthetic element(s) of religion as connected to artistic expression (e.g., visual arts, clothing, sermonic style, dance, music, literature, etc.). This collection should not be viewed as an effort to mine the "African-ness" of the religions/religious thought of African peoples within the geography of the "Americas" and its various contact points. Rather, the volume presents numerous ways in which aesthetics becomes a means by which to chart the nature of religion in Africa and the African diaspora (and its geographies—the spokes on the "Diasporic" wheel).[4] Framing this

approach is an assumption that aesthetics speaks to how the human is made and constituted, all the while involving something of a political reality in that aesthetics speak to and from the concerns of social groups.[5] Furthermore, and of fundamental importance, the essays in this volume suggest the construction, presentation, and placement of Black bodies as a matter of aesthetics also sheds light on the nature of religion and religious experience within African and the African diaspora.[6] This arrangement, in short, is the focus of this volume. However, in what remains of this introduction attention is given to defining and framing the central terms and frameworks upon which the volume's purpose rest—beginning with the troubled and troubling notion of the "African diaspora."

Context: Africa and the African Diaspora

How does one intellectually frame and "capture" the existential and ontological complexities of the movement into and out of Africa that marked the Modern Period? How does one describe the thick geographic and cultural arrangements and exchanges that supported the system of African slavery as a significant Modern reality?[7] From the sixteenth century on such questions served to shape the conceptual and cartographical presence we have come to refer to as the "African diaspora."[8]

While serving a useful purpose within contemporary scholarship, this concept has been far from problem free; rather, it has been debated and interrogated in terms of the geographical arrangements envisioned, the cultural cartography developed, and the time frame of concern it suggests. For example, some scholars have pointed out the manner in which it fails to adequately account for Africa—the cultural impact of Africa as concept and location—in that the diaspora does not begin in the Atlantic or Indian Ocean but on land with the movement of Africans across the continent.[9] Mindful of this debate, the African diaspora concept is used in this volume to reference a complex situation of contact and exchange encompassing Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean and Europe (although an argument could be made to include, for example, Asia in this geo-cultural cartography). As such, this notion of the African diaspora is not synonymous with Paul Gilroy's notion of the "Black Atlantic".[10] Even if the terminology of "Black Atlantic" is used as a similar reference point it must be done recognizing its limitations in that the African diaspora entails shifting boundaries, discourses of culture, and other mechanisms of differentiation extending beyond a North American center

to include an "active" Africa and South America.[11] In a word, "in strictly geographical terms, the Atlantic Ocean washes the shores of Africa, North and South America, and Europe."[12] I suggest one might also think of the African diaspora as the Black labyrinth. Such a conceptualization avoids some of the geographic challenges and shortcomings related to nation/state formations as anchors for the diaspora. Instead, Black labyrinth allows for the maintenance of tension between "place" and "not-place" through a thick arrangement over a vast geography, with many socio-cultural twist and turns, numerous points of contact and convergence.[13]

While other formulations are possible, this volume is concerned with the Africa diaspora—the Black labyrinth—as it relates to the process of enslavement and colonization.[14] The slave trade and colonization are used to gauge this notion of the African diaspora in that the ripples and movements of the African diaspora reach beyond the end of "New World" slavery and continue to impact and shape discourses of meaning and practices of place into the twenty-first century.[15] This is not to argue for a single slave reality, nor to suggest a single trajectory.[16] Denial of such a flat depiction is given here through the inclusion of numerous points of contact and exchange—North America, South America, the Caribbean, Europe and Africa. Furthermore, the structure of this book is meant to suggest that the African diaspora or what I call the Black labyrinth is not unidirectional, but rather overlapping, complex, multidirectional—assuming the significance of porous boundaries. Stemming from these qualifications there is a somewhat obvious caveat: The nature and meaning of the Black labyrinth extends beyond the confines of any particular location while also needing to be represented in relationship to particular locals.[17]

The cultural-religious geography this book seeks to address is a moving target because the notion of the African diaspora refers to something that is in transition; or, as Donald Carter, states so well: diaspora is meant to capture a location and being, "of drifting endless on the betwixt and between of the world's boundaries. Rather than seeking 'assimilation' as a goal, diaspora is a way of being 'other' among the established, of keeping live the drama of the voyage of 'otherness' in worlds that seek sameness and homogeneity."[18] It is "both process and condition" offering historically situated points of cultural continuity and cultural areas of notable difference.[19] And, again, there is something aesthetic about this formulation; and embedded in the aesthetics of the African diaspora is something religious. Finally, the aesthetic representation and expression of religion

in the African diaspora is connected intimately to the body and issues of embodiment.

INTO THE BLACK LABYRINTH: BLACK BODIES CONSTRUCTED AND "PLACED"

Argued in both implicit and explicit ways, the essays in the volume are framed by recognition of the body as aesthetically and religiously significant. That is to say, the contributors to *Black Religion and Aesthetics* recognize the body as a contested terrain, as tablets upon which the power and practices of a given society are inscribed, and also a biological reality—flesh through which and on which diasporic geography is mapped and developed. Hence, under girding this depiction shared by the various authors is an understanding of the body as complex—as both metaphor and material.

Focus on the body "grounds" the African diaspora by not allowing it to simply have a discursive function, existing in large part as a conceptual arrangement.

Philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists amongst other scholars have given sustained attention to the body as metaphor. With links running back to Hegel, Kant, among others, intellectuals such as Michel Foucault explored the manner in which the body is constructed in compliance with social systems. So conceived, the body can be understood outside attention to materiality in that it is a symbol or, for Foucault, a "matter" of discourse.[20] When defining the body, the privileging of epistemology and power vis-à-vis discourse renders the body a "story" of sorts, cartography of information meant to justify and safeguard certain social understandings and arrangements. In opposition to this discursive construction and framing of the body, others have highlighted the materiality of the body by giving priority to biology. Such naturalistic rendering of the body has tended to understand it as pre-society, an unchanging "mass" that must be circumscribed and civilized.[21] While helpful individually on some level, more is gained when the overlapping nature of the two theories of the body is recognized and harnessed.

Mary Douglas, for example argues the body as symbol and the physical body act on each other in that "there is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other." The regulations of the functions of the body, the movement or placement of the body, are "expression of social control" in that restrictions are placed on the physical body by the social system. Although there is tension between

the body as self and the social body, according to Douglas, the latter is dominant.[22] In addition to Douglas' work, sociologists of the body like Bryan Turner and Chris Shillings seek to hold together for analysis the two "forms" of the body, arguing that the body is affected by society but also affects society.[23] That is to say, there is connection between the two modalities of the body. Both collect and convey meaning. Both communicate. In other words, "meaning . . . resides in the body, and the body resides in the world."[24] The body shifts and changes, takes various forms, occupies various spaces in time but always articulates meaning through its form, content, and production. As metaphor and material, the body is displayed meaning but also displays meaning. Information concerning the world and action in light of this information comes through and is dependent upon the social body and the material body.[25]

Of particular concern here is the manner in which this understanding of the body plays out with respect to particular bodies, Black bodies. The proclamation directed at Frantz Fanon—"Look, a Negro!"—echoed across the geography of contact and conquest and suggested the marking of all bodies defined as Black.[26] Such construction of Black bodies entails the assumption of difference and, more to the point, the inscription of difference as a fundamental negation. While noted as race, this distinction is not limited to racial difference in that it is connected to gender, class, and so on. Only in this way can one recognize, for instance, the inscription on or marking of Black women in the African diaspora or the ways in which identity within the African diaspora involves a highlighting of class in some areas and race in others.[27] Mindful of this, DuBois' problematic might be rephrased: What does one do/think when one's body both contains and produces a social contaminant? What does one do/think when one's body as flesh prompts the question of how does this fit—what in fact, is it—and whose body as metaphor suggest a negative response, a barrier, a warning?

The importance of the body—metaphor and material—is not limited to the generic political and social arrangements hinted at above. The body's significance also rests in what it says about the formation and practice, the expression and arrangement, of religion within the African diaspora.

The way in which Black bodies are constructed, constituted, and arranged in time and space is interrogated in this volume through the rubric of religion and religious expression. This analysis is not simply concerned with body construction and display as a negative, with regard to how such construction and placement serve the status quo

by safeguarding the integrity of the New World experiment. Attention is also given to the manner in which religion and religious expression challenge the construction of Black bodies to serve the social system and encourage re-evaluation of the proper "space" for and "use" of material Black bodies. Furthermore, in stead of defining religion and religious expression solely as groupings and celebration (enactments) of certain doctrines and creeds, the content of this book as a whole suggests openness to definitions that extend beyond these markers and consider religion as related to what I have elsewhere labeled the quest for complex subjectivity—the push to make meaning in complex and multilayered ways. Religious expression, then, is the enactment of this "push."

The Body, Aesthetics, and Religion: An African Diasporic Arrangement

Within the context of the religious, the body functions as a means of communication,[28] and the purpose of this communication involves challenges to (and at times reinforcement of) the dominant social structures. Recognition of religion, and the role of the body in religion, beyond doctrine/creeds demands an alternate vehicle of expression. Within this volume, that alternate mode is aesthetic in nature.

Artistic expression and aesthetics can and have been used to reinforce subjugation of certain social and material bodies.[29] They have been employed to naturalize structures of domination and discrimination. For instance, aesthetics played a role in the generation of the Black labyrinth by presenting as refined and valuable (in theological terms representative of the beauty and wholeness of the divine) the markers of expansion and colonization. Through architecture, clothing, the visual arts, literature, music, and so on, the new cartography of subjugated life was made "beautiful" and balanced.[30]

Aesthetics became a source of dominance without betraying anything of its illusionary disinterestedness. Rather, it formed and justified a particular experience of the world. Aesthetics dictates the proper "form" of life for embodied bodies, and for those of African descent this had major consequences from the period of exploration to the present. "Racists accounts, widely accepted in the time of European colonization and beyond," writes Sarah Nuttall, "present the African continent as the metaphor par excellence for physical ugliness and moral decay. According to these accounts, ugliness and decay were particularly visible in the black body . . ." Even when not presented as ugly, in the case of the mulatto, Black bodies remained reified and

only appreciated because they were exotic, a fascinating foreignness, that could be consumed because of European power.[31] Violence, enslavement, various forms of discrimination, pain and torture were rendered aesthetically pleasing through art. Or, as Russ Castronovo remarks, even these things could be rendered "sublime".[32] Yet, the discursive creation and shaping of Black bodies, combined with the confinement of their corporality, was challenged by means of a new vision of their meaning and materiality established through an aesthetic turn in religion—the work and tools of aesthetic became deeply religious.[33]

Although the "Black" in Black bodies has not meant the same thing to all within all locations, there is still an overarching condition and process that made Black bodies—however understood by those who possess them and are possessed by them—"other." In both explicit and implicit ways, the essays that comprise this volume suggest religious thought and religious experience within the African diaspora involve an aesthetic shift whereby dominant perceptions of Black bodies—the proper placement in time and space—are challenged and corrected by means of how the body is represented and what the body produces. If the construction and representation of Black bodies by Europe involved an "exorcizing" of blackness,[34] the aesthetic representations of religiosity involve a re-presenting of Black bodies counter to the discourse, logic, and sociocultural representations of White superiority. The expression and experience of the religions of the Africa diaspora—namely the religiosity forged by those of African descent in these various contexts—serves to counter the aesthetics used to restrain and warp their individual bodies and collective body.[35] The once despised Black body is rendered, at least in momentary spurts, valuable through an aesthetic shift.

By aesthetics I do not simply mean philosophical discussion of abstract qualities, although the pieces in this volume are concerned with the quality and meaning attached to Black bodies and what they produce as a matter of aesthetic grammar—notions of wholeness, beauty, balance, meaning, integrity, and so on. However, in addition to this, the concern here is with an understanding of aesthetics as having relationship to the historical by serving as a means by which lived experience is formed and shape. In these pages, then, aesthetics becomes a way of articulating and placing Black bodies over against the ontology and epistemology guiding social systems. This involves both values and experience—values experienced. There is nothing disinterested about this arrangement; rather, it is meant to challenge and change perception and practice with regard to Black

bodies and White bodies. The "stigmatized" body[36] seeks to force its re-presentation and thereby to also challenge the authority and very meaning of the previously non-stigmatized body.

Aesthetics must have a location, must be lodged somewhere and in something. In this volume, the location encompasses a grammar of significance and involves artistic production—music, film, literature, dress, dance, sermonic style, and the visual arts. The task Paul Gilroy assigns to "artistic expression" might also be given to the expression of religiosity through aesthetics: "artistic expression, expanded beyond recognition from the grudging gifts offered by the masters as a token substitute for freedom from bondage, therefore becomes the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation."[37] Gilroy highlights writing, spoken language, and music (all three revolving around the word), but Simon Williams and Gillian Bendelow extend the range of artistic expression as communicative mechanism. "Alongside performance art and other praxical modes of embodied expression such as dance," they write, "art provides a powerful 'visual narrative' of the embodied biographies of artists themselves, expressing fundamental features of the human condition. In doing so, the boundaries between art and social theory, reproduction and resistance, are (temporarily) destabilized, if not (permanently) effaced."[38]

While in agreement with the assessment of art as communicative device offered by Gilroy, Williams, and Bendelow, this volume offers a more general assumption as its guiding theory: *Religion's challenges to problematic re-presentations of the Black body are often expressed aesthetically and by means of artistic production such as the visual arts, but also dance, dress, music, the spoken word (e.g., sermonic style), ritual activities as well as a broad attention to the placement (and use) of the material body in time and space.* Artistic production and aesthetics, in this case, are meant to incite, to advance particular agendas that involve embodied experience of the world. Not simply contemplation of art for art's sake. Artistic production and aesthetics, according to the scholars in this volume, "*do* work." In making this statement, I am not suggesting, like DuBois, that art is simply propaganda.[39] Mine is not a judgment concerning the proper use and place of art and aesthetics. Rather, I am suggesting that the aims of religiosity as well as its display are often presented on and through the body in aesthetically defined fields of meaning and representation. And these fields of meaning were meant to disrupt and challenge the grammar of construction and placement that defined existentially (material) and ontologically (metaphor) Black bodies.

The religious, in a sense, makes aesthetics intentional in a way that can give robust and complex meaning to what is otherwise fixed. Through the religiously understood grammar of aesthetics the body is plastic, transformed and transforming whereas the mechanisms of dominance have sought to reify Black bodies in ways that please and serve White bodies and their construction as normative.[40] This is not aesthetics devoid of power and influence, but aesthetics projected as demanding power or, as some theologians might argue, "liberative" existence.

This book is concerned with the ways in which the placement of Black bodies in time and space *qua* cultural formulations serves a religious purpose in the African diaspora by re-creating and re-presenting Black bodies vis-à-vis alternate aesthetic arrangements.[41] Put another way, this book through a variety of perspectives and examples seeks to examine the manner in which the construction and confinement of Black bodies (as metaphor and material) through the mechanisms of slavery, colonization, and continued hardship are challenged. And in place of these fixed and despised bodies, religion uses alternate aesthetics to encourage the development of new Black bodies.[42] Furthermore, underlying the volume as a whole is an assumption that the aesthetic dimensions of religion allow for a move beyond nation-framed discussion of religion by recognizing (in soft ways in this volume) the manner in which the aesthetic quality of religious thought and life allow for a non-threatening grammar of religious dialogue that reified doctrinal assertions cannot.[43] That is to say, for instance, doctrinal formulations differ in the various traditions and modalities of religious thought noted both explicitly and implicitly in this volume, but the vibrancy of color, the movement of the body, the various artistic renderings of ultimate questions cut across such differences, while still allowing for exchange, appreciation, mutuality.

The Book: Structure and Content

Methodologically, this volume is multidisciplinary in nature—shaped by a range of ways of exploring religion: theology, anthropology of religion, cultural studies, art history, film studies, sociology of religion, and religious education. The book is not devoted to any particular tool of analysis, and in fact some of the chapters combine an autobiographical tone with scholarly analysis while others are more traditional in presentation. Furthermore, the chapters are arranged in terms of "areas" of the Black labyrinth—North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa.

The first section explores the aesthetic dimensions of religion in North America and South America. It opens with an essay by Anthony Pinn in which he examines the possibility of an embodied Black theology in which the notion of beauty is used to re-think and reformulate the meaning of liberation and "salvation." Nancy Lynne Westfield explores the sermonic style of African American women within church circles for what the "preached word" says about the beauty of Black women's bodies within the context of Black Churches as patriarchal organizations. Moving south, Lindsay Hale offers a reading of Afrobrazilian religion through the aesthetic significance of ritual substances such as blood, water and honey. And, Carol Duncan's chapter examines the nature of ritual within the context of film production and viewing from a Canadian perspective.

In the second section of the book, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert examines the aesthetics of Haitian painting related to the practice of Vodou. Primary attention is given to an interrogation of the iconography developed by painters seeking to depict the lwa—its use within rituals and its place in the economy of Haiti. Miguel De La Torre follows with attention to the racialization of Ochún as a matter of aesthetics within Cuban Santería. He does so by questioning the shifting of the orisha's body from Black to White as she moves from Africa into the Caribbean and North America. The volume moves from the Caribbean to Europe with two chapters that explore the aesthetic dimension of religiosity within the United Kingdom. Robert Beckford examines the religious significance of clothing within Pentecostal circles and documentary filmmaking. And, Anthony Reddie examines the spirituality of musical production from the perspective of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora as found in Britain.

The final section of the book explores the topic within the context of Africa. Opening this section, Linda Thomas explores the manner in which African Initiated Churches (AIC) in South Africa forge a sense of beauty over against oppressive social structures. Thomas focuses on rituals of renewal used to give new meaning and importance to Black South African bodies. In the second chapter of this final section, Elias Bongmba argues that within the context of African art, aesthetics must be understood as "triadic" in nature—"addressing a 'feeling' resulting from the visual dimension of the artistic production, 'framed' by power dynamics associated with the social context of the 'art,' and finally as a 'spiritually' oriented 'experience.' "

As the content of the volume suggests, less concern is given to representation of all religious possibilities; such a discussion—in light of the numerous religious traditions practiced by people of African

descent—is beyond the scope of one volume. More important than an encyclopedic approach to covering all "major" traditions with equal attention to all geographic locations is the more general presentation of the manner in which aesthetic considerations are part of the religious orientation of people of African descent. Several traditions are covered so as to give this statement both abstract theological/religious significance as well as content-related importance.

Ultimately, what holds this volume together is a shared interrogation of the aesthetic and artistic workings associated with black religion and re-presented through the body. This issue is tackled in a variety of ways, some more theoretical and others more experiential. But in all cases, the concern remains connections between religious thought, religious expression, and aesthetics as seen through the lens of Black bodies.

Notes

1. Lao Tzu, *The Tao te Ching*, 2, In *God's Breath: Sacred Scriptures of the World*, editors, John Miller and Aaron Kenedi (New York: Marlowe, 2000), 98.
2. Arthur C. Danto, *The Body/Body Problem: Selected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 11.
3. For an intriguing narrative on the spread of Buddhism through Soka Gakkai into North and South America and Europe see Richard Hughes Seager, *Encountering the Dharma: Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai, and the Globaliation of Buddhist Humanism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
4. While not discussed philosophically in the introduction or in the various essays in any sustained way, this book binds together aesthetics and religion. Formation of the African diaspora, with its clash of cultures, required both as a way of forging sociopolitical hierarchies and justifying the brutality necessary to accomplish this process. See James Alfred Martin, Jr., *Beauty and Holiness: The Dialogue between Aesthetics and Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). Also see Sarah Nuttall, editor, *Beautiful Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006) and Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1982). West interrogated the manner in which the "normative gaze" fixed Black bodies and rendered them of limited value and social significance. What is most important about West's project for *Black Religion and Aesthetics* is his linking of struggle against the fixing of Black bodies to progressive religiosity.
5. Danto, *The Body/Body Problem*, x.
6. Regarding the United States context, readers should give attention to Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive*

Culture: From Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998). This text provides analysis of the ways in which expressive culture—clothing and so on—became a mechanism for identity formation over against sensory-based discrimination. Such an anthropological argument lends itself to the concerns of this volume with the manipulation of the body within the context of religiosity as a means by which to address life in African and the African diaspora post-European contact. For expressive culture within the context of identity formation and the politics of the body, see Nuttall, *Beautiful Ugly*.

7. Stephan Palmie offers an interesting interrogation of the conceptualization of Africa in his introduction to *Africas of the Americas: Beyond the Search for Origins in the Study of Afro-Atlantic Religions* (Boston: Brill, 2008).
8. Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World," *African Studies Review* Vol. 43, No. 1 (Special Issue on the Diaspora, April 2000): 13.
9. Michael Gomez argues this point, suggesting in the process that the idea of an "Atlantic World," to be robust must include "an Africa that is fully participatory throughout each phase of its development, from the dawn of the transatlantic slave trade to the present." Gomez, "Introduction," Michael Gomez, editor, *Diasporic Africa: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 4; Patterson and Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations," 14.
10. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
11. Livio Sansone, "Introduction," in *Africa, Brazil and the Construction of Trans Atlantic Black Identities*, editors, Livio Sansone, Elisee Soumonni, and Boubacar Barry (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008), 1; Kristin Mann, "Shifting Paradigms in the Study of the African Diaspora and of Atlantic History and Culture," in *Rethinking the African Diaspora: The Making of a Black Atlantic World in the Bight of Benin and Brazil*, editors, Kristin Mann and Edna G. Bay (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2001).
12. Antoinette Tidjani Alou, "Marine Origins and Anti-Marine Tropism in the French Caribbean," in *Recharting the Black Atlantic: Modern Cultures, Local Communities, Global Connections*, editors, Annalisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi (New York: Routledge, 2008), 351.
13. Annalisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi, in "Introduction: Black Bodies, Practices and Discourses around the Atlantic," make a similar point when arguing for the concept of the "circumatlantic perspective." See Annalisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi, editors, *Recharting the Black Atlantic: Modern Cultures, Local Communities, Global Connections* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
14. I have in mind Jayne O. Ifekwenigwe's argument that Columbus' contact with the Americas should be used to distinguish not the Diaspora, but a pre-Columbian and a post-Columbian African Diaspora. See

Ifekwenigwe, "Scattered Belongings: Reconfiguring the 'African' in the English-African Diaspora," in Kahlid Koser, editor, *New African Diasporas* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

15. While it is important to note the movement of Africans outside the framework of slavery as Ivan Van Sertima and others note, I provide the following comment for consideration: "It was, however, the slave trade that made the African presence essentially global." Joseph E. Harris, "The Dynamics of the Global African Diaspora," in *The African Diaspora*, editors, Alusine Jalloh and Stephen E. Maizlish (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1996), 9. If one thinks of the African body and its labor as commodity, this statement has relevance.
16. See Khalid Koser, "New African Diasporas: An Introduction," in *New African Diasporas*, editor, Kahlid Koser (New York: Routledge, 2003).
17. Jeffrey C. Stewart, "I Sing the Black Body Electric: Transnationalism and the Black Body in Walt Whitman, Alain Locke, and Paul Robeson," in *Recharting the Black Atlantic: Modern Cultures, Local Communities, Global Connections*, editors, Annalisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi (New York: Routledge, 2008), 259.
18. Donald Carter, "Preface," in *New African Diasporas*, editor, Khalid Koser (New York: Routledge, 2003), x.
19. Patterson and Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations," 11.
20. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Penguin, 1979); Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Penguin, 1981).
21. See Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow, *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
22. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Routledge Press, 1996), 69, 74, 76–77, 87.
23. Bryan Turner, *The Body and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 2nd edition (London: Sage, 1993/2003).
24. Vicente Berdayes, Luigi Esposito, and John W. Murphy, "Introduction," in *The Body in Human Inquiry: Interdisciplinary Explorations of Embodiment*, editors, Vicente Berdayes, Luigi Esposito, and John W. Murphy (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2004), 13–14; Williams and Bendelow. *The Lived Body*, 54; Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco, "Introduction," in *The Body: A Reader*, editors, Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco (New York: Routledge, 2005).
25. On the connection between aesthetics, bodies, and religion also see Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling, *Re-forming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity* (London: Sage, 1997), 4–5. This matrix of information and action makes use of the senses. Interesting work on how the senses served to justify subjective knowledge used to enforce race-based discrimination is offered by Mark M. Smith in *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

26. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).
27. Judith Butler notes the inseparability of sexual and racial difference. See Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 178–182.
28. Linda B. Arthur, editor, *Religion, Dress and the Body* (New York: Berg, 1999), 6.
29. See Nuttall, *Beautiful Ugly*; David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
30. See, e.g., Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710–1940* (San Francisco, CA: Bedford Arts/Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990).
31. See Nuttall, *Beautiful Ugly*, 9.
32. Russ Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 3–8.
33. Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003).
34. Patterson and Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations," 13.
35. I have found Arthur Danto's work invaluable in framing the artistic and aesthetic significance of religion through the body both here and in *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003). E.g., Danto's *Philosophizing Art: Selected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Readers should combine Danto's philosophy of art with Robert Farris Thompson art history of the Atlantic world as represented in texts such as *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).
36. This idea of the stigmatized and the nonstigmatized body is borrowed from Erving Goffman. See Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Touchstone Book, 1963/1986). However, there seems to be in Goffman's work limited interrogation of the assumed White and male body. Readers should also see Sarah Nettleton and Jonathan Watson, editors, *The Body in Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
37. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 40.
38. Recognition of the communicative role of the arts is made similarly by Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow. See *The Lived Body*, 7–8, 189–205.
39. See Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy*, Chapter 3.
40. David Morgan provides an important discussion of aesthetics within the context of religious imagery that has direct bearing on the concerns in *Black Religion and Aesthetics*. See Morgan, *Visual Piety*.
41. I am not suggesting that this aesthetic matrix is always traceable in its various forms to some African origin. Such an assessment is beyond the scope and concerns of this volume.

42. Black Religion is used as an umbrella category by which to catalog the various traditions, practices, signs, symbols, structures, beliefs and practices associated with people of African descent.
43. This volume, including the introduction and my essay represent my continuing interests in this issue. My ongoing effort to interrogate the connections between religiosity, aesthetics, artistic production and the Black labyrinth include projects under development such as my contribution to Alexander Byrd, Michael Emerson, Caroline Levander, Anthony Pinn, *Teaching and Studying the Americas* (under contract with Palgrave Macmillan).

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North and South America

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A Beautiful *Be-ing*: Religious Humanism and the Aesthetics of a New Salvation

Anthony B. Pinn

I believe a focus on beauty[1] as a category of significance in Black theological discourse is essential if this discourse has as its primary motive temporal liberation as the normative framework of life. This is so because linking beauty to liberation, as having temporal significance, focuses liberation on a deep appreciation for the physical body. That is to say, a more naturalistic notion of liberation (as a mode of salvation) lends itself to a needed appreciation for the beauty of the human body in relationship to the larger physical world. By so doing liberation (or "salvation" as liberation is typically understood in liberation theology) can involve in a significant manner the soul *and* body.

African American Theologies on Salvation

Analysis of African American soteriology, or doctrine of salvation, has often highlighted a tension between "this-worldly" concerns and "other-worldly" preoccupations. Many scholars posit the latter as the dominant element in African American soteriology—a high regard for salvation as the resolution of existential and ontological dilemmas through the culmination of human history. The problems for Black religion's alleged work toward social transformation posed by this salvation vis-à-vis the end of human history are apparent, particularly when, as is usually the case, this soteriological perspective is tied to a general disregard of or suspicion toward the human body. Black

theology of liberation, developed as of the late 1960s as a somewhat radical reworking of Christian theology in light of systemic oppression and the demands of justice, seeks to modify this more anemic soteriology because of its inability to carry the full weight of African American hopes for social transformation—a radically improved existence *in* human history.

While leaders of this relatively new liberation theology are mindful of ties to traditionally Black Christianity, they also note the manner in which they deviate. This deviation involves a more sustained focus on the critique of White supremacy and its impingements on the life options of African Americans. Regarding this, James Cone, one of the recognized "fathers" of academic Black theology notes that, "although Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights activists did much to rescue the gospel from the heresy of White churches by demonstrating its life-giving power in the Black freedom movement, they did not liberate Christianity from its cultural bondage to White, Euro-American values."[2] The shift initiated by Cone and continued by his students involves the institution of a hermeneutical shift and alternate source materials (e.g., popular culture, African American history). Rather than a rehashed hermeneutic of social Christianity, Cone and others adapted a hermeneutic of suspicion as a way of discerning the manner in which the Christian faith had been damaged and shifted from a commitment to radical change for the benefit of the oppressed to the tool of the status quo—White supremacy and its trappings.

In providing this critique and offering an alternate theological discourse, Black theology argued for a particularized theological approach as opposed to the efforts of the dominant, White theological discourse to universalize the experience of Whites. Black theology suggested with great force that God sided with the oppressed to such an extent that God is best understood as ontologically Black (as blackness best represented the nature and context of oppression within late twentieth century United States). By extension, those who claimed to be Christians had to also become ontologically Black.[3] The workings of God with regard to liberation of the oppressed, Black theology suggested, is found within the historical struggle for freedom and it is expressed aesthetically in the Black Church Tradition and also in Black popular culture—the blues, literature, and so on.

Black theologians gave traditional theological categories revised meaning and located their interpretation and application within the communities of oppressed African Americans. So, for example, Christology remained central, but transformed. Jesus the Christ is

presented as a revolutionary (sometimes physically Black, but always identified with the suffering masses) committed to the ending of oppressive structures and relationships. He becomes associated in strong ways not with the stained glass windows and paintings of a blond and blued-eyed figure. But rather, he becomes a representative of the ontologically Black God, intimately connected to oppressed African Americans by sharing in their pain and their "blackness." Black women within theological discourse, Womanist theology, have rightly and convincingly argued for further rethinking of the Christ event so as to not emphasis the historically situated figure because such a focus entails a tangled mess of gender issues: Is the Divine best represented in the form of a male, and what does this say about the significance of women? Rather, they suggest a focus on the Christ of community—on the ministry of this figure, and the relationships of respect, care, compassion, and transformation that ministry entailed.[4]

Both Black and Womanist theologies maintain an awareness of Christ as a source of God's salvation, as a sign of God's commitment to liberation. Christ is God's revelation; God's "Yes" to human freedom from oppression. Regarding this, "black people," Cone writes, "have come to know Christ precisely through oppression, because he has made himself synonymous with black oppression. Therefore, to deny the reality of black oppression and to affirm some other 'reality' is to deny Christ."[5] Pushing against a strictly race-based Christology as presented by Black theology's focus on the blackness of Christ, Womanist theology maintains an awareness of Christ as connected to Black communities. But it also urges recognition of the manner in which Christ must also be understood as present in the work of Black women. That is to say, Christ is concerned with the destruction of racism and a host of other forms of oppression, including classism, sexism and heterosexism. As Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas remarks, "a vital and effective Black Christ must reflect the complexities of Black reality. A womanist Black Christ is one who can respond to those complexities—that is, the Black struggle to 'make do and do better' in face of racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist oppression."[6]

The implications of Black and Womanist Christology are important in that they firmly lodge soteriology in human experiences of earthbound oppression and liberation.

A reasonable argument can be made for understanding salvation as socio-economic and political liberation in the contexts of both Black and Womanist theologies. Clearly neither theological camp is

interested in talking about heaven or the Kingdom of God as anything more than a metaphor for a transformed and historically situated reality. That is to say, all theological categories must say something useful to the struggle for freedom.[7] An argument is made against otherworldly orientations, suggesting that such efforts to overly spiritualize the Gospel of Christ and the interpretation of this message involve an oppressive posture that does damage to human dignity and integrity by not struggling against modalities of misconduct in this world. Clearly, according to these liberation theologies, from the early missionaries amongst enslaved Africans who used an otherworldly framework as a way to safeguard chattel slavery to twentieth century churches who use this framework to avoid sociopolitical involvements that might compromise their mainstream and middleclass status, a focus beyond this world has served a negative purpose. Such has been theologically duplicitous, rendering disingenuous Christian piety, and fostering contentment with salvation that has no impact on temporal conditions. In the words of the spiritual, "You can have all this world, just give me Jesus." To this sentiment, Black and Womanist theologies say "no—hell, no!"

Otherworldly orientations misinterpret the meaning of human-divine connection, assuming that it must entail the eventual usurping of the former by the latter. According to Cone, "human liberation is God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ…"[8] Salvation is existentially and epistemological synonymous with liberation within the context of human history. Salvation has nothing to do with conceptions of a nontemporal arrangement as the culmination of God's concern for the oppressed. Such an arrangement is inconsistent with the historical sensitivities of these theologies. Salvation, the argument goes, is not a reward received; but rather the outcome of struggle with God for social transformation. In short, "salvation" according to Cone and most in Black theology would agree, "is a historical event of rescue" through which proper relationships are enacted and justice given prominence; it "is the granting of physical wholeness in the concreteness of pain and suffering."[9] The impetus is not a gift from God; one should not "seek salvation," according to Cone because those who seek it "lose it." As Scripture, a prime source for Black and Womanist theologies, says "He that would save his life will lose it. He who loses his life for my sake will gain it." Hence, simply put from Cone's perspective rather than seeking salvation the true task is rebellion "against inhumanity and injustice."[10] In other words, heaven does not connote a future home because "home," Cone asserts, "is where we have been placed now, and to believe in heaven is to refuse to accept hell on earth."[11]

Salvation, these theologians want us to believe, is not simply a matter of saving bodiless souls. How can it be, when "any statement that divorces salvation from liberation or makes human freedom independent of divine freedom must be rejected" says Cone?[12] Theologian Delores Williams nuances this perspective by downplaying the role of the cross in salvation history and emphasizing the manner in which Christ, through his ministry, provided survival skills that facilitate salvation.[13] Redemption has to do with a new vision of proper relationship between God and humanity, between humans, and between humans and the larger world of nature. It involves an appreciation for and motivation premised on the deep intersections between all forms of all, of which hold vitality, significance and life intensity. It is an effort, although I would suggest that neither Womanist or Black theology have abided by this, to create a healthy synergy between body and spirit, one that exposes the human to the comforting weight of connection to all that is both within the range of the individual's life meaning (body) and within the scope of connection to all that is (spirit).[14]

Salvation for these theological oriented scholars, nonetheless, is not simply a one-dimensional concern with political change. No, relationship with God, with the transcendent, remains the *modus operandi* for this understanding of salvation. Ultimately, the message is simple and less than a full embrace of humanity's worth: The human has value because the human bears the image of God. In a word, God in the human gives the human ontological importance. Hence, the fullness of human significance is not realized solely in the realm of human history, it is also borne out in an undefined future known only by God. This is what theologian James Evans means when saying the Christ event represents both "our past and future."[15]

Salvation and the Black Body

As suggested by the above, Womanist and Black theologies acknowledge the body through a vocabulary of embodiment. However, this vocabulary promotes what James Nelson refers to as "one directional" discourse—beginning with the transcendental nature of religion and moving toward the body.[16] While there is great benefit to the idea of the divine embodied, this perspective has done little to highlight and center the physical body within black religion in general and Black and Womanist theologies in particular. Consequently lurking behind Black theology's large claims regarding liberation, with few exceptions, is a troubled relationship to human flesh, to Black bodies.

Salvation may entail alteration of the space occupied by these bodies, but this arrangement does little to celebrate the texture, the feel and functions, of these bodies.[17] The theological effort to counter the damage done by discriminatory ideologies and sociopolitical structures tends to circumvent these same Black bodies. This is because, as Kelly Brown Douglas points out, liberation theologies in Black communities draw from a Christian Tradition that has a troubled relationship with the body, in spite of its theology of the incarnation.[18] Cultural critique Michael Dyson puts it this way, "...the Christian faith is grounded in the Incarnation, the belief that God took on flesh to redeem human beings. That belief is constantly trumped by Christianity's quarrels with the body. Its needs. Its desires. Its sheer materiality."[19] Furthermore, what theologian Roy Morrison II says about eschatology is true by extension to soteriology. He writes, "Paul Tillich has observed that religious symbols can lose their power. This is also true of an eschatology that has enshrined the hopes and aspiration of a downtrodden people. Moreover, an eschatology that once was effective in assisting self-maintenance may, in a different century, be irrelevant for the task of self-transformation."[20]

Traditional readings of scripture only serve to further entrench this perception of human bodies. Much to their detriment, African American Christians have uncritically embraced this attitude, with deep consequences in that Black bodies become at least doubly damned—religiously and socially. Nonetheless, the idea of an oppressed people, despised because of the bodies they carry through the world, embracing notions that sanction theologically their dehumanization is problematic on a variety of fronts, and it need not continue as a dominant theological motif. Needed here is an alternate approach, an understanding of salvation that avoids this dilemma. I suggest attention to the deep connections between liberation and aesthetics points in useful direction; and, a humanist framework allows for the linking of liberation/salvation and aesthetics in ways that rescue the body.

I end this section with a restating of an anchoring concern of this chapter: Black and Womanist theologies have made clear connections between salvation and liberation, but in ways that entail "distance" from the body. They, in essence, offer salvation as a form of disembodiment to the extent that salvation means an appeal to union with an "outside" reality. Put differently, the Black Christian notion of salvation entails a radical push against status as an object without an equal attention to the merits of subjectivity. I propose an alternate way of thinking about liberation and salvation, one that does not

disassociate them from the body: Salvation/Liberation is concerned with aesthetics—the beauty of the body within spaces of quality and comfort.

Beauty as Liberation

Theologies within African American communities neglect aesthetics in general or beauty in particular in part because of their failure to take seriously the body as more than the target of a negative discourse or an activity of invisibility. What Edward Farley notes in regard to the Western theological tradition is quite apropos with regard to Black theological work. "If giving the body its needed nourishment is 'pampering,'" Farley writes, "how much more would we pamper if we granted the human being its need for beauty? Here is that strand of the Christian movement that is deeply suspicious of the very thing in which beauty finds its initial mediation—the body and the senses, the whole pleasurable interaction with the world that constitutes life itself."[21] Furthermore, Farley remarks, this negative aesthetics is premised simply on a disregard for the physical form of the human but is also due to a certain interpretation of time whereby the present is held suspect and the future, through an apocalyptic preoccupation, is highlighted. With such a scenario, all that is permanent, holy, and worthy of attention (e.g., heaven and God) is disassociated from the realm of the body.[22]

Regardless of such a predicament, "the beautiful," is related to liberation/salvation in that it entails a harmony of meaning by which the African American is in accord with the world, and this of course requires the refiguring of the world in ways that destroy racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and so on. Furthermore, the idea that religion involves a quest for complex subjectivity pushes liberation beyond mere sociopolitical and economic arrangements and hints at the centrality of beauty as a marker of freedom or liberation in that beauty better captures the significance of a deeper sense of being or meaning as the fundamental aim of liberation.[23] Hence, it is recognition of African American "being" as beautiful—a notion fought and denied in an oppressive world. In this respect liberation should entail a fuller sense of the beautiful: a new weight to the phrase "black is beautiful." This entails recognition of the beautiful as not simply external to the African American (not simply a matter of proportion or transcendence) but rather a matter of internal realities connected to the significance of human existence as meaningful. This altered theological perspective celebrates in word and deed connection to

the "All" of life that only a full sense of the self "as related to" can achieve.

Liberation/salvation is not guaranteed; it is uncertain. Hence, beauty as connected to liberation has little to do with a guaranteed arrangement of ideal relationships between the self/self, self/others, others/world. Rather, beauty involves a certain posture toward those relationships, recognition of wholeness—fullness of meaning—that may not be achieved. Beauty is, as Farley notes, a certain type of ethical inclination not tangible historical outcome—the "way in which the faithful person [mine is a much broader understanding of faithfulness] behaves towards others and in the world."[24] Such a shift away from historical processes and toward a positioning of the self for deep and meaningful encounters entails recognition of potential, of possibility, a speaking to self, others, world, in light of what they might become—a celebration of the push for more life.

A qualification concerning what is normative: I am not of the opinion that beauty entails an openness to the "harmonious" as well as the "perilous."[25] Such a perspective is reasonable from those who have not encountered as a component of their community's history the manner in which identity and "being" are distorted through modes of oppression that render them less-than, "Other," and by extension lacking in beauty. To the contrary, I want to be guided by the liberation theologian's embrace of transformation as normative, without accepting her assumption that transformation is guaranteed. Hence, beauty as tied to liberation on the level of normative statements approaches a measured realism: transformation, the full scope of the beauty recognized and embraced is the goal, while not always obtained as outcome. Mindful of this, I argue beauty glimpses the absence of the perilous (read oppressive). It captures the vision of the quest for complex subjectivity that defines religion. Beauty is liberation, the final aim of progressive religious experience.

The above raises a programmatic question: How is this sense of liberation as a sense of the beautiful within the context of the present developed? I suggest African American humanism points out an intriguing prospect with regard to this task. In place of suspicion concerning the body, drawing loosely on the work of Richard Wright, I suggest African American humanism proposes a radical embrace of the Black body—warts and all—as proper life orientation. African American humanism in this sense, I propose, pushes for recognition of the beautiful within the irreverent and within the grotesque: flesh is made beautiful not because it mirrors divine perfection, but because it houses the push for fullness or wholes; it connects us to all

the world. Rather, beauty connotes a wholeness involving comfort with one's "weight" in the world, and the importance or significance of one's presence in the world.

From Wright's work I draw not complete lessons regarding soteriology. Nor is my read concerned with literary devices per se; rather, I am interested in reading Wright in my capacity and interests as a theologian, and in relationship to a central question: What is the nature of salvation in a godless world?

Humanism on Human Life

The African American Christian approach to salvation/liberation (and beauty by extension) briefly presented above and the humanist alternative I shall offer, while different in perspective, are drawn from a similar need: to make sense of the existential difficulties and dilemmas associated with being human within a troubled world. They both face theologically the threat of death, morality, nothingness. The substantive conflict between the two positions is a matter of epistemological posture. In short, the reality of existential difficulties and deep anxiety prompts some African American Christians to seek resolution (or salvation) through an appeal to a divine presence that alters the human's relationship to mundane life. This is not the option taken by African American humanists.

From the period of slavery to the present, African Americans such as Frederick Douglass, Hubert Harrison, J. Saunders Redding, James Foreman, Richard Wright, and Alice Walker—to name a few—pushed for a notion of the best welfare of humans (or what some might call salvation) as revolving around self-realization achieved through the auspices of human potentiality for transformative thought and action.[26] From my perspective, these figures are humanist in that they promote a vision of life in keeping with what I have elsewhere labeled the five fundamental principles of African American humanism. They are: (1) Understanding of humanity as fully (and solely) accountable and responsible for the human condition and the correction of its plight; (2) Suspicion toward or rejection of supernatural explanation and claims, combined with an understanding of humanity as an evolving part of the Natural environment as opposed to being a created being. This can involve disbelief in God(s); (3) Appreciation for African American cultural production and a perception of traditional forms of Black religiosity as having cultural importance as opposed to any type of "cosmic" authority; (4) A commitment to individual and societal transformation; and, (5) A controlled optimism

that recognizes both human potential and human destructive activities.[27]

For the African American humanist, difficulties and anxiety are never resolved fully but mitigated through an appeal to human potential, expressed in celebration of the human: his/her body, vision, integrity—without appeal to a trans-historical co-worker. By extension, for the humanist, salvation entails a process of self-realization and historical transformation as a human project, a conversion that surfaces and highlights the beauty of the human *in* the human form.

There is a difference between the Christian and humanist perspective related to the best way to locate and focus human dignity as it relates to soteriology. For Christian theologians (Black and Womanist) noted in this chapter, dignity is ultimately a matter of the divine making itself available to humanity and redirecting human self understanding through this "free gift." On the other hand, for the African American humanist thinker dignity involves an assertion of human agency and creativity without appeal to validation from a trans-historical "something more," without a God in place to guarantee a certain outcome for those who play by the rules of the faith. It is for the African American humanist thinker, in part, an issue resolved through a new aesthetic of life that is attached to ethics, but not in the way theological aesthetics often has worked in that beauty and wholeness are not related to intimacy or contact with the divine; and ethics does not arise out of a proper response to this proposition.

African American Humanist Thought and the Salvific Act

In setting up this last section of my essay, I am concerned with the manner in which African American literature speaks to a revised notion of soteriology—a sense of salvation as self-realization in the form of beauty recognized, on some level as an embrace of the body. In working through this issue, drawing on African American literature is beneficial in that it tends to wrestle with theological questions and concerns without a deep regard for Christian doctrine at the expense of creative thinking—a problem that plagues much of what qualifies as more formal Black and Womanist theological discourse. Specifically, I give consideration to a humanist notion of salvation as self-realization by turning to Richard Wright's more existentialist writings, particularly "The Man Who Lived Underground." I do this because Wright's existential writings provide one of the best examples of an African American humanist perspective within literature. He provides an

explicit challenge to traditional Black Christian theological formulations that helps illuminate the contours of what might qualify as the initial outline of an African American humanist soteriology. In a sense, Wright destroys what I would consider one of what Alain Locke labeled "the idols of the tribe." In this case the "idol" is a soteriology that leaves behind, so to speak, a deep appreciation for the body as beautiful, and a greater sense of self-reliance and self-realization as the hallmarks of the best welfare (or salvation) for the human.[28]

Notions of self-reliance and self-realization as presented here should not be understood as one's will trumps all others. Salvation does not entail freedom from responsibility to others. Richard Wright's character Cross Damon, who seeks to initially operate in this individualized manner, ultimately realizes the problematic nature of such a stance. What Wright presents through this character is the humanist as understanding and accepting a life lived for self within the context of community as the last best option. Richard Wright portrays his character Cross Damon as recognizing this before dying. This is how, as a matter of theological insight, I interpret Damon's words. "I wish I had some way to give the meaning of my life to others," he says, "to make a bridge from man to man. Tell them not to come down this road . . . We must find some way to being good to ourselves . . . Man is all we've got . . . "[29]

Dying on the floor, Damon reflects on the life he lived, the attempt to live completely free from others and recognizes the search for meaning cannot be done in isolation. Rather, "never alone . . . Alone a man is nothing . . . Man is a promise that he must never break . . . "[30] The protagonist, Fred Daniels, in "The Man Who Lived Underground" expresses a similar commitment to self-realization within the context of others when reflecting on his effort to show the police officers what he had discovered in the cave: "He was eager to show them the cave now. If he could show them what he had seen, then they would feel what he had felt and they in turn would show it to others and those others would feel as they had felt . . . "[31]

Sensitivity to human integrity involves an embrace of humanity over against deep feelings of guilt that can only be addressed through surrender to the God/man, Jesus. This certainly seems the perspective of Fred Daniels, in "The Man Who Lived Underground." Daniels, when viewing a church service from his cave in the sewer, says to their singing about accepting Jesus into their lives that "they're wrong . . . He felt that their search for a happiness they could never find made them feel that they had committed some dreadful offense which they could not remember or understand."[32]

For both Cross Damon and Fred Daniels, self-realization, an embrace of who they are through recognition of their embodiment and what that means, promotes self-transformation within the context of sensitivity to others. It is recognition of the body as important, vital, really, in what philosopher Lewis Gordon refers to as "the constitution of a meaningful world that we may call . . . life."[33] For the humanist, as Richard Wright notes, salvation, or best welfare, means a move to a fuller sense of self in relationship to self, others and the larger world. This interconnectedness involves a confrontation with Black flesh, the Black body—and an embrace of its ambiguity—as more than a subject and/or object.[34]

Salvation involves the forging of identity premised on a realization of the realness of the world and a comfort with the body in which we "move and have our being." Substituting salvation for "self-invention," one gets a sense of my meaning in this statement by philosopher Robert Birt: "but to become human and develop a human identity is a process of invention (self-invention), of personal and collective action conditioned by social relations."[35] For the African American humanist salvation is a process of construction, of self-realization, of identity forged by humans; and at its best this process takes place within the company of others. It is a profound recognition of the beauty that is the human in healthy relationship to self, others, world. Turning again to Robert Birt, one finds these words, "struggle for identity, for an authentic human existence which is the core of 'our spiritual strivings,' is a radical effort to transform the world, to transform ourselves, and to give birth to a new humanity."[36] As Katherine Fishburn notes, humans are "metaphysically alone but morally bound to others in a mutual sense of responsibility to life."[37]

Salvation for the humanist is not the end of trouble (no God to guarantee this through the completion of the liberation project). Rather, it is simply the forging of an identity better capable of wrestling with the alienation and other oppressive tendencies that mark life in the world. This perspective on salvation does not escape metaphysics altogether in that it speaks to a concern with the nature of being and existence. Yet, unlike the Black Christian perspective, metaphysics here is without grounding in a notion of a divine reality outside time and space. Hence, without this grounding, the picture is rather bleak.[38] However, a theological assessment premised on humanist sensibilities does not find it so deeply troubling. Rather, this bleakness points to the difficult nature of transformation. And this, I argue, is a much more realistic depiction of human struggle for salvation than one finds in the unfulfilled promises of Black theology

and Black Christianity. Put another way, Black Christian soteriology betrays determinism (based on the workings of God), while African American Humanism seeks to maintain an existential (nondeterministic) orientation.

A distinction between this humanist perspective and that of Black and Womanist theologies involves the nature of passion and urgency involved with both—the deeply disturbed tone of Black liberation theologies and the more measured, dispassionate tone of humanist theological formulations. This difference does not stem from a lack of concern with oppression and the oppressed within humanist theological frameworks. Rather, it stems from humanists' recognition of the absurd nature of life, and the notion that we construct this world alone, without divine guidance and the balance—the hopefulness of hope—such guidance provides.

Black Christian Tradition posits something after human history, and even Black liberation theologies that hold talk of heaven suspect do not rule out the plausibility of something beyond human history in that God exists. However, African American humanist soteriology is limited by death: Salvation is partial in that the human remains the resident of a troubled world. Furthermore, the humanist speaks of salvation in ways that are preoccupied with the present, and the Black Christian Tradition with the past (the Christ event) and future (end of human history). Perhaps this is why Fred Daniels, when hearing the church service from his space below ground, wants so desperately to tell those Black Christians to be unrepentant, to embrace themselves.[39]

For the African American humanist soteriology takes an interesting twist in that salvation involves the human's freeing of him or herself to forge a deeper sense of meaning and identity. It is a push for freedom from unnecessary restrictions that bind people and keep them from an embrace of the body as a sign of humanity's potential and limitations. It is the lack of a full sense of their potential, their responsibility for life that at one point bothers Daniels as he watches people in a movie theater. Those in the theater are "sleeping in their living, awake in their dying," and, like the people in church, they were more concerned with "shadows of themselves" than a full embrace of life's realness. They embraced illusions and failed to take responsibility for their living. They were captivated by pretense, illusion, and ignored the potential to transform their existence: they simply "laughed at their lives."[40] Providential proclamations, hence, are inappropriate and without use.

Wright's characters Cross Damon and Fred Daniels both are involved in a salvific process, seeking to recreate themselves, to be

"born-again" so to speak: Damon after taking the identity of another and Daniels after descending into the sewer. This process, this push for salvation, involves not the grace of a benevolent other, but rather shear "force of will."[41] For Cross Damon this entails movement from exercise of will over-against all others to exercise of will within the context of communal concerns and obligations. As Michael F. Lynch notes, Wright absorbs in his work a notion of the interconnectedness of human community and salvation: individuals are saved in community.[42] And this salvation is fragile and temporal, but significant.

The importance of this human project, self-realization and creativity, is what Daniels wanted those in church to embrace. Salvation was to be found, as imperfect as it is, in the work of their hands. The singing he hears "Glad, glad, glad, oh, so glad I got Jesus in my soul . . . " disturbs him. In fact, "he felt," Wright records, "that their search for a happiness they could never find made them feel that they had committed some dreadful offense which they could not remember or understand."[43] Guilt over this alleged offense was unproductive in that it kept people beholden to a bad system of metaphysics, one that did not allow for the full expression of human potentiality and responsibility for self and others.

Fred Daniel enters the sewer or "death" and emerges (or is resurrected) a new man, with an alternate sense of self in relationship to others. Based on this it becomes somewhat clear that salvation involves transformation prompting a different posture toward the world, a realization of what it means to carry one's body through the world. It is a determination to exercise one's will through the movement and positioning of this body. This is not done through negation of the body but in ways mindful of its impact on others thereby discerning of the "secret of [human] existence."[44] The importance of the body is heightened when one notes that Fred Daniel carves out his new existence in the cave and his relationships with others through the physical force of his body pushing against walls and other boundaries. It was the work of his body, the pushing of his arms against tools, against walls, that carved out his new space in the sewer—not singing about a place outside this world created by cosmic forces.

The scriptural and theological bases for Black Christian formations of soteriology are groundless for African American humanists such as Cross Damon and Fred Daniels. Salvation entails, hence, humans left to their last best hope, their best devices for self-realization. Old notions of salvation involving Jesus and a life beyond this world sung about by those in the church Daniels observes from the cave are done

away with; and in their place Daniels suggest an unrepented embrace of human existence.

The humanist sense of salvation is easily put: The body is given a new value and importance in that salvation involves self-realization in the body, wholeness or beauty forged within the context of human possibility and limitations. Value and importance is not attached to something beyond human will—God in this instance. Salvation has nothing to do with redemption based on the actions (e.g., Christ event) performed by a cosmic other for the benefit of its creation. The beauty this mode of salvation entails is not the grand plan, the quiet workings of a divine being who makes the human shine by reflecting the divine image. Rather, it is simply the result of human creativity and the new sense of identity forged—all worked out within the context of vibrant flesh in touch with other pulsating lives *in* the world.

Notes

1. Beauty is here understood as wholeness for instance, or as the marking of what is pleasing and sublime.
2. James H. Cone, "Preface to the 1989 Edition," *Black Theology & Black Power* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989), vii. While Cone's work represents the first generation of academic Black theology, it is appropriate to frame this discussion in terms of the categories established in his work because his students, with almost no exceptions, have maintained his theological sensibilities with regard to major categories such as soteriology and Christology. Hence, some thirty years after first published, Cone's work remains highly representative of black theological discourse.
3. See James H. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990). For a critique of this position see Victor Anderson's *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York: Continuum, 1995).
4. See e.g., Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).
5. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 120.
6. Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 116.
7. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 121.
8. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 138.
9. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 152, 153.
10. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, 125–126.
11. James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 141.
12. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 141.

13. Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 164.
14. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.
15. James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 142.
16. Anthony B. Pinn, "Embracing Nimrod's Legacy: The Erotic, the Irreverence of Fantasy, and the Redemption of Black Theology," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, editors, Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 164.
17. Anthony B. Pinn, "Introduction," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, editors, Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3.
18. See Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Church and Sexuality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003) and Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).
19. Michael Eric Dyson, "When You Divide Body and Soul, Problems Multiply: The Black Church and Sexuality," in *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 221.
20. Roy D. Morrison II, "Self-Transformation in American Blacks: The Harlem Renaissance and Black Theology," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, editor, Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 38.
21. Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 11.
22. Ibid.
23. I develop this theory of religion in Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).
24. Farley, *Faith and Beauty*, 110.
25. Ibid.
26. See for additional information on a genealogy of African American Humanism: Anthony B. Pinn, editor, *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
27. Anthony B. Pinn, *African American Humanist Principles: Thinking and Living Like the Children of Nimrod* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
28. Alain Locke "The New Negro," in *The New Negro*, editor, Alain Locke (New York: Atheneum, 1986), 8.
29. Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, Library of America Edition (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 585.
30. Ibid.
31. Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," in Richard Wright, *Eight Men* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), 81.
32. Ibid., 60.

33. Lewis R. Gordon, "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility," in Lewis Gordon, editor, *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 72.
34. Ibid., 72–75.
35. Robert Birt, "Existence, Identity, and Liberation," in Lewis Gordon, editor, *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 206.
36. Ibid., 212.
37. Katherine Fishburn, *Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel-Victim* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1977), 148.
38. See for example Arnold Rampersad, "Introduction," in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, editor, Arnold Rampersad (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995).
39. Fishburn, *Richard Wright's Hero*, 160.
40. Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," 30.
41. Arnold Rampersad, "Introduction," in Arnold Rampersad, editor, *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 4.
42. Michael F. Lynch, *Creative Revolt: A Study of Wright, Ellison, and Dostoevsky* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 94.
43. Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," 60.
44. Patricia Watkins, "The Paradoxical Structure of Richard Wright's 'The Man Who Lived Underground,'" in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, editor, Arnold Rampersad (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 157.

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2

The Foolish Woman Grows Angry Because They Teach Her: Influences of Sexism in Black Church Worship

Nancy Lynne Westfield

My primary questions for this chapter are: What does the African American Church teach when the aesthetic of the Black female body is rarely or never explicitly mentioned in worship? What does it mean if the women of the church forbid preaching concerning the aesthetic of the Black female body? What if, Black, Christian women are the purveyors of sexism and misogyny in the African American Church? As a way of engaging these questions, I will analyze a case study. In preparation for the analysis of the case study I want to describe the three presuppositions that I bring to this conversation.

First, I believe Black women are caught in the contortion of having been taught to hate our bodies while at the same time required to love and nurture Black men, White men, White women and all children. Black women struggle with the impossible task of negotiating self-hatred while simultaneously charged with the responsibility of care for all others. The author of *Communion: The Female Search for Love*, bell hooks, states, "(N)ot only do (Black women) embrace this faulty logic, but also the (racist, sexist, hegemonic) culture lets us get away with thinking that we can hate our bodies and still be seen as the group most capable of teaching others about love."[1] This distorted thinking concerning our bodies is the legacy of having survived North American chattel slavery.

In the undocumented, but painfully truthful, article entitled "Let's Make a Slave," attributed to Willie Lynch, Lynch describes formulaic

ways of preparing a woman to be a slave. Lynch writes

> Take the female and run a series of tests on her to see if she will submit to your desires willingly. Test her in every way, because she is the most important factor for good economics. If she shows any sign of resistance in submitting completely to your will, do not hesitate to use the bull whip on her to extract that last bit of bitch out of her. Take care not to kill her, for in doing so, you spoil good economics. When in complete submission, she will train her offspring in the early years to submit to labor when they become of age.[2]

African American women survived a system that sought to crush their spirit and shatter their sense of self through the brutalization of their body. The system demanded that they, for survival, teach their children to be submissive, docile, and compliant to the will and ways of the oppressor. Black women survived the brutality of slavery, in part, but not exclusively, because we learned to be bent-over people—submissive and accommodating to authority. Constructing strategies of survival, Black women dealt with the reality of cruelty and dehumanization by becoming dutiful and obedient. Many Black women maintaining this dutifulness subscribe to what Katie Cannon calls an ethic of decorum. I will talk later about this ethic of decorum and how it effects our church communities. The submissiveness that allowed African American women to survive is accompanied by a survival strategy of boldness, audacity, and forthrightness. Many women have kept "that last bit of bitch."

The "bitch" in Black women is a complicated issue. Delores Williams, noted Womanist theologian, in a recent speech, quoted the Willie Lynch reference, saying "... do not hesitate to use the bull whip on her to extract that last bit of bitch out of her" then, Dr. Williams said parenthetically to the women in attendance, "If you got any bitch left in you—you better keep it." African American women are caught in the conundrum of having to become compliant in order to survive while also having to nurture inside of us some modicum of empowerment, audacity, and boldness. We had to hide and cultivate a counter voice to the disenfranchisement and chattel existence that was our waking reality. Now, in contemporary times, African American women refuse the dehumanization of being called a "bitch," while simultaneously reserving the right to maintain our "bitchiness." For a husband, father, or lover to call a Black woman a bitch is the height of insult and ridicule. Conversely, for a Black woman, when the correct tone of voice is used, to call a sister a "bitch," is a gesture of empowerment, an acknowledgement of courage, and needed forthrightness for continued survival. In my mid-twenties, I dated an African American

man, who, in a moment of anger, called me a "bitch." Offended, but not stymied by his insult, I immediately retorted to him that he was a "bitch lover"—meaning that if you love me you must also love the "bitch" inside of me. Later in the chapter I will say more about the use of the term "bitch," particularly from the pulpit, and the complexity it brings to the identity of Black women.

My second presupposition concerns the sexisms in Black Churches, most importantly, the internalized sexism of Black, Christian women. There exists egregious gender discrimination in Black Churches. Black women must contend with the distorted myths and stereotypes concerning our bodies and our sexuality on a daily basis. Black women's bodies, perceived through the lens of racism, classism, sexism, and hetereosexism have been degraded, demeaned, demonized by White women and all men. Four-hundred years of dehumanization, racist stereotyping of the Black-body-as-ugly, while simultaneously being an object-of-sexual-desire has served to confound Black Churches concerning a response to and strategy against sexism. For African American women, the pain of sexism is a burden carried in society, but more importantly, it is an unchallenged burden in Black Churches. Caught in this mind-body split and charged with the teaching of love, Black women look to the Black Church for refuge and clarity only to find unquestioned sexism, unchecked misogyny, unexamined patriarchy, and internalized sexism. The values of sexism and patriarchy are touted as Christian values and thus rendered as unquestionable.

Black Churches, having spent hundreds of years clearly teaching our people how to re-think the oppression of racism, has, in our complacency and silence, simultaneously taught our people that the oppression of sexism is not of critical importance. While there is clarity for the need to combat and teach against racism, the Black Church is ambivalent about teaching against sexism. Alton Pollard writes, "today, the prevailing culture in Black Churches is still one of silence, repression, denial, miseducation, and misinformation, especially where patterns of patriarchy and sexual oppression are concerned."[3] The sexualized stereotyping of Black women is common place. While the larger culture provides a schizophrenic stereotyped portrayal of the Black woman as simultaneously being the vixen, the shrew, and undesireable, nymphomanic, and unwanted, promiscuous and unlovable, slut and ugly—she is the Jezebelle and the Ugly Duckling all at the same time, the church remains uncritical and silent. This distorted image of Black women's identity and sexuality perpetuate the myth that Black women are being controlled by our libidos, thus sexually available to all men (and women) for any activity. Some few churches

have made a feeble response beyond silencing to blaming and shaming of the victim. Much of the silencing, blaming and repression has been through the teaching of women by other women.

Regrettably, sexism in the Black Church is maintained and sustained by Black women against other Black women. Black women can be more patriarchal than Black men. Alton Pollard, in an unpublished essay, "A Woman's Work, A Man's World: Critiquing and Challenging Patriarchy in the Black Family," describes internalized sexism as women idealizing the Black patriarchal male role. Pollard says that Black female patriarchs are not uncommon—they often occur, but not always, in the absence of a male patriarchal figure. Not so ironically, Black women with internalized sexism are among the most ardent defenders of strict gender roles and expectations. As ardent defenders against the sexualized stereotypes of Black women, the Black female patriarch justifies her stance in support of patriarchy as a necessary strategy for the continued survival of Black women.

Christian women, straining to demonstrate their morality and fighting to protect their questioned virtue overcompensate by being silent and silencing any conversations about sexuality. The silence and silencing creates and maintains self-hated and abuse. The silencing is a politic of decency that is strangling the women of our churches. I will talk more about the politic of decency, later.

Third, and the last of my presuppositions, concerns the role of worship in the Christian education of African American congregations. My pedagogical presupposition involves two tenets about learning. First, learning is both "caught" and "taught," that is, learning happens through explicit actions as well as implicit innuendo. Persons learn from what is said as well as from what is never said or from what is veiled in speech or action. Persons learn as much or more from the relationship in the teaching/learning enterprise as they learn from the curriculum or lesson plans. And second, learning happens by doing. It is through experience, multisensory encounters, body/mind/spirit engagement that deep learning occurs. Consequently, the "happening" in African American congregations is in worship. I believe the gift and genius of Black Church worship is, in part, its educational facility for the congregation.

For Black Churches, worship is the central gathering place for religious and cultural formation, information and transformation. No other arena in the church is as consistently attended by the majority of active members as is worship, giving worship a particular basis for moral influence and education for faith maturity. The significance of worship is brought-to-bear as the majority of churches establish and

maintain membership roles by worship attendance. During worship, the rhythms of the music and songs ranging from hymns to spirituals to gospel rekindle in the congregation their African American heritage and culture. Prayers describe to God the needs of oppressed persons in contemporary time. The announcements guide persons to Bible studies and programs for faith education.[4]

It is in the sanctuary, as gathered people, during worship, where the big ideas of faith are consistently and experientially worked out. The complex notions of salvation, forgiveness, suffering, redemption, liberation and the like, are routinely grappled with through song, prayer, offering, sermon, and response. The ritualized practices and behaviors of worship teach the community the priorities, the values, the mores, and social codes of the congregation. Worship informs and reinforms, shapes, and reshapes the congregation of their shared identity as Christians, as African Americans, as men, women and children.

For worship in the Black Church Tradition, the sermon is the apex of the ritual. The preacher, I would argue, is then, the primary teacher in this experience of learning. Preaching as teaching, then, grapples with the big questions of life that would otherwise confound, confuse, and devastate the community of believers. The preacher/teacher's role is to assist the congregation in making sense out of those things that have challenged them and in some cases, bested and conquered them. Meaning-making and the unraveling of complexity and conundrums is the stuff of great sermons. Good preaching, then, as good teaching is finding people where they are; providing insight and elucidation; challenging and strengthen resolve; nurturing and instilling resilience; placing new endings on old stories to create hope; dispensing wisdom for mind, body and soul.

Laity, as learners, participate expectantly in the sermonic moments actively listening—anticipating insight, wisdom, "a word from the Lord." During worship, the learner looks to the teacher to frame the important questions—to assist with prioritizing all that must be dealt with on a day-to-day basis in this oppressive society and then give guidance to what is right and what is wrong. Persons in the pews as learners look to the sermonic moment to enlighten and nurture their imaginations—their souls. Learners do not sit uncritically in the pews. If the teacher is preaching without insight, someone will say aloud, "Help Him (Her), Holy Ghost." Neither do learners sit unthinking in the pews. Regular participants of worship are very clear about what is never said or never to be said. Laity have a clear sense of the taboos. In short, preaching, praying, liturgy, are venues for congregational education—but more to the

point of this chapter, worship in the Black Church can assist in the mis-education of the people—it is the mis-education with which I am concerned.[5]

THE PROBLEMATIC

Many Black Churches are progressive enough concerning issues of race and racism to place Black art on their church walls and use Black images in their worship bulletin covers as signs of their tending to issues of racial affirmation and pride. However, issues of body, body aesthetic, or sexuality are ignored and "pooh-poohed." Few, if any, direct statements come from the pulpit explicitly affirming the bodies and beauty of Black women. Even when women preach, the same pulpits that resound with clarion calls for justice against racism fall to whispers concerning the issues of sexism and hatred. The traditional practice of bold outspokenness for justice turns soft or even silent concerning the bodies of Black women and issues of self-hatred and self-acceptance.

The incident that I am recounting occurred in a mainline, Protestant, historically African American Church in the northeast corridor of the United States. The church then and now is considered "the flag ship church" of the denomination. The church, located in an urban neighborhood, is thriving with 500 members, a healthy budget, and vibrant worship. The congregation is middle-class, well-educated, and members primarily live in the surrounding neighborhoods of the church. For the purposes of this example, I will call this church "First Church."

I am recounting this incident, not because it is atypical or rare. I am relating this incident because I believe that it personifies a common, typical, ethos and ethic in Black Church tradition concerning the treatment of the Black female aesthetic and sexuality. I have no doubt, that anyone steeped in Black Church culture and tradition will rightly presume the end of the story before I get to it.

An Incident on Woman's Day

I was born into and remain until this day, a member of First Church. The elder women in my church are proud of me. Under their watchful eyes and fervent prayers, I have become an ordained minister and scholar. By the 1990s I had graduated from college, then graduate school with a M.A. in Christian Education. I was ordained and was serving on the staff of a church in New York City. In 1995, as a way

of continuing to support me, I was invited to preach on the coveted day—Women's Day.

First Church's Women's Day is similar to other Women's Days—the day begins with breakfast (served by the men) with a woman speaker. The social hall is packed to capacity because women from other neighboring churches are invited to attend the special day. Following the breakfast is the 11:00 worship with an invited woman preacher, and the day ends with an afternoon concert by an all women choir or woman soloist. The women of the church take special pride in this day—there is a color of the day selected and all the women dress in this special color, special programs are printed with lists of patrons names, a special offering is taken in support of the church and its ministry. Women's Day is one of the biggest fundraising events of our local church. The women of the church work hard to raise money and to make the day a highly regarded moment by the pastor, the men of the church, and the invited guests.

This particular Women's Day was no exception. I was delighted to receive the invitation to preach on this special day. It was an honor to be asked—an honor for me as well as for my family. I was eager to preach as a gesture of appreciation and respect to the entire congregation, but especially to the stalwart women who had blessed me throughout my life and ministerial career.

During the summer months before Women's Day, a new fad hit the streets of this urban center. All summer long, teenaged girls could be seen wearing oversized t-shirts with the words "bitch" or "whore" written in large, body-sized, block lettering. I believed the fad was costuming for the misogynistic lyrics and messages of the hip-hop and rap music being produced that summer. It was painful to see young Black women walking in the streets literally dressed in the names and words of shame and disrespect. Their bodies were billboards proclaiming self-hatred and advertising the U.S. capitalism that requires victimization. By donning these t-shirts the young women were actively and ardently complicit in perpetuating the stereotypes that Black women were still and yet chattel and that sexism, racism, classism ruled, in part, because of their naive support and ignorance.

As I wrote my sermon, the young women clad in these "bitch and whore" t-shirts were on my mind. I wanted to directly address this fad and it's implications for young women and thought that the pulpit on Women's Day Sunday was the appropriate place, time, and venue. I also knew, having grown up in this church, I needed to choose my words carefully. I knew that making remarks about the street fads and

hip-hop culture had to be done with great finesse or I would offend the elder women of the church by broaching this taboo subject and breaching church decorum.

I woke up that Sunday morning with my sermon rolling restlessly in my spirit and mind. I was unsure, even concerned about incorporating my "t-shirt" comments. I arrived at the church and was swept up by the excited women. The breakfast and the speaker were delicious. Eleven o'clock worship was, as they say, "a high time in the Lord." I walked proudly in the procession through a sanctuary full-to-overflowing with women dressed in red. The choirs sang, the women prayed—by the time I rose to preach I was confident in the sermon I had prepared. I vividly recall preaching fervently and having the sermon well received from the start. Near the end of my sermon, with outstretched arms, these words came tumbling out of my mouth: "YOU AIN'T NO BITCH, YOU AIN'T NO WHORE. YOU, MY SISTERS ARE THE BELOVED OF GOD—MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE!" Though these words were a minor comment in the totality of my sermon I remember that they thickened the air of worship and hung without dripping for what seemed a long time. When the doors of the church were opened, a teenaged woman gave her life to Christ. After service, I stood shaking hands with people in the chancel. From my vantage point, I could see the elder women gathering in the narthex, caucusing—I knew I had offended them—I had breached the decorum. After greeting all the folks, I made my way to the pastor's study to change out of my robe. The chair of the Women's Day Committee knocked on the door and entered the room. I figured I would get my tongue lashing then, but instead she thanked me and handed me the love-offering envelope. Confused, I walked out of the church—on my way, I was congratulated and celebrated by the male pastor, the male associate pastor, and the organist (all without conflict or chastisement). I exchanged pleasantries in the parking lot with a few people and drove home.

On the drive home, I breathed a sigh of relief. I told myself, "Well that wasn't so bad—no one said anything." I was sure (and am still convinced) that had I been a man the language I used and the agenda I affirmed would not have been an issue. I assumed that because the elder women did not chastise me at church that they had accepted by words—or at least would let me "slide" this time.

By the time I got to my parent's house, my mother had a sumptuous meal of fried chicken, candied yams, greens, and macaroni and cheese prepared. My family and I sat down at the table, prayed, began to eat and discuss the wonderful time we had shared at Women's Day.

During the meal the telephone rang and my father answered it. He called me to the phone and said that Mrs. Green (not her real name) was on the phone for me—my heart sank.

Our conversation did not last long—mostly because it was not a conversation. I said a series of "yes ma'ams" and "ah huhs" and Mrs. Green, in a firm tone said—"Baby, you know we are proud of you—and you did well today, but we have to tell you that the pulpit is NOT the place for that kind of language. The pulpit is sacred and that kind of street stuff has to be left in the street. We do not use profanity in our sanctuary." I thanked Mrs. Green for calling and she ended the conversation.

Reflection

I want to reflect upon why I think the elder women were angry; why I think they were angry to the point of making a phone call.

Proverbs provide layers of meaning and a constellation of wisdom from which to mine. A proverb from the Congo says "the foolish (woman) grows angry because they teach (her).[6] At its surface, the proverb's meaning infers that part of being foolish is to attempt to remain unenlightened—to maintain one's own status quo of comfort in ignorance and mediocrity. Additionally, there is an inference to laziness. Perhaps the foolish woman is angry because she is more lazy than content. My experience of the elder women of my church is not mediocrity or laziness—so we must looker deeper into the proverb. A more relevant interpretation of this proverb for this situation is the possibility that the elder woman's anger is confusion and cognitive dissonance welling up in her as the silence is broken and gives way to voice and liberty and a certain appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of the body.

It is quite reasonable to assume that what angered the elder women of my church was my use of profanity—that is, after all what Mrs. Green said when she chastised me. If that were the crux of the case, then a few words denouncing vulgarity would suffice. My hunch is that my use of profanity in the pulpit is not what angered the elder women. Male preachers have said that much and more from that pulpit and no chastisement occurred. I think what angered the elder women was my audacity to change the focus of Women's Day away from niceties, pleasantries, and fund raising to a more substantive critique concerning the beauty and aesthetic value of the bodies of Black women. My comments, albeit brief, broke the code of the sanctuary that says that the bodies of women can be present (the women, after all, were

dressed in red), even active (the women were praying, singing, preaching), but the bodies of women cannot be named, claimed as something other than chattel, or heralded as inherently, divinely good. The elder women were angry because my words were about the carnal, fleshy, sexual, experience of exploitation and sexism. The elder women believe that such talk is taboo even if such talk will save our lives.

Women have been taught in the sanctuary to silence, tone down, disregard, even hate their bodies as bodies. However, when body is spiritualized as while praying or singing or testifying, or shouting or dancing the holy dance, then the body is seen as "good." But, if the body is the body, carnal, flesh, then it is to be silenced and hidden. I suspect that their anger had much to do with their own endurance of sexism as well as their own internalized sexism that they perpetuate. A sudden insight into one's own oppression is cause for anger. Too often, the anger is mis-directed at the liberator in a gesture of complicity and not at the oppressor in a gesture of newfound understanding. Rather than being mad at society, or men or themselves, they were angry with me.

Sexisms (Plural)

With this proverb in mind, I want to build on my three previously espoused presuppositions. The sexism and internalized sexism in Black Churches is intertwined. Many Black men, as sexist, still refuse the ordination of women. Too many Black male pastors still have exclusively male deacon boards and trustee boards. Black female patriarchs in misguided efforts to uphold male domination perpetuate and nurture the inferiority of women by keeping control for men or keeping control as sexist men would control. Black women, in efforts of survival, have duplicated, mimicked, and replicated the power dynamics of the patriarchal structure. In churches that do not ordain women, it is the women who are often the ardent opponents to rethinking the ordination of women. In male dominated church structures, it is often the women who will fight to uphold, rather than dismantle the decision making structures that keep them away from the table, while at the same time frying chicken to place on that very table. Women preachers, when ordained, look strangely and dangerously similar to men in the ways they preach, concerning the issues they preach on, and in the autocratic ways they make decisions and wield power. Many of my female seminarians and my female colleagues who are pastoring have told me that unless they communicate to search committees that they will uphold patriarchal values that they will not

get called to pulpits and once in pulpits they must uphold the values of sexism in order to be respected and taken seriously by men and women alike.

Women relating to other women as if they were chattel in order to maintain the status quo of patriarchy and male domination is not new in Black Church tradition or Black culture. The internalized sexism of Black women that is a direct result of Black male sexism is poignantly captured by Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*. In *The Color Purple*, the newly married Harpo asks his father's advise concerning his new bride Sophia. Harpo wants to know from his father how to get his wife to mind him. The father asks, "You ever hit her?" The son replies, no. The father then asks "how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating."[7] For a sexist, control of a woman's mind insists on the control of her body. I suspect the Willie Lynch formula of brutality for breaking the spirit of women is so disturbing, in part, because even if the practice is not maintained, the mentality still rages on. Sexism is handed down from father to son as the right and only way to maintain "the upper hand," that is to say, manly control and unquestioned power. The cycle of despair and dehumanization is nearly impossible to break.

More troubling to me was the advise given to young Harpo when he asked his step-mother Celie the same question. Celie gives Harpo the same advise that her husband gave—beat her. Later in the novel, Celie cannot sleep. She is restless for nights and feeling guilty. In the night, Celie realizes what she has done. Celie awakens in the night talking to herself:

> What it is? I ast myself
> A little voice say, Something you done wrong.
> Somebody spirit you sin against. Maybe.
> Way late one night it come to me. Sofia. I sin against
> Sofia spirit.
> I pray she don't find out, but she do.
> Harpo told.
> The minute she hear it she come marching up the path,
> toting a sack. Little cut all blue and red under her eye.
> She say, Just want you to know I looked to you for help.
> Ain't I been helpful? I ast…
> You told Harpo to beat me, she said.
> No I didn't, I said.
> Don't lie, she said.
> I didn't mean it, I said.[8]

Patriarchy is self-perpetuating when it is passed from father to son. Male dominance is a difficult oppression to overcome, but U.S. society has made many strides. What is alarming to me is that I believe the entrenchment of sexism in our church tradition is nurtured as much or even more by women in efforts to beat down other women. Black female patriarchs, in foolish expressions of jealousy and envy, teach their boy-children to beat their wives literally and figuratively. Our churches are filled with women like Celie who toss and turn in the night, restless and guilty about the sin they have wrought on their sisters when they give council to men to brutalize and when they, acting like patriarchs, brutalize other women. Celie knew the horror of domination and servitude, but when given the chance to steer her step-son away from being a dominator or when given the chance to give Sofia a life without brutality from her husband, Celie spoke just as her husband had spoken—beat her, control her, break her body so she will give control of her mind. Paulo Freire, noted teacher, writes that the oppressed, when given even a modicum of power, will do what they know, that is, oppress others.[9]

Sexism and internalized sexism, like other cycles of violence must be halted and the victims, both oppressed and oppressor must be healed and reeducated. Thanks be to God that our churches not only have Celies in the pews, but also in our congregations are women like Sofia—Sofias who declare to all before God that they love men, but that they will fight for their right to be free of domination and control, even in the church. The Sofias who never thought they had to fight in their own house, but who find themselves fending off attacks and confronting the Celies as liars and Judases must find support and allies in the pulpit from male and female preachers/teachers.

Alice Walker's portrayals of Celie and Sofia provide a graphic picture of the struggle Black women have with Black men and with other Black women in the same house—in the same church. The dynamics of these sexisms are more subtle in the local church, but, it can easily be seen in Black Churches decorum of decency.

Decorum of Decency

Black churchwomen, as a defense for survival and in misguided attempts to prolong patriarchy, have become upholders of a super-morality and godliness concerning the bodies of women. Attempting to garner greater social (and divine) respectability, Black churchwomen prescribe to notions of decency that forbid the explicit mentioning of the body aesthetic or the overt critique of any issues related to female

body, sexuality, reproduction or exploitation. Black churchwomen, straining for respectability and decency, pressure other churchwomen to succumb to repression and self-denial if they are to be thought of as "good" Christians. The protocol for women in Black Churches is to pressure women to hide and deny their body and silence any conversation about the body. Womanist ethicist Dr. Katie Cannon writes that Black women who have internalized the sexist mindset promote a Victorian ethic of self-hatred, body loathing and artificial morality as good church decorum.[10] In an effort to combat the stereotype of being oversexed-Jezebelles while at the same time being intolerably ugly, Black women inflict upon each other an impossible standard by creating a climate of decency.[11] This decency requires that Black churchwomen are taught to suppress the sexual aspect of self. The church teaches, through silence and innuendo, that the body and bodily needs of the Black woman are lower than the spiritual expressions of self. The carnal expressions of the woman must be tamed, overcome, shamed, blamed, ridiculed or denied. Cannon, in an essay entitled "Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority" writes, "...in order to inscript our skin that is 'too dark,' our hair that is 'too nappy,' our facial features that are 'too broad,' and our buttocks that are 'too wide' as definitive loci of positive human being–ness, Black churchwomen are taught that we must suppress the sexual aspect of our humanity, by reinforcing norms and practices that proclaim sex as a gift from God and relational/recreational sex as the devil's handiwork."[12]

The decorum of decency actively and venomously critiques Sunday morning attire with strict, unwritten rules. Women's hair, make-up, jewelry, shoes, and all clothing must fit within rigid standards. Church decorum monitors a woman's mannerism, physical gestures, volume of conversation, and tone of voice. There are "church behaviors" that must be adhered to and if breeched chastisement and often ostracism occurs. Some churches where the wearing of suites by women is the uniform for worship will require that women while seated in the chancel area place a handkerchief across their laps. Ushers will supply the handkerchief if one is not brought by the woman. Ironically, I find that the handkerchiefs draw more attention to the bodies of women in the chancels, rather than less. Usher boards are instructed to seat women based on what they are wearing. If dress is not "acceptable," then she is seated toward the rear of the sanctuary.

The decorum of decency is detrimental to women and actively participates in the mis-education of women as it creates a climate of fear and ridicule among the women. The mis-fitting ethical code serves

to alienate women creating stratas of who is "in" and who is "out." When this decorum is the value that is most revered, these prudish tenets refuse substantive conversation or preaching about body, body aesthetic, or issues of sexuality. Such conversations are considered gosh, in poor taste, tacky. The women who are the most strident in upholding this mis-guided ethic are often revered by other women and placed as chairpersons of women's day committee and heralded as leaders. Women learn and teach, like Celie, that to fit-in and gain any status and power, you must be alienating, dehumanizing to other women. The cycle of violence is very difficult to challenge, re-think, and heal.

The Elder Women's Anger

My hunch is that what disquieted the elder women was not that I used profanity. The words I used breeched the Victorian notions of decency, but, more specifically, the words I used promoted and heralded the female body and the aesthetic of the body into our theological conversation in the classroom called Woman's Day worship. The words bitch and whore undeniably connote women's bodies, women's sexuality, and women's distorted identity. My message explicitly included a conversation about the sexual politics of women's bodies in society. The message of my sermon could not be spiritualized nor could it be universalized to include the men. Though I did not then, and do not now, want to recklessly and uncritically offend the elder women, I do, as a gesture of continued survival, think it is time to question and dismantle the decorum of decency that is stifling the women in our pulpits and gagging the women in our pews.

Gone to Meddling

A phrase in the Black Church tradition is to say that a preacher has "gone to meddling" when he or she becomes emphatic and prescriptive about the lives and behaviors of the congregation. I want to conclude by meddling. Paul Giddings writes that conversation and preaching that includes gender and sexuality is "the last taboo in the Black community."[13] Giddings says that there is an historical and contemporary refusal by Black Churches to "engage one fundamental issue: Black sexuality."[14] I believe that it is the height of hypocrisy or naiveté to attempt to discuss issues of suffering and salvation for Black women and refuse to discuss sexuality, the Black body aesthetic, and issues germane to the deconstruction of the sexisms. If the character

Celie had any wisdom, then she possessed the insight to call her sexist offense against Sophia a sin. Black Churches must begin to name and reflect upon the sexisms, not as a social ill to be ignored, but as a sin against God. This sin against God, like other sins, turns our faces away from God's face; turns our bodies away from God's body; turns our minds away from that which is holy, righteous and love filled. We must, as men and women suffering the ravages of the sexisms, repent of this sin and turn back to God. Our silence and refusal to acknowledge the gravity of these issues is a death-dealing enterprise for our churches. We must break these cycles of violence and despair that are wrecking our faith communities and find new ways of being communities that are life-affirming, life-sustaining, and healthy.

As gestures of repentance, I would offer these few suggestions:

- Assess the climate of the female leadership in your church for acts of sexism, judgment and violence. If the code of decency is oppressive to any women, work to dismantle it and heal the women.
- Set a climate of warmth, hospitality, acceptance, and affirmation for men, women, and children throughout the life of the congregation, and especially in the worship service.
- Entreat the female leaders of the church, clergy and laity, to find authentic, female expressions of authority and power.
- Assist Black women in healing from the contorted reality that demands that we hate our bodies while having the responsibility of teaching all to love. This, after all, is a simply a set-up for failure.
- Refuse to have a double-standard for male preachers and female preachers. Give all preachers encouragement to express their truest selves.
- Male pastors, dare to use your power to become outspoken allies against the sexisms. Female pastors, recognize and affirm the brothers who are working on their inherited sexism.
- Rethink the event of Woman's Day and shift it from a day of fundraising to a day of consciousness raising for the issues of women.
- Take seriously the mis-education in your church concerning issues of female identity, self-hatred and self-worth. Work at ways of tapping into the educational power of worship and become intentional about what is being taught and caught in your congregation during worship.
- Preach often on issues that celebrate Black women's bodies, issues of sexuality and sexual health, and love. Preach often on shifting roles of the Black family and the shifting roles of fathers, mothers, daughters, wives, husbands, etc. Preach consistently on male-female

relationships and gender oppression. Preach on the hardship of misogyny and the oppressive cruelty of the sexisms.
- Preach like our minds, souls and, most importantly BODIES depend upon the Lord.

We can no longer afford to be prudish, prim, proper, and pedantic while our young people die from lack of education, while their identity and self-worth shrivels, while women live and die thinking them selves to be inferior and thinking that inferiority is being a good Christian woman. "For until and unless the Black faithful are willing to face matters of human sexuality candidly we cannot ever really know who we are, let alone who God is."[15]

NOTES

1. bell hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 106.
2. http://www.angelfire.com/ne/savedbygrace/lynch.html. Accessed October 14, 2008.
3. "Teaching the Body: Sexuality and the Black Church," in *Loving The Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, editors, Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 317.
4. For more information see Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker, editors, *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002).
5. See Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1933).
6. Albin Kweku Korem and Mawutodzi Kodzo Abissath, *Traditonal Wisdom in African Proverbs* (Ghana: Publishing Trends, 2004), 24.
7. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 35.
8. Ibid., 39–40.
9. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1981).
10. Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins, editors, *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 12.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Emile M. Townes, editor, *Embracing the Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 237.
14. Ibid., 236.
15. Pinn and Hopkins, *Loving the Body*, 316.

3

Spiritual Matters: The Aesthetics of Ritual Substances in Umbanda

Lindsay L. Hale

Dona Luciana[1] had a job for me, an important job, one she could not do herself. It seemed that, from time to time, Ronaldo, who, like Dona Luciana is a medium in the Umbanda religion, would become possessed by Omolu, the Yoruban god of sickness and healing. When this happened, it did not go well for Ronaldo. I was present one evening when this occurred.

It was on a Monday, in the middle of August, during an Umbanda session in which Dona Luciana and Ronaldo had both received spirits known as *caboclos.* These are important spirits in Umbanda, because they are astute advisors and healers. In most cases, the caboclos are portrayed as the spirits of Brazilian Indians who lived long ago, though that isn't always the case. Dona Luciana, for example, receives a caboclo called Jurema, who was a young, aristocratic Portuguese woman,[2] while one of Ronaldo's caboclos, Hector, was an ancient Greek mariner. No matter. Hector had tended to a couple of visitors who had come. I believe the last consultation that evening involved an older woman with a chronic swelling in the feet and ankles. She visited Hector on several occasions, and these consultations always unfolded in the same way. Hector would begin by running his hands up and down the length of her body, without actually touching; this maneuver, known as a *passe,* is meant to cleanse and readjust the spiritual body that envelops the material body. He would proceed to listen to her as she described her recent symptoms, interrupting to ask questions—have you seen the doctor recently? Did he prescribe anything new? Are you taking the medicines just exactly as he said? Are

you drinking enough water? How much? Ronaldo would examine the woman's feet and ankles and dab them with sweet oil and lavender water, before giving his advice. Outside of lighting a candle in a quiet place in her home and visualizing peaceful, happy scenes, his advice was practical and not at all supernatural: Follow doctor's orders, stay out of the sun, get plenty of rest, drink lots of water, massage the limbs, and take light exercise every day, nothing strenuous, just a walk around the block will do a lot of good.

His work done, Hector departed, leaving Ronaldo and me to wait for Jurema to finish with her clients, at which point she too would leave Dona Luciana's body and we would sing a hymn to close the session. Sitting quietly in the corner of the little bedroom where Dona Luciana and Ronaldo held their weekly Umbanda sessions, I noticed that Ronaldo seemed distracted, tired, and paler even than usual. Suddenly I could see distress in his eyes; his breathing was shallow, rapid, his hands shook, and when I took hold of one, it was cold and clammy. Alarmed, I called out to Jurema, just as Ronaldo fainted. Jurema moved quickly across the room and opened a little tackle box in which Ronaldo kept chalk, candles, matches, paper, olive oil, holy water, lavender water, a piece of black soap from Africa, a baggie full of dried herbs mixed with incense, little baggies of brown sugar and coffee beans, and other items he used during rituals. She handed me the box and, whispering, urged me to "*pegue a garrafa do azeite de dendê*" ("grab the bottle of red palm oil") which I did. "*Abre-a*." Open it. I did. In pantomime she indicated that I was to smear a little on Ronaldo's forehead, the pulse points on his wrists, and on the tops of his feet. I did, and Ronaldo's revived. I tried to hand the bottle to Jurema, but she backed away, shaking her head "no," palms out in a gesture that said: keep it away from me. I put the bottle away and closed the tackle box and brought Ronaldo, sitting up against the wall, looking drained and weak, a glass of water. Jurema finished with her clients, we sang the closing hymns, and went out to the living room to talk about the night's events.

This chapter explores aspects of aesthetics in one Afrobrazilian religion, Umbanda,[3] by focusing on the deployment of substances in rituals of healing, cleansing, offering, and sacrifice.[4] Like the painter with her palette of colors, practitioners of Afrobrazilian religions draw on a wide range of substances—blood, water, oils, honey, infusions of herbs, chalk and soap imported from Africa, plants and foods that metonymically recall an African paradise and a Brazilian hell—to at once represent, explore, and construct the spiritual and the sacred. While most studies of religious aesthetics focus on familiar genres

such as music, choreography, and plastic and visual arts, I focus on the relatively neglected area of substances because, in appealing to vision but also to touch, taste, and smell, they play a crucial role in engaging practitioners in a deeply embodied way with their religion. Further, I suggest that as we come to understand the language of ritual substances, that we can read, written in blood and water and palm oil and perfume, in pungent foods and herbal baths, texts that speak to the historical and contemporary struggles of Afrobrazilian identity.

Before we go there, though, even before we can go back to Dona Luciana's living room where she will explain Jurema's gestures and give me my new job, it is necessary to give a brief overview of Umbanda, and my research into it.

Umbanda

Dona Luciana calls her religious practice *Umbanda*. Umbanda is a popular religion, practiced at least occasionally by hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of Brazilians, especially in Rio de Janeiro, where it began in the early decades of the twentieth century. Actually Umbanda's roots go back much further, to the religious beliefs and practices brought to Brazil by enslaved Africans, mostly from West African (present day Nigeria, Benin, Ghana) and the Central African regions of Angola and Congo. In Salvador (figure 3.1), the capital of Bahia in the Northeast of Brazil, slaves and their descendents were able to maintain the West African traditions to this day with remarkable fidelity (albeit with some changes, most notably the identification of the African deities—the *Orixás*—with the Catholic Saints), giving rise to what is popularly known as *Candomblé*. In Rio de Janeiro, however, there was much mixing of traditions from various parts of Africa with Catholic elements, and especially characteristic of Umbanda, with Spiritism derived from the writings of a French mystic, Allen Kardec. The mixing of African traditions, Catholicism, Spiritism (and other elements) that produced Umbanda was not uniform, and there is a great range of variation within Umbanda. Many Umbanda *centros* (centers) are very Afrobrazilian, similar in many respects, especially in the aesthetics of ritual, to the traditional Candomblé. In this essay, I will refer to the practices at those centers as "Afrobrazilian Umbanda." What goes on in Dona Luciana's apartment, though there are elements of Afrobrazilian traditions, is much less African; here, I will refer to it with a term that many of its practitioners use. That term is "White Umbanda" (*Umbanda branca*).

Figure 3.1 Photo of Salvador, Bahia. Photograph taken by Anthony Pinn.

I first began doing field research in Rio de Janeiro, focusing on Umbanda, in 1986. I had originally planned to do my work in Salvador, looking at one of the traditional (and famous) houses of Candomblé. But I took the wise advise of two eminent anthropologists, Gilberto Velho and Peter Fry, and delayed my trip to Salvador to allow myself a few weeks to look at Umbanda in Rio. Though I discounted it at the time, both suggested that I might find this extraordinarily fertile ground. They were right, and I am grateful. Umbanda, with its wide aesthetic (and as we will see, ideological) range from Afrobrazilian to White, posed questions—religious, historical, political, aesthetic, personal—that I could not put aside. I never made my trip to Salvador that summer, and have been working with Umbanda ever since.[5] I first worked with Dona Luciana, and then over the years, while continuing with her, expanded my "sample" to include the range of diversity within Umbanda.

AZEITE DE DENDÊ

The red palm oil—the *azeite de dendê*—with which I revived Ronaldo is a remarkable substance. It comes from the nut of the *dendezeiro,* the oil palm native to West Africa. Azeite de dendê flows through most Afrobrazilian cuisine. Reddish-orange, the oil is very thick,

with a velvety texture that it retains when used in cooking, and a pungent flavor that both conveys and mellows spicy hot seasonings, giving such Afrobrazilian dishes as *moqueca* (a stew of fish or shrimp made with onions, tomatoes, hot pepper, green pepper, and coconut milk) wonderful flavors and an exquisite, indescribable feeling in the mouth.

A staple of Afrobrazilian cooking, azeite de dendê is a main ingredient in many of the foods associated with, and offered to, the *Orixás*—the African deities—in Candomblé and Afrobrazilian Umbanda. Ogum, the god of war and ironworking and protector of travelers, takes azeite de dendê in many of his dishes. If you roast a yam for Ogum, or make a pot of beans for him, you liberally douse it with palm oil. Popcorn for Omolu, who possessed Ronaldo that evening long ago, or for the trickster/messenger Exu, is cooked in red palm oil. Azeite de dendê, then, is a symbol, an index, metynomically connected to Africa, Afrobrazilian culture, Afrobrazilian religion, and various *Orixás*. But it is no mere abstract symbol; azeite de dendê is grounded in sensual experience; it flows through wonderfully aromatic dishes, it carries spicy and warming flavors, it caresses the tongue, the palate, and then it slides down the throat to become one with the body. It is Africa, in symbol, substance, and bodily experience.

So, about the job Dona Luciana had for me. While the Orixás are celebrated in Umbanda, they are not invited to possess mediums. This is especially true in White Umbanda, and especially in regard to Omolu, the Orixá of sickness and healing. According to Dona Luciana, the Orixás are too powerful, too dangerous; thus, "we receive instead caboclos who serve the Orixás." Omolu, she went on, is particularly "heavy" and dangerous, but he comes to Ronaldo occasionally. "When he does, you can send him away by giving him azeite de dendê, which is his substance. I can't handle azeite de dendê," Dona Luciana continued, "it conflicts with my spirits, who are very refined and evolved. It is too heavy, it is a thing of Candomblé, African. It is poison for us. My spirits, when they use oil, use olive oil, light and sweet. But you, my son, are more turned to the African line; it won't hurt you."

Amacis and *Banhos*

It is afternoon at the House of Father John, a place where the Umbanda is very Afrobrazilian. Linda's strong, dark fingers and Fernanda's plump pink hands worked together, shredding and mashing the leafy herbs floating in the big porcelain bowl. Linda, a daughter of Ossaim, the Orixá of sacred and medicinal plants, had collected the various

herbs, each of which she named for me as she recited its properties, from various locations, picking each at precisely the right time according to the vast herbal knowledge passed down over generations, first in Africa and later in Brazil. As Linda and Fernanda chatted softly, straddling the low bench with the bowl between them, their hands worked steadily, unhurriedly, but soon enough the mass of leaves dissolved into a thin, green soup. Their work done, they put the bowl aside, beneath an altar, to steep and ripen for seven days.

Zé, a wiry, smaller man in his thirties who grew up in the interior of Minas Gerais and once told me a story of how, in the old days in his town, an old man steeped in the ways of African sorcery, seated under a tree to ward off the noonday sun, could make an enemy sick or even kill him by just muttering the right words, some months earlier sat straddling the same low bench, a bowl of greenish liquid between his legs. Zé dipped into the bowl from time to time as he sponged the face of a larger man, a man with a split lip and a drooping mouth. I think the man had been punched in the face, but I didn't ask. Zé prayed softly, his black, sinuous hands gently tending to the battered caramel colored face before him. I thought of the old sorcerer of his story, whose muttered curse could kill, and about Zé, whose prayer and gentle hands and herbal infusion perhaps could cure the damage done to one man by another.

What Linda and Fernanda were preparing that afternoon, and what Zé was applying to that unfortunate man that evening, are referred to in Afrobrazilian Umbanda as *amacis.* Some are used for healing, others to bathe ritual items, others as part of initiations and other rituals; *amacis,* these infusions of sacred and medicinal herbs, cleanse, purify, energize, and fortify. Pungent, organic, they smell of earth, forest, herbs, decay; they feel of water, the oily life juices of plants, bits of green matter, cool or tepid, and a little viscous, against the skin.

Amacis are important in Candomblé, and at the House of Father John, where Zé and Elena and Fernanda practice what I am calling Afrobrazilian Umbanda, but they are not used by Dona Luciana, or by participants at the House of Saint Benedict, a White Umbanda center where I spent considerable time. They do employ cleansing, energizing, and fortifying liquids in a practice called *banhos* ("baths"), but these are used privately and follow a rather different logic, and a different aesthetic. Here are some White Umbanda banhos that were recommended to me, to cleanse and energize my spirit:

"In the evening, pluck the petals of a fresh yellow rose, one that hasn't started to fade, into a bowl of water. Place the bowl on your altar and light a candle. In the morning, take a regular shower and

then pour the rose water over you. You can do the same with a white rose; the yellow rose carries the energies of Oxum (Orixá of fertility and fresh water); the white rose, the forces of Oxalá."

"Fill a clean, white, ceramic bowl with water. Add seven pieces of rock salt, pure, without iodine, or seven drops of lavender. Let it rest over night, and in the morning bathe your head in the water."

"Collect a liter of water from a waterfall of a clear flowing stream in the forest. Add nothing to it; this water is full of the energies of Oxum, the Orixá of fertility, beauty, and fresh water, who resides by the waterfall, collecting water lilies. Let it flow over you, head to toe."

The adjectives used to describe these *banhos* were "clean," "pure," "light," "simple," and their effects were described as "purifying," "energizing"; they would make me feel "light," "clean," "calm," and "tranquil." When I described a *banho* that Zé from the Afrobrazilian House of Father John, had recommended—that I macerate a bunch of basil in a bowl of water, as I had seen Linda and Fernanda do with the leaves and herbs—to strengthen the powers of concentration and perception I needed in my research, Seu Gomes from the House of Saint Benedict (White Umbanda), characterized this as "gross," "heavy," and, most tellingly, as the practice of people "lacking in science."

As with Dona Luciana's comments about azeite de dendê, we will have to return to the differences between the *banhos* and the *amacis,* Seu Gomes' remarks, and their significance, in our concluding discussion. But first, let's turn to another practice, again involving the application of material substances to the body as a form of spiritual mediation, prevalent at the House of Father John but absent among the practitioners of White Umbanda that I worked with.

Sacudimento

Among the items in Ronaldo's little tackle box were several pieces of chalk. These he used mainly to draw *pontos riscados,* designs that are a kind of signature of the various spirits. When he received Hector, the Greek mariner, he would draw wavy blue lines to represent the ocean, a yellow crescent moon, and seven white stars—a kind of pictograph, a scene that such a spirit would inhabit. Drawn on a square slate or sheet of paper, the *ponto riscado* remained on the floor, nearby, as Hector tended to the various people who came seeking his help. *Pontos riscados*, these hieroglyphs in chalk, are ubiquitous in Umbanda.

At the House of Father John, I saw many *pontos riscados*, but a few times I saw them drawn, not in white or pastel chalk, and not small, but big, on the ground, in black gunpowder.

It is late afternoon at the House of Father John. At back, on a big concrete slab, a man is standing holding a staff, perhaps six feet long, with a fat, long candle at one end; the other end rests beside his right foot. He is dressed in old clothes, not shabby or dirty, just old, expendable. He is there to undergo a healing, cleansing ritual known as a *sacudimento,* a word which comes from the verb *sacudir,* to shake, jar, jolt, agitate. He looks weary, sad, troubled. No one talks to him, no one takes any notice of him as he stands, slope shouldered, red eyed, staring off into the distance, until Orlando, a medium who receives the spirit of a powerful sorcerer, José Mineiro, comes out and picks up a stick of gunpowder chalk from an assemblage of materials near where I am sitting. Orlando is not in trance. He nods at me, and, squatting down, balancing on the balls off his feet, sets to work on a magnificent ponto riscado. Working quickly, he draws in a double bladed hatchet, emblem of Xangô, the Orixá of thunder and justice; wavy lines representing water, a bow, a clutch of arrows, a Star of David, all connected with thin lines of gunpowder, and finishes by tracing a thick, black circle of gunpowder, several feet in diameter encompassing the man and the drawings. Orlando stands up, stands back, scrutinizes the work, and without a word turns and goes back inside.

Off to the side the materials that are to be used in the *sacudimento* have been assembled. Among other items there are:

Seven raw eggs. Eggs are said to absorb bad energies.

Seven pieces of imported African chalk, called *pemba*.

A bowl containing coffee beans, raw sugar, and manioc flour. These represent the old slaves, who were worked to death to produce coffee and sugar to make White people rich, White people who in return fed them little more than the empty calories of manioc flour.

A large clay bowl, full of cut up yams, manioc root, cabbages, beets, turnips and other roots. Linda, the daughter of Ossaim, tells me that these represent the *caboclo,* or Indian spirits; these are the kinds of things the Indians would grow in their forest gardens.

There are various bowls of beans (uncooked). There are red and purple beans for the grandmother Orixá, Nanã; little brown beans known as *mulatinhos* (little mulattos) for the warrior god Ogum, white beans for the sky god, creator of humankind, Oxalá; black-eyed peas for Oxum, and little black beans for the old slave and sorcerer, José Mineiro.

There were seven red and seven black candles for Exu, the trickster who mediates between humans and Orixás; and twenty-one candles

for Oxalá. Right after Orlando finished drawing his ponto riscado, these candles were arranged in geometric patterns outside the circle of gunpowder.

A live rooster, a live hen, and a big enamel bowl containing an *amaci* made of water and the leaves of *fortuna* (which, as its name implies, is thought to bring good luck and wealth) and *mamona,* the broad leaves of the castor bean plant on which, at the House of Father John, foods prepared for the Orixás are served, first to the deities, and then to the people.[6]

The light fades, until the man, all alone, is illuminated by the little light of his candle and the greater light of the thirty five candles surrounding the ponto riscado. Full dark now, the drummer Fernando and several mediums emerge onto the patio. Among the mediums is Orlando, but now he is José Mineiro, the old sorcerer. He sits on a little stool, drinking sweet red wine from a little black cup. As he sings a little song about himself, one of the mediums brings him the hen. He cuts its throat, letting the blood spurt and drip onto the slab. Working slowly, deftly, singing softly all the while, he dismembers the bird, placing the feet, the wings, the head, and the heart in a clay bowl. He repeats the procedure with the rooster. Two of the mediums carry the bowls out to the gate, where they are offered to Exu, without whose help, no ritual can succeed.

The time has come. Fernando's hands come down on the drum, beating out a looping, clopping rhythm that, for all its drive, has always reminded me in one its rhythmic lines of the clip clop of a horse on a rough trail. Fernando knows many, many beats, to summon and send the spirits; when Fernando, like others steeped in the traditions of Afrobrazilian drumming, play, spirit is made manifest in sound, enveloping the night and penetrating the body. Suddenly he changes the rhythm, and doubles the tempo. His clear voice lifts like a horn *Descarrega, Descarrega, meu santo Antônio* (take away the load, the bad energy, Saint Anthony)... Almost as if in a dance, the mediums pour the amaci over the man, and then the bowls of beans, the bowls of roots and coffee and sugar; they break the eggs over him. A medium grabs a knife and rips at the man's clothes; the mediums are all in trance now, dancing, swirling, a few, possessed by their Exus and Pomba Giras,[7] cackle and laugh The gunpowder ignites with a whooshing, ripping sound, a flash of light, and a shower of sparks.

And then it stops. The man is led inside, where he is cleaned up and dressed in new clothes, while the mediums, back to their usual

selves, clean up the patio. The man returns after awhile. He looks much better, relaxed, smiling. He chats for a bit and walks off into the night.

I don't know what troubles brought that man to undergo the sacudimento. I had never seen him before at the House of Father John, nor would I encounter him again. I didn't ask; something told me that this was a delicate matter, better left to those who truly needed to know. What mattered was that this man was suffering, and people at the House of Father John went to his aid by way of this ritual. It was a remarkable, dramatic performance, filled with so many vivid images and scenes and moments—before it started, even, the assemblage of all those materials, those bowls full of beans and roots and *amaci,* the candles; visually, so striking, and each component itself a mythical text, a story of old slaves or Indians or an Orixá or Exu or the magical numbers seven and three and twenty one. That lone, sad figure, suffering written on his face, in his posture, holding his candle-torch; then as darkness fell, bathed in the warm glow of all those candles, the light of compassion. The drumming, the singing, the dancing, the ripping of clothes, swirling to the fiery crescendo—it was a tour de force, a memory that will stay with me forever. So much, so rich, so moving; but for this chapter, let me just underline the fact that this ritual in large part involves the sensual envelopment of the body within a whole repertoire of substances and actions, an aesthetic experience laid on, and taken in through, the very nerves at the surface of the skin. The significance of this for our understanding of Afrobrazilian and White Umbanda I leave for the concluding discussion.

Blood

The brightest line dividing White Umbanda from Afrobrazilian Umbanda is drawn in blood. Blood sacrifice is fundamental in the kind of Umbanda practiced at the House of Father John. It is utterly banished from the White Umbanda of Dona Luciana and the House of Saint Benedict.

At the House of Father John, blood is ubiquitous. The blood of living beings both contains and represents the spiritual force of *axé.* Sacred plants, symbols, sacred places, the drums that call the spirits, the center post of the *terreiro,* the sacred items buried underneath its floor, these and many other things are called *axés.* They are foci of the spiritual force, the *axé,* immanent in the Orixás, the force that drives life, and being. But like any font of energy, these *axés* must from time to time be recharged, made new, and this is done largely through

blood. So, for example, every year blood is shed to renew the drums, the center post, the *terreiro* itself. And, every year, on the feast day of the Catholic saint associated with a particular Orixá, animals specific to that deity are sacrificed, and its favorite foods are prepared and offered, representing and constituting the deep reciprocity between Orixás and human beings.

(I must point out that this is not the practice of people insensitive to animals. Sacrifice is done with the deepest respect, and much care is taken to minimize suffering. They believe it must be done. And yet, the sacrifice of mammals in particular is accompanied with sadness; I have seen, e.g., the watering eyes and heard the cracking voice of Fernando, the very *macho* drummer, as he wiped clean the knife he had just used on the throat of a goat he had caressed and calmed and sang softly to in its last half hour of life.)

Dona Luciana has great respect for Candomblé, in which, like the Afrobrazilian Umbanda of the House of Father John, blood sacrifice is central. As she puts it, that is their tradition, their line, and they must be true to it. Fortunately, she continues, "my line is Umbanda! So I don't have to sacrifice animals, thank God, I love animals. Candomblé is Candomblé, Umbanda, and blood sacrifice is not a part of Umbanda." (According to Dona Luciana.)

At the House of Saint Benedict, the responses to my questions about blood sacrifice are not phrased so diplomatically. An erroneous practice. Cruel. Barbaric. Primitive. Ignorant. Just as the Jews evolved beyond those Old Testament practices, so Umbanda has evolved beyond the backwards practices from Africa. That is what they say at the House of Saint benedict.

Foods

I am looking at a photograph I took sixteen years ago, in the utility closet of Dona Luciana's little apartment. Dona Luciana long ago had turned the closet into a shrine for the Oriental line of spirits, a line that is not very common in Umbanda but is central to her religious practice and spiritual life. Sharing space with the water heater and the breaker panel is a beautifully polished dark mahogany table on which perches a gleaming, golden Buddha. A Chinese water painting scroll hangs behind the Buddha; above that, like a many legged starfish, shines a golden sculpture representing the sun. The photograph depicts a small tray, piled high with four red apples, a bunch of green grapes, a watermelon wedge covered in cellophane, a pineapple, a big, ripe papaya, a bunch of little yellow bananas, and

a spoon. Behind is a plate of rice; the plate and the tray rest on the floor underneath the statue of the Buddha. Dona Luciana prepared this offering for the Oriental spirits, to whom she owes so much. Sometime later, after the candle has burned down, after the spirits have partaken of this gift of fruits and grain, it will be covered in a yellow towel and taken to the beach, to be discreetly disposed of in the evening tide.

I am thinking of a chilly August dawn, sixteen years ago. I am sitting with my late friend Jorge, a man some twenty years my senior, a man who grew up poor in the slums of Rio, a man who would go on to a successful career as a hydraulic engineer and retire to a fine neighborhood, but who never would abandon the samba, the soccer, the Orixás, the Afrobrazilian culture of his childhood. We are out back of the House of Father John, sitting on some steps looking over the cement slab where on another occasion a man stood holding a candle torch while Orlando drew gunpowder designs around him. We are eating, and drinking beer from little plastic cups. We eat from plates that are broad, green leaves, about the size of both my hands cupped together. On my plate are a couple of black-eyed pea fritters, filled with bits of fresh and dried shrimp, fried in azeite de dendê; a couple of tablespoons of black beans; a dollop of okra stewed with tomatoes, green peppers, hot peppers and dried beef; a hard boiled egg, hominy with honey, a bit of chicken, a bit of goat meat, a piece of roasted yam drizzled with honey and azeite de dendê. The food is cold, and greasy. Jorge nibbles at his. I devour mine; after eight hours of celebrating the Orixás, I am famished. Jorge smiles—"so, gringo, how do you like the food of the saints?" I take his empty cup and fill it with beer. "Food of the saints I like just fine, Jorge; beer of the saints, also."

Food is the final category of substances on which I will comment. Here again there are pronounced differences between the White Umbanda of Dona Luciana or the House of Saint Benedict, and the Afrobrazilian Umbanda of the House of Father John. I should begin by saying that Dona Luciana's offering of food to the Oriental spirits is something of a departure from her usual practice. Except for Iemanjã, the sea goddess, who is Dona Luciana's spiritual mother, and the Oriental spirits, she does not prepare food to offer the Orixás, or the other spirits. Nor is this done at the House of Saint Benedict. The rationale is that these elevated spiritual entities have no need for material nourishment. The food could only be symbolic, but even as symbol, food, grossly material, implicated in bodily functions and appetites, is inappropriate. As Cici of the House of Saint Benedict put it, better to offer ribbons and flowers, pure water.

(But it is interesting that Dona Luciana, who shares those White Umbanda ideals, makes exceptions for those entities who are most central to her life. Perhaps the elemental, embodied meanings of commensality trump the abstract logic that separates the spiritual from the material.)

At the House of Father John, on the other hand, *comida de santo,* "food of the saints," is a primary vehicle connecting humankind to the sacred. To begin with: the food recalls the mythology, the character, of the various Orixás. Each has favorite and tabooed dishes. As Jorge and I ate from our leaf plates that morning, we were taking in physical nourishment, but we were also in a sense "eating" a heritage. The hard boiled egg pertained to Oxum, the Orixá of fertility and fresh, flowing water; the okra stew recalls Xangô, Orixá of thunder and justice; the hominy, sweetened with honey, recalls Oxalá, creator of humankind; the black-eyed pea fritters, Iansã, the warrior goddess who swirls in the tempest, while the yam and the black beans and the beer are favorite foods of Ogum, the warrior. And so on. These are substances that are good to think with, to borrow Claude Lévi-Strauss' felicitous phrase.

Equally, these foods form part of the nexus of reciprocity underlying Afrobrazilian religion. At one level, they are a labor of love, and they represent a significant material investment. Those cold beans and fritters and okra stew Jorge and I shared at the cold end of night were the fruits of long hours of several women's loving labor in the kitchen, women who rely on the Orixás for their well being. They are gifts. Before they became food for Jorge and me and several dozen other human beings that morning, portions of each had first been given as offerings to the Orixás, and to other spiritual beings, as gestures of appreciation but also as sustaining gifts for which the recipients would be grateful—and generous in turn.

And finally, these substances—these mediators of reciprocity, these vehicles of tradition—may be understood as abstract symbols, but they are symbols that become one with the substance of living, breathing, sensual bodies.

Discussion

In *Distinction,* his seminal work on the social significance of aesthetics, Pierre Bourdieu explores the ways in which taste—in painting, in sport, in music, in notions of desirable body types, to name a few—while experienced as a private property of the self, is actually a product of social experience, and implicated in the construction of class

boundaries and class identities; it goes without saying that taste marks not only class, but also ethnic, regional, and political distinctions.[8] To say that one person has a taste for Phillip Glass while another goes for George Strait may not tell us *all* we need to know about where the two parties are coming from and how they would like to see themselves in the mirror (and the improbability that they would *ever* find themselves at the same party), but it does tell us a lot.

Surely this is relevant to some of the choices, regarding ritual substances, we have seen in this essay. Dona Luciana and her spirits cannot abide azeite de dendê. The banhos prescribed at the House of Saint Benedict involve spring water, drops of lavender and pieces of rock salt, while Dona Luciana prescribes rose petals steeped in water. Blood is anathema, and one would never see the pungent, viscous, green amacis. The language used in White Umbanda to talk about these substances—"pure," "clean," "light" for theirs, "heavy," "primitive" for the stuff of Afrobrazilian Umbanda—evokes sensual/aesthetic properties as well as an entire subtext of class and racial distinction. In their choice of ritual substances, as well as other aesthetic aspects of ritual (dance, drumming or its lack, and other elements equally beyond the scope of this short essay) White Umbanda sets itself apart from, and implicitly (at best, often the claims are quite explicit) *above,* Afrobrazilian Umbanda. (Remember Dona Luciana's comments that she and her spirits are too *evolved* to work with azeite de dendê, or the remarks at the House of Saint Benedict that blood sacrifice, fundamental to Afrobrazilian religion, is *barbaric, primitive, African*). But there is more to this than holding Afrobrazilian culture at arms length, though as the Brazilian sociologist Renato Ortiz so convincingly argued in a brilliant historical study,[9] the rejection of that identity was enormously important in shaping this style of Umbanda. If these aesthetics are a rejection of African roots and Afrobrazilian identity, they at the same time embrace and celebrate a European heritage and White middle-class identity. If we take Clifford Geertz's suggestions regarding the interpenetration of aesthetics, ethos, and worldview,[10] and if we extend Durkheim's suggestion that religion is society's way of representing itself to itself, then White Umbanda's choices of substances (along with those other elements of ritual aesthetics) relates to the broader ethos of bourgeois, middle class and (mostly) White culture, and represents not only an aesthetics of what is good, but a view of who they are (and, negatively, who they *are not*). Equally, if not more importantly, the near-immateriality of these ritual substances (spring water, a few drops of lavender perfume . . .) reflects the dualism of Western thought, religious thought especially,

that draws a dichotomy between mind and body, culture and nature, spirit and matter, with the first term of each pair morally privileged, the second, though necessary perhaps to the very existence of the first, a kind of embarrassment, a threat, a contaminant. And yet, paradoxically, the privileging of the immaterial is represented materially, sensually, in spring water and rose petals, drops of lavender, material representations of rarified spirit.

The ritual substances and their deployment in Afrobrazilian Umbanda paints a very different picture. These substances also make claims to identity, but it is an Afrobrazilian identity. That bowl of coffee and raw sugar and manioc flour we encountered in the sacudimento is an explicit reminder of the suffering and exploitation of Afrobrazilian ancestors, as were the black beans for the old sorcerer José Mineiro, who with his little bowl of sweet red wine and his head and heart full of African medicine and magic, represents the potency of his roots, the strength of his character and his culture. The various leaves and roots employed in the amacis, beyond their healing intent and efficacy, also represent the African traditions, those age old techniques of healing and cleansing using the living substances of nature. We saw how various foods—many of them prepared with azeite de dendê—evoke the Orixás, not as abstract entities, but concrete identities, figures celebrated in a vivid and explicitly African mythology, spiritual beings, yes, but thoroughly embodied characters, with appetites, aversions; sensual beings, mythical, but essentially human.

If the dualistic, European tradition is highlighted in White Umbanda, privileging spirit over matter, mind over body, nature over culture, the ritual substances of Afrobrazilian Umbanda seek a very different goal. They bring spirit and matter, nature and culture, mind and body together. Linda's cultural knowledge guides her collection of natural herbs and leaves; she works that vegetal matter, imbued with spiritual force, with her strong fingers, producing a substance, the amaci, mindfully applied to the body of that man with the broken face, or that other man with the broken heart, to effect healing. Those bowls of substances that washed over that broken hearted man during the sacudimento were really bowls of spirit, powerful metaphors flooding over the surfaces of the body, to alleviate the sickness of a troubled mind. And those foods, lovingly prepared by women endowed with the "hand of the kitchen," pungent, delicious, thoroughly sensual and material in their textures and flavors, those are given up as offerings to entities that partake of the spiritual essences of these substances, which then feed the bodies of tired worshipers, ingested as food but also understood as metaphors of spiritual

forces and the webs of reciprocity binding human beings and Orixás. And finally, there is blood, the sacrifice of which White Umbanda vehemently rejects, but which, as it is ritually shed in Afrobrazilian Umbanda, unites spirit and matter, mind and body, human and Orixá life and death, joining together that which has been separated in its warm, salty, crimson flow.

NOTES

1. Names and certain details that might reveal identity have been changed in the interest of privacy.
2. Many, many Umbanda mediums receive spirits named Jurema. Almost all are conceived of as spirits of young Brazilian Indian women. Dona Luciana's Jurema is the only one I ever met with a European background. This is likely related to Dona Luciana's own strong identification with her Portuguese ancestry.
3. There is a wealth of scholarly literature on Afrobrazilian religions generally, and Umbanda specifically—but very little of it is in English. Here I will just refer to sources available in English. The classic historical and sociological overview of Afrobrazilian religion (including an excellent chapter on the emergence of Umbanda) is Roger Bastide's *The African Religions of Brazil* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1978) originally published in French in 1960. Diana Brown's *Umbanda Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994; first published in 1986 and based mainly on research carried out in the late 1960's) is a sophisticated and meticulously well researched book that places Umbanda, particularly what I call "White Umbanda" within the broader social-historical context. John Burdick's *Looking for God in Brazil, The Progressive Catholic Church in Urban Brazil's Religious Arena* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) discusses Umbanda within the larger "marketplace" of religious alternatives in a low income community in the greater Rio area. I have written several articles dealing with various aspects of Umbanda, based mainly on my ethnographic research. Among the articles are "Preto Velho: Resistence, Redemption, and En-Gendered Representations of Slavery in a Brazilian Possession-Trance Religion." in *American Ethnologist* Vol. 24, No. 2 (1997): 392–414; "The House of Saint Benedict, the House of Father John: Umbanda Aesthetics and a Politics of the Senses" in *Race, Nation and Religion in the Americas*, editors, Henry Goldschmidt and Elizabeth McAlister (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and "Umbanda," in *Religion and Society in Latin America: Interpretive Essays from the Conquest to the Present*, editors, Lee M. Penyak and Walter J. Petry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, forthcoming). In addition, the University of New Mexico Press is publishing my book, tentatively titled *Hearing the Mermaid' Song: The Umbanda Religion in Rio de Janeiro,* scheduled for release in August 2009.

4. In "Blood, Oil, Honey, and Water: Symbolism in Spirit Possession Sects in Northeastern Brazil" (*American Ethnologist* Vol. 22, No. 4 [1995]: 828–847) Dolores J. Shapiro explores how in these various sects (Candomblé, Giro, and Mesa Branca), blood, honey, oil, and water constitute metaphors of racial identity and ideology, in much the same way that blood and water work within and between Afrobrazilian and White Umbanda. While I was thinking along these lines before reading Shapiro, her excellent essay both confirmed and helped me develop my understanding.
5. That first trip in 1986 lasted three months. I returned, supported by a Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Research Fellowship, in 1990–1991, spent well over a year, and subsequently made a number of return trips, each of around three months duration, subsequently.
6. I was told by my friend, Jorge, that the leaves used as plates were mamona—but I lack the botanical knowledge to confirm this. I just know the leaves were broad, dark green, and made perfectly functional platters.
7. In Candomblé, Exu is an Orixá who serves as the intermediary between human beings and the other Oixás. While this meaning is retained by many Umbandistas, in Umbanda Exus are the spirits of human beings, who, generally, conducted their lives with something short of exemplary moral rigor—petty or serious criminals, carousers, abortionists, or in the case of their female counterparts, the *Pomba Giras,* bargirls, prostitutes, dancers, and other characters. Despite, and in part due to, their moral ambiguity (which makes them very human) Exus and Pomba Giras are much loved—they tend to be funny, theatrical—and are valuable spiritual allies.
8. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
9. Renato Ortiz, *A Morte Branca do Feiticeiro Negro* (Petropolis Rio de Janeiro: Editora Vozes, 1978).
10. Clifford Geertz, "Ethos, World-View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

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From Hattie to Halle: Black Female Bodies and Spectatorship as Ritual in Hollywood Cinema

Carol B. Duncan

> And there one lies body to body with one's blackness or one's whiteness, in full narcissistic cry, each sealed into his own peculiarity with, it is true, now and then a flash or so, but these are threatened at the source.
>
> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Hattie McDaniel's portrayal of Mammy in the 1939 film, *Gone with the Wind*, marked the first time that a Black actor, male or female, had been honoured with the Hollywood motion picture industry's highest award, the Academy Award or Oscar, as it is popularly known. McDaniel's Academy Award as best supporting actress commemorated a role, the loyal domestic servant or slave, that she had effectively portrayed, not only in *Gone with the Wind*, but on stage and screen throughout her acting career. When criticized by Black organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for playing domestic servant roles and thereby contributing to the perpetuation of negative racial stereotyping, McDaniel, pragmatic and cogently critical in her assessment of economic opportunities available for Black women in the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century, apparently retorted that she would rather *play* a maid than *be* a maid. And indeed along with other Black women actors of the first half of the twentieth century such as Louise Beavers and Ruby Dandridge, McDaniel made a career out of playing maids in Hollywood films and on television.

Following McDaniel's win, Whoopi Goldberg was awarded a best supporting actress award for her turn as a charlatan-turned–*bona fide* medium in *Ghost* (1990). A few Black women would be nominated for best actress Academy Awards starting with Dorothy Dandridge in 1954 for her role as Carmen in the all-Black production of *Carmen Jones* based on Bizet's opera, *Carmen*. Others followed including Diana Ross for her portrayal of Billie Holliday in *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), Cicely Tyson in *Sounder* (1972), Diahnn Carroll for the titular role in *Claudine* (1974), and Angela Bassett for her portrayal of Tina Turner in *What's Love Got to Do with It* (1993). However, it was not until 2002, that a Black woman was awarded the best actress Academy Award. Halle Berry's win for her portrayal of the beleaguered, widowed, love-starved, downtrodden Leticia Musgrove, in the 2001 film, *Monster's Ball*, was widely hailed as a landmark achievement. She received the award the same night that Denzel Washington was awarded best actor for his role as a corrupt police officer in *Training Day*, and Sidney Poitier, an Academy Award first as a Black best actor winner himself, for *Lilies of the Field* (1963), was honored with a lifetime achievement award. Her tearful, emotional, acceptance speech in which she proclaimed that her win had kicked down the door for all women of color in Hollywood was watched by millions around the world.

The erased sexuality of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* and Leticia's overt sexuality in *Monster's Ball* are intrinsically linked; they are foils of each other as representatives of the subservient Mammy and hypersexual Jezebel stereotypes. Important here are McDaniel's and Berry's embodiment, as light-skinned and dark-skinned Black women actors, and its effects on their casting in Hollywood roles. Though physically different roles, there are aspects of Mammy in Leticia's waitress and a glimmer of Leticia's sexually charged persona in one pivotal scene between Mammy and Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind*. Although there are discernible differences between Mammy and Leticia, there are also striking notes of similarity. While Black women filmmakers such as Julie Dash in *Daughters of the Dust* (1991)[1] have consciously countered stereotypic depictions of Black mothering in both storylines, characterization and casting, some portrayals in comedic movies such as *The Nutty Professor*[2], featuring Black male actor Eddie Murphy, in female drag, come perilously close to stereotype in their depictions of Black motherhood. Leticia and Mammy serve as fantasy figures reflecting the projected desires of both viewers and filmmakers. What do these characters say about Black womanhood and why should it matter to us as viewers of

movies and scholars and students in Black religious and theological studies? Simply put, the movies, in addition to being a highly profitable culture industry with an international audience, arguably serve as the central popular myth and meaning-making vehicle in contemporary western popular culture. As such, every aspect of the movies from film production and distribution to marketing and management is deserving of critical attention. Commonly held notions and stereotypes about race, gender, sexuality, class, and other markers of social difference are addressed in films. Film viewing is not the passive activity of escapist entertainment that it is popularly deemed to be but rather is potentially a meaning-making activity with the possibility of personal transformation for the viewer. As viewers, we bring our individual personal histories and communal experiences to films thus making each film viewing event a unique and potentially meaning-creating experience. From this perspective, agency in the creation and development of filmic narratives rests not only in the hands of filmmakers but also, crucially, in the interaction of viewers with the films-as-events. For Black people, in particular, rendered either invisible and absent from Hollywood cinema over the last century of its development, or twisted and distorted through stereotype and caricature, the ability to look at these filmic representations, critically, provides an opportunity for analysis about Others as well as to look back at Black people and "[name] what we see."[3] Historically Black women had to develop "looking relations" in response to erasure and absence in a Hollywood cinema which in effect "denie[d] the 'body' of the Black female."[4]

This chapter is an attempt to provide a reading of two Hollywood films, *Monster's Ball* and *Gone with the Wind* from my perspective as a Black female Canadian viewer who is a sociologist with interest in African diasporic religious and cultural forms. In doing so, I take up bell hooks' notion of "black female spectatorship"[5] as an analytical tool suggesting, too, that it can function as ritual practice which could contribute to religious and theological studies of Black experiences. In situating film viewing as ritual, I am also drawing on Catherine Bell's notion of ritual as "enacted thought"[6] which focuses on the meaning-making dimension of action to suggest that film-viewing practices are a form of ritual, through which viewers, in their interaction with film can engage in processes of meaning-making, identity formation and transformation. Film viewing practices, in this instance, encompass private viewings in homes as well as public and communal viewing of films in theatres, educational and church or other religious group settings.[7]

I will present a comparative analysis of Hattie McDaniel's Mammy, in *Gone with the Wind*, and Halle Berry's Leticia Musgrove, in *Monster's Ball*, suggesting that the two roles can be characterized as bookends of mainstream Hollywood cinematic representations of Black women. The Hollywood beauty aesthetic has long excluded dark-skinned Black women, at the same time that there has been a fascination with mixed-race and light-skinned Black women as sexual objects stereotypically portrayed as tragic mulattos.[8] As such, Hollywood cinema presents a limited range of aesthetic practices for Black women through the recycling of these two stereotypical images. Though separated by more than sixty years and pivotal events which have altered the course of gendered, raced and class relations in the United States such as the Second World War, the modern American civil rights movement and second and third wave feminist movements, there are parallels which underscore and highlight both changes and most notably consistencies in the representation of Black women in Hollywood cinema. First and foremost, both McDaniel's Mammy and Berry's Leticia occupy mothering roles: Mammy as a devoted and loyal enslaved domestic in a wealthy Southern home in the 1860s and Leticia as an early twenty-first century, contemporary poverty-stricken single parent with few financial and emotional resources to take care of herself and her young son. The focus on motherhood in roles featuring Black women is, in itself, not surprising given that Hollywood cinema's favored role for Black women, historically, is Mammy, the loyal domestic servant. Second, both women were publicly awarded for roles which resonate explicitly, by name, in the case of Mammy and implicitly, in the case of Leticia, with long-established racial stereotypes of Black women as asexual, docile mammies and hypersexual, licentious Jezebels. Third, both roles are linked to themes of redemptive love, forgiveness, and financial prosperity, won and lost, in the storylines of the films. Anchoring all three themes is the continued representation, in Hollywood cinema, of Black female bodies as sites of projected desire and exploitation in domestic and sexual service. These in turn are based on linked sets of dualisms concerning modern Black female representation in the West: Mammy/Jezebel, Madonna/whore and beauty/bestiality whose roots lie in the emergence and continued impact of the Hottentot Venus as an iconic image of Black female sexuality 200 years after she was first displayed to western European audiences as representative of a freak of nature and virtual proof of Black Africans essentialized difference and inferiority to White Europeans.[9]

Black Female Spectatorship: Seeing *Gone with the Wind* and *Monster's Ball*

The act of seeing involves our historical and political locations.[10] Seeing, thus, is both a biological and social phenomenon that involves people as both viewers and subjects and is shaped by social relations of power.[11] Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* asserts that Black people are rendered objects through the process of colonization and importantly the gaze of the colonizer.[12] bell hooks maintains that critical Black female spectatorship can be a site of resistance only when individual Black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking.[13]

My grandmother, Dorothy Sebastian Prince, and I would have been almost exactly the same age, definitely grown women, as the folk say and not girls when *Gone with the Wind* premiered in 1939 and *Monster's Ball*, sixty-two years later in 2001. Our familial generation span is almost identical to that of the two films. As a Black woman who was born and came of age during the early decades of the twentieth century in Antigua, then a British colonial territory in the English-speaking Caribbean, my grandmother was, like most women of her generation, not a habitual moviegoer. In fact, her participation as viewer of mass visual culture was limited mostly to television and this was a practice of her old age begun in the 1970s in her seventies. My own viewing practices began then, too, at age 7 in Antigua, a few short months before my departure for life in Canada. My mother came of age as a moviegoer in 1950s Antigua, then England in the 1960s where I was born, and finally Canada by the 1970s. Attracted to broad sweeping epic stories with romantic vistas, one of her first acts of motherly love for my brother and myself upon our migration to Canada was to habitually send us to movie matinees at local movie theatres to see films that she thought would not only entertain us, but also as a way of furthering our acculturation to life in Canada. We saw *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and *The Sound of Music* (1965) that first summer in Toronto.

While *Gone with Wind* presents a hagiography of the Old South, *Monster's Ball*, on the other hand, represents an ode to a New South, a post–civil rights era changed one in which White men with deeply entrenched racist attitudes as personified by prison guard, Hank Grotowski (Billy Bob Thornton), can redeem themselves through sexing/loving Black women. Told ostensibly as a love story between two deeply wounded people drawn together by the untimely death of their sons, economic circumstances, and emotional need, *Monster's*

Ball is an extended commentary on race, sex, gender, and desire in the contemporary American South.

Similar to the scene that bell hooks describes when she is watching Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and the character Nola Darling is raped by one of her lovers while the other movie audience members either do not react to, or actually cheer on the rapist, not realizing, it seems, that a rape is taking place and mistaking it for consensual and loving sexual interaction, I was disturbed by the unproblematized portrayal of desire for a Black, female body as an object of sexual desire by a White male whose character had been portrayed as being virulently racist earlier in the film and who had taken part as an agent of the state in her Black husband's execution.[14] While the lovemaking scene, the in/famous "Make Me Feel Good" scene that is initiated by Leticia's proposition to Hank in her living room, to "make me feel good," could purportedly be read as an act of redeeming love, I was disturbed, when viewing the film, publicly, at a cinema, by the lack of reaction by the audience, at large, to the racism portrayed in the screen and the simultaneous air of excitement and titillation over the display of Halle Berry's scantily clad or nude body on screen. My initial reaction at the time, in the company of friends, was to start a conversation, in the theatre, about the unfolding narrative on the screen. In so doing, we participated in a practice of viewing that disrupted the narrative flow and provided a basis for a burgeoning critique.[15] How could I, as a critical viewer and religious studies scholar, make sense of viewing this film and its largely unproblematic reception in early-twenty-first-century North America topped off with an Academy Award at that? First Mammy wins the award and then Jezebel, too, it seems. What began as a movie house conversation during the first viewing of the film in 2002 has led to ongoing critical analysis of the film, specifically, and the broader issues of raced, sexed and gendered representation of Black women in Hollywood cinema. The starting point of such analysis is Mammy, the most enduring of stereotypes of Black women as workers and mothers, upon which Hollywood cinema was fixated.

Comparing Mammy and Leticia

Mammy is one of the most persistent images of Black women as workers and mothers. A product of U.S. Old South racial mythology, Mammy was a stereotypical construct that masked the sexual exploitation of Black women living and working in the homes of White families at the same time that her docility and loyalty justified labor

exploitation. For example, Harriet Jacobs, a mixed-race Black woman enslaved in the United States in the mid nineteenth century, writing under the pseudonym, Linda Brent, gave witness to the continued sexual victimization that she and other enslaved Black women faced through her domestic servitude in the master's and mistress' house.[16] Jacobs' frank discussion of humiliation, debasement and the constant threat of sexually predatory behavior toward Black women by White male slave owners is in stark contrast to the purposely desexualized image of Mammy. Mammy's physical appearance, particularly her girth, the darkness of her skin, her wearing of an apron and headtie were meant to signify her inferiority, servility, and sexual undesirability. Racialized stereotypes have physical as well as emotional and affective characteristics. Thus, Mammy is the ultimate self-sacrificing nurturer. She cares more about complete loyalty to the family of her White master and mistress than her own. In fact, she is frequently portrayed as having no family of her own and being particularly harsh with other Black people, especially Black males. McDaniel's portrayal of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, is the quintessential Mammy. Her devotion to the heroine, Scarlett O'Hara, and her family through three generations of women is total and complete. In the film, after the Civil War and emancipation, incredibly, Mammy chooses to stay behind at the burnt out plantation house, Tara, to care for her old master and mistress and Scarlett's two younger sisters rather than seek her own freedom!

While Mammy is desexualized, Jezebel, on the other hand, is the hypersexualized image of Black womanhood that erased culpability for, and in fact the very commission of, acts of sexual exploitation and victimization of Black women by White men during and after slavery. In the ultimate "blame the victim" scenario, Black women's supposed sexual insatiability excuses White men's sexual victimization of them. As such, Black women as temptresses get blamed for leading the men astray into committing acts of terror and violence. Jezebel's contemporary image is the "bad black girl," according to Jewell.[17] She is a sexually provocative, light-skinned Black woman whose physical features approximate dominant White-identified codes of beauty. Leticia in *Monster's Ball* exemplifies Jezebel.

While hierarchies of "color" as distinct from "race" are never mentioned, overtly, in *Monster's Ball*, they are certainly implicit in the casting of Halle Berry, a light-skinned Black woman in the role. Would audiences have responded differently to the pairing of Billy Bob Thornton's Hank with a darker-skinned Black woman actor such as Phyllis Yvonne Stickney, Alfre Woodard, Whoopi Goldberg,

or Angela Bassett, for instance? This comment is made in light of the well-established tradition in Hollywood cinema of using light-skinned Black and other non-White actors and actresses in roles that feature romantic pairings with White partners. Examples from 1950s interracial dramas featuring Black/White pairings include mixed-race Black American Dorothy Dandridge and Kurt Jurgens in *Tamango* (1956) and light-skinned Jamaican-American Harry Belafonte and Joan Fontaine in *Island in the Sun* (1957). More recently, in films in the action/adventure genre, Tanzanian/British Thandi Newton and Tom Cruise were paired in *Mission Impossible II* and Halle Berry and Pierce Brosnan in *Die Another Day*. Berry's mixed parentage (her mother is White and British, her father is Black American) is widely reported, in the media. Audiences often read into onscreen portrayals, off-screen biographies of actors. This form of intertextuality linking characteristics associated with the actors as reported in the popular media with their onscreen performances could and probably does inform the viewing of Berry's portrayal of Leticia who, herself, enters into a relationship with a White man through the course of the film. As Margaret L. Hunter notes in her study concerning "the politics of skin tone" in African American and Mexican American communities in the United States, women of color with lighter skins are portrayed in the media as most attractive and desirable.[18] Music videos, fashion magazines and popular films that emerge from Black popular cultural contexts are replete with images that feature light-skinned women of color as ideal sexualized objects of beauty and desire. Such mirroring only serves to reinforce deeply held notions about beauty and desirability among consumers of popular culture. Hunter, through her interviews with Black and Latina women, discusses the impact of color hierarchies in communities of color in the United States on women's self-esteem, familial relations, and importantly, for this discussion, perceived desirability as romantic partners.[19] Overwhelmingly, lighter-skinned women were perceived and experienced enhanced possibilities of partnership over their darker-skinned sisters.

Leticia's body is frequently on display. When not wearing her waitress uniform at the diner (her link to Mammy through paid domestic work), the character is usually portrayed braless in skimpy tops and tight skirts. Unlike the bad Black girl, however, Leticia is dependent and distraught. The savvy and cunning associated with the bad Black girl stereotype are stripped away from the character. She is instead a damsel in distress, a retrograde Scarlett O'Hara, as I will discuss later, who needs as she says to Billy Bob Thornton's Hank at the film's conclusion, "to be taken care of." And taken care of she is as he first

gives her a lift to work, takes her and her son to the hospital where her son eventually dies after a hit-and-run accident, becomes her lover in perhaps the most sensational scene of the movie, buys her a car, rescues her from eviction, and moves her into his refurbished house and names his business after her.

Halle Berry's Leticia Musgrove and Hattie McDaniel's Mammy are both American Southern Black women. In movie narrative time, these women are separated by 140 years, from 1860 to 2001. And yet there is some of Mammy in Leticia and Leticia's Jezebel in Mammy. Both are pictured without male partners. Leticia's husband, Lawrence, played by rapper and music producer, Sean "Puffy" Combs is executed in jail early in the film. Hank Grotowski, who becomes her lover, is in fact, one of the guards at the jail who participates in his "Monster's Ball," the ritual enactment of the prisoner's last meal and last requests before his execution. This is a fact that Hank finds out in the crucial sequence before his first sexual encounter with Leticia but which he keeps to himself and she finds out only at the film's conclusion. Mammy ostensibly has no significant other. The male servant, Pork, an Uncle Tom caricature, is clearly not her partner. Mammy is, in her own words, completely devoted to the O'Hara family having mothered three generations of its women including Scarlett's mother, Scarlett, and Scarlett's daughter, Bonnie Blue.

A first point of comparison is Leticia and Mammy as mothers. Leticia ineffectively parents her extremely obese son who eventually dies when hit by a car on a dark and stormy night. Her love for her son is never in doubt but it is clear that her husband's incarceration shortly after the boy's birth and the strain of parenting him alone on her wages as a waitress in an unstable job market have taken their toll. Leticia turns to alcohol to relieve her pain and is abusive toward her son, verbally and physically. Her life is clearly in crisis as her car breaks down, she falls behind on the house rental payments and is on the verge of eviction when we meet her in the movie. Mammy, on the other hand, is many ways the ultimate good mother in her relationship with the White family. She is all knowing and all caring and acts as a moral conscience and physical caretaker for Scarlett. She even draws the grudging respect of Rhett Butler who gifts her with a red, taffetta petticoat following his honeymoon in New Orleans with Scarlett. Mammy, however, has no children of her own and her devotion and loyalty to the White family to whom she is enslaved is complete.

Relations with Black and White men constitute a second point of comparison. Both Mammy and Leticia are estranged from Black men.

Mammy seemingly by choice as her mission in life is service to the White household and Leticia through the death of her husband by execution and her son by a hit and run accident. Within days, Leticia is cut off, permanently, from the Black men in her life. Her isolation and need for connection eventually lead her to reach out to Hank, who unbeknownst to her, was one of the guards who escorted her husband to his execution in prison. Mammy, on the other hand, by dint of her physical appearance is deemed outside of the realm of sexual attraction. She is in fact, Scarlett's foil. At the honeymoon scene, Rhett admits his admiration for Mammy and expresses his desire for her to like him and as a gesture of his affection suggests buying Mammy a gift. Scarlett declines to buy her a gift. Rhett acting on a statement made by his Mammy years ago decides to buy Mammy a red, taffeta petticoat. When we next meet Rhett and Mammy, they are conversing outside of the bedchamber in which Scarlett is in labor. In their interchange, Rhett is flirtatious with Mammy who also flirts back lifting her skirt to show her petticoat. As I have discussed elsewhere, this revelation of the petticoat of a mammified Black woman is a trope in erotic fiction.[20] The audience is expected to be in on the joke that this flirtation could not possibly be serious given Rhett's previous statements about Mammy's size and her lack of attractiveness. This same motif of red fabric representing luxury shows up in *Monster's Ball*. In the moments leading up to their lovemaking, Leticia in a drunken conversation tells Hank about her love of her red curtains purchased on credit from a store owner who "kinda liked her." While there are no further allusions to Letiticia's past life, the reference suggests that one of Letiticia's possible strategies for economic survival over the years are "favors" from men who find her sexually attractive. The comment also foreshadows the relationship that develops with Hank that like nineteenth-century Louisiana concubinage arrangements called *plaçage*, between mixed-race Black women and their White patrons, includes the provision of material goods (in Leticia's case a car) and significant financial assistance including a home.

Leticia is like a retrograde Scarlett O'Hara. She is feisty, she is Southern, and like Scarlett, her only child dies and she is need of rescuing. Interestingly, both Berry and Leigh share mixed-race family histories although Berry's is public (it is always public if one is of African descent—the one drop rule in effect) and Leigh's rumored (Anglo-Indian or Persian). Both are praised by men who rescue them for their beauty. While Mammy serves as Scarlett's foil, in an interesting gender twist, Leticia's son, Tyrell serves as his mother's own foil as a large, dark-skinned Other. Tyrell's body is the one that is

rejected. When Scarlett returns to the plantation, Tara, and finds her father alone with Mammy, it is supposedly inconceivable that a sexual relationship could have taken place. In the film, it is outside of the realm of possibility; however, in reality, we know that many such relationships actually occurred. Leticia, however, completes this story arc in her relationship with Hank by living out the interracial possibility deemed not only improbable but the source of comic relief in *Gone with the Wind*. Hank and Leticia's relationship in *Monster's Ball* can be viewed as a reworking of the deeply entrenched Hollywood cinematic trope of "love conquers all." In the movie's storyline, there is a lot to conquer including multiple losses experienced by both characters. In the case of Hank, his adult son, Sonny (Heath Ledger), with whom he has a troubled relationship and who also participates in the "Monster's Ball," commits suicide. We learn through the course of the film that Hank's wife, Sonny's mother, also committed suicide earlier. Shots of the gravestones in final sequence of the film reinforce Hank's suffering. Leticia, in quick succession loses her husband, first to a lengthy jail sentence leading up to his eventual execution and then her son in a freak accident while walking home in the dark on a stormy night. Unable to pay for car repairs and on the verge of homelessness due to eviction from her rented house, it is clear that she is barely making ends meet, financially, in her job as a waitress at a diner that Hank frequents. Her son deals with his pain through chronic overeating and Leticia through drinking. Hank's courting of Leticia involves a series of rescues in which he comes to her aid like a knight in shining armor. He stops on that fateful stormy night when Tyrell is struck by another car that speeds off into the night and is there to comfort Leticia when her son dies. He provides her with transportation to and from her job.

Their first sexual encounter occurs one night when Leticia invites Hank into her home after he gives her a lift home from the diner. They are both drunk and sitting on her couch when she expresses her despair with an imploring "make me feel good" to Hank. She exposes a naked breast. The graphic sex scene that followed mirrors, in some sequences, Hank's depersonalized sexual encounter with a White, female prostitute earlier in the film that the audience gathers is a fairly regular occurrence given the exchange of pleasantries between Hank and the woman. The directorial choice to include such mirroring suggests that the relationship began out of need for comfort expressed through sex and then developed into a broader based relationship. A later scene depicting a sexual encounter between Hank and Leticia does, in fact, bear this out through a marked difference

in the depiction of the sex. The camera focuses on Leticia's face and eyes, the small gold cross on her necklace. She remains semi-clothed, and she is depicted as receiving pleasure from Hank's lovemaking. What is crucial in the depiction of both encounters is that Leticia's body and its pleasuring is a crucial aspect of Hank's development and transformation from prison guard with racist attitudes and behaviors that were undoubtedly passed down to him by his father, a retired prison guard with deeply entrenched racist attitudes.

Significantly, upon meeting Hank's father when she drops by the house to leave a gift of a cowboy hat for him after their sexual encounter, Leticia has a conversation with him that repels her and threatens the newly developed relationship. It is clear from Hank's father's sexually suggestive comments that he, too, has had sexual contact with at least one Black woman in the past, even though the context of this relationship including whether or not it was consensual is not indicated. In fact, in discerning that Leticia's relationship with Hank is sexual, Hank's father deems this development as evidence of Hank being "just like his daddy." Hank's challenge is to overcome the powerful forces of familial and larger societal socialization in which he has been raised that would condone sex with a Black woman as a sexual object in a subordinate relationship as an acceptable practice but never as a loving act in equal partnership. Hank, however, consciously attempts to make that leap after hearing about his father's conversation with Leticia and making the decision to relocate his father to a home for the aged where he significantly is placed with an older, Black, male room mate (are these the seeds of a *Monster's Ball* part two in which Hank's father also undergoes a change of heart on race?). He also quits his job as a prison guard and buys a gas station which he names, Leticia's. Thus, in breaking the dichotomy of sexing/loving Leticia, Hank breaks the familial pattern of hatred of Blacks.

Crucial to Hank's transformation is Leticia's wordless forgiveness of his omission of the fact that he had been a prison guard involved in the execution of her husband. The audience is let in on Hank's secret when he, himself, realizes during the evening of his first sexual encounter with Leticia that she is the wife of Lawrence Musgrove. He keeps this knowledge to himself and it is not revealed to Leticia until, while rummaging through the contents of a box in a bedroom at Hank's now newly refurbished house, she comes across the drawings of Hank and Sonny that Lawrence had drawn on his final evening before his execution. The shocking realization dawns on her that the only reason these drawings were made was because Hank and Sonny were present during her husband's last night of life. Hank, in the meantime, has

left the house to purchase chocolate ice cream because, in his words, "it seemed the right thing" to do. In the meantime, Leticia wordlessly expresses her anger with punches on the bed and tears and yet says nothing to him when he returns. He feeds her the ice-cream, in a scene that ritually enacts the dynamics of their relationship in which Hank is provider and Leticia is consumer. They look out into the night sky in the movie's final scene. The suggestion here is clearly that they have decided to start over. The relationship signifies a new beginning. With dead spouses and children and extended family and parents either not in the picture, in Leticia's case, or removed to another location, in the case of Hank's father, they represent the possibilities of starting anew. Hank's redemption lies in his willingness and ability to take care of Leticia and her silent forgiveness and acknowledgment of his pain and suffering. For Leticia, the deaths of her husband, Lawrence and her son, Tyrell, become her conduit to a new life. In their absence, Leticia is no longer a caretaker. In fact, she notes that she "needs to be taken care of" and he affirms that he will take care of her. The exchange of words served as a type of vow between Hank and Leticia, a pact signifying the nature of their relationship.

My critical gaze as a Black woman spectator came into play when examining the nature of the pact between Hank and Leticia in a wider sociohistorical context. I view this relationship as resonating very strongly with long-established historical traditions, from the slavery era in the state of Louisiana in the southern United States and other parts of the Americas such as the Caribbean of concubinage between Black and mixed-race women and White men. These relationships were governed by economic and sexual exchange in which the women and their children who resulted from these unions were provided for financially by the men. Perhaps romantic love was a factor in some of these relationships. What is apparent, however, is that in traditions such as *plaçage* in New Orleans, the exchange of brown, mixed-raced women's bodies for financial and social security was a dominant factor in the relationship. Thus, a critical view of *Monster's Ball* from the standpoint of a Black woman spectator suggests that the nature of Hank and Leticia's relationship including its frank and explicit depictions of sex, exchange of vows and her silent knowledge/forgiveness in the execution of her husband is frankly emblematic representation of the power dynamics involved in those earlier, historical relationships of concubinage.

Uncomfortable ethical questions are raised here concerning the degree of complicity in which these women participated in gaining resources and privileges within a highly stratified system of racialized

and gendered power relations. As well, it suggests that such gains almost always necessitated subtle forms of concealment and double consciousness involving simultaneously knowing and not knowing that we discern in Leticia's slight smile and gaze into the distance at the film's close. It suggests an alternative reading of the film in which Leticia is not solely a reactor to her situation with limited choices but a woman who is able to self-consciously exercise a degree of agency based on sexual exchange.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this exploratory analysis of *Monster's Ball* critiqued in comparison to *Gone with the Wind*, has underscored the importance of examining movies as a central place of myth-making and the circulation of controlling gendered, raced and sexed stereotypes and images. Often public discourse concerning representation, such as awards ceremonies, posits a dichotomy of "positive" and "negative" images when in actuality, elements that may appear "positive" in one circumstance may appear "negative" in another. Clearly, the discursive terrain in which these images are played out is much more complex and hotly contested. The challenge for Black religious studies and Black theology is to take these images and their discursive contexts seriously. This analysis is especially important for movies, videos, television and other forms of mass media in an increasingly media-oriented popular culture, the discursive is clearly one of the arenas in which the politics of identity gets played out.

Notes

1. *Daughters of the Dust* was the first film directed by a Black woman, Julie Dash, to be released, nationally, in the United States. Set in 1902, it chronicles the migration of the Peazants, a Gullah family, living in the Sea Islands on the coast of the states of Georgia and the Carolinas to mainland United States. Nana Peazant, great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother to many of the characters in the film, is a tall, spare Black woman with short dreadlocks, as embodied by actor Cora Lee Day. With her uncovered head of locks and long, lean body, Day presents a radical counterpoint to the stereotypical image of Black elder womanhood associated with signs such as the head kerchief covered hair and a stout, large body.
2. A remake of the 1963 film starring Jerry Lewis, *The Nutty Professor* featured Eddie Murphy as Professor Sherman Klump, a lonely, overweight Black man who is a brilliant university science professor and researcher.

Sherman's research leads to the discovery of a substance that, upon ingestion, leads to radical and miraculous instant weight loss. The weight loss is accompanied by a personality change into his alter ego, Buddy Love. As a result, the peaceful, kind, and considerate Sherman becomes the arrogant, self-serving, and disruptive Buddy. In a scene featuring Sherman's family at dinner, Murphy, through the use of clever editing and costume design and make-up, plays all of Sherman's family members seated at the same dinner table including Sherman's mother. Typically, in the sequences featuring Eddie Murphy as Sherman's mother, Mrs. Klump, she is depicted as an overweight Black woman who loves to cook and who is a super nurturer rather like Aunt Jemima.

3. bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 199.
4. Ibid., 200–201.
5. Ibid., 197–213.
6. Catherine Bell, "Constructing Ritual," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, editor, Ronald L. Grimes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 21–32.
7. For example, as communicated by African Canadian film maker, Phillip Daniels, in a personal interview (January 2005), his documentary, *Seeking Salvation: A History of the Black Church in Canada* (Vision TV and Travesty Productions, 2004) was purposely publicly screened in a number of Toronto Black Church and Black community settings in addition to its air dates on television and screenings at film festivals and university settings, precisely because of the film maker's awareness of the significance of viewing practices as a site of critical inquiry. I have had the opportunity to attend some of those screenings (April 24, 2004 and August 1, 2004), and witnessed and participated in personal and communal interaction with the unfolding narrative on screen. In this instance, the film viewing experience was very akin to "having church," as several film goers remarked about the call and response reaction to interviewees, their words and musical performances, on screen.
8. The tragic mulatto stereotype portrays a light-skinned, mixed-race Black person, usually female, as being trapped between the social worlds of Blacks and Whites in a racially segregated society. The "tragedy" of the tragic mulatto is this supposed rejection from both Black and White social contexts. Usually the mixed-race heroine, as depicted in such Hollywood films as *Imitation of Life* (1934) and its remake, *Pinky* (1949) is phenotypically close to, or indistinguishable from dominant White beauty standards as represented by light skin, straight textured hair, and light-colored eyes. She is paired with a White male love interest and is poised to enter the world of White privilege save for the secret of the "one drop" of Black blood in her ancestry.
9. Sara Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman from Southern Africa who, after being transported from the Cape, was displayed naked as an object of

supposed scientific curiosity in both London and Paris in the early nineteenth century. The unrelenting focus of the White European gaze was on Baartman's buttocks on genitalia. After her death in 1815, her body was dissected and her pelvis was preserved in formaldehyde where I was displayed at the muse de l'homme well into the late twentieth century. Baartman as the Hottentot Venus, as she was dubbed, served as the quintessential symbol of blackness as wild, animalistic, and freakishly hypersexual as epitomized by the large size of her buttocks and supposed anatomical variations in the appearance of her genitalia in comparison to supposedly "normal" White European women. Her remains were finally returned to South Africa, for burial, in 2002. For a full discussion of Baartman see Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 19–54. See also Sander Gilman's discussion of Baartman "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Art, Medicine, and Literature," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, editor, Henry Louise Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 223–261.

10. Dionne Brand, *Bread out of Stone: Recollections, Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming, Politics* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1994), 169–171.
11. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Viking Press, 1973).
12. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).
13. bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 198.
14. bell hooks. "'Whose Pussy Is This?' A Feminist Comment," in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 232–233.
15. In "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," 199, bell hooks cites Manthia Diawara's discussion of the power of spectatorship in his article, "Black British Cinema: Spectatorship and Identity Formation in Territories," suggesting that there are moments of "rupture" when the spectator resists "complete identification with the film's discourse." For hooks these moments of rupture were crucial to Black audiences in the United States during segregation being able to enjoy films in which negative stereotyping was present. She suggests that these ruptures "restored presence where it was negated" through viewers' discussion both during or after screening.
16. For a full exploration of her experiences, see Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs), "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, editor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Signet Classic, 2002), 437–668.
17. K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (London: Routledge, 1993).
18. Margaret L. Hunter, *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 85.
19. Ibid.
20. Anaïs Nin's erotic stories, "Saffron" in *Delta of Venus* (New York and London: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1977) and "Artists and

Models" in *Little Birds* (New York and London: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1979), contain references to highly sexualized Black women in long petticoats. In Nin's stories, the garments serve as a code for Black female hypersexuality which is invariably licentious and animalistic. See the following article for further discussion: Carol Duncan, "'Mammy' in the Erotic Imaginary of Anaïs Nin," *Journal of the Association for Research and Mothering* Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2002):146–155.

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The Caribbean

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5

Sacred Forms: Ritual, Representation, and the Body in Haitian Painting

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

> . . . [I]n sacred works, where the acts will not, in themselves, result in anything, but may be rewarded if they please the divinity to whom they are addressed—where, therefore, there can be said to be no direct material purpose—the form is the total statement; and its distinctive quality is that reverent dedication which man brings only to divinity.
>
> Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen*

In her exploration of the work of Haitian flagmaker and Vodou priest Clotaire Bazile, Anna Wexler describes the "mastery of ritual detail" that characterizes his work as both *oungan* and artist as a skill that allows him to translate the "intense awareness of [his sacred work's] power to heal and to destroy into tangible forms."[1] This "mastery of ritual detail" encapsulates the aesthetic dimension of all sacred work in Vodou and guides the recreation of those sacred forms which, in Deren's words, encompass the "distinctive quality" of "reverent dedication which man brings only to divinity."[2] In Vodou, mastery of the ritual forms is essential to the summoning of the spirits—known as *lwa* or *mystères*—into the presence of believers (or *serviteurs*), and this mastery requires strict attention to the aesthetics of worship and representation. As Wexler explains, "there is an edge to acts of beauty that not only represent but activate the transforming energy of the spirits."[3]

Early historians of Haitian art found in the aesthetic foundations of Vodou a key to understanding the development of a painting tradition closely linked to religious practice. LeGrace Benson, writing about

Wilson Bigaud, underscores the importance of "Haitian history, true and invented, and Haitian religion" as inspiration for the art created by the artists of his generation, born of "pride in the establishment of a sustained independent Black country by means of a revolution assisted by the *lwas* [and] despair that the promises made to the *lwas* were still unkept."[4] Selden Rodman, in *The Miracle of Haitian Art,*[5] argued that the artists of the first generation of the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince—many of them Vodou priests or practitioners—not only drew inspiration from religious beliefs and practices, thematically as well as formally, but built the aesthetic bases of their visual language on the forms and objects familiar to them from ritual practice. Chief among these were the *vèvè* or ritual drawings sketched on the temple ground with cornmeal, ash, powdered eggshells, or coffee grounds as a means to summon the *lwa* (spirits) to join believers during ceremonies. *Vèvè*, as Patricia Mohammed has argued, "consecrate the ground area they cover for the *loa* they represent,"[6] turning the space of ritual into a canvas for the reproduction of intricate and ephemeral ritual designs that will be erased by dancers' feet during ceremonies. The masterful recreation of these ritual designs, critics have argued, served as an introduction to artistic creativity for many Haitian painters and constitutes "the visual progenitor of Haiti's renaissance."[7]

Inspiration was also drawn from two other categories of religious art available to early Haitian painters, that of the Catholic chromolithographs and church frescoes depicting incidents in the lives of the saints, and the "richly ornamented" sequined ceremonial flags—such as those produced by Clotaire Bazile—which serve as "points of entry"[8] for the *lwa* during ceremonies. The chromolithographs offered a visual example of "an institutionalized religion's understanding . . . and . . . conceptual meditation of the sacred."[9] The same could be argued for the flags, simultaneously objects of great beauty and potentially of great power, which, during ceremonies, "are unfurled and danced about . . . to signal the spirits represented by the *vèvè* . . . or the images of corresponding Catholic saints sewn on them" to join the ritual.[10] "Their reflective brilliance," Wexler argues, "is said to attract the spirits into the human gathering, mediating between two worlds."[11]

The ritual function of the *vèvè* and the *drapo*—central elements in Vodou's most important sacred forms—which also include food offerings, dance, music, and animal sacrifice—is not abstraction, but rather the fulfillment of a ritualistic embodiment that invites the spirits to enter the realm of the living through physical manifestations of

their presence, chief among them the phenomenon of possession. The achievement of beauty through ritual, which is vital to the success of the appeal to the spirits in Vodou, hinges on the "mastery of ritual detail" that Wexler observed in Bazile's work and which is realized primarily through manifestations of the *lwa* through the bodies of the *serviteurs* or initiated. The aim is to invite the spirits—*les invisibles*—to embody themselves in a chosen *serviteur* who in turn will give the spirit a voice. Success is predicated on mastering the forms, on reaching the high level of aesthetic practice that will satisfy the requirements of the *lwa*.

This close relationship between the spirits and the living—established through the body as a vehicle for sacred work in Vodou—is one of the most significant themes of Haitian art, particularly in the first and second generations of the Centre d'Art. Early Haitian painters, I would argue here, turned the centrality of sacred work in Vodou practice into one of the guiding principles (and subject matters) of a bourgeoning artistic tradition. This close link between ritual practice, faith, and art—as we will see below through various examples of salient works by noted Haitian painters—has been repeatedly articulated through representations of bodies engaged in the masterful performance of sacred work, of ritual intended to breach the divide between living beings and the word of the *lwa*. The paintings examined below reveal how the "mastery of ritual detail" has been as central to the successful embodiment of the spirits in Vodou practice as it has been to the articulation through art of the vital transformations that have made Vodou such a dynamic and aesthetic-centered religious practice.

Toussaint Auguste's *Papa Zaca en Possession* (Possessed by Papa Zaca, 1953, figure 5.1) depicts most vividly the breach of the divide between the living and the *lwa* that is the one common goal of all sacred work in Vodou. Auguste (1925–), a painter from Leogane, a village southwest of Port-au-Prince, just north of Jacmel, was one of the early painters working at the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince. Acknowledged as one of the first generation masters of Haitian painting, Auguste's choice of religious subjects articulates the complexities of religious life in Haiti, where Vodou and Christian practices seem often to coexist in somewhat congenial simultaneity. Known for sensitive depictions of Vodou ritual in his paintings, Auguste has also portrayed Protestant rituals (see his *Baptism*, 1949), which he knew well as a lay reader for the Episcopal Diocese in the mid-1940s, and was one of the muralists who participated in the decoration of the Episcopal Cathedral of Sainte Trinité in Port-au-Prince, which

Figure 5.1 Auguste, Toussaint. *Papa Zaca en Possession* (1953). Oil on masonite. 11¾ × 14¾ inches.

includes his renderings of the *Flight into Egypt* and *The Temptation of Adam and Eve*.

In *Papa Zaka en Possession*, however, Auguste has turned to the *lwa* most closely connected to the Haitian peasantry (another prominent subject in his work) to depict Vodou's most significant embodiment ritual within the context of Haiti's most urgent historical crisis (the severe deforestation that has rapidly destroyed the land's productivity in the small island-nation). Papa Zaca, also known as Azaca or Kouzen (Cousin) Zaka, is the Vodou *lwa* of agriculture, the protector of the Haitian land. A peasant figure traced to Amerindian culture, Papa Zaca is recognized by his blue denim jacket and the *makout* or sissal market sack he habitually carries. Those possessed by Papa Zaca usually don his characteristic peasant straw hat and go through the motions of sowing seed. When he appears in a ceremony, he is typically offered peasant fare—boiled maize, *afibas* (stuffed pig intestines), and glasses of *clairin* (peasant-distilled white rum). His *vèvè* (see figure 5.1) incorporates the elements of his agricultural role—his *makout* with its decorative tassels, the scythe and machete

as instruments for clearing and sowing the land, the pipe that points to his enjoyment of simple pleasures, the grid-like patterns on the *makout* that recall seeded fields, and the bottle of *clairin*.

Auguste's painting articulates with great simplicity and acute clarity the reciprocity of the relationship between *serviteur* and *lwa* that marks the phenomenon of possession—the embodiment of a *lwa* in the body of a *serviteur* that is the cornerstone of Vodou as a belief system. During possession, the possessed—the "horse"—gives his or her voice to the spirit, articulating "the reciprocal abiding of human and god" and making communication between the world of the spirits and that of humans possible.[12] The *lwa*, as Joan Dayan has argued, "cannot appear in epiphany, cannot be made manifest on earth without the person who becomes the temporary receptacle or mount."[13] The horse, therefore, must surrender his or her body temporarily to the needs of the *lwa*, allowing, through the process, the guiding wisdom and divine power (or *ashé*) to flow from the realm of the spirits into that of their *serviteurs*. In *Papa Zaca en Possession*, Auguste captures this ritualized reciprocity through the mirror-like elements that articulate the link between the two figures—the *lwa* and the woman he has possessed.

The importance of the "embodiment" of the horse by the *lwa* is underscored in *Papa Zaca en Possession* by the prominence given to the possessed woman, who occupies the geometric center of the canvas. Dressed in the garb of the *lwa*—unadorned denim dress, *makout*, and straw hat—she is represented following the *crise de lwa*, the moment when the spirit occupied her head, just as she has completed the embodiment process and is ready to speak for the *lwa*. The reciprocity, evident in their mirroring positions, is underscored by the matching jugs, as Papa Zaca readies to pour the contents of his into hers. The exchange could be of seeds, water, the *clairin* or local rum favored by the *lwa*, or of the *ashé* or "power in the state of pure energy," as Miguel Barnet has defined it (82).[14] The prominence of the *makout* recalls the *lwa*'s association with abundance and magic, attributes traditionally linked to the tassel decorations on Papa Zaka's straw bag.[15]

Auguste contextualizes his representation of possession, not by placing his reciprocal figures within the ceremonial space of the *ounfó* or temple, but by using the backdrop of the eroded and deforested Haitian landscape as the means of emphasizing the need for Papa Zaca's intervention to help the Haitian land recover its fertility. The leafless and truncated trees in the foreground, the stump of a tree on the lower left corner, and the denuded and deforested hills in the

background, all point to Haiti's devastating ecological dilemma. In Haiti, persistent and prolonged deforestation dating back to the clearing of the land for sugar cultivation in the early eighteenth century, and continuing into the present because of the lack of ready access to cooking fuel in the countryside, has left the island severely deforested. With its forest coverage reduced to less than one percent of the national territory, Haiti has been plagued by the devastating consequences of its severe environmental crisis—the catastrophic erosion that has washed away the fertile topsoil into the sea, frequent deadly mudslides, severe decreases in rainfall, and growing desertification in areas of the country that once produced several yearly crops.[16] It is a situation exacerbated by the devastating loss of the sustaining connection between the people and the *lwa* who reside in the family's plot of land or *heritage* that many have been forced to abandon because of its decreasing productivity. In Auguste's painting, the reddish brown earth extends into the horizon to meet the bluish rocky hills. There is no grass, no crops, no sprouts in the landscape that frames the figures, thus underscoring the need for the *lwa*'s presence and intervention if the Haitian land is to be returned to its former fertility. The environmental contextualization underscores the "total integrity of cultural form" that characterizes Vodou as religious practice.[17] Possession, as illustrated by Auguste, has the ultimate goal of practical intervention in solving Haiti's environmental dilemma. The painting underscores that the ultimate goal of successful sacred forms rests in the *lwa*'s successful intervention in the resolution of the problems plaguing the mortals who serve them.

The placement of the possessed at the center of his painting also allows Auguste to use the space she occupies as a liminal space between the two realms—that of the spirits, occupied by the *lwa*, represented here in human form, and that of the *serviteurs*, toward which, in her state of possession, she has temporarily turned her back. His composition, which shows a fairly symmetrical allocation of space to the three realms depicted, balances the space occupied by the *lwa* on the left with the space to the right occupied by four elements: a truncated, branchless tree which reminds us of the barrenness and deforestation Papa Zaca is called upon to resolve; the cemetery cross usually found in the *vèvè* for Bawon (Baron) Samdi (the *lwa* who rules over death and the cemetery and who belongs to the family of spirits known as Ghédé); a lamb, Christian symbol of sacrifice, standing here for the animal sacrifices often offered to the *lwa* as a gesture of placation or thanks; and a red door on a white hut, combining the colors sacred to Papa Legba, keeper of the gates that divide the spirit

and material worlds. The allusions to the Bawon and the Ghédé and to Papa Legba underscore the liminality of the space occupied by the possessed. Legba stands at a spiritual crossroads between humans and the *lwa* they serve; his permission is required for such interactions to occur. Ghédé, as Maya Deren argues, straddles "the great divide between the living and the dead," being "naturally, not only the lord of both, but the lord of its interaction."[18] The allusion also emphasizes the link between Ghédé (who presides over fertility rites) and Papa Zaca (whose agricultural realm Ghédé is prone to invading). They are believed to be brothers whose relationship is marked by competition and uneasy truces.

Auguste's *Papa Zaka en Possession*, through the centrality of the *lwa*'s horse (Papa Zaca's living manifestation) in its composition, underscores how the aesthetic quality of the ritual embodiment represented (the excellence of the correspondences between *lwa* and *serviteur*, in this case) allows for the precise representation of the straddling of "the great divide between the living and the dead" that is the ritualistic goal of possession. The precision of its representation—the naïve realism through which Auguste captures the ineffable quality of the horse's temporary transformation into the *lwa*—eschews needless metaphor, capturing the transformation instead through the literal *embodiment* of the *lwa* as a human *mirrored* by his horse. Auguste's aesthetic solution to the depiction of the transformation, I would argue, resting as it does on an apparently simple device—that of showing the disembodied *lwa* both in its imagined bodily manifestation and as embodied by its horse—moves beyond mere representation of a particular religious phenomenon for the viewer. It suggests a symbiotic convergence of ritual and art through which the artists can convey the nature of belief and practice in Vodou within a context that establishes the ultimate function of these ritual practices.

Just as Auguste invokes Papa Zaka in his depiction of the mystery and functions of possession, Zaca's brother Ghédé presides over Wilmino Domond's *Dance Scene* (figure 5.2), which illustrates the importance of music and dance as vital elements in Vodou's sacred forms. Domond, born in 1925 in Jacmel, was a coffee-farmer-turned-painter who followed in the footsteps of his cousin Castera Bazile, himself an acclaimed Haitian artist. A member of the Centre d'Art from 1948, Domond was one of the "dominant figures of the second generation" of Haitian painters.[19] His *Dance Scene* offers a charming representation of couples dancing a *kontredans* (a version of the European *contredanse*) to the tune played by a small band of musicians. It is linked to Vodou beliefs and practices by the *drapo* found

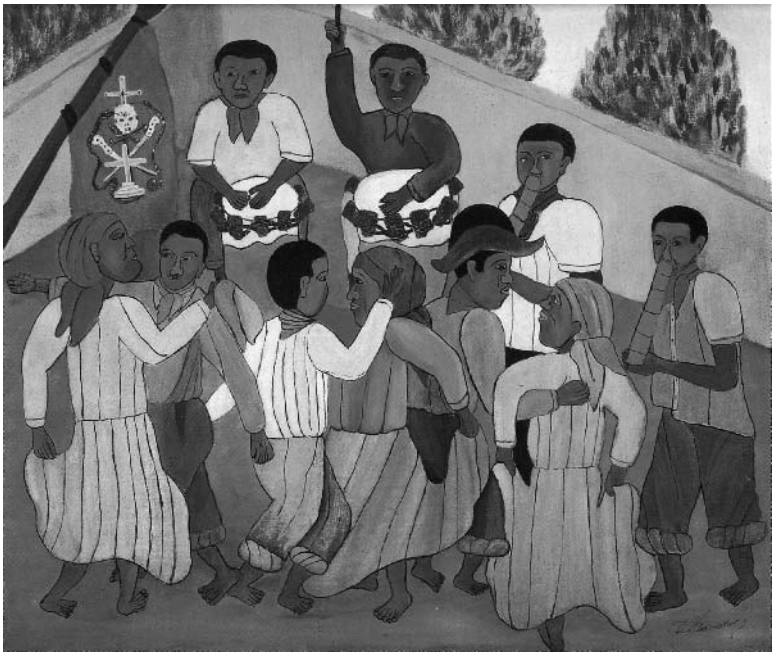

Figure 5.2 Domond, Wilmino. *Dance Scene* (c.1949). Oil on cardboard. 24¼ × 24¾ inches.

on the upper left quarter of the canvas, which connects the dance to the Ghédé. Bawon Samdi, his wife Maman Brijits (Brigitte), and the Ghédé spirits are traditionally served with the colors featured here (black, white, and purple) and are symbolized by the image of the cross on a coffin or tomb that we also saw in *Papa Zaka en Possession*. The allusion to the Bawon and the Ghédé transforms what could have been read as a pleasant peasant dance into a ceremonial offering to the *lwa* and his spirit family.

Domond's composition privileges the three pairs of dancers, who occupy the foreground of the painting, forming a horizontal band that leads the eye from left to right. The painter, however, uses the diagonal lines formed by the low wall that fences the enclosed dancing space to point to the upper left corner occupied by the *drapo*, thereby accentuating the space occupied by the ceremonial flag. Its presence is also signaled by the arm of the drummer who occupies the upper center of the painting. As it extends upward, it creates a horizontal line that further delineates the space occupied by the flag. Domond, however, seems interested in broadening, rather than circumscribing,

the presence of the *lwa* in his dance scene, an aim he accomplishes through his use of purple, the color associated with Ghédé. Shades of purple, from that of the *drapo* itself to those of the wall against which it stands and the clothing of dancers and musicians, suggests the presence of Ghédé throughout the painting. The presence of the *lwa*, one could conclude, permeates the dance scene, enveloping the bodies whose ceremonial dancing invokes his company.

In *Dance Scene*, Domond is working with a limited palette that he uses to advantage to create a scene of harmony and synchrony that suggests the modulations of the dance and the importance of the synergy between musicians and dancers to sustain the presence of the *lwa* among them. Working primarily with dark blue, yellow, and ochre (in addition to the *lwa*'s characteristic purple, white, and black), the palette integrates his dancers and musicians into one single purpose—that of uniting visually the cadences of music and movement to sustain the presence of the *lwa*. We see this, for example, in his use of yellow in the clothing of the drummer that occupies the apex of the angle formed by the low wall. The color, repeated in the dresses of two of the dancing women (the ones that frame the dancing couples to the left and right of the small group), creates a triangle that accentuates the diagonal lines formed by the low wall. The yellow is balanced at the top of the triangle by the purple of the *drapo*, a balancing that is rearticulated at the lower right corner of the painting by the clothing worn by one of the musicians. The two colors underscore the triangle-within-a-square composition that opens the painting to the space occupied by the viewer, suggesting other dancers outside that space, among whom the viewer could locate him or herself.

Maya Deren, in her seminal work on Vodou, found that "Haitian dancing was not, in itself, a dance-form, but part of a larger form, the mythological ritual."[20] Ritual dance, she argued, discourages individual virtuosity and privileges "the simple, anonymous movements" of the collective body.[21] These "simple, anonymous" movements are the ones recreated by Domond in *Dance Scene*: its three couples move in unison, eyes fixed on their partners, the position of their feet suggesting ritual movement in response to an uncomplicated pattern. The dance suggests "the gentle rolling of the hips seen in many Caribbean dances of Kongo provenance."[22] None of the dancers seems interested in a virtuoso display of individual dancing skills, but in the measured, prescribes steps of the traditional dance. The subdued eroticism of the dance—the dancing in couples, the staring into the partners' eyes, the coordinated movements of the dancers—link the dance represented in the painting to Ghédé, since ordinarily ritual

choreography is limited to a general movement of the dancers counterclockwise around the *poto mitan* or temple center post. The most salient dances involving couples are linked to the performance of the "semicomic and sexually provoking rhythms of *banda*"[23] dedicated to Ghédé and associated either with gyrating hips and sexual gestures or by rhythmic, sensual dancing by couples that recalls the "intimate, suggestive subtlety" of Ghédé's M'sieur Entretoute avatar.[24] While Ghédé can be brazenly obscene, M'sieur Entretoute is slyly erotic and wittily sensual. Ghédé's dances, although most commonly associated with the affirmation of the erotic principle—"the inevitable and eternal erotic in men"[25]—are often, according to Katherine Dunham, performed at funerals "in keeping with the African philosophy which closely associates procreation with death."[26]

In her study of Katherine Dunham's approach to ritual dance in Haiti, Joyce Aschenbrenner observes that, in Haiti, "the distinction between sacred and secular [dance is] one of function rather than form."[27] This is a link not always understood by observers. Eighteenth-century writer Louis Méderic Moreau de St. Méry, writing with little understanding of the religious foundation of Vodou in his seminal work on Haiti, could not distinguish what he called the "danse vaudoux" from the ritual for which it opened a path. What escaped him was the vital link between the drums, songs, and dance: "The ritual orientation of the initiates, the rhythm of the drums, the songs of the ounsi, work together to create a kinesthetic medium for the lwa to manifest themselves in dance."[28] I would argue that, for a painter such as Domond, vitally interested in the recreation of sacred forms in his painting, establishing this distinction between secular and sacred dance in *Dance Scene* was of primary importance. Hence the prominent position accorded to Ghédé's *drapo* in his composition and his efforts at recreating the simple movements of ritual dance while conveying the subtle eroticism characteristic of the M'sieur Entretoute avatar of Ghédé. Maya Deren called the Vodou dances "meditations of the body," arguing that they should not be seen as means to secular pleasure, but dances in which the physical projects to the psyche, leading to communication with the spirits. Domond's painting, with its use of the color purple as the means of connecting his musicians and dancers to Ghédé's *drapo* and its ritualized yet sensual recreation of his dancing couples, captures the essential distinction between sacred and secular dance and affirms their role in sustaining the presence of the *lwa* among the living.

Auguste and Domond are concerned with depicting the importance of "mastery of ritual detail" in the summoning of the *lwa*

into the human ceremony. Nehemy Jean, in his *Mangé Loa* (1949), shows how a community prepares for such a ceremony, capturing the detailed arrangements required to accomplish the sort of ritual mastery that will summon and please the spirits. His *Mangé Loa* is named after the most common ceremony in Vodou—the feeding of the spirits or *mystères*, as they are also known—whose aim is the restoration of the energy that is constantly drawn away from the *lwa* by their *serviteurs*. "In order to continue to *travailler* (work) with the *mystères*," Rigaud, Métraux, and Mètraux have explained, "it is necessary to replenish their source of energy, an aim which is achieved both through the sacrifices and through the exercise of ritual powers during the service."[29] The *mangé lwa* may involve the sacrifice of animals (birds, goats, chickens, and, on very special occasions, a bull) as well as offerings of drinks, cakes, and specialized dishes favored by the spirits. Once the offering "has become the property of the *lwa*, the participants can come closer to them by eating the food they have cooked for the spirits."[30] *Mangé lwa* ceremonies usually end with the arrival of the Ghédé.

In Vodou, feeding the *lwa* is the individual's foremost duty, a ritual of the greatest importance for adherents. Since the *lwa*'s function is that of organizing the physical and spiritual world into patterns of knowledge and well being for their devotees, their labor is cosmic and their energy must be replenished. It is the devotee's responsibility to provide the wherewithal from which that energy is to flow by feeding the *lwa*. The ritual meals are prepared in accordance to time-honored traditions and must follow exact recipes and rules since the *lwa* are often hard to please. The choice of foods and method of preparation are often determined by the *lwa*'s attributes and personalities. They have favored foods and drinks that must be offered to them in specific ways. The various rituals of preparation of food for the *lwa* are part of the process of initiation, part of the *konesans* (knowledge) needed for moving up in the *ounfó* (temple's) hierarchy. The elaborate rituals involved in the feeding of the *lwa* are a reminder that the most fundamental premise of Vodou is the notion of service. The title of *serviteur* borne by devotees implies a relationship of reciprocity between *serviteurs* and the spirits. The devotee who remembers to make a libation to the *lwa* by pouring on the ground a few drops of his morning coffee is recognizing that service to the spirit is a form of discipline that can bring its own reward. It is representative of adherence to a moral code that imposes certain obligations—some of them perhaps tedious and repetitive—but promise the possibility of divine intervention if it is ever needed.

Nehemy Jean's *Mangé Loa* (1949, figure 5.3) captures the Vodou community's preparation for such a ceremony. Jean, who joined the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince in 1947 under the auspices of Dieudonné Cedor, was born in 1931 in Limbé. He was among the fifty artists who left the Centre to form the short-lived Foyer des Arts Plastiques in 1950. A painter who has enjoyed considerable international success, Jean owned his own art gallery in Port-au-Prince, L'Atelier. He has lived in New York, where he attended the Arts Student League and Columbia University, and worked in Brazil in the late 1950s. His murals adorn the walls of the Port-au-Prince airport.

Jean's *Mangé Loa* focuses on the preparations of a ceremony apparently dedicated to Papa Zaka, as two of the *serviteurs* are depicted as

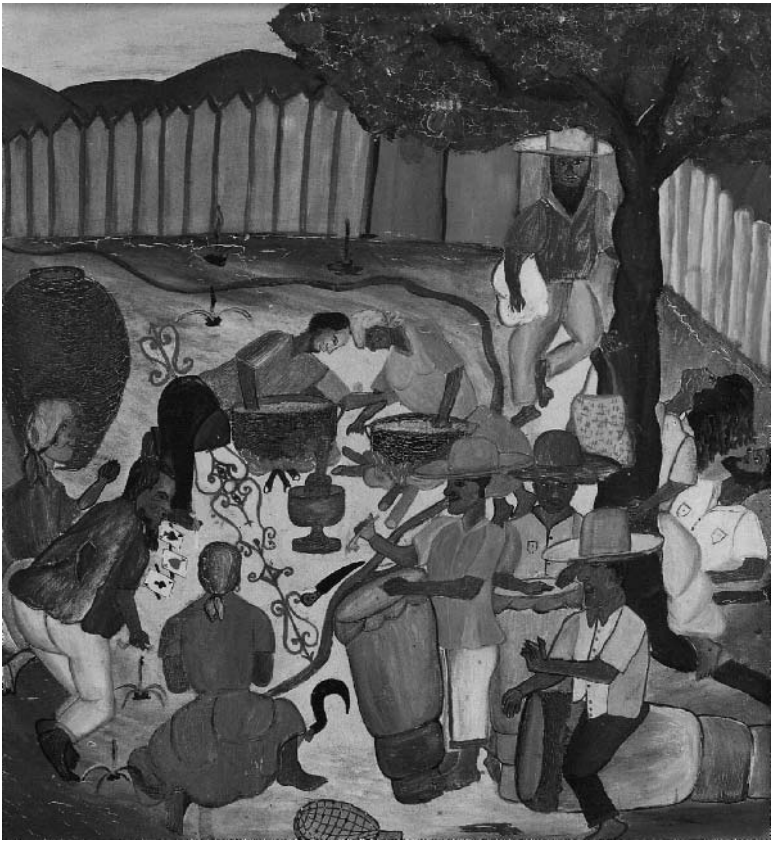

Figure 5.3 Nehemy, Jean. *Mangé Loa* (1949). Oil on cardboard. 20 × 16 inches.

preparing *tchaka*, a corn based food that is a favorite of Zaka. Papa Zaka's characteristic *makout* hangs from the tree and the scythe and machete also associated with the *lwa* lie on the ground. The absence of live animals being readied for sacrifice also supports the identification of the ceremony as one offered to the agricultural *lwa*. The painting could depict a *ceremony-yam*, a rare ritual offered to Papa Zaka, which involves the presentation of the first produce gathered from the fields in a plea for the *lwa*'s protection and assurance of a good crop for the following season. The painting captures, in the participants' painstaking preparations, the notion central to Vodou ritual that "to participate properly is to engage divine benevolence."[31]

In Jean's vibrant scene of ritual anticipation, the painter is careful to set his scene at dusk, the period of preparation for ceremonies that usually take place at night. The painting is organized around a series of scenes that, brought together, build for the viewer the overall sense of the various duties performed by *serviteurs* in preparation for a communal ceremony. Jean uses color and reflected light to move the viewer's eye from tableau to tableau, building his scene by a process of accumulation which brings order to what at first look appears disconnected. The upper left quarter of the painting remains in shadows and moves our focus toward the ceremonial space. Seen clockwise, we find the *lwa*'s fruit-laden tree, framed on the right by a brightly lit orange fence. The same light illuminates the figure of a fresh arrival bringing provisions for the ceremony; the bright blue of his shirt and orange pants are duplicated diagonally across on a similar figure crouching on the lower left quadrant of the painting. Both men wear the simple denim shirt characteristic of Papa Zaka. The same orange color used for the fence and the men's trousers highlights the *lwa*'s *makout*, as it hangs from a branch. Two figures near the right margin of the painting—one, that of a woman hugging the tree—look upward (in hope of shaking some fruit down?). They share the right quadrant of the painting with the three drummers—the traditional Rada *batterie* of *petit* or *bula*, *seconde*, and *maman* drums—setting up for the ceremony and dance. The drummers, the "lynchpins" of the Vodou ceremony,[32] are arranging their instruments, drawn here following the Rada tradition, with shells carved out of the trunks of trees in the shape of brightly painted truncated cones. Their heads, made out of goatskins, are stretched by pegs braced with cords. The lower left quadrant of the painting is occupied by three figures, one of which appears to be the drawer of the *vèvè* traced on the ground and of the uneven and as yet incomplete circle that attempts to circumscribe the ceremonial space. This space also includes objects used by the *oungan*

for divination: the playing cards that are usually spread in a *laye* or large straw tray, and the candles that some *oungans* use with a glass of water for the same purpose. At the very center of the painting are the *vèvè* and the two central figures—head drawn together in a quasi-ceremonial salute—whose sacred task is that of preparing the food for the *lwa*. The *vèvè* is similar to those drawn in honor of Papa Legba to ask for his blessing for the ceremony to come. As the gaze moves clockwise, the shadows of the upper left quadrant force the eye toward the center, where the principal focus of the ritual—the preparation of the *lwa*'s favorite food—is taking place. All the necessary supporting activities that will contribute to the ritual feeding of the *lwa* are depicted as surrounding the preparation of the food, the true cornerstone of the ritual.

In *Divine Horsemen*, Maya Deren speaks of the collective nature of Vodou as resting upon the "intense degree of dedication, devotion"[33] that Nehemy Jean captures in the ritual preparations of his *Mangé Loa*. She credits this collective effort with the ability to provide "the generally uncreative, often distracted individual with a prescribed movement and attitude, the very performance of which gradually involves and perhaps inspires him."[34] Service to the *lwa*, according to Deren, based as it is on mastery of the forms prescribed and favored by the spirits, allows the collective to function "at a level superior to the creative capacities of the individuals which make it up."[35] As a creative act, the performance of sacred forms confers grace, power, and knowledge on the *serviteurs*: "The individual participates in the accumulated genius of the collective, and by such participation becomes himself part of that genius—something more than himself."[36] Ira Lowenthal, in his study of Vodou ceremonies in southern Haiti, argued that the effectiveness of ritual is measured by its ability to "create a subjective reality for the *sevité* [*serviteurs*] in which the *essence* of worship comes to be participation in the collective creation of song and dance."[37] It is clear, he added, "that Haitian aesthetic sensibilities are closely tied to the notion of full participation in the act of creation, rather than to passive contemplation or appreciation."[38]

Jean's painting, with its focus on bodies providing their individual contributions to the steps prescribed for the collective ritual, highlights the reciprocal nature of the relationship between *lwa* and *serviteur*. The essence of the *manjé lwa* ceremony, as Hurbon has argued, is the nourishing of the *lwa* by the *serviteurs* in an effort to assure that the *lwa* will be capable of helping them when needed: "the sacrificial victim and the food constitute the link between the spirits and the faithful."[39] It represents yet another way in which Vodou provides

for the breaching of the divide between the living and the *lwa*. The ceremony, however, has a secondary goal—which could be described as aesthetic—that results from the mastery of the ritual forms themselves, as "the joy and the ecstasy of the spirit" direct the faithful "toward genuine re-creation."[40]

Vodou's sacred forms include healing ceremonies that are, like the *manjé lwa*, among the most-often performed rituals in Haiti. The *oungan*'s major role, as Maya Deren reminds us, is medical, and represents "one of the ways in which the houngan may mediate between the loa and the people."[41] The *oungan*'s role as healer is displayed in all its complexities in Jean Léandre's *Healing Ceremony with Music* (c.1975, figure 5.4). Léandre, a painter from Cap-Haitiën, joined the Centre d'Art in 1975. His work, like we see in *Healing Ceremony with Music*, often focuses on elucidating the intricate connections that make up a Vodou ceremony.

Healing Ceremony with Music depicts a curative ritual most probably performed by a secret society (members of secret societies can often be identified by the uniforms they use during ceremonies, as is the case here). Secret societies, although common in Haiti, are less well understood than the more open Vodou *ounfó*, which are more welcoming to visitors and strangers. The societies, headed

Figure 5.4 Léandre, Jean. *Healing Ceremony with Music* (c.1975). Oil on masonite. 14¼ × 23⅞ inches.

by *oungans*, provide vital links between religious and civil society throughout Haiti. Among the best known of these societies are the Bizango, studied by Wade Davis in his research on the phenomenon of zombification. His two books on the subject, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) and *Passage of Darkness* (1988), reveal how secret societies function as "an important arbiter of social life among the peasantry," a force "that protects community resources, particularly land, as they define the power boundaries of the village."[42] Davis's research unveiled the Bizango's role in the ethnobiology and pharmacopeia behind the zombification process, a very rare form of "social sanction" administered by the secret society to those who have violated its most sacred codes. The Bizango, as Michel Laguerre explains in *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*, is a remnant of Haiti's colonial past, when Bizango, the violent spirit of a warrior, functioned as the protective spirit of the Bissagot slaves. Individuals enter such secret societies—which are widespread throughout the island—through a ritual of rebirth or initiation that involves an oath of allegiance to the group and which admits them into a world of sharing the secret handshakes and passwords that are the marks of powerfully connected initiates. The societies stand "as the conscience of certain districts in Haiti in that [they] protect the residents against exploitation by outsiders."[43] In some districts in Haiti secret societies have played a crucial political role.

Healing Ceremony with Music is built around the central figure of the man on whose behalf the ceremony is being held, his nakedness and thinness presented as emblematic of the illness that must be eradicated. As in *Mangé Loa*, all the elements of the ceremony are included here, bearing witness to the painstaking preparation for the sacred work of healing, a ritual in which the *lwa* are expected to work their power through the body of the petitioner to restore its health and vitality. The food to be offered to the *lwa*, carefully prepared and attractively presented, is ready; jars, bottles, and pitchers give evidence of intense preparation and careful thought to everything that may be needed to propitiate the *lwa* and follow its dictates. The room has been arranged carefully to facilitate the ritual. The crowded scene illustrates the beginning of the ceremony, when everything is at the ready and the *oungan* is just beginning his invocations to the *lwa* with the aid of the musicians, *serviteurs* and relatives of the patient (identified by the absence of the society's uniform).

At the feet of the patient is the *oungan* (or *bokor*, as they are often called in secret societies), holding in one hand a black cloth he brandishes before his patient and in the other one a candle indicative on

his appeal to divination to diagnose the illness and seek the proper remedy with the advice of the Vodou spirits. Behind the *oungan* stands the Rada *batterie*—the three drummers with their variously sized sacred drums—accompanied by a woman playing a maraca made from a hollowed gourd. The music—appropriately, given the title of the painting—is regarded as the central element in the summoning of the *lwa*. To the *oungan*'s left stands an initiate who is represented holding the *oungan*'s *asson*, the sacred rattle used in summoning the lwa, which is the symbol of the *oungan*'s sacred profession. The initiated *ounsi*, clapping and singing to the beat of the drums, line up against the back partition of the enclosed ceremonial room, formed by an elaborate curtain. The setting is characteristic of the often affluent surroundings of the secret society's premises. Two ritual symbols flank the patient—the headstone with its cross for Bawon Samedi and the Ghédé to his right and the serpent for Danbala to his left—both represented amid flames. Together with the food and drink ready to be presented to the *lwa*, there are two sacrificial animals, a pig and a chicken, both of whose lives, as is typical of secret society ceremonies, will be offered to the *lwa* in exchange for the renewed health of the patient. The most salient element in the painting, however, may be the multiplicity of musical notes spread charmingly over the entire scene, indicating that the music has permeated all the possible spaces in the ceremonial area, unifying all the masterfully prepared ritual elements of the sacred work and reinforcing the summon to the *lwa*. The floating musical notes is a device that seeks to encapsulate the power of the drums to bring together all the elements of the ceremony: "the solid mass of the drum's beating," as Deren explain, is "at once compellingly dynamic and yet of a reliability, a stability, which transcends all miscellany, comprehends it, swallows it, holds steady with such unshakeable persistence that it serves as a magnetic core to which all temporary deviation returns."[44]

The prominent position accorded to the ritual symbols flanking the patient—those of Bawon Samdi and Danbala—underscore the patient's position between life and death, and therefore the gravity of his illness. These *lwa* are invoked here because of their powers for healing or as potential givers of life. Ghédé, although best known as ruler of death and the cemetery, is also "the greatest of healers, the last recourse against death."[45] During ceremonies for Ghédé, the gravely ill are brought before the *lwa* for his intercession, since Ghédé, an essentially fair *lwa*, will not allow those who plead humbly for their health to die if their time has not come. Danbala, in turn, is the patriarchal serpent divinity, an ancient water spirit, linked in ritual and service

to rain, lightning, wisdom, and fertility. Those possessed by Danbala during ceremonies dart out their tongues, snake-like, crawl on the ground with sinuous movements, climb the posts of the *peristil* (the *ounfó*'s entry hall) and have been known to hang head down from the rafters like snakes. Danbala is always understood to be a positive force, the essence of life. In his Simbi avatar (with which Danbala shares many characteristics and functions) he rules over all magic—"whether it be medicinal, protective paquet, or the less benevolent wanga"[46]—such as that depicted in *Healing Ceremony with Music*. (*Bokors*, unlike *oungans*, are reputed to also "work with the left hand"—to add to their regular functions as Vodou priests the ability to work with magic.) In the painting, Danbala is depicted by Léandre in his Petwo avatar of Danbala le Flambó (the torch), surrounded by fire.

The painting, in its mixing of elements drawn from both Rada (the drums, the worship of Danbala, for example) and Petwo rites (Ghéde and the Bawon, the Simbi and Flambó avatars of Danbala), shows the richness of the two main sources of Vodou rites. In Haiti, the sacred forms through which the *lwa* are summoned to communicate with humans conform to one of two major rites, Rada and Petwo, which although manifestly different, share many common elements. The Rada rites, traced back to the kingdom of Dahomey, in what is now Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, are generally considered to be the most faithful to ancient African traditions, and to many believers, are the most genuine. They are invariably portrayed as *dous* (*doux* or sweet tempered). The Rada pantheon boasts the great *lwa*, or *fle Ginen*, the first to be saluted in ceremonies: Atibon Legba, Marasa Dosou Dosa, Danbala and Ayida Wedo, Azaka Mede, Ogou Feray, Agwe Tawoyo, Ezili Freda Daome, Lasirenn and Labalenn, and Gede Nimbo. The Petwo rites do not lay claim to the same connection to the ancestral spirits. They are recognized as Creole or Haitian-born *lwa*, born in the crucible of the plantation and often incorporating belief and ritual practices drawn from central and southwest African groups such as the Kongo and Angola—late arrivals in the new world. Whereas the Rada *lwa* are thought to be *dous*, Petwo *lwa* are considered to be *anme* (*amer* or bitter). They are associated with fire and said to be *lwa cho* (*low chaud* or hot lwa) capable of forceful and violent behavior. The Petwo pantheon includes major *lwa* such as Met Kalfou, Simbi Andezo, Ezili Danto, and Bawon Samdi. Many of the *lwa*, however, exist *andezo*, or in two cosmic substances, and are served in both Rada and Petwo rituals.

Healing Ceremony with Music—with its display of the careful preparations involved in a major healing ceremony, its conveying of the

power of music to invite the *lwa* into the human gathering, its placement of the patient between the two major healing and life-affirming *lwa*, its blending of Rada and Petwo rites—articulates with great clarity the importance of the mastery of ritual detail in Vodou's sacred work. With its human body needing the intervention of the *lwa* and the support of his community at the very center of the painting, the work embodies the power of ritual mastery in Vodou's sacred work.

I have attempted, through the analysis of the four works discussed above, to show how the concept of sacred work—with its aesthetic commitment to mastering ritual details as a path to securing the breaching of the divide between the world of the living and that of the *lwa* through the bodies of the *serviteurs*—has served both as inspiration, theme, and guiding aesthetic principle for a number of major Haitian artists interested in producing works that fall under the category of religious paintings. My analysis, dependent as it is on an understanding of how carefully the mastery of ritual elements is represented in these paintings, begs the question of the paintings' implied audience and, perhaps, purpose. It is undoubtedly true that a significant number of Haitian paintings, especially in the first two generations of painters from the Centre d'Art, centered on Vodou ceremonies as a thematic focus. For its Haitian audience, these paintings captured a world of ritual practices and embodied beliefs that encapsulated the essence of their spiritual world. This encapsulation both opened this ceremonial world to outsiders and created multileveled modes of representation, not all of which could be easily read by an audience not versed in Vodou practices.

Toussaint Auguste's *Papa Zaka en Possession* is a case in point. We do not know much about the circumstances of its production, other than its connection to the Centre d'Art created by DeWitt Peters in 1944. Whether created for the market following Peters' suggestions as to desirable subjects, or commissioned by a collector, the painting opens its full meaning only to those who bring knowledge of the specificities of possession to its reading. A first confrontation with the painting without knowledge of its title does not readily yield its subject matter, as it is not a stereotypical depiction of possession. The reciprocity of the relationship expressed through the mirroring of the *lwa* in its horse is created by an inspired, imaginative solution to the question of representation that masks its true meaning from the casual observer, to whom the painting may look like a scene of two peasants greeting each other in a despoiled countryside. This masking, similar to the one that led to the masking of the *lwa* behind chromolithographs and plaster statues of the Catholic saints, allows

Auguste to move away from the conventional symbols of possession into a representation that is both full of religious and ritual content and alive with aesthetic substance. These multiple levels of significance—which become increasingly accessible the deeper the viewers' knowledge of the beliefs and practices of Vodou—speak to the painting's status as religious art and to its evoking a sense of awe from its viewers. Writing about European religious painting, F. David Martin speaks of how the "awe-fullness evoked by the sacred is not supposed to be fully explainable, either verbally or by pictorial depiction. In turn, the awe-fullness of the sacred may generate ultimate concern, which then involves humans in various theoretical (e.g., theology), practical (e.g., moral) and social (e.g., ritual) activities that attempt to articulate the concern."[47] In *Papa Zaka en Possession*, as in the other paintings discussed above, this sense of "awe-fullness" stems from the careful representation of the principle of mastery in ritual practice, as an element that conveyed the spirit of Vodou as a belief system. For a non-Haitian audience, one not necessarily aware of the significance of the ritual elements displayed, the paintings nonetheless capture the complexity of belief and, perhaps most importantly, the quality of mastery which, drawn from Vodou practice itself, finds its way into the aesthetic dimension of the art itself.

NOTES

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6

Dancing with Ochún: Imagining How a Black Goddess Became White

Miguel A. De La Torre

Much was on her mind, so much that her head began to ache. What she really needed now was a reprieve so that she could get her thoughts together and think clearly about her options. Maybe a dip in cool waters would be a perfect antidote to her headache and provide a needed escape from the hot, humid summer day. Seeking relief, the orisha[1] Ochún, the African Aphrodite, made her way to the Osun River.[2] There she slipped out of her clothes and eased herself into the refreshing, clear waters. In these waters, she had always found safety and clarity. As she leisurely bathed, she felt reenergized, her options becoming clearer. After the passing of hours, she slowly emerged from the waters. She undid her long hair so that it cascaded down her narrow back—its ends gently caressing the voluptuous curves of her hips as she walked toward a shaded area by the river banks. Wet and naked, she sat down and gingerly combed the curls of her strikingly dark hair that gently dangled on the sides of her long slender neck. Anyone who might have walked by and observed this bare goddess admiring herself in a hand mirror would easily conclude that she was the most beautiful among all beauties of Africa. Of course, if Ochún would have noticed the passing stranger, with a haughty paternalistic look, she would have dismissed him.

With each stroke of her tortoise shell comb, the numerous gold bracelets adorning her slim wrists jingled and chimed, producing the seductive musical enrapture of an alluring and intoxicating siren. Once dried, she arose and tied a yellow handkerchief around her petite waist to hold up her revealing and flowing skirt ornamented

with tiny mirrors, gold bells, and cowrie shells. Within that skirt she usually hid a small gourd of *oñí* (honey). Whenever she rubbed her fingers, dripping with the sweat fluids of her gourd, across the quivering lips of any man or god, she would incite erotic abandonment. Truly, as the love goddess, Ochún represented female sensuality, sexuality in general, love, and lust.

Just as Obatalá[3] is considered to be ranked as "highest" within the orisha pantheon, Ochún is ranked the lowest, or most junior. As the youngest and most sensuous of all the orishas, it is easy to dismiss her as being too concerned with epicurean delights to care about the needs of her children. Yes, it is true that she revels in nightlong dancing and parties, but her discerning intelligence should never be underestimated. On this particular day she was in deep thought, anxious over the fate of her beloved children, that is, her devotees.

Combing her hair served as a distraction from feelings of helplessness as she witnessed her children being kidnapped and sold into slavery. Shackled and overcrowded onto ships, her precious devotees would sail west, never to be seen or heard from again. As many as 20 percent would not complete the journey, dying in route and ending up as an offering to Olocun.[4] In a way, these were the lucky ones for at least they could be reincarnated back on the land that witnessed their birth. Those who did not expire were chained upon wooden planks. A minimum amount of space was allotted so that the maximum amount of bodies could be packed. Engulfed in darkness, lying in their own vomit and manure, they barely survived the voyage. Several of the young maidens were kept on deck to satisfy the sexual appetites of the crew. Although it is difficult to calculate, Ochún must have witnessed more than fifteen million of her children make the transatlantic voyage to some mystical island called Cuba.[5]

Ochún knew that something had to be done, for her children needed her presence during their difficult times. This is why she sought the consul of Yemayá, the maternal orisha whose domain is the oceans.[6] Unfortunately, Yemayá was forced to admit that the orishas were powerless to prevent this catastrophe. Ochún pondered these words from Yemayá. In fact, it was Yemayá's admission that caused Ochún's headache, leading her to bathe in the healing waters of the Osun River. But after much contemplation, Ochún arrived at a decision. Because of her love for her children, she would accompany them to this strange new land called Cuba. But before departing, she asked Yemayá to straighten her hair and lighten her skin to the color of copper, so that *all* Cubans, masters and slaves, Spaniards and Africans, might join together in worshiping her as the Mother of all Cubans.

Once in Cuba, Ochún found it difficult to operate in the open (see figure 6.1). The faith and traditions of Africans, now forced into slavery, were dismissed as either superstitious or demonic. Those who insisted on worshiping the orishas faced all forms of abuse. The only way that Ochún, as well as any other orishas, could operate in Cuba was to put on Catholic masks to hide their African faces. This was possible because of the properties of ashé.[7]

The orishas are universal beings because all that exists contains ashé. In this way, they are able to manifest themselves in the symbol and figures of other world faiths and religions. Even if believers of other faiths never heard of the orishas, they still worship them whenever they bow down before their own deities. This is possible through a process I call "Anonymous Santería."[8] The Yoruba worldview recognized the existence of Ochún's presence in other religions, including the faith of the slave masters; their task was to discover her self revelation. Within a short time Ochún's children learned that the "god" of their White masters, La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre,[9] was really their beloved Ochún who was wearing the Catholic mask of their oppressors. Whenever they bowed their knees before the Catholic statue of La Virgen, they knew that in reality they were worshiping Ochún who was now represented by this particular statue.

Figure 6.1 Presentation of Ochun in Cuba. Photograph taken by Anthony Pinn.

The Spanish masters were pleased to see how quickly their slaves converted to the "true" faith. But Ochún's children knew that the ashé that flows through all religions, including their master's Catholicism, made their faith more sophisticated than those who assumed to be their superiors. The irony is that the masters didn't know the true power undergirding their faith, although it was clearly understood by the slaves.

BECOMING WHITE

Exploring the whitening of Ochún is more than noticing how this once biracial statue of La Virgin del Cobre became White. Although Ochún went from Black to copper, La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, along with most of the characters in her story, went from copper to White. Once the whitening process began, it was difficult to stop. In fact, the statue in my own office to which I light a candle every morning is a White blond with blue eyes! The whitening of this Black goddess is more than an aesthetical transformation, for as Ochún became whiter, Cuban racial hierarchies became more normalized and legitimized.

The bleaching of Ochún is best illustrated in the story depicting her first encounter with "Cubans." According to the tradition, two Taíno brothers,[10] Juan and Rodrigo de Hoyos,[11] along with a ten-year-old Black slave boy named Juan Moreno,[12] set out in 1610 on Nipe Bay in search of salt. Nipe Bay is not far from the copper mines of Cobre on the northeastern tip of the island. In these mines, countless Taínos perished extracting copper for the profit of the Spaniards. As the numbers of the Taínos dwindled, Africans were being imported to replenish the slave population.[13] It was about 5:30 in the morning, while rowing their canoe, that these two Taínos and the African slave boy came upon a carved statue of the Virgin Mary floating on a piece of wood. Miraculously, the statue was dry. At her feet was inscribed, "I am the Virgin of Charity."

Since the discovery of the statue, Ochún, masked as La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre made her home with the oppressed. It is no coincidence that La Virgen first appeared to the Taínos and Africans, the two most oppressed groups on the island. She could have appeared to the local Spanish priest or bishop, but instead she chose to be in solidarity with "the least of these." If the rich and powerful Spaniards or if the religious authorities who lived on the island, wanted to come to La Virgen in awe and adoration, they had to do so by means of the marginalized.

The color by which Ochún/La Virgen chose to appear is also more than a simple aesthetic choice. She refused to appear in the color of the colonizers who were responsible for introducing so much misery and destruction upon the Taínos and Africans. Instead, she appeared in the color of the racial Other, in a real sense, the color of death and life. Death because it was the color of the copper being mined at Cobre and responsible for the decimation of Native People and Africans. But her skin color also represented new life. She chose the color of those relegated to be the economic and racial outcasts—those who would comprise the new Cuban people.[14]

With time, the symbol of La Virgen was co-opted by White Cuba, an attempt to rob the oppressed of a liberative symbol. As already mentioned, most of the popular statues depicting *la virgencita*[15] reveal a White, blond-haired figure. Not only was La Virgen de la Caridad bleached, but so was one of the Taíno brothers in the row boat. Rodrigo was transfigured into a balding, bearded, white-haired Spaniard named Juan, thus transforming the original story into the legend of *los tres Juanes* (the three Johns), one who is Black, one who is red, and one who is White. But with time, even the remaining Taíno is White, so that today, many statues depict an old and a young White Spaniard in the row boat with a small Black boy. Essentially, color was written out of the story, leaving a minor representation in the form of a child. Ironically, one would never have expected to find a White Spaniard accompanying slaves and native people on such an arduous and demeaning task such as collecting salt. Nevertheless, this bearded patriarchal figure rewrites itself into the story. By incorporating the oppressor, he becomes equal with the Others in the row boat, and to him also appears the Divine. The bearded Spaniard masks the power relation along racial lines existing during this time.

Masking the Cuban African

Although it is problematic to make the copper-skin Virgen White; it is more troubling to bleach the Black goddess to appear as a *mulata*,[16] for to become a mulata is to stop being Black. The whitening of Black symbols such as Ochún masks hostility toward those who would prefer to explore *negritude* (Black consciousness) as the entomological starting point of Latino/a identity. A mulata Ochún assumes the myth that a purer symbol is created through the organic result of a racial mixture. Such miscegenation is supposed to create an acceptable "whiter" ethnic group that, by definition, excludes Africans. In a

perverse way, "whitening" Africans becomes the basis for developing racial harmony and reform among Cubans.

Throughout Cuban history, whenever the Black population threatened to exceed the White population, a process known as *blanqueamiento* (whitening) occurred whereby land was freely given to poor White Spaniard families who would leave Spain and come to live on the island. Another method used to keep the Black population in check was their exclusion from social setting by dividing Blacks from biracial Cubans (mulato/as). The latter was accorded some privileges and assimilating, up to a point, as White allies. This procedure created a desire in the minds of some Blacks to whiten themselves (usually by marrying whiter spouses) in the hope of achieving social advancement.

White Cuba, toward the end of the nineteenth century, believed that Blacks had the potential to be equal to Whites, but were "stuck" in an earlier stage of cultural development. The solution required assimilation to the "superior" White culture through a process of de-Africanization. Hence *blanqueamiento*, the whitening of Blacks, became a prerequisite for Black advancement. While scientists and intellectuals in the United States understood racial mixing as degeneration and mongrelization, Cubans saw *mulatez* as lifting the savage races toward civilization and progress.[17] This is evident in the work of José Elías Entralgo, a sociologist who was a proponent of Cuba's version of eugenics. As chairperson of the 1959 *Movimiento de Orientación e Integración National* (Movement of National Orientation and Integration) of Cuba, he claimed a cause and effect relationship existed between "mulattoization" and national integration. He applauded the rape of African women by their White masters as the necessary evil of bettering Africans, allowing their integration into White society.[18]

In spite of Cuban miscegenation, "whiteness" remains synonymous with power and privilege, both on the island and in *el exilio* (the Exile). Ochún, like all other Cuban Blacks must learn to self-impose the gaze of dominant White Cuban eyes. This is a gaze that requires her to "whiten" herself by asking Yemayá to straighten her hair and lighten her skin to the color of copper. If she, like all other Black Cubans, hopes to share in the privileges of Cuban society, then she must become a mulata.

With the coming of the 1959 Cuban Revolution that placed Fidel Castro in power, an exodus of Cubans who found refuge in the United States began. For the most part, the first two waves (1959–1973) of Cuban refugees were predominately White and educated.[19] Not surprising, the culture and religious traditions they brought with them

were rooted in their whiteness. As Santería manifested itself within the U.S. context, that expression was aesthetically whiter. It is as if the Black Ochún became a mulatta in her journey to Cuba, and White in her journey to Miami. Although Ochún chose to leave Africa, La Virgen del Cobre was kidnapped from Cuba so that she too could live in exile. On September 8, 1961, her feast day, the statue of La Virgen at the parish church at Guanabo Beach in La Habana, was removed (stolen?) from her pedestal. This replica of the statue located in Cobre was stashed in a suitcase and smuggled out of the country to an awaiting crowd of over 25,000 mainly White Cubans who congregated at a baseball stadium.

Anglicizing Ochún

Cuban Santería's exodus to the United States served an important survival function. Although the first two waves of Cubans mainly belong to the White elite and the middle class, their Latino/a ethnicity relegated them to the U.S. margins. For many, ethnic discrimination and poverty became a way of life. This exodus created a crisis. Santería responded by helping to foster a community that provided physical, emotional, material, and psychological assistance. The creation of a Cuban enclave in exile forestalled assimilation to the dominant culture during a time of alienation and grief over separation from loved ones due to forced migration. When Ochún followed her children to Cuba, worshiping her became the means by which displaced Africans established a common identity amidst a social structure designed to extract their labor while destroying their personhood. When whiter Cubans kidnapped La Virgen and brought her with them to the United States, they found themselves alone, living in economically deprived areas, exposed to street violence, drugs, and gangs. The psychological and physical need to belong was met through faith. Devotion to Ochún/La Virgen created solidarity among refugees forced to live in an alien, if not hostile environment.

Even though Ochún/La Virgen was whitened in exodus, she maintained her role as a religious symbol of resistance, empowering Cuban refugees to face and survive the adversity of a new country. But as decades passed, Euroamericans discovered this faith tradition. As they gazed upon this new, and what to some appeared as an exotic religion, its symbols began to be Anglicized, a process that starts with the faiths' culture objectification followed by minimizing its role as a resistance religion. Moving the focus from the class and racial disenfranchisement of Hispanics to middle-class, White,

academic Euroamericans minimized the function La Virgen/Ochún played in the life of the marginalized. Historically (as in the case of Constantinian Christians), it is always disadvantageous for the disenfranchised when the dominant culture co-opts the religious symbols of marginalized groups.

For example, in the introduction of her ground-breaking book, Karen McCarthy Brown describes her journey to Mama Lola's house in Brooklyn.[20] Her trek into the exotic is worth repeating.

> . . . the brief drive to Mama Lola's house was my introduction to the Brooklyn outpost of the Caribbean. As . . . I inched through the traffic clogging Nostrand Avenue on an intensely hot July afternoon, our nostrils filled with the smells of charcoal and roasting meat and our ears with overlapping episodes of salsa, raggae [*sic*], and the bouncy monotony of what Haitians call jazz. Animated conversations could be heard in Haitian French, Creole, Spanish, and more than one lyrical dialect of English. The street was a crazy quilt of shops: Chicka-Licka, the Ashanti Bazaar, a storefront Christian church with an improbably long and specific name, a Haitian restaurant, and Botanica Shango—one of the apothecaries of New World African religions offering fast-luck and get-rich-quick powders, High John the Conqueror root, and votive candles marked for the Seven African Powers. I was no more than a few miles from my home in lower Manhattan, but I felt as if I had taken a wrong turn, slipped through a crack between worlds, and emerged on the main street of a tropical city.[21]

The "wrong turn" Brown describes betrays her middle-class privilege of having a car that allows her to drive through neighborhoods where the inhabitants never had the opportunity of making a "wrong turn." Like a "lion-country safari" where people drive their cars through enclosed habitats, Brown gets to drive through the habitats of the disenfranchised, gazing and observing how they live. Regardless as to how many years she may have lived in Manhattan, this is her first introduction to "the Brooklyn outpost of the Caribbean" that has existed a few miles from her doorsteps. Her ethnographic gaze reinforces the normative power structures of New York City.

Those on display to the ethnographer's gaze "slipped through a crack" and found themselves in this neighborhood because of their skin color, ethnicity, and economic status. Brown describes this place as some type of pseudo-tropical city, an exotic place of strange sounds and smells—sounds and smells that were quite normative in my own upbringing. Brown's romanticized description of the neighborhood ignores the reality of those of us who were forced to live there, a

reality barely unpacked in her analysis. Missing from her rich aesthetic description of the neighborhood is the roach infested apartments, the empty refrigerators, the broken spirits of not finding employment, the alleys littered with used syringes and crushed lives, in other words, missing is the everyday hopelessness of those forced to live in what she saw as some type of "tropical city." We never got to drive by lower Manhattan where she lived and observe her habitat, unless, of course, we were the domestic help, or performed some other type of menial labor.

These observations are not made to degrade Brown's impressive and important scholarship, nor is it to insinuate that Brown doesn't deal with poverty or racism in her book—she obviously does. Rather, I want to emphasize how her approach to the orishas from a different social location can ignore the reason for Mama Lola's faith and co-opt how the marginalized approach their religion. Missing from her description and the description of some White Euroamerican academics who study Ochún is how the orisha symbolizes liberation, resistance and survival. Middle-class Anglo privilege is creating a middle-class Anglo version of Ochún. Of course, White Euroamericans are not the first to co-opt Ochún, and in the process reinvent the religion of the marginalized. As already illustrated, White Cubans on the island led the way.

More important than what is missing when Anglo eyes gaze upon Ochún is how the faith must be objectified for easy appropriation. Johannes Fabian illustrates what transpires when ethnographic research involving personal, prolonged interaction with the Other occurs. According to Fabian, "we pronounce upon the knowledge gained from such research a discourse which construes the Other in terms of distance, spatial and temporal. The Other's empirical presence turns into his [her] theoretical absence."[22] In Brown's description (as well as other Euroamerican researchers), two Times are juxtaposed. There is the "here" Time she occupies which is modern and civilized as indicated by an enclosed car and a home in lower Manhattan. Then there is the "there" Time occupied by the Objects of research—a Time which is more primitive "filled with the smells of charcoal and roasting meat and . . . overlapping episodes of salsa, raggae, and the bouncy monotony of what Haitians call jazz." The Objects of research are assigned a different Time, although they occupy the same space, thus creating a temporal distancing which allows the gazer to appropriate and/or dismiss the "knowledge" uncovered by the research. If the researcher's Euroamerican sensibilities are troubled by the predominance of blood sacrifices, then

these rituals are minimized. If the researcher is troubled by a lack of codification in rituals and practices, then a set of rigid rules and regulations are imposed.

In addition, Anglicizing Ochún contributes to the cultural genocide of the U.S. Cuban community. Non-Cubans' limited knowledge of the nuances of Cuban culture makes it impossible to properly read or understand how Cuban Santería, through its rituals and ceremonies, addresses the needs and concerns of a people. Thus, these rituals and ceremonies must be reinterpreted to fit a dominant Euroamerican worldview pattern that may be destructive to the Hispanic marginalized social location. As the resistance faith of the marginalized is restructured along Euroamerican lines, Euroamerican researchers can set themselves up as the "experts" of Santería, (mis)appropriating Ochún, along with the other cultural symbols of the faith. The faith's aesthetics must be redefined and given new meaning to make sense in an Anglo world. This colonization of the faith only contributes to the continuous destruction of the Cuban faith community.

DESPERATELY SEEKING OCHÚN

Concerned about the aesthetical cooptation of Ochún by Euroamericans, and with this cooptation the change in focus of the religion, I began imagining what would happen if I were to simply speak with Ochún about my concerns. Unlike Christianity, Santería provides the opportunity to consult the orishas in person when they mount (possess) one of their children, usually during a bembe[23] when the gap between the spiritual and the physical is bridged. I fondly remember the bembes that my parents held when I was a boy. So, it is not difficult to imagine myself at one of the gatherings held at my parent's crowded apartment in Queens to honor the Queen. I cannot help but wonder what would have occurred if I had had an opportunity to discuss my concerns with Ochún face-to-face.

More than likely the bembe would have been held on a Saturday night, Ochún's sacred day. Thirty to forty people would have crowded into my parents two-bedroom apartment in Jackson Heights. One of the rooms was dedicated to the orishas and it was here that my parents conducted consultations. In the other room the rest of the family slept. In a corner of *el cuarto de los Santos* (the room of the Saints) my parents would have erected *un trono* (a throne) in honor of Ochún. Along the walls surrounding *el trono* they would have huge yellow and gold[24] cloths as if they were drapes. *El trono* would consist of a *canastillero* (a high cabinet) also draped with fancy gold and

yellow cloths. Leaning next to *el trono* would probably be a peacock-feather fan, the common emblem of Ochún. Perched on high would be Ochún's *sopera*[25] containing her stones,[26] usually five pebbles chosen at dawn from the depths of a river.[27] Other tureens belonging to other orishas would also be present surrounding *el trono*.[28] On the floor, around *el trono* would be an array of arranged fruits and cakes, including Ochún's favorite foods: plates of rum cake, pumpkin, and honey. These treats serve as food offerings whose ashé will be "consumed" by Ochún. Also, the food offerings would be flanked by many flowers, specifically her favorite, sunflowers. In front of *el trono* there is a small basket to collect offerings—a *derecho*.[29] In this case, copper pennies would suffice. Next to the basket would be a bell. Upon entering *el cuarto de los Santos*, I imagine prostrating myself in front of *el trono*, dropping some copper pennies into the basket, shaking the bell, and kissing the floor. Upon getting up, I would join the bembe.

The bembe is mainly a drumming and dance ritual. Three sacred ritual drums called *batáa* are played so that the worshiper's messages can reach Ochún and induce her to respond in person. I make sure to show respect to the *batáa* by never turning my back to them, after all, they house the spirit of Aña. The first song honors the saint, so no one dances. Instead, we all stand to show honor and respect. Afterward, the drummers play a rhythm that invites Ochún to possess one or more of the dancers.[30] Among the dancers, one stands out, Pepito, who is whirling as if he was in a trance. Pepito is a burly muscular man who works in construction. A child of Ochún, he wears the yellow *eleke* (neck beads). Pepito, like most heterosexual men, was distraught when he discovered that he was a child of one of the female orishas and thus would end up being mounted by her. Some consider Ochún to be the patron of gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgender persons,[31] thus adding to Pepito's apprehensions. Most machos prefer to be a child of one of the warriors.[32]

All who are present begin to focus on Pepito, channeling their ashé into him. Pepito started to dance in a very sensual and suggestive manner, waving his arms so as to make his imaginary golden bracelets jingle. He would rub his body with his hands and thrust his hips in the direction of the men in the room. Obviously there was a heightened awareness of all the realms of sensuality in the room; hence, it is not surprising that a certain degree of gender-bending was occurring. I am mesmerized as I watch a transformation take place before my eyes. Through dance, this manly individual starts to exhibit very feminine seductive characteristics. Then, Pepito started

to laugh—a laughter that seems to go on forever. At that point, all in the room knew Oshún had arrived. Many started to greet Ochún with the words, "*yeye dari yeyeo.*"

Suddenly the drummer loudly slaps the *iya*, the largest of the three drums that is surrounded by small bells. A deafening silence fills the room as Pepito collapses on the floor before us. Of course, every so often some try to fake an orisha possession, but those present usually just leave them on the floor, telling them to get themselves up. But this time, several santero/as rush to help Pepito. The person who started dancing and collapsed is not the same person who was helped up from the floor. Pepito started the dance but Ochún finished it. He ceased to exist, but in his place was the incarnated orisha. S/he was helped up by the santera/os and moved to the adjoining bedroom to prepare her for her people. Those of us who are left behind waited with anticipation for her return. Because Oshún is the patron of gold, and it is she who bestows wealth, many came tonight to ask for money aware that she is always eager to grant petitions to her devotees. I did not come for wealth, but rather, to discuss my concerns about her, with her.

After some time, Ochún returns in full regalia. At her appearance, the drummers start singing songs of praise to her. All eyes were transfixed on the way Pepito as Oshún moved among the worshipers. S/he moved in a haughty matter, as though s/he was a lady of high society. Oshún gracefully glided around the room, at times whispering advice in the ears of believers and demanding sacrifices from others. To a woman who madly loved a married man, Oshún showed great compassion; for she knows what it is to be totally infatuated with Changó whose passion is satisfied in other ways, be they the conquest of other lovers or the conquest of enemies like Oggún. Of course, Changó was not her only lover. She has been romantically engaged with other orishas, among them were Orúnla (to whom she was married until she met Changó), Oggún (Changó's arch enemy), Ochosi, and Oko. She has even been known to tempt the dead to abandon their posts while guarding her lover Changó. Her multiple relationships gifts Oshún with profound insight into the complexities, challenges, and conflicts caused by the dynamics and difficulties of interpersonal relationships. Along with the advice, Oshún told the woman to write the name of her lover on a piece of paper and placed it in a hollow pumpkin (among her favorite offerings) along with honey and other ingredients. After a certain time, the pumpkin was to be brought to the river.

She clearly avoided a devotee of Obba, the lawful wife of her lover Changó, who was present. Ever since she tricked the naive Obba into

cutting off her ear and feeding it to Changó, both could barely stand being in the same room. Soon, Ochún/Pepito started to dance again. S/he grabbed different people, men or women, it didn't matter. After a while s/he approached me, took me into her/his arms and twirled me around. Although I used to be a great disco dancer in my youth, winning many dance prizes, I had difficulty keeping up. No one, with the possible exception of her lover Changó, can out dance her. I confess at first feeling strange about dancing with Pepito, but when I looked into his/her eyes, I thought I saw an intelligence that could see into the deepest recesses of my being. The beauty of her sparkling eyes shone through those of Pepito. I felt bathed in love, a spiritual ecstasy that bordered on the material. Dancing with Ochún was an exhilarating and exciting experience, but what I really wanted was an intellectual dance. As though she sensed my thoughts, she leaned into my ear and purred, "*mi hijito* (my little child), why are you so anxious? I know you came to chat with me, so let's go to the bedroom and talk." With that, Ochún/Pepito took my hand and led me to the other room for a private consultation.

The Conversation

Once we arrived in the bedroom, Ochún/Pepito laid down on the bed, allowing both pillows to prop him/her up. I swiftly took the chair next to the bed and sat down.

Miguel: Gracias Ochún for taking the time to chat with me.

Ochún: How can I not take the time to answer your questions. After all, you are *hijo de Elegguá* (a child of Elegguá)—although a trickster, still remains my intimate friend and protector.

Miguel: Ochún, I'm deeply concerned about how Santería is changing as more and more Euroamericans enter the faith and set themselves up as experts, and in the process, redefine it. It is not that they intend to redefine it, rather, their social location is so privileged and different from the marginalized. I fear that our culture is being hijacked, that our religious symbols are being given new meanings with the possible danger of being used against us.

Ochún: Are you saying this because some Euroamericans criticized some of your writings concerning Santería?

Miguel: No, not necessarily, although I find it troubling when non-Cubans correct my Cubanness—even though I've been a Latino a lot longer than they, or when those who are converted to the faith as adults begin to question how I've practiced the faith since I was a child.

Ochún: *Aye Miguelito, que simpático eres* (Oh little Miguel, you're so cute). Here you are concerned about Santería when you left the faith long ago to become a Southern Baptist minister. You're so concerned about the faith becoming Anglicized but then you join one of the most American religions in this country. Isn't this born-again conversion a very Eurocentric concept? Euroamericans must be born-again because they were never brought up to be one with the creation that surrounds them. You complain about Anglicizing Santería, yet you use American concepts of faith. Can't you see why I can't take you seriously?

Miguel: *Coño Cachita*[33] *no jodas* (Damn it *Cachita*, don't "screw around"). You know that I left the religion of my parents, but I never abandoned my heritage of which Santería is a main part. *Todavía respeto los santos* (I still respect the saints).

She let out a sarcastic laugh that curdled my blood. I instantly knew I had crossed a line. I shouldn't have cursed. So I profusely apologized, quickly changing the topic to discuss my concerns about how the changing aesthetics of the faith were altering the power structures. I even appealed to her vanity to get the conversation back on track.

Ochún: *Mira Miguelito no coma mierda*, (Look here little Miguel, don't eat manure). The secret to life is love! This is a love that leads me to assist individuals, regardless if they know me or not. I want all to live in harmony with their destiny. There is no "us versus them." All have the potential to be children of the orishas. When anyone looks beyond their physical self toward the otherworldly to deal with the difficulties of life, I stand ready to assist them in their everyday trials and tribulation. My love is so strong that I don't care if they call me Ochún, La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, Aphrodite,[34] Venus,[35] or Lakshmi.[36] I don't care if they see me as Black, mulata, White, or green. What is important is the needs and hardships of the believer. For if there is no devotee, there is no Ochún, or whatever else humans want to call me.

In the same way she once seduced Oggún out of the forest (for he had entered the woods to live the life of a hermit thus bringing civilization to a standstill) she temptingly led me in our conversation to explore new possibilities.

Miguel: But I do care. Do you have to become White so as to minister to Euroamericans? Why can't they become ontologically Black or Cuban—or both?

Ochún: Did I have to become La Virgen del Cobre so that Cubans can recognize me as their *madre* (mother)? Of course I did. Do you honestly believe that the Santería you grew up in is in anyway the same as how I was worshiped in Africa? Of course not. The religion must change to meet the different needs of people. Cuba was not Africa so the religion, the symbols, the rituals, and the beliefs had to change

to face the challenges of a new environment. You White Cubans had to change the religion so that you could discover me. This does not mean that I abandoned my African children. Surely you noticed how during the Mariel boatlift of the late 1970s many of the Black and biracial Cubans coming to the United States were somewhat shocked by how Santería was being practiced by a predominately White Cuban exile community? The attempt to make Santería more mainstream by downplaying the African elements and highlighting concepts closer to Christian thought has and continues to radically transform the religion among you white Cubans. This doesn't mean I abandon white Cubans because the orthodoxy was not maintained. Surely you have heard the critique offered by U.S. African Americans about how white Cubans Christianized the faith. These are similar to the criticisms you have about Euroamericans. But tell me, how can we orishas embrace the Cuban and African communities, as well as the Euroamerican community, if you are not willing to deal with the cultural barriers that divide you or the racist and ethnic discrimination that is prevalent in your social interactions.

Miguel: But Ochún, you are not really considering the reality that whichever group gets to define the religion reinforces its power to the determent of the disenfranchised Other.

Ochún: I know you are concerned with liberation, but frankly, my children are just trying to survive. You already survived and have a well-paying job so you can afford to think of utopias. My children are too busy trying to feed their families. I am present in their hardships doing something. Besides, haven't you insisted that liberation is also for the oppressor? Well, why do you think my arms remain open to Euroamericans, and before them White Cubans. Don't be so quick to judge. *Bueno Miguelito*, I need to return to the bembe and minister to my devotees. I sincerely hope you found our exchange enlightening.

With that Ochún lifted herself off the bed. I too rose from my chair realizing that our consultation had come to an end. And then, quite unexpectedly, she embraced me. In the strong arms of Pepito, made muscular by years of hard labor, I suddenly found myself lost in the gentle hug of a mother. All too often, I have thought of Ochún as the quintessential love goddess, concluding that such love was restricted to the sexual. But now, finding myself in her arms, I was reminded of my mother. With my eyes closed, I was again in my own mother's arm's, a sensation I dearly miss since her passing several years ago. Ochún leaned into my ear and whispered "I love and miss you very much." Tears started to roll down my face. I held her tighter, not wanting the moment to pass. Eventually, she pulled away and left the room, leaving me alone. In the empty bedroom I had to sit down

again. I found myself gently sobbing, yet I wasn't sure why. Maybe it is because I terribly miss my mother and Ochún's presence brought back vivid memories. Or maybe it was because I miss from where I came. I am no longer a poor kid from the *barrio*. Instead, I have obtained middle-class privilege. The cultural capital obtained by my doctorate now made it impossible to truly return to my *comunidad*. And it is at this moment that I realize that maybe the Black goddess is not the only one who has been whitened.

NOTES

1. Created by the Supreme Being Olodumare, orishas are considered to be quasi-deities. They serve as protectors and guides for all humans, exercising authority over different aspects of nature, the body, and human encounter.
2. Besides being the patron goddess of eros, Ochún embodies the sacred dimensions of waters, and can usually be found on the banks of freshwater rivers. The Osun River, located in present day Nigeria, specifically personifies Ochún. It is believed that from these waters, Olofi (the appellation of the Supreme Deity on earth) soften the clay with which humans were formed. Other creation stories name Obatalá, the head orisha of the Yoruba pantheon, as forming humans from clay.
3. Obatalá, the father of peace, is the first orisha created by the Supreme Being Olodumare. He is considered to be the most powerful orisha in the Yoruba pantheon, credited with creating the universe, including humans. He is considered to be the patron of all human heads.
4. Olocun is considered to be among the first and most powerful orishas created. She is the androgynous queen of the ocean's depths who is responsible for the worldwide flood. Shackled to the bottom of the sea (as punishment for causing the flood) her anger is still felt in the form of tidal waves and rough seas. Although chained in the ocean's depth, she claims all humans who drown. During the Middle Passage, many Africans were cast overboard, either because they died during the journey, or as a means of disposing those who were too weak or too rebellious.
5. Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom*, Updated Edition (New York: Da Cap Press, 1998), 282.
6. In some legends, Yemayá is presented as Ochún's older sister, while in others, she is presented as Ochún's mother.
7. Ashé is understood to be the Supreme Being as sacred energy—an energy that encompasses the power, grace, blood, and life force of all reality. As a transcendent world force it cannot be seen or personified; it is neither good nor bad. All that has life or exhibits power has ashé. Ashé is the energy produced by the blood of living creatures being spilled, or by the movement of water, wind, or fire. Simply put, this neutral cosmic energy undergirds every aspect of existence.

8. "Anonymous Christianity," according to Karl Rahner, understands non-Christian religions not as a self-willed decision to avoid accepting the "true" faith from God, but as the revelation of God at work in all non-Christian religions. All religions contain God's grace, a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. Ergo, a non-Christian religion should be recognized as a lawful religion without denying the error or depravity which it may contain. See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, trans. by David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973) 46; and, Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978) 119–123. In the same way, I insist the "anonymous Christianity" should not be limited to Christianity. Just as Christians theorize that those of other faiths are in reality worshiping the Catholic God, followers of Santería have always maintained that believers of other faith traditions were worshiping the orishas whenever they honored the god(s) of their own faith. Everyone who worships the Divine through their different religious expressions is in reality worshiping the orishas. In the final analysis, it is those who practice Santería that are the ones with a deeper understanding of the spiritual for they possess *el conocimiento* (the knowledge) to recognize the names of the orishas masked by the faces of gods which exist in other faiths. See Miguel A De La Torre, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans., 2004) 12–13.
9. Declared the Patron of Cuba by Pope Benedict XV on May 10, 1926.
10. The Taínos were the indigenous people of the island who awoke to discover the lost Columbus anchored on their shores.
11. The fact that these two Native Americans had Spanish names indicates how "successful" the Spaniard genocide and assimilation project was.
12. It is interesting to point out that Moreno in Spanish means "person of color."
13. During the time of La Virgen's apparition, Cuba was an island of approximately 20,000 inhabitants. This was a population in flux. Because of the decimation of the Taínos, there were less than 2,000 left. To replace them, Africans were being imported. By this time, their numbers swelled to about 5,000. The remaining 13,000 comprised the Spaniards (mostly men) who came to Cuba in search of fame and glory. For many of these Spaniards, Cuba was a midway point to other exploitable lands on the continent. See Louis A. Pérez, Jr., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 45–47.
14. Miguel A. De La Torre, "Ochún: (N)Either the (M)Other of All Cubans (n)or the Bleached Virgin," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 69, No. 4 (December 2001): 849–850.
15. A term of endearment that can be translated as "the little virgin."
16. Mulata refers to biracial women with African and European ancestry. Like La Virgen, their skin color appears copper. Cuban religious scholars have uncritically embraced *mulatez* as a theological concept to describe the ethos of those who define their identity through their association

with Brazil and the Caribbean. In an attempt to create a counterbalance to what Latino/as scholars of religion with indigenous roots have termed *mestizaje*, predominately white scholars from the Caribbean have named their culture *mulatez*, and in so doing, have masked their own complicity with internal Hispanic racism. For a deeper analysis of this critique, see Miguel A. De La Torre, "Rethinking Mulatez," *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion and Identity*, editors, Miguel A. De La Torre and Gastón Espinosa (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 158–175.

17. Alejandro de la Fuente. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 178.
18. Specifically, he said: "The day…when a white slave master first had intercourse with a slave Negress in the bush or in the *barracoon* [slave quarters] was the most luminous for mankind…A vivifying transfusion took place that engendered a fertile and plastic symbiosis. From such mixing was to emerge new physical attributes and ascending psychic and moral virtues." See Carlos Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa*. (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, 1988), 47.
19. This first wave (1959–1962) brought 215,000 refuges that were demographically homogeneous. The vast majority composed an elite of former notables who were mostly White (94 percent), middle-aged (about thirty-eight years old), educated (about fourteen years of schooling), urban (principally La Habana), and literate in English. The second wave (1962–1973) brought 414,000 refugees who were predominately White, educated, and middle class. While in Cuba, they largely constituted the group directly relying on economic links with the United States. On average they were semi-skilled working-class people who capitalized on the emerging economic enclave being established by the first-wave Cubans. See Richard R. Fagan, Richard A. Brody, and Thomas J. O'Leary, *Cubans in Exile: Disaffection and the Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), 19–28.
20. Although Brown is describing her experiences with Haitian voodoo (a cousin of Santería), she could easily have been describing my New York *barrio*.
21. Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1.
22. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), xi.
23. Bembe is a drum and dance festival performed in honor of one or more orishas.
24. Yellow and gold are Ochún's favorite colors.
25. Large lidded ceramic soup tureen that is usually decorated in the favorite color of the orisha.
26. According to legend, when the orishas left their earthly community, their ashé remained among certain stones called *otanes*.

27. Among ordinaries rocks are *otanes* resonating with the ashé or the orishas that can only be discovered if the believer listens carefully for the orisha's presence.
28. The priest/priestess (*santero/as*) upon ordination usually receives *soperas* for the orishas Obatalá, Changó (the Lord of thunder), Yemayá, and Ochún. Many possess the *soperas* of other orishas.
29. Spanish for "right" signifying a monetary offering paid for services rendered.
30. Although I am aware that different toque songs played for different orisha are usually conducted in order, still, for purposes of my imagination, I will fast forward to Oshún's toque. And while several orishas may possess more than one person, again, for purposes of my imagination, I will only concentrate on one possession.
31. Randy P. Conner and David Hatfield Sparks, *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-Inspired Traditions in the Americas* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 73.
32. The four warriors are: Elegguá (the trickster), Oggún (the Lord of Iron), Ósun (the messenger of Obatalá), and Ochosi (the Lord of the Hunt).
33. *Cachita* is a term of endearment used by Cubans when referring to Ochún.
34. Greek love goddess.
35. Roman love goddess.
36. Hindu goddess of fortune and beauty.

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3

Europe

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7

Black Suit Matters: Faith, Politics, and Representation in the Religious Documentary

Robert Beckford

The aim of this chapter is to explore religious and political affiliations represented in the symbolic artifact of dress,[1] specifically, a black suit as a site of multiple meanings in African Caribbean communities within the wider context and experience of diaspora.[2] In this introductory section, I will sketch out the theoretical framework within which this particular case is considered.

My interest in this topic stems from considering audience response to the black suits I wear in my television documentaries, and consequently how public perception of my dress style relates to my personal understanding. The hermeneutical distance between audience and author is always contested space that at its best facilitates discussion, dialogue, and challenge. But it is always without certainties.

I am an African Caribbean man living in Britain, so a legitimate starting point for thinking about dress is with the postwar immigration of my parent's generation. African Caribbean Christian traditions, dress, and diaspora sensibilities collide and collapse on the stage of postwar immigration to Britain and the arrival of so called "West Indians" in Britain after World War II. After centuries of Christian missionary activity from first Europe and then North America most West Indians disembarked with a complex religious heritage, a tapestry of African derived themes reworked and Creolized into Caribbean Christianity.[3] Dress was also subject to syncretism, as the economic migrants also arrived with a particular sense of style; a fusion of English colonial civility and Caribbean color schemes infused with Black American flair and proportion.[4] Newsreels and black and white

photographs capturing these moments reveal West Indians dressed in "Sunday best" clothes disembarking for a new life in the mother country. So from "day one" "dressing up" for Church—an integral part of African Caribbean Christianity in Britain, is bound up with social history and cultural expression.

Despite the conflation of faith and dress from the earliest moment in diaspora history, theological reflection on dress has received little academic attention. So I want to stimulate reflection by identifying ways that we might think about dress in relation to Church and context. As Anthea Butler has demonstrated we can interpret dress and attire through the dominant theological modes of interpretation within a given historical period.[5] So in the case of Britain, since postwar immigration, these modes are *compensation*, *respect*, and *paradox*.

Dress Style and Theological Orientation

The first mode is *compensation*. This theme emerges from examination of fledging congregations in the mid 1960s. A seminal study exemplifying this approach is William Calley's anthropological investigation of West Indian congregations. Calley argued that the formation of what he pejoratively terms "sects," is the response to a racially hostile environment. In the midst of social disadvantage brought about by postcolonial racism, the central purpose of the "sect" is to alleviate the social pressure by providing "satisfaction." Satisfaction refers to the function of Christology where each believer is offered a higher status in Christ and a new identity superior to their social status.[6] Within this scheme, church dress, should be interpreted as a momentary suspension of the drudgery of work dress. Consequently, "West Indians" dressed up for Sunday morning worship in early postwar Britain in order to survive and compensate for what they were denied throughout the week.[7]

Calley's perspective provides little agency for Black Christian religion, a view challenged a decade or so later by Iain MacRobert. This leads to the second mode, *respect*. In contrast, the second mode interprets Pentecostalism as a counter ideology rather than mere survival. Counter ideology signifies the creation of a new way of being in the world as a result of Christian conversion. Central to maintaining this oppositional worldview is worship. Iain MacRobert captures this orientation in his 1980s study of Black Trinitarian Pentecostals worship. Speaking of the Spirit in worship he says, "the Spirit produces a new way of interpreting the world and a new perception of self and community."[8] In this case, rather than an opiate, in a context of racial

hostility, worship is a catalyst for affirming the equality, self-dignity, and self-worth of African Caribbean people. Counter ideology as the leitmotiv of Caribbean Christianity justifies the creation of an alternative space for the development of artistry, educational attainment and community projects within these congregations. Within this second frame, dressing-up for Sunday worship reflects interior and exterior self-confidence, agency, and empowerment or "respect."

However, there are limitations to the *respect* mode, and these concerns shape the third theological space, the *paradox* mode. I want to illustrate how it works by referring to Valentina Alexander's 1996 study of Black British Pentecostals.[9] She makes her starting point Black liberation theology. For her, a primary concern is how the church rates in terms of liberation or "*theological liberation and how it is both interpreted and utilized*." Working with liberation hermeneutics, a critical aspect of her work concerns social analysis—how social analysis facilitates liberation. Reflecting on the social analysis at work amongst Trinitarian Pentecostals she identifies a paradox that she terms, *passive radicalism*. Passive radicalism refers to

> . . . an implicit tool enabling believers to identify, challenge and overcome the various levels of their ideological and material oppression without necessarily seeking out its socio-historical source and without making an explicit theological alignment with that liberational process.[10]

In short, a personal, private faith, while facilitating personal liberation (respect) lacks the necessary social criticism to address structural oppression. As a result Alexander calls for a new social criticism or *active radicalism* to

> . . . broaden the scope of social analysis, providing it with a multidimensional insight into social transformation and allowing for the possibility of an historico-analytical element to be added to its method of interpreting the social world. . . . Believers are able to recognise therefore that liberation must address structures of oppression as well as provide personal empowerment for individual advancement.[11]

Within Alexander's thesis, dressing up for Sunday morning worship symbolizes a conflict, a double-speak of personal empowerment and social passivity.

I want to build on Alexander's perspective by making my starting point dress as a site of conflict. However, my intention is to move beyond the limitations of passive radicalism and locate within dress

style a semiotics of active radicalism, that is to say, I want to foreground religious and political signs and symbols that signify active radicalism. Appropriating active radicalism is not a new endeavor as Alexander's analysis has been central to my reflection on African Caribbean Pentecostalism. Put simply, in search for a new praxis, I have sought to correlate political aspects of Black popular culture with Christian themes to produce a political theology. I have adopted a critical correlation where theological ideas are challenged and even modified by cultural criticism.[12] Further, I have opted for a praxis approach, which seeks to mobilize the product of correlation into a social theory and social action.

Religious Themes in Television Documentary

In recent years, I have been gifted with the opportunity to explore religious and cultural themes through television documentary. My motivation for using this medium is partly a natural desire to engage with a cosmopolitan audience and also a result of the unnatural policing of Black political theology within African Caribbean Churches and the theological academy in Britain. As I have suggested elsewhere, being a Black political theologian represents a "double jeopardy." On the one hand, it means one is too bookish for the passive radical church and on the other, too "Black" for the neo colonial theological academy in Britain.[13] So naturally, the interface with mass culture (television) and the potential for developing new and meaningful conversations is particularly enticing. However, unlike writing books, penning articles or teaching undergraduate seminars, broadcasting has drawn unsolicited attention to my physical attire, namely, how and why I represent myself and its potential meaning(s). My resulting intellectual curiosity over self-representation is not retreat into narcissism, but instead desire to reflect on active radicalism in dress, that is to say, a social and religious concern for how dress "charts changes, broadcast political conflict and communicate resistance."[14] In order to explore dress as signifying practice in documentary, I want to place this concern in context by first detailing the type of films I have made and identifying a tension arising from doing religion and culture in documentary.

I initially entered filmmaking as a response to a challenge. I went on a viewer's complaints program called, *Right to Reply* in 1995. I was upset about the state of Black programming on *Channel 4*, one of Britain's five terrestrial broadcasters. During a heated debate with the commissioning editor—the person responsible for programming,

I was challenged to "try and do better." Never one to turn down a fight, I decided to find out as much as possible about television broadcasting and the opportunities available to a Black political theologian. Naturally, there were none! British television is "made in the image" of British society, dominated by White elites, and still informed by neocolonial "regimes of truth." I was only going to get a "break" from one of the few within the profession with a vision for Black people doing more than sports and entertainment on television. Thankfully, three years later a "door opened" when a Black producer, Trevor Phillips, who would later go on to become a leading human rights commissioner, approached me to participate in a documentary he was making on Britain's Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. I was given the platform to retell an aspect of my family history. A few years prior, as an act of reconciling and seeking justice for my family's slave history, I had sought out descendants of the Black and White Beckford families to explore how redemption might look and feel within the peculiarities of our situation. This story formed an integral part of the narrative for Phillip's film and to critical acclaim *Britain's Slave Past* was aired in 1999. Moreover, the response from Black people was positive, moving and affirming. Many informed me that it was the first time they had been exposed to slave history and the connections made in the documentary. I was astounded by the potential of the medium for politicizing people. But from the outset compromises had to be made—there were parts of the film that I thought fundamental to the story that were omitted by the producers and editors for commercial reasons. For instance, a meeting between a member of the White Beckford family and myself that explore reparations was omitted. (This editorial decision raises the question of the potential and also pitfalls of using this medium.)

The main potential documentary provides is access to a mass audience. Beyond the confines of the traditional academic logo-centricity the theologian is able to make a unique contribution to the public sphere discourse on religious and cultural themes. Although, in today's world, the public sphere is multiple, layered, competitive and hierarchical, one can make an impact even though it may not be a global one. Even so, the media as an aspect of popular culture is a strategic site in the struggle for meaning and today, television, film, art and other visual media, are central to battles over "race and representation":

> What we are talking about is the struggle over cultural hegemony, which is, these days waged as much in popular culture as anywhere else.[15]

In recent years, these struggles have moved from the romantic idea of critiquing capitalism and "race" to exploring how cultural forms are at the service of capitalism in a "globalized world."[16] Consequently, there is always a need to be reflexive and examine the potential and extent of one's interpellation.[17]

The major pitfall arises from the ongoing negotiation between the *popular* and *prophetic*. The popular refers to the commercial demands of mainstream popular television. At present, my films are made for *Channel 4*. Established as a public-private partnership, twenty-five years ago, like all broadcasters, reviews, ratings and impact are central measures for evaluating the relative success of a film. Broadcasting cannot be separated from the wider ravages and pressures of political economy. The *prophetic* as Cornel West notes is the desire to foster hope, courage and love in a context driven by cynicism and skepticism.[18] Tension exists because of the assumption amongst many television executives that redemptive narratives are "too worthy" and a turn-off for audiences. Instead, genres grounded in fear, punishment and shock tactics are considered to be more bankable. To be successful within this commercial documentary I have had to learn to signify—encode meanings for my intended audiences as well as find congruence between the media marketplace and non market values. Generally these two poles shift with each project and are reconciled at the outset of each film project but are none the less a constant struggle during production.

CHANNEL 4

After *Britain's Slave Past* in 1999 and inspired by the launch of a new BBC station dedicated to "thinking," I moved over to the BBC and developed two documentaries with *BBC 4. Black Messiah* (2001) was a dialogue between the political theologies of African American and African Caribbean Christianity. The aim was to draw a distinction between African American Christianity's engagement with politics and the African Caribbean experience of disavowal. Similarly, *Ebony Towers* (2003) compared the rise of Black intellectual thought in America in the late twentieth century with the struggle to establish a Black academy within Britain. My "calling card" for mainstream television was a six part series for BBC Religious Education, *Test of Time* (2001). This was my first full-fledge role as a documentary presenter and explored how the hard teachings of Jesus such as forgiveness, peacemaking and loving one's enemy were being played-out in six global situations. The film earned a British Academy of Film and

Television Award (BAFTA) for education. Next came *Blood and Fire* a rare excursion with the BBC's Black Britain Unit for *BBC 2* (2002). It was the story of Jamaican Independence from British colonialism with a focus on American destabilization of the Michael Manley led socialist project of the 1970s.

I returned to *Channel 4* in 2003 at the invitation of the new religions commissioning editor, Aaqil Ahmed, to present provocative explorations of religion and culture for prime-time evening viewing. These documentaries can be divided into three strands—church history, politics and religion, and culture.

The first strand is general church history but with an emphasis on insurrecting hidden themes. For instance, *Who Wrote the Bible* (2004) was a historical, critical examination of biblical authorship and its resource for a critical Christianity in Britain. Similarly, *The Real Patron Saints* (2006) deconstructed the hagiography of British saints to locate genuine unifying themes for the United Kingdom. The next four films were revisions of Christology. *The Secret Family of Jesus* (2006) explored the known relatives of Jesus and their place within the early Jesus movement. *The Hidden Story of Jesus* (2007) examines the reflections on Jesus in other faith traditions to build a broader inter-faith Christology. *The Secrets of the Twelve Disciples* (2008) debated the theology and politics of the disciples and apostles and *The Nativity* (2008) examined hidden as well as liberation readings of the birth narratives of Jesus.

The second strand represents political investigation. In these films, I examine national and global themes in order to offer alternative vision of social, historical or economic practice. Films such as *Empire Pays Back—Reparations for Slavery* (2005), *Ghetto Britain—Failures of Multi Culturalism* (2006), and *The Great African Scandal—How the West Impoverishes Africa* (2007), fall into this category. And, the final group consists of popularist conversations between religion and popular culture. For example, *God is Black* (2004) sought out the influence of Nigerian Anglicanism on debates over sexuality and gender in Anglicanism. *Gospel Truth* (2005) contoured the argument of an Ivy League music professor that African American gospel music has part of its musical DNA in Scottish Psalm singing. *Faith and the Fury—Hollywood Bible Films* (2005) was a cinematographic history of Hollywood's retelling of biblical epics and the emergence of an explicitly Christian film industry at the beginning of the twenty first century. *God Gave Rock and Roll to You* (2006) detailed the rise of popular music from the spirituals and gospel music, its rejection and later appropriation by Christian musicians.

There are a plethora of issues that arise from this work. As mentioned above as an academic, the tension between intellectual ideas and popular media has been a major concern. Similarly there are academic themes resulting from the dynamic process of doing documentary. Documentary is an art, the art of record, with its own aesthetic. All of which produces a myriad of ethical issues within film making practice. Finally, as a political theologian, I am interested in how documentary facilitates hospitality and creates new alliances.

In this exploration, I want to relate to all of these issues by making my focus the less obvious, but equally intriguing theme of non-verbal communication, specifically, the dress of the documentary presenter. On the surface such a proposition may appear trivial, especially if we consider traditional documentary unease with any interference with the art of record.[19] The idea of form over content or dress codes playing any meaningful role in the communication of events may appear a capitulation to the post modern hybridization and weakening of the form.[20] However, to my defense, dress has historically been one of the most important visual markers of religious commitment, class status and ethnic allegiance. Whether purists like it or not, dress is therefore consciously or unconsciously an additional layer of meaning.

In this case, I want to identify ways that a black suit is a site of struggle and multiple meanings but with the potential to be reinscribed to signify active radicalism.

Black Suit Matters

One overlooked feature of making documentary films in Britain is the freedom to signify in dress. Disinterested in wardrobe or presenter aesthetics apart from the obvious technical color clashes, documentary presenters such as myself are left with a small budget to buy something "appropriate" for the task. Within this theater, dress has tended to be inconsequential, but I have always believed it to be fecund with meaning. After all, for some time, symbolic interaction has informed us that appearance is critical to how we establish our identity, and dress as part of appearance informs others of the role we are playing.[21] This sensibility was at the forefront of my mind when I presented my first film for *BBC 2* in 2002, *Blood and Fire*.

I wore a navy blue shirt, beige trousers, and brown shoes. All purchased from a high street men's fashion retailer, *Reiss*. I thought this style to be a Black urban play on the middle class traditional academic "summer uniform" in England, but with what I considered a slightly more fashionable cut to the trousers and shirt. After broadcast, the

feedback from both BBC executives and audiences focused exclusively on the subject matter—the importance of revising colonial histories, diaspora engagement, and so forth. Nothing was said about dress. In contrast, in the first film I presented for *Channel 4*, *God Is Black* I wore a black corduroy suit throughout. Intriguingly, several e-mails I received after the film was broadcast referred to the fact that I was wearing black. This warrants further investigation.

So while it was clear that in the first program, I was playing an accessible academic role, what did the black suits signify? For some viewers it was inappropriate because at particular times, I was on location for part of the film in West Africa and therefore I should have worn something of a lighter color. Beyond fashion, others thought that the black suit was a symbol of clerical or "political affiliation." So, "are you ordained," and "are you an Afrocentrist" featured in some of the emails I received after broadcast. Similarly, but with a different tone, one Nigerian man wrote and said, "your cloths are black but your mind is European!" He took exception to the critical portrayal of an independent church in Lagos featured in the film and like many Black viewers interpreted critical assessment for anti-blackness.

Although, these considerations of a black suit may not be representative of all the audience response, the comments and reflections challenged me to think hard about how black dress in documentary reflects, even unconsciously, a situating of oneself in relation to others—a signal of what is really going on. For instance, was my dress a site for a subversive play on identity, politics and religion? Did it have the potential for exerting symbolic agency?[22] But there were other variables at work including hairstyle politics and audience ambiguity. Let me explain.

In both of the films in question, (*Blood and Fire*, *God Is Black*) I wore my hair in shoulder length dreadlocks. Dreadlocks have multiple meanings in contemporary Britain. Once, the sole preserve of Rastafarians, the style has been appropriated by soul culture (funky dreads) and White youths committed to alternative lifestyles to name a few. My desire to "lox-up"—wear my hair in dreads was an act of self-confessed rebellion, a desire to reclaim dreadlocks within the context of the "baldhead" Black Church. Also, it was a signifier, within the wider social context that black hair is beautiful without the need to relax or straighten it. It was not a retreat into an imaginary African identity, but rather a diaspora production, made in Jamaica and crafted in Britain.[23] In the context of the documentary, the bricolage of dreadlocks, black suit, and Black heterosexual male Christian opens up fields of semiotic enquiry where hair, dress style, gender and

skin color are projected into a world full of assumptions about Black men in suits. This leads to the matter of audiences.

I had learned prior to television work of the ambiguity at work in wearing dreadlocks and a suit. For instance, on one occasion, I spoke at a "well to do" sixth form in Birmingham to a group of middle-class young ladies attending the school. After the lecture one of the Black students approached me, to comment on my dress. She said that she appreciated the "juxtaposition of dreads and a suit, because it conveyed a really positive sense of blackness in the mainstream." But elsewhere this combination has had an opposite effect. For example, elsewhere I have described the experience of being overlooked as a university lecturer by a receptionist at a BBC office in London for a White motorbike courier who was dressed in motorcycle leathers. The receptionist thought he was "Dr Beckford." So, at best hairstyle is a "visual metaphor for identity" but it is subject to the cultural ambiguity of audiences and their interpretation of appearance.[24]

So what does it mean to wear a black suit in documentary and how might it be read as active radicalism? While aware of audience responses, by way of contrast and self-revelation, I want to state my intended meanings. My meanings emerge from the various contexts in which questions of dress have arisen and taken shape but they make their point of departure the critical awareness sought after in active radicalism. To this end, I seek to inscribe new meanings to recode these critical significations.[25]

HOLINESS SUIT

The first influence comes from my church upbringing. I wear a particular variation of the holiness suit when I wear a black suit.

I was raised in the Wesleyan Holiness Church in Britain, a Caribbean diaspora church that lived the factious intersection between its syncretistic Caribbean heritage and theological allegiance to its Euro-American denomination. A habitus, Diane Austin Broos terms the tension between the Africa rite and the missionary's moral orders.[26] In Wesleyan spirituality, dress is a code, a manifestation of the theology of the people. Consequently, modesty, propriety and sobriety were reflected in a dress management. The basic idea was to reflect the central doctrine of sanctification. To this end plain colors and simple dress was encouraged and monitored. However, ironically, simple dress for men at least meant wearing 1960s style loose fitting suits that at one point were fashionable in the secular world. Not only was there a "chronology of fashion acceptability," enabling

dress styles to one day be transformed into holiness attire, there was also a dialectical relationship between fabric and Sprit, both working on each other.[27] For instance, for the first generation of Holiness inspired West Indian migrants, dress codes were structured in opposition to the "rude boy" flamboyance outside of the church. Another and more controversial example of dress codes being fashioned as part of an ongoing dialectic was women's dress.

Special attention was given to female dress, leaving the denomination wide open to the charge of patriarchy and even misogyny. This is because modesty as an expression of holiness became synonymous with policing female clothing. I can recall a plethora of arguments between my mother and my sisters on Sunday mornings while they were getting ready for church. Ironically in the 1970s and 1980s women were not permitted to wear trousers in church—a trend reversed buy the male hierarchy in the 1990s. But they were less flexible over the covering of heads. Based on a literal interpretation of St. Paul's admonition, women were required to attend all services wearing a hat or scarf. Women inside the sanctuary without a hat were provided with one by church sisters! So on one level, a holiness suit came to symbolize an ethical straightjacket—a binding of a perceived dangerous female sexuality. But there were other features of the holiness suit that facilitate an appropriation of this signifier without buying into its historic relationship to misogyny.

This is because the holiness suit as part of Sunday dress was also "shot through" with hidden eroticism and subversion. Hidden eroticism refers to the ways that dress was also intimately related to rituals of pleasure. There was a certain delight and appetite for transforming the biological image to symbolize the otherworldly image. In front of many mirrors on Sunday mornings, these two horizons met in ceremony.[28] So, even within the confines of a strict moral code dressing up for church was fecund with experiences of playfulness and joy. It was also a site for subversion. Subversion refers to the identity politics particularly inter-generational conflicts that were expressed in arguments over dress style. On reflection for second-generation subjects such as myself, struggle revolved around fashion, specifically, how we could incorporate secular trends within the limited conventions, not always as an act of rebellion but also as an act of pleasure, to capture the "cool" of the "world." Practically, this meant wearing suits that reflected local tastes than continuing to import Caribbean church dress style. There was a two-tier suit system in operation. On one tier were the progressives who opted for the local styles with their softer lines and subtle themes. On the other were the conservatives

in 60s style Caribbean suits. Dress symbolized a cultural and theological divide. Capturing or appropriating aspects of secular fashion provided raw materials for a reworking of the black suit toward a disavowal of Caribbean traditions including the attendant patriarchy.

So for me, on one level, the black suit situates me within postwar African Caribbean Christianity in general and Black Pentecostalism in particular. It signifies a second-generation contextualization of holiness style to reinscribe newer more inclusive gender politics.

Political Suit

Dress as a signifier of political affiliation has a long history in the Caribbean diaspora. There is not enough time and space for an extensive survey here, but one feature emerging from late-twentieth-century Black Atlantic history is the collapsing of "race" and religion into militarism. For instance, we may consider the dynamic pseudo-army motif of Bedwardism and Garveyism or the beige khaki suit of Rastafari, as examples of militarism, religion and "race" in dress codes.[29] Within this experience of dress and style the body is presented as a political object to be worked upon and never completely finished. Within my personal history, the early 1970s was the point at which I became cognizant of the conflation at hand. I was conscientized by encounters with African American culture, particularly, the moments in black and white photographs and television coverage of African American political life (Civil Rights and Black Power Movements). Both the "Jesus army" of Dr. King and the "ethnic army" of the Black Panthers wore uniforms. In an age of anti-fashion[30] the military-politicization of black clothing (suits, leather jackets, etc.) were a reflection and radicalization of the world; the affirmation of all things black in order to exorcise its historic dehumanization. Ironically, these anti fashion statements have in the modern world been transformed into icons of fashion or "revolutionary chic" for nostalgia, commoditization and consumption. You can pick up a "mod suit" or "black panther" style leather jacket from every retro cloths store in every major British city. Further, another danger associated with this re-contextualization is the separation of the politics of fashion with the politics of gender (Black feminism). Sexism and misogyny were unsavory aspects of these insurgent Black liberation struggles and played a shameful role in the marginalization of women and weakened the political veracity and integrity of these quests for "freedom."

On this side of the Atlantic, black suits as a symbol of a quasi-militarism of Black struggle has emerged intermittently in Black

urban life and most recently in the 1990s with temporary rise of the Nation of Islam (UK). The religious-political dynamic of Black men in suits came to public prominence during the acquittal of the four men alleged to have murdered the promising Black teenager, Stephen Lawrence in 1993. The acquittal verdict was given in 2003 and led to disturbances outside the court. Although not involved in any trouble members of the Nation of Islam were in full view of the media and public in their dark suits and red bowties. Within the mainstream media with its highly racialized discursive practices, these Black men in suits were "read" as threat. Old English ideas of blackness as fearful and foreboding were collapsed into very new fears about the Islamic radicalization of Black youth. In contrast, for many Black urban youths the image of Black me in black suits represented, action, a show of force and a positive blackness.

So while my black suit may project back to an era of political radicalism, such nostalgia must, as Angela Davis suggests, recognize the cost, suffering, and complex historical contexts in which these images are formed. This is necessary to counter the nostalgic desire to reduce politics to consumerable fashion icons. Therefore my black suit is, on a second level, a signifier of being aligned to the historic struggle against *all* forms of structural oppression.[31]

Designer Suit

The final suit is the designer suit. In *God Is Black* one person that I interviewed on location asked me, "Where did you buy that suit?" She said that she liked the texture of the suit and wanted to know what design label it was. It was a Nicole Farhi suit. Nicole Farhi is a reputed French designer. This designer's more exclusive range is out of my financial reach, but this suit was part of a more accessible mid-range introduced in the 1990s. The question of the designer label, introduces the third understanding of the black suit, its relationship to global economics.

As a theologian and filmmaker, my spending power is above average and my social mobility reflects a general rise of status amongst many second and third generation African Caribbean Christians. However, I must confess that the Holiness tradition of thrift still lives with me and I was only able to spend the £350 ($700) in 2004, more readily than normal as the production company had provided the budget for wardrobe. Aesthetically, I really liked the design of the suit. The jacket was tapered which provided a sculptured fit. The lapels were thin and angular, complementing the single-breasted front. It was the

sort of design that provides early middle age men like myself, with a sense of elegance, class and the contemporary without having to pander to youth fashion. What impressed me most was its suitability for the task; hard wearing yet, providing me with a sense of authority without detachment or inappropriateness. Intriguingly, dressing up to film was akin to dressing up for Church and consequently added to my denominational orientation of always being "in the Spirit." However this approach to the designer black suit is not the dominant reading within African Caribbean Christian circles.

A questionable relationship between designer suits and Black male Christians in Britain has become a feature of early twenty-first century life with the emergence of a more prosperous middle class and the influence of prosperity doctrines. Prosperity doctrine is part of a collection of ideas that form the basis of the Word of Faith Movement in North America.[32] Put simply and somewhat crudely, prosperity doctrines centre on the importance of financial management in the life of the believer and some suggest that material blessing as a sign of God's favor. Within this new order, a Christian man in a well-dressed suit takes on a new meaning, that is, an exemplar of divine favor. This view runs counter to the holiness tradition and its commitment to the St. James' exhortation to *not* favor the well dressed who enter the community of faith so as to avoid pandering to rich and powerful over and against the poor (James 2). Sadly, this very ancient "reversal of status" motif in Jewish literature is subordinate to translations of Malachi 3:10. This text is interpreted as a timeless law designed to secure the believer's material prosperity.

But we should not reject the various levels of agency reflected in prosperity doctrine and the complex theologies at work here. For instance, in Britain, Pentecostal writer Mark Sturge has argued, material advancement amongst poor African and African Caribbean subjects must be interrogated in relation to the desire to establish a financial platform to secure social and political influence for future generations.[33] However, Sturge is not sufficiently critical of the rampant capitalism and rabid individualism that often accompanies capitulation to the worst excesses of this doctrine. There is a certain irony if not contradiction at work when those who have been devastated by global capitalism uncritically embrace it. As Dwight Hopkins has argued in a world beset by new forms of economic imperialism fronting as globalization, a commonwealth ethic is required. Commonwealth asserts the need for mutuality, sharing of resources and communality to challenge the exploitation on which much of the global economy is built.[34]

While the aspiration of second and third generation Black Christian subjects is embodied in the designer suit, for me it is the commonwealth values that are foregrounded. More specifically, I have taken it upon myself to pour financial resources gained from film work back into development projects in West Africa as a way of acting out the alternative economics signified in the designer suit—"to whom much is given, much is expected."

Play

To some extent reflecting on a black suit this way is play, a seeking out of the playful aesthetics at work in a black suit. By play, I am referring to it in a carnivalesque sense that is, how a black suit signifies covertly and is therefore a form of deception. There is however, a danger with always reducing Black expressive forms to instrumentality as opposed to assessing its aesthetic quality and form. For this reason, I have asserted the "aesthetic." The aesthetic also signals elements of delight, the erotic and pleasurable in cultural forms.[35] So playful aesthetics opens a broader field of meaning.

To conclude, the homology of my black suit, locates me in relationship to the propriety of the Holiness tradition, the revolutionary cool of Black Nationalism and within the conflict zone of contemporary, middle-class, Black, urban church dress. What is clear from audience response is that even within a world of arbitrary and antonymous signifiers, there is still a limited opportunity to express agency through dress, in this case the social and structural themes exhibited in active radicalism. But, rather than being mechanical, it is arbitrary. So, I will continue to wear a black suit as nonverbal communication to augment the struggle over values that lie at the heart of black religion in Britain and also in my films.

Notes

1. By dress, I mean all the ways the body is used in the expression of identity.
2. Diaspora is a complex notion and my intention here is to make use of Floya Antias's view of diaspora as a society process where: "…a connection between groups across different nation states whose commonality derives from an original, but may be removed homeland; a new identity becomes constructed on a world scale, which crosses national orders and boundaries." See: Antias, "Evaluating 'Diaspora': Beyond Ethnicity?" *Sociology* Vol. 32, No. 3. (August 1998): 557–580.

3. I am thinking here of the work of Dianne M. Stewart in *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
4. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
5. Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
6. William Calley, *God's People: West Indian Pentecostal Sects in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 39.
7. Ibid., 134.
8. Iain MacRobert, *Black Pentecostalism, Its Origins, Functions and Theology.* Ph.D. dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1989, 458.
9. Valentina Alexander, *"Breaking Every Fetter?" To What Extent Has the Black Led Church in Britain Developed A Theology Of Liberation?* Ph.D. dissertation, University of Warwick, 1997, 1.
10. Ibid., 227.
11. Ibid., 251.
12. Robert Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostal: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 2000).
13. Robert Beckford, *God and the Gangs: An Urban Toolkit for Those Who Won't Be Bought Out, Sold Out or Scared Out* (London: DLT, 2004).
14. G. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 61.
15. Stuart Hall, "What Is the Black in Black Popular Culture?" In *Black Popular Culture*, editor, Gina Dent (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1992), 24.
16. Toney Sewell, *Black Masculinities and Schooling: How Black boys survive modern schooling* (London: Trenthan Books) 170–171.
17. See Robert Beckford, "House Negro, Field Negro: New Positions in Theology and Culture," in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Theology and Popular Culture*, editor, Gordon Lynch (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007).
18. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
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8

A Dialectical Spirituality of Improvisation: The Ambiguity of Black Engagements with Sacred Texts

Anthony G. Reddie

For many Black people, their general theism and theology enable them to hold a dialectical perspective on reality.[1] The concrete and explicit is not all there is. Talk of Black religious traditions and sensibilities calls to mind the work of such scholars as Albert Raboteau[2] and Robert Hood.[3] Their work is characterized by a pervasive sense of the work of the spirit(s) within Black life. The spirit offers different ways of knowing,[4] and provides an alternative, parallel reality to the concrete nature of the immediate built environment that most commonly confronts us.[5]

I am aware of the tension within Black religious and theological discourse surrounding the relationship between the spirits and the Holy Spirit. The latter is contained within a distinct Christian framework that is often seen as being an anathema to or simply distinct and separate from the former.[6] Recent ethnographic research, in Africa for example, is beginning to tease out some of the complexities of this discourse.[7]

Whilst I accept that for some, more evangelical Christians, the collapsing of Christian and other forms of spiritualities is problematic, I will not be abiding by such orthodox Christian strictures in this work. Drawing on the work of Hood[8] and more recently, Dianne Stewart,[9] I will work with the clear intentionality that the spiritualities of Black people extend way beyond the often constricting limitations of Hellenistic influenced orthodox Christianity. But having

said that, I need to acknowledge my own positionality; as a Christian Black liberation theologian and religious educator.

I was born into and have been socialized within a Christian Caribbean home of Jamaican migrants to Britain. I have chosen to give you these bare facts by way of an introduction because to understand my approach, commitment to and dare one say, sheer enjoyment of Black-religio cultural production; one needs to understand something of the context into which I was nurtured. My mother in particular, was (and remains) a committed Christian.

Growing up in a Daisporan Caribbean household was a fascinating experience. The world that was inhabited by my parents was one that was separated from the wider arena of White working-class life in Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK. My parents, in order to shield themselves and their children from the ongoing shadow of racism that seemed to stalk the lives of Black migrants living in Yorkshire, constructed an elaborate internal universe of ritual, belonging, and best of all, family that was to be our bulwark against the harshness of the outside world.

In this self-enclosed world, living in the back room of our terrace house that also served as a dining room and a kitchen, my parents told of a magical world that was back home in the Caribbean. It was a world punctuated by seemingly "exotic creatures" and extravagant, idiosyncratic characters. This was a world that captured my imagination and that of my three siblings. The storytelling capacity of my parents and their peers was one of juxtaposing the ordinary and the extraordinary in the one narrative structure. African American Womanist scholar Elaine Crawford argues that long before Jürgen Moltmann promulgated the notion of eschatological hope as the foreground for Christian theology,[10] one could witness the experiential practices of African women as purveyors of a theology of hope.[11] Similarly, I would submit that prior to the emergence of "Magic Realism"[12] as a category in post colonial literature, African Caribbean people, such as my parents, were offering a nascent practice of this very same theory. The religio-cultural storytelling and the narratives of my elders were examples of a conscious dialectical spirituality in which the struggle for truth between often competing realities and notions of self were always clearly in evidence.

The best of times in the relatively small, close-knit community of African Caribbean migrants in Bradford were those moments when members of the extended family and other close friends would visit our home and, over the course of several hours, myriad stories would ensue; each told with panache and liberal amounts of jocularity. It seemed like a magical time. In many respects it was.

I have chosen the informality of narrative encounters within our familial home as the repository for this dialectical spirituality as the church that we attended on most Sundays was a very Eurocentric patrician High Wesleyan Methodist Mission, in which the phenomenon of cultural dissonance and Black existential concealment were readily apparent.[13] In short, as Black people, we knew that this church was not the place to "let it all hang out." So it is in the familial home that I locate the central features of this dialectical spirituality.

What I took from this world of storytelling and colorful narratives was the importance of being able to tell a story and hold the attention of an expected audience. The great champion storytellers were my Mother and my Auntie "Dotty,"[14] my mother's only surviving sister. These two individuals were the special women in my early life, and they were very different. My aunt was strident, ebullient, and headstrong, whereas my mother was more quiet, reflective, and circumspect; but both of them were united by an amazing ability to tell a good story.[15]

Witnessing the elders in my family and wider community waxing lyrical as they told stories from the dim and distant past and those of a more recent vintage, I learnt one of the central truths of Black cultural life; namely, that the Diasporan Black religio-cultural world was one of painting vivid pictures and images in the mind of the listener.[16]

Black religion and its resultant spiritualities was one where the listener was inspired by tails of another mythic world. The power of inspired oratory transported the listener to "another space and time." When the elders in my family were regaling their younger charges with dramatic stories of "back home" (in the Caribbean), it often felt like you were there whilst the narrative was unfolding. "Back home" (in this case, the Caribbean island of Jamaica) remained a mythical and tantalizing reality not unlike the notions of home in post colonial literature,[17] the eschatology of Black Christianity[18] or the powerful notions of homeland for the exilic people of Israel in the Hebrew scriptures.[19]

The power of this narrative was that it held in dialectical tension the realities of the "now" (life in inner city Bradford, West Yorkshire) and the "not yet" (the anticipated hopes of post colonial return to the seemingly romantic idyll of the Caribbean) in a manner not unlike the often perilous balancing acts to be found in normative Diasporan Black Christianity. African American religious scholar, Lawrence Jones contends that the notion of "hope" within Black Christian religious communities possesses two essential dimensions. It is a

dialectic, between the here and now and the promises of eternity—the struggle for truth between the immanence and transcendence of God.[20] Lawrence Jones continues by stating that

> The Black religious community has not had the luxury of dichotomizing faith and work, or religion and life, or the sacred and the secular. This is surely one beam of light it has to cast. The interface between time and eternity has always defined an area of tension in the Black religious community, the hopes of which have been directed to both.[21]

Given the age stratification in this cultural environment, children were mostly invisible, in that they were rarely seen and certainly not heard. These cultural and community orientated events were most definitely adult oriented affairs. Whilst I was rarely permitted to share any of my stories in these settings, I began to appreciate their formational qualities, as I realized I was being inducted into and socialized within a religio-cultural world view that was markedly different from my White peers at the local school I attended.[22]

As the elders congregated in the "front room" and we younger folk were banished to the more mundane climes of the back room, my siblings and I would occasionally peek our heads around the door in order to get a glimpse of the adults at play. Peering through the gap in the slightly opened door I saw my parents and their peers laughing, joking and expressing their exuberant and defiantly hopeful selves in a manner that so rarely found expression in their more public identities in the wider society of Bradford.

People who so often were repressed and diminished by the forces of racism and economic and societal struggle were, in this particular setting, wonderfully expressive and self conscious entertainers. In effect, the Black elders in my family could hold in tension the struggles and travails of this, the material world and the glories and potential of the spiritual world.[23] This dialectical balance of holding together the immanent and the transcendent has been both the "curse" and the "gift" of being Black in world where that very Blackness was a pernicious construction of Whiteness and White hegemony. Black people have long learnt the art of being dialectical improvisers![24]

DuBois and *Double Consciousness*

The notion of competing realities is not a new phenomenon for Black people. This was first detailed by the great W.E.B. DuBois in his now classic text *The Souls of Black Folk* first published in 1903. DuBois

detailed a phenomenon he termed "Double Consciousness." In using this term, DuBois was speaking of the struggle evinced within African American people to reconcile two opposing realities at war within the Black psyche.[25] This dialectical struggle was one between competing notions of truth, whether determined by a self affirming internalized form of subjectivity, what Pinn calls the quest for "complex subjectivity"[26] or an all embracing externalized form of negation and objectification. DuBois' most memorable comment in this book that has to a great extent helped to define Black Diasporan discourse was that the "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line."[27] In the first instance there is the internal vision of a self that is positive and clothed in the garment of belonging and self-affirmation. This internalized vision is juxtaposed alongside the external world of White hegemony in which that same Black self is denigrated, demonized and disparaged. These two "unreconciled strivings"[28] have continued to fight their tumultuous struggle within the battlefield of the Black mind.

Within the Africa Diaspora, the religious and theological developments within the life experiences of the disenfranchised Black working-class—who I have described as the voiceless[29]—has been accomplished by a variety of means. This study argues that one of the means by which Black people have sought to challenge their ongoing dehumanization is through a dialectical spirituality, in which seemingly oppositional concepts and modes of thinking are juxtaposed and held in tension; much in the way in which jazz musicians use improvisation to hold together disparate and competing musical phrases and sources.

In this chapter, I want to show how a dialectical spirituality that is at play within Black religio-cultural production has been used to subvert White hegemony, but can also be employed as a means of engaging with sacred texts; in the context of my ongoing work, principally the Bible. This form of dialectical spirituality is amplified when viewed through the prism of jazz music and the practice of improvisation. Improvisation provides a compelling thematic and methodological framework for enabling Diasporan Black people to utilize their dialectical spiritualities in order to move beyond the traditional and unhelpful binaries and rigidity in how they often engage with the Bible.

For the irony that confronts many Black Christian religious scholars such as myself is the dichotomy that exists within many Diasporan African Christian religio-cultural contexts; where a playful dialectical improvised spirituality as witnessed in storytelling,[30] music,[31]

dance, and drama[32] is replaced by a rigid Biblicism when it comes to Holy Scripture. I want to argue that repeated attention to the dialectical and improvised qualities of Diasporan African life can reopen the seemingly rigid and inflexible approaches to our Black Christian engagement with the Bible, which seem to be an increasingly common phenomenon across the world.[33]

Although I am arguing for a more self-conscious, deliberate articulation of dialectical spiritualities as a means of affirmation and empowering of the Black self, I would argue that this mode of resistance has been one of the primary means by which Black people constructed a creative strategy of resistance to the dehumanizing tendencies of White supremacy over the past five hundred years. In effect, it is not a new thing!

My utilization of jazz, as opposed to the Gospels or the Spirituals is an acknowledgement of the plurality of Diasporan musical cultures as a means of indicating the intimations of Black spiritualities.[34] I must stress, however, that the writer remains nonetheless, a Black Christian theologian and religious educator, and so my task in constructing a dialectical and improvised approach to reading sacred texts will be affected by means of an engagement with the Bible. In effect, my plural and hopefully, inclusive cultural lens will still carry a strong confessional Christian, Biblical base.

Jazz and Improvisation

My assessment of the improvisatory qualities of Black religio-cultural life has been undertaken in order to provide a substantive underscoring for the next section of this chapter, namely an outline of the basic features of Jazz music and improvisation. I am arguing that the seemingly esoteric reflections on jazz music are not disconnected from the ways in which Black people have improvised with the environment in which they have been located as a means of engaging with the challenges, absurdities and the gift of "second sight"; that is the reality of double-consciousness as it has faced them.[35]

One of my extra curricular activities is listening to jazz. Sadly I do not play and my technical sophistication in musical terms does not extend much beyond "that sounds great" and "I know what I like." I have always admired the creative virtuosity of jazz musicians.

All great jazz musicians are able to straddle that delicate balance between that which is given and the newness of each performance or individual encounter with the tradition, which in turn, yields new insights and knowledge. In metaphorical terms, this delicate process

of living with the tensions of creating "the new" from the "already established" has been likened to the art of standing on a high backed chair and pushing that object onto two legs and seeing how far one can push and retain balance before you lose control and fall onto the floor.

Jazz musicians are constantly reworking an established melody in order to create something new and spontaneous for that split moment in time in mid performance. Duke Ellington once remarked that there has never existed a jazz musician who did not have some inclination of what he or she was going to play before they walked onto the stage.[36] One's improvisation is never totally created or made up on the spot. One does not create new art in a vacuum. All jazz improvisation is a negotiation between what has been conceived previously and what emerges in that specific moment, either on stage or in the recording studio. All great jazz has its antecedents.

Jazz music is a potentially rich paradigm for all people involved in the task of doing, reflecting upon and writing theology. I make this claim with one principal thought in mind—namely, that jazz music represents both the best and worst in human nature. It straddles the contradictions between a group of intensely fierce individuals who come together to join forces to make music.

In my research I have spoken with a number of jazz musicians. From conversations with these persons, plus my reading of auto- and biographical literature, I have seen the ways in which the collective that is the jazz ensemble represents all the challenges of being an individual, as is the case in our personal existential relationships with God, alongside the perennial tension of being an individual alongside others. The latter is the challenge of attempting to share the same space and time with others, with whom you are called work in co-operation and mutuality—the others you are called to love, but whose personality may drive you to distraction—or drink, drugs and even violence. The litany of fistfights, feuds, vendettas and sheer enmity within jazz bands is legendary. This tension of being an individual with one's own relationship to the Divine and the need to engage with others is summed up in Jesus' great injunction to "Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength" and to "love your neighbor as you love yourself." Those twin injunctions sum up the working dilemma of every jazz group there has ever been. It is the working dilemma of every community on earth there has ever been. It is the tension at the heart of the Kingdom of God.

Jazz music is a voluntary engagement, for it is a form that eschews rigid conventions or categorizations. It demands mutuality and

community, and yet it has, since the early 1920s, been built around the searing geniuses and contradictions of brilliant soloists. It is free form and yet demands certain rules and conventions working alongside and with others—those with whom one might not possess any sense of empathy or love, save for the act of making music in that split moment of time.

Jazz represents the tension between time and eternity; between immanence and transcendence; between the sense that art is created within and through context, and yet it appears to carry within it the traces of inspiration and magic that comes from another space and time. When theologians investigate the contradictions of individuality and community, between being bound by conventions and yet being compelled to go beyond all that is known and accepted as given, one is dealing with the most fundamental of existential concerns.

The questions jazz poses are concerns for Christian faith and for all humanity. What does it mean to improvise on a given melody? How far can one go before what you are creating is no longer faithful to the melody and sources that inspired the artist in the first instance? How inclusive can we be? Can anyone join, or do we have or need certain limits or boundaries to help define who or what the band or the community is meant to be and become?

Many scholars have shown that jazz music is not just an inconsequential art form; rather, it is a depiction of the most central concerns of human identity and existence in the twentieth century. Jazz music is part of a rich musical heritage. Older Black musical traditions, like the blues, spirituals, hymnals and gospel music, have offered us a rich tapestry of cultural production through which the theologian can mine in order to discern the liberative impulse of God. Jazz music has become an integral part of this crucial matrix.

My use of jazz as a signifier for the dialectical spiritualities of Diasporan Black people is a commitment to the serious task of creating a framework in which all people are enabled to become participants in a process of critical thinking, reflection and then action.[37] Just as the jazz ensemble is a exercise in power-relations in terms of competing egos within wider framework of the group dynamic; so too, I believe, is the sense that the dialectical spiritualities of Diasporan Black peoples is both an individual and a collective affair. One of important tropes of jazz is the dialectic between the individual and group. Solos take place within the context of the group ethic. In the western practice of rock music, drummers are rarely appreciated. Drummers, especially thinking of Ringo Starr for example, often get a bad press. And yet in jazz, not only are drummers the bedrock of the rhythm section,

but in the case of the late great Art Blakey and before him Chic Web, drummers have even been known to become Band leaders.

In linking the aesthetics of jazz music to the practice of reading sacred literature, is to engage in a form of practice in which participants are enabled to improvise upon a written text and then explore it for new meanings and theological connections. In this work, I have attempted to create a model of theological exploration in which all persons are active participants.[38]

Getting Beyond the Old Dichotomies of "Evangelical" versus "Liberal"

The beauty of improvisation, as I have hopefully demonstrated, is the facility it possesses to get us beyond the traditional and dare one say the sterility of perennial arguments around evangelical and liberal approaches to Christian theology.

Improvisation within jazz music is neither stuck with the seeming rigidity of past, represented by tradition, or with the perceived relativism of late and post modernity. At the heart of the debates surrounding evangelical and liberal approaches and interpretation of Christianity, lays the often thorny problem of Biblical authority. Yet, Vincent Wimbush has illustrated, until quite recently, Black people have not been consumed by such arguments surrounding the literal or more allegorical interpretations of the Bible.[39] For Black people, a dialectical spirituality has enabled us to hold in tension seemingly contradictory and hostile approaches to sacred text.

Prior to the 1940s and 1950s, Black peoples' engagement with the Bible was not characterized by sometimes arcane arguments around doctrine and metaphysical postulations. Rather, the critical question was, what was going to alleviate our suffering and how did the Bible attest to God's solidarity with poor Black people in the past, in order that the future could be redeemed?[40] This point is amplified by Vincent when he writes

> African Americans interpreted the Bible in light of their experiences.…As the people of God in the Hebrew Bible were once delivered from enslavement, so in the future, the Africans sang and shouted, would they. As Jesus suffered unjustly but was raised from the dead to new life, so they sang, would they be "raised" from their "social death" to new life. So went the songs, sermons and testimonies.[41]

One can assess the truth of the art of being faithful to the source but playing the melody in a new way, which is at the heart of

improvisation, by acknowledging John Coltrane's celebrated recording of Hammerstein and Rogers' perennial favorite, *My Favourite Things* made famous by the motion picture film, *The Sound of Music.*

The creative improvisation of Coltrane can be seen in the dramatic iconoclastic work of James Cone, the "Founding Father" of Black theology. James Cone argues that the central motif within the metanarrative of the Bible is that of God's revelation in human history, exemplified in Christ, in order to liberate from oppression all those who have been *denied a voice.*[42]

Many marginalized and oppressed peoples have read and interpreted the Bible in light of their own context and experience. They have done so in order to locate the overarching truth of God's revelation in history. This process has involved them looking within and behind the text in order to locate themes that attest to the reality of their existential condition. Writing with reference to the exodus motif within the Bible, which remains an emblematic theme for Black people in South Africa during the epoch of Apartheid, Robert Beckford writes

> For Blacks it was paradigm (Exodus) of how God was going to set them free from the political bondage.... Given the dangers of bias, ideological approaches to the text require a high degree of self awareness and also sensitivity to the bias within the biblical text and the context of the reader. Greater awareness forms part of the checks and balances of reading a passage of Scripture ideologically.[43]

Within the context of jazz music, the musician as I have outlined previously, is not limited by the notation or the exactitude of the melody as he or she has received it. The art of improvisation is a challenge to find new meaning and phrases to transform an existing melody, without departing from the original to such an extent that the previous incarnation is obliterated. In effect, it is the delicate synthesis of bringing the new from the old—bearing witness to what has gone before, but not being limited or constrained by it.

The need to bring new meaning and fresh insights from the Bible, whilst remaining connected to the traditions that have informed the collective whole that is "Holy Scripture," has always been the high challenge presented to Black preachers, for example. It is the challenge to "bring a fresh word" for the immediate context without doing violence to the text from which one's inspiration is drawn.[44] Essentially, I am arguing that Black preachers within the ongoing

dynamic that is Black worship are improvisers and that improvisation provides a helpful framework for helping us to move beyond the limited binary of evangelical and liberal arguments around Biblical authority.

Improvisation allows us to play with the dichotomy of being faithful to the spirit inherent within the Word of God, without locking ourselves into rigid positions that assert that the WORD has to be taken literally and is inerrant.

So, utilizing a jazz hermeneutic can enliven our contemporary approaches to preaching and interpretation of the Gospel. Perhaps, of greater import, when allied to broader questions of Black spiritualities, it can enable ordinary lay people, many of whom are Diasporan Africans living in racist contexts such as post colonial Britain or the United States, to become improvisers themselves.

They can be enabled to find the courage to play an inherited melody with new vigor, imagination and panache; and most importantly, to own that playing as their own creation. In the words of Jesus, they will find the courage to be so inspired that their improvisational will harness the indwelt Spirit of God in order that they might discover life, and that this life might be experienced in all its fullness (John 10:10).

After all the verbiage and rhetoric, what we are left with, in terms of articulating an improvised approach to rereading Biblical texts with marginalized Black peoples, is the essence of jazz improvisation itself. This essence, as befits the whole nature of improvisation is one of dialectical tension and contradiction.

For many, the tensions and contradictions in terms of jazz improvisation can be found in the very human figure of the great Louis Armstrong. To some, Armstrong is something of an embarrassing anachronism. Any man who can submit himself to stand next to Bing Crosby of all people and allow the latter to take the major role in a travesty of a film entitled *Birth of the Blues* deserves all the brickbats coming to him. And yet, when you listen to Armstrong's seminal 1927 recording of *West End Blues*, many people, such as myself will argue that there must be a God who exists within and beyond the human frame, but also that that God is most definitely Black. Jazz music can offer creative and challenging ways of opening up the scriptures in a manner that gives due recognition to the past without reifying it or limiting the Bible to ahistorical form of pseudo idolatry.[45] Let us not forget that many of us worship a living God and not a dead, fixed book!

A Jazz Inspired Black Theology Approach to Bible Study

The final section of this chapter is premised on the basis that Jesus can be likened to a jazz musician.[46] He responded to the challenge of bringing to life innovative perspectives from the tradition in order to respond to the current context in which he was immersed. This was the challenge (indeed it is an ongoing one) of attempting to preserved the integrity of the former whilst giving life to the latter. It is the power of responding to circumstances in such a way that the "giveness" of the context is radically realtered and something startling and new emerges. Whether it is Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite women (Matthew 15: vv 21–28) or the rich young man (Mark 10: vv 17–22), the engagement with others inspires Jesus to bring about new insights and learning. This engagement is one that straddles the tension between that which exists (the tradition of Judaism) and that which is becoming (the reinterpretation of that tradition).

This final section offers a Black theology, jazz-inspired rereading of a Biblical text that is aimed at challenging adult religious educators and others charged with helping ordinary Black people to engage with and interpret the Bible. As a Black theologian and a religious educator, I am often dismayed at the extent to which many Black clergy and professional lay Christian educators often collude with Black congregations by refusing to challenge the apparent dominance of fundamentalist and literalist readings of Biblical texts. This final section offers an alternative take on how one can reread Biblical texts in a spirit of dialectical improvisation.

We begin this rereading by considering the importance of contextual engagement. Just as the jazz musician must engage with the context in which he or she is located, so too must the Bible study leader.[47] For the jazz musician the context in which they might be performing, even if it is within the same club for an audience that might have heard this composition before, perhaps only some few hours previously, there is still the challenge of trying to say something new in this situation. No two performances are ever the same, because people and how they respond to the time and space in which they are housed at the precise moment in time is never the same.

The context in which the performance is housed is a unique cocktail of numerous pressures, expectations and needs. The good musician is not only aware of these subtle nuances within the context, he or she responds to them, utilizing this stimulus to create new art from within the midst of existing knowledge and truth.

The Bible study leader in this respect is no different. If we are leading a Bible study in the power of the Holy Spirit, the dynamic interchange between the various elements that co-exist in that time and space should ensure that our work is never stale.[48]

Rereading Luke Chapter 8: 40–48

One of the great challenges facing all our Christian faith communities is the challenge of trying to find relevance from the task of reading the Bible. The Bible remains central to the faith of virtually all Black Christians.[49] How can those of us who are charged with leading Bible studies become so energized and inspired that we find new ways of opening up the scriptures for the adults and children we may lead?[50] In this, the final section of this chapter, I want to offer a Black theology reading of Luke chapter 8, which is informed by a jazz inspired approach to Improvisation.

My reflections upon Jesus as a jazz improviser are drawn from a Black theology rereading of Luke Chapter 8 and Jesus' engagement with the woman hemorrhaging.[51] From my improvised perspective of Jesus' actions in this text, I want to highlight a number of substantive themes.

First, Jesus is close to the action. He is within the crowd, not distant from it. Jesus' improvisation involves being emotionally and physically involved with the context in which he finds himself.[52] In effect, Jazz necessitates that one is engaged with the social and cultural milieu in which you are located. This very intentionality of Jesus acts as a counterbalance to the noncontextual and often abstracted theologies of predominantly prosperity led practitioners of Black Christianity as seen in the likes of Creflo Dollar[53] in the United States and Matthew Ashimolowo in the United Kingdom.[54] Jesus engages with the context in which he is located, in a real and embodied way and does not retreat into spiritual banalities as a means of avoiding being labeled "political."[55]

Although jazz has often been characterized as intellectually or cognitively based; there is no doubt that the best jazz musicians commit themselves wholeheartedly and holistically to the enterprise, that is, their work and art is both a cognitive and an affectively based enterprise. Jesus' actions in this text, like the best of jazz musicians, are those of commitment. It is to commit one's whole self; one's heart, mind, soul and strength—to be a proclaimer of the "Word of God," in the midst of the business of the world and the contextual struggle in the lives of people.

In the passage, Jesus is on public display. He does not confine his work to a happy band of carefully chosen acolytes who will reinforce his every action and agree with the sentiments of all his pronouncements. For all jazz musicians, there is the challenge of offering their art to the public gaze. The hours, months and years of practice are undertaken with the precise aim of offering that art and craft to the public. The sanctity and safety of the rehearsal room is not the end in itself but simply the preparatory context before the all important public declaration of truth on the stage.

Looking at Jesus' actions in this text in light of a jazz process of improvisation is to recognize the challenge of being vulnerable in the self-conscious glare of the public.[56] Jesus' actions are visible in front of all comers, when he engages with the woman. Similarly, taking Jesus' lead and those of innumerable jazz musicians, a Black theology reading of this text, and the Bible as a whole, should lead its practitioners and adherents to accept the challenge of engaging in a public act of truth seeking and truth telling in terms of one's engagement with the Biblical text and with others as we mine the "Word of God" for meaning in the contemporary situation.[57]

Jesus' public engagement eschews any sense of the closed binary of "them and us" that seems to characterize aspects of the worse forms of self-congratulatory, overregulated forms of holiness inspired versions of Black Church practice and Black Christianity, as a whole, across the African Diaspora.[58]

With all privileges there comes responsibility and even vulnerability. One cannot hide. One is called to speak truth. While we are naturally governed by the framework of established doctrines and the discipline of the tradition into which we have been authorized or socialized, one, as an individual is called to make ourselves vulnerable as we enable others to engage with the Good News of Christ. And that can be a place of vulnerability.

Such vulnerability emerges when we consider the potentially unpalatable nature of Jesus' actions as they witnessed by the many observers and bystanders within that context. Let us not forget the context of this story. Jesus is on his way to attend to a very important man, the leader of the synagogue—a man who would no doubt have been very grateful to Jesus and his movement if he healed his daughter. I am sure that all the disciples wanted Jesus to attend to Jairus' daughter. No doubt the crowd wanted to see what Jesus would do when confronted with this kind of expectation.

Yet, in the midst of the business, Jesus stops and deals with this anonymous woman—a woman who is ritually unclean, therefore an

outsider—someone who is beyond the traditional cultural and religious niceties of the wider community and society. Jesus improvises like a jazz musician within the context, responding to need, and in the process of this performance, brings about new insights and learning.

The challenge of reading the Bible from a Black theology perspective, inspired by the aesthetics of jazz improvisation is one of being *consistently prophetic*.[59] Confessional Christian Black theologians, such as myself, undoubtedly believe that the Gospel of Christ is good news for all human kind, but one has to be sufficiently honest to acknowledge that it is bad news for some. A Black theological reading of the Bible, carried through the prism of a jazz hermeneutic[60] is an ideological form of hermeneutical practice that challenges the casual ethnocentric and ecclesiological certainties that belittle, oppress and marginalize some people over and against others.[61] Such a Black theology rereading challenges the notions that some people are created more in God's image than others. It challenges those who feel that some people belong more than others. It challenges those who think that some people are a part of the "us" and others who are different are a part of the "them."[62]

For those who think that some belong, and deserve to be noticed, that is, the Jairus' of this world, but others can and should be ignored because they are unclean or seemingly not worthy, that is, the woman who was bleeding, this text can and should be an immense challenge. In terms of the woman, I read her plight in hermeneutical terms as a Black gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered person who is seen as "beyond the pale" due to her social condition.

A jazz inspired reading of this text, in which Jesus is seen as a jazz musician, challenges us to think again, what we mean by the bounded nature of our theologies that still work on the binaries of "in" and "out." A Black theology jazz improvised reading suddenly challenges us to reassess who is upset by the "Good news" of Christ. Is it those who think they are on the inside, with their cultural taboos tolerated and affirmed, or those on the so-called outside, who suddenly find themselves acceptable and welcomed? For all these people in the former category, a jazz inspired and dialectical Black theology rereading of this text is bad news, because it is a disturber and a denouncer of all that they hold to be true.[63]

A Black theology reading of this text can open up new ways of seeing established and well worn patterns and practices. It is my hope that this form of hermeneutic, following Jesus' example as an improviser, can open up new possibilities for many Black Christian communities in how they engage with sacred texts, particularly, the Bible.

Jesus' actions remind me of the genius of many great jazz musicians whose dedication to improvisation opens up new possibilities for us all. Utilizing a dialectical spirituality in which single trajectory truths are rejected in favor of improvised multiple perspectives, is to draw upon Diasporan African cultures and traditions, particularly as they are applied to sacred texts, in order to learn new ways of reusing old tricks.

NOTES

1. See Anthony G. Reddie, *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue: Inside Looking, Outside Looking In* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 170–203 for further details. Some material and ideas from this chapter is presented in that volume.
2. See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
3. See Robert E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?: Afro-cultures and God-Talk* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990).
4. Cheryl Bridges, Johns, *Pentecostal Formation: A Pedagogy among the Oppressed* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 62–137.
5. Robert Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostal* (London: SPCK, 2000), 168–182.
6. Peter J. Paris, *The Spiritualities of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 27–57.
7. Brigid M. Sackey, "Spiritual Deliverance as a Form of Health Delivery: A Case Study of the Solid Rock Chapel International," *Black Theology in Britain: A Journal of Contextual Praxis*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (May 2002): 150–171.
8. See Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?*
9. See Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
10. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 1967).
11. See A. Elaine Brown Crawford, *Hope In The Holler: A Womanist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2002), ix–xvii.
12. See Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang, *A Companion to Magical Realism* (Woodbridge, UK: Tamesis, 2005).
13. See Anthony G. Reddie, *Nobodies to Somebodies: A Practical Theology for Education and Liberation* (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2003), 11–13.
14. It is not uncommon for many Caribbean people to be given "pet names," which become the popular means of identification of the person, oftentimes, in preference to their given "Christian" names.

15. See Anthony G. Reddie, "An Unbroken Thread of Experience," in *Family and All That Stuff*, editor, Joan King (Birmingham, UK: National Christian Education Council [NCEC], 1998), 153–160.
16. See Carol Tomlin, *Black Language and Style in Sacred and Secular Contexts* (New York: Caribbean Diaspora Press, 1999), 103–124.
17. See Richard Werbner, editor, *Memory and the Postcolony* (London: Zed Books, 1998).
18. See Lewis V. Baldwin, *Towards the Beloved Community: Martin Luther King JR. and South Africa* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1995) for excellent analysis of Martin Luther King's Christian eschatological vision, juxtaposed alongside the Black anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.
19. See Richard Coggins, *The Book of Exodus—The Epworth Commentaries* (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2000), 3–8.
20. Lawrence N. Jones, "Hope for Mankind: Insights from Black Religious History in the United States," *Journal of Religious Thought*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall—Winter, 1978): 59.
21. Jones, "Hope for Mankind," 59.
22. See Caryl Philips, *The European Tribe* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 2.
23. See Anthony G. Reddie, *Faith, Stories and the Experience of Black Elders* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2001).
24. See James W. Perkinson, *White Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 51–114.
25. See W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1st published in 1903] (New York: Banton Press, 1989), 3.
26. Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 82–107.
27. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, xxxi.
28. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3.
29. This term is used to invoke the sense of powerlessness and invisibility that affects Black British people in the United Kingdom. "We" are invisible to the wider society, particularly in terms of religious or cultural significance. The all embracing hegemony of Whiteness, on which Englishness is predicated (see Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* [London: Hutchinson, 1988]) excludes the important contributions Black people have and continue to make to the body politic of the nation. This invisibility is secured on the basis of Black people being "other" and thereby lacking any authentic sense of belonging to Britain. This sense of being "other" and not belonging is exacerbated when one considers the tendency to pathologies of the Black self, linking Black presence to structural and societal ills like crime, illness, unemployment and educational failure. In order to find a working heuristic for this ongoing phenomenon, I have constructed a notion of Black in Britain being "voiceless." This methodological and thematic construction is explored in more detail in a recent book *Dramatizing Theologies: A Participative Approach to Black God-Talk* (London: Equinox, 2006).

30. For an assessment of the dialectical and improvised qualities of religio-cultural African Caribbean storytelling see my previous book, Reddie, *Faith, Stories and the Experience of Black Elders.*
31. See Robert Beckford, *Jesus Dub: Theology, Music and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 2006).
32. See Reddie, *Dramatizing Theologies.*
33. Beckford, *Jesus Dub*, 130–144.
34. To this list I would also add Rap, but I am less familiar with this musical tradition, and so have confined my interests to jazz. For a helpful study that engages with the spiritualities of Rap see Anthony B. Pinn, editor, *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).
35. See Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 157–179.
36. Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *Jazz: A History of America's Music* (London: Pimlico, 2001), 290–291.
37. This theme is addressed in greater detail in Reddie, *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue*, Chapter 6.
38. See Anthony G. Reddie, *Acting in Solidarity: Reflections in Critical Christianity* (London: DLT, 2005). See also Reddie, *Dramatizing Theologies.*
39. Vincent L. Wimbush, *The Bible and African Americans: A Brief History* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 63–70.
40. Wimbush, *The Bible and African Americans*, 19–46.
41. Wimbush, *The Bible and African Americans*, 24.
42. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco, CA: Harper-San-Francisco, 1975), 62–83.
43. Robert Beckford, *God and the Gangs* (London: DLT, 2004), 102–103.
44. Ermal Kirby "Black Preaching," *Journal of the College of Preachers* (July 2001), pp. 48.
45. See Clive Marsh, *Christ in Focus: Radical Christocentrism in Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 2005), 57–60.
46. See Reddie, *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue.*
47. For an excellent example of responding to the Bible contextually, see R.S. Sugirtharajah, editor, *Voices from the Margin* (New York & London: Orbis/SPCK, 1997).
48. See Sean Freyne and Ellen Van Wolde, editor, *The Many Voices of the Bible: Concilium* (London: SCM Press, 2002).
49. See Anthony G. Reddie, "Editorial," *Black Theology: An International Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1: 8–9.
50. I have attempted something of this sort in terms of my previous work. See Anthony G. Reddie, *Growing into Hope*—2 volumes (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1998). See also Reddie, *Nobodies to Somebodies*, 53–57.
51. This rereading has been informed by Womanist Theology. See Delores Williams *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

52. See Robert Beckford "Theology in the Age of Crack: Crack Age, Prosperity Doctrine and 'Being There,'" *Black Theology in Britain: A Journal of Contextual Praxis*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (November 2001): 9–24.
53. See *http://www.creflodollarministries.org/* for further details of his ministry. Accessed January 5, 2009.
54. See *http://www.kicc.org.uk/* for further details of his ministry. Accessed January 5, 2009.
55. See Robert Beckford, "Theology in the Age of Crack: Crack Age, Prosperity Doctrine and 'Being There,'" *Black Theology in Britain: A Journal of Contextual Praxis*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2001): 9–24.
56. Many theologians of spoken of Jesus as the "Wounded Healer" whose vulnerability reaches out to others who themselves are also vulnerable and broken. See Henri J.M. Nouwmen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (London: DLT, 1994).
57. This is staple "ingredient of the task of Practical Theology." See Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action* (London: SPCK, 1996), 118–135.
58. I have addressed elements of this phenomenon in a previous piece of work. See Reddie, *Acting in Solidarity*, 45–53.
59. For excellent example of this see Gerald West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa and New York: Cluster Books and Orbis, 1991).
60. See chapter 6 of Reddie, *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue*, where I outline in more detail the process of undertaking a jazz inspired approach to undertaking Black theology.
61. See Harry H. Singleton, III, *Black Theology and Ideology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 47–67. See also Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins, editors, *Loving the Body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) for an excellent exploration of the limits placed on Black people by the Black Church in terms of its prohibitions around sex-gender sexual relationships and sexuality as a whole.
62. This form of reading has been inspired by Kelly Brown Douglas' recent book *What's Faith Got to Do with It?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), where Brown challenges the traditional Christian imperial hegemony that is built on an adversarial closed monotheism.
63. This has been the central task of Black theologians such as James Cone and Womanists such as Jacquelyn Grant, both of whom have a strong Christological focus to their theological method. See Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 108–195. See also Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (Atlanta, GA: Scholar's Press, 1989).

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Africa

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The Aesthetic Dimensions of Religion in South Africa: Africa Initiated Churches Considered

Linda E. Thomas

The Broadway Play "The Color Purple," based on Alice Walkers' book by the same title, if interpreted through a theistic lens, serves as a striking example of the questions and core of theological aesthetics. The play unveils a storyline about a fourteen-year-old African American girl named Celie who endures tremendous acts of violence, abuse, and cruelty. At the same time, the play posits an uncomfortable, poignant, and surprising "thesis," if I may use that word, that there exists beauty not only in the midst but in the very thing or person that is either experiencing or committing an action that by any stretch of the imagination would be considered horrible. I would argue that the "The Color Purple" is a play replete with a theology of aesthetics that presents the thesis, beauty exists in unexpected places and circumstances. This thesis serves as an apologetic for the issue of theodicy at best, or, minimally, as a way of suggesting that dignity and beauty exist precisely in spite of violence, denigration, and deep suffering.

Two scenes from this Broadway show illustrate a theology of aesthetics. The first is the opening of the play where people of African descent are in worship on a Sunday morning. It is a scene that ignites and liberates the spirit of the audience. The lives of Black humanity smitten with the everyday challenges of life are liberated through an authoritative message that we too are made in God's image and likeness and beauty.

The second scene, for me and millions of others, is central and powerful. Celie who throughout her life had been called ugly and forced to live an ugly reality of being a slave first to her abusive father and then to her husband now sings a song titled, "I'm Here." Though others have called her ugly, she sings, "I'm beautiful, and I'm here." This song pushes Celie to a new stance in her life and her human agency propels her forward to act on the beautiful life she builds from the ashes of ugliness. It takes years for Celie to become conscious of her God-given beauty, but when she becomes conscious of it nothing stops her. She is saying, "I am here so you have to get use to it. Trying to destroy me with violence and insults will not work. I am here not because of you but because of God." Celie's ability to see beauty in spite of her own suffering presents a message of life's energy able to rise in spite of unspeakable suffering. It also suggests something slightly more disconcerting, on some levels, that in the very essence of that which may not be pleasing to the eye—ugliness, beauty (and God) are visible to the discerning eye. The one, who has eyes and is able to see, does so perhaps because of one's own experience of suffering.

That is a theology of aesthetics. That is what this chapter will present. I will examine a theology of aesthetics that will argue for the healing power of being able to see, experience and create beauty in the face of tremendous suffering. It is not a theology of glory. It is not a simplistic or naïve attempt to make light of suffering or to legitimize it just because beauty may be created and exists in it. As an African American theologian and anthropologist, let me be very clear about that point: Suffering of the oppressed is never legitimate. It is never legitimate and is always to be resisted. A theology of aesthetics is one way that persons forced to live with immense suffering can accomplish two things: survival and resistance.

That is what I will demonstrate in this chapter by sharing the lives of people very far from a Broadway play. They are at the opposite ends of the earth in many ways. I will present the history, theology, and ritual practices of Africa Initiated Churches (AICs), churches where the most oppressed of the oppressed, the poorest of the poor in South Africa developed and practice a theology of aesthetics that creates beauty in the very same world where they live, survive in spite of, and resist forces that create very ugly systemic and personal suffering.

I argue that the theology, practice of hospitality and corresponding rituals used in worship and healing services create beauty amid ugly and dominant structural poverty. I define beauty as a force that emboldens people to live daring, determined, and intentional lives

even in the face of life-threatening and morally reprehensive systems of ugliness that would otherwise eat them alive, steal from them their dignity and wrest from them their agency. I explore the ways that a theology of beauty functionally and historically has given rise to understanding and actions that empower, electrify, and grant agency to individuals and the entire community of adherents of AICs.

My research investigations and fieldwork in South Africa commencing in 1985 to the present provide the following definitions for the purposes of this chapter. First, religion denotes institutionalized expressions of belief in the sacred—the interaction of spirituality with humanity and all of creation. Second, ritual signifies repetitive practices to interact with the sacred. Third, empowerment suggests the ways people trapped by systems of poverty perceive their positive agency resulting from their aesthetic experience with the sacred.

The History of African Initiated Churches: General Trends

I begin with the history of AICs, will move to an examination of AIC theology, then move to rituals that express that theology and close by demonstrating ways that both theology and ritual combine to create an embodied theology of beauty.

The dominant social force that birthed the AIC tradition is structural poverty resulting from racism embedded in the system of Apartheid. Apartheid was brutal, it was racist: Its effects are long lasting. Structural poverty—whether chronic or transitory—impacts greatly the economic asymmetry among the classes within South Africa. Black South Africans have long lived under a regime of forced structural poverty. Everything from land rights to wages, access to education, healthcare and employment have been structurally constructed to limit, reject and deny their acquisition by Black South Africans. Of course, it began long before Apartheid. Indeed, this racial discrimination has its roots in the arrival of Christian missionaries. Andries Du Toit in an article titled, "Chronic and Structural Poverty in South Africa: Challenges for Action and Research," writes: "Ten years after liberation, the persistence of poverty is one of the most important and urgent problems facing South Africa."[1] Writing an article whose aim is to expand the accepted wisdom and approaches to poverty studies, Du Toit makes a distinction among terms used interchangeably for the poor. For example, the "chronic poor" are people who are cyclically destitute or underprivileged throughout their entire lives and whose offspring have a high probability of being poor and living in

the cycle of poverty as well.[2] They are folks "who have benefited least or are likely to benefit least from economic growth and national and international development initiatives."[3]

The large numbers of people who experience chronic and long-lasting poverty in South Africa leads the Chronic Poverty Research Centre at the University of the Western Cape to posit that "poverty is proving to be much more intractable than initially hoped."[4] The legacy of inequality left by the system of apartheid continues to cause unimaginable oppression upon the racial majority who are poor. The grim picture is that "inequality has increased and . . . the benefits of growth have not reached the poorest of the poor."[5]

Chronic poverty is tied to the class position one has in a society. That is to say, people are poor for extended lengths of time because of their structured position, that is, their place in society as it relates to their ability to retrieve resources and as it relates to with whom they come into contact. In other words, social contacts provide social power. People whose incomes fall below the poverty line do not have equal power relationships with those with social or economic power. Clearly it places Black South Africans into disproportionate levels of material poverty. Thus, structural poverty has racial and cultural dimensions. Probing further along this line of investigation, we note the intensified racial feminization of poverty among Black South African women forced into adverse economic and social conditions. To appreciate the grueling daily impact of material poverty in South Africa and throughout the continent of Africa and the African Diaspora, find out where and how women live. The poorest of the poor are the ones who have formed the core base of AICs. As anthropologist and theologian, I have, for over two decades, observed the clear, deep, and positively structural implications of poverty that has its roots in racism and the abhorrent consequences of Apartheid and its aftermath. I have also seen the clear, deep and positively life-changing effects of a theology and accompanying rituals of survival and resistance that occur among the poorest of the poor adherents of AICs.[6]

I will focus the remainder of this chapter on the primary site for my research, St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission Church, an AIC founded in 1952 by Mother Christinah Nku of Evanton, South Africa. Predating Martin Luther King, Jr. by a century she had a vision of equality and equity for all people—even the poor. There emerged from her dream a denomination that has come to be the second largest AIC in South Africa—over 2 million people engage in rituals of healing for mind and body.

From this context, rose a religious movement and theology of beauty, led by Mokotuli Nku. Theologically, Mother Nku made a conscious choice to elevate portions of the traditional Christian story to suit the needs of her parishioners. She also made a conscious choice to re-imagine the Christian message, to accommodate to its primary tenets without assimilating fully to its dogma and doctrine that would have crushed if not destroyed the elements of African religion, had she adhered to missionized Christian orthodoxy.

Her theology of beauty and the rise of AICs, I argue, were and are so successful for at least three reasons. First, she insisted on incorporating into AIC theology traditional, non-orthodox Christianity. The rituals, traditions and theologies of African religion would not die with the advent of Christianity. This, I argue, has given legitimacy, empowerment and agency to the poorest of the poor, The Black South Africans that she served and her denomination continues to serve. Second, Mother Nku insisted on selectively choosing portions of the orthodox Christian story to encourage, support and perpetuate. Third, Mother Nku, above all, practiced the prehistorical art and theology of the Hebrew Scripture; that is to say, hospitality. Collectively, Mother Nku developed a theology that honors the specific history of Black South Africans apart from Christianity, while at the same time adapting the central messages of Christianity to support the specific life situation and experience of her adherents.

St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission Church: Theological Considerations

The core of Mother Nku's theology lies in the central message of imago dei. It is not a new concept. Surely it is a component of orthodox theology. However, historically orthodox theology has subtly, sometimes not so subtly, been interpreted in thought and deed so that some members of humanity are made more and others less so in God's image. The case for this has been well documented by Womanist and feminist scholars, especially those who have shown that when the imago dei portion of the Christian story is woven with the rest of the story, men end up being the head of the household, rulers of churches, dictators of government and, by nature, the most God-like. Black and Womanist theologians and historians have long added the precursor "White" to the notion that men are, by nature, the most natural and ordained leaders, that their imago dei is a little brighter and comes with a natural superiority. Such racist, sexist theologies leave Black South Africans with the message of being less than: less competent, less able, less capable and

less beautiful than their White counterparts. Such ordained rights to power emerged from Christian tradition and supported the regime of Apartheid, at the expense of countless Black lives.

Mother Nku reclaimed the notion of imago dei from those who abused it and retold the message in ways that promoted the beauty, dignity and equality of all people. While to us today that message seems obvious, for Black South Africans, living under unjust systems that constantly and penetratingly tell them that they are absolutely less than beautiful, less then the complete embodiment of God's own image—this message is radical. It is life-giving. It does make survival possible AND resistance righteous.

Nku gave primacy to the message of imago dei. She did not negate the rest of the Christian story, such as sin, guilt, forgiveness, and redemption. But what she chose to do was elevate the core message that she thought to be the most life-giving, the most immediately empowering and life-changing for her adherents. That message is one of absolute dignity and unqualified beauty. For people forced to live in poverty, abject, inhuman poverty, the message of utter sinfulness and the need to submit and sacrifice would not energize, would not encourage Black South Africans to stand tall, and certainly would not promote behavior to resist the systems that called them ugly, unworthy, and ill-equipped to act as the equals of White persons.

Instead, they heard through Mother Nku a positive message that effectively empowered her adherents to believe that they were worthy of and entitled to food, shelter, and clothing. Her unwavering message that Black South Africans are unabashedly, unequivocally, un-irrevocably and absolutely made in the exact image of God rooted her listeners in an ideology that is unmistakably ruled by personal dignity, human rights and collective empowerment and ultimately, agency—in the face of external political, social, economic and cultural realities that tried to say and do the opposite.

The message of imago dei, as reinterpreted or refocused by Nku was not the only difference between hers and other traditional orthodox Christianities. She also made central to her theology of aesthetics the intentional inclusion of non-Christian African beliefs and practices. She understood the necessity of poor Black people indigenizing the gospel in the local cultures suitable for Black folk. That is why she combined a reinterpreted missionary Christianity from Whites with the cultural contours of African sensibilities. For instance, Nku synthesized the prophetic role of the Hebrew Scriptures with the diviner's hermeneutic found in African cultures and religion. Hence propheting (i.e., speaking the truth about a particular situation;

telling a person truths about their lives and/or predicting their future) became a central ritual whereby the church pastor speaks truth by telling congregants about the causes of their sickness and instructing them about what types of sacrifices to ancestors are required. At the same time, propheting could entail advising church members to pursue traditional biomedicine prescriptions.

An additional manifestation of embracing Christianity within the cultural particularities of poor Black folk is shown in the combination of the worshipping of Jesus and the veneration of African ancestors. Jesus is viewed as an ancestor, that is, one whose spirit is present and alive beyond the expiration of the body. At the same time, the doctrine of the trinity is not of central importance because children are not equal to their parents in most African cultures. Thus, Jesus could not possibly be equal to God. Just as Jesus assumed a central place within the belief, cosmology and adoration rituals of Mother Nku's Christianity, so did veneration of African ancestors. The latter had passed over into the spirit realm and were, thus, closer to and in more direct communication with God. The living Christians among Nku's adherents did not forget obligations and ritual symbolizations owed the ancestors because those recently dead acted as intercessors on behalf of the living with Jehovah or *Thixo*, the indigenous name for the Christian God for Xhosa-speaking people. Therefore, Jesus and the ancestors located themselves within a Christian and indigenous pantheon which proved essential to the rituals of healing and conversations between God and humanity.

The full-fledged and equal integration of both orthodox Christian doctrine and African traditions is important to clarify. It is not simple assimilation of a few customs into a dominant Christian doctrine. Nku's religion carries the name Christian but it is not merely a carbon copy or an epiphenomenon of White missionary doctrine and principles. On the contrary, I suggest that it should be understood to be a religion where neither African nor Christian orthodoxy dominates. Rather, it is a religion that emerged from a confluence of both traditions into its own AIC.

As the Union of South Africa became an apartheid state and the genocide of Black people more overt, Nku's church grew rapidly and congregations spread all over South Africa and across its borders. Nku's ministry expanded, while her church grew, through the establishment of schools for children and programs for youth and adults. People's lives were transformed and this directly benefited the community. Nku's ministry was subversive in that it functioned as a "hidden transcript,"[7] which was a response to systems that dominated the poor. According to

medical anthropologist Mamphele Ramphele, "apartheid" as a system "effect[ed] people's sense of well being along a continuum."[8] Though there were a variety of responses to apartheid, the ministry of Nku was the medium through which poor people disempowered by a brutal state system "talked back" through voices and in rituals and with a theology that denied the oppressor power and that was distinctly African and Initiated and Christian.[9] From this theology rose ritual practices and AICs as places of healing and hospitality.

RITUAL PRACTICES AS RESPONSE TO APARTHEID

In addition Nku created successful practical strategies for survival for subalterns suffering within a world classifying them as bestial servants for White supremacist privileges. St. John's Church became a shelter for the homeless, even though homes were no more than shacks that barely withstood the cold wet winds, especially in areas such as Cape Town, South Africa. Community members from far away distances literally interpreted St. John's as a hospital for healing and many sought sanctuary there from sicknesses before and after visiting mainstream doctors. In fact, in my years of fieldwork at St. John's, not one person interviewed ever stated that the church's rituals of healing ever failed them. The unemployed also gravitated to the church because those without a livelihood perceived St. John's as a rock in a weary land comprised of an always welcoming extended family atmosphere—a place where Black South Africans could come regardless of circumstance and, in many ways, exactly because of circumstance, not only to hear a message of human dignity and being made in divine likeness, but to be treated as such.

Likewise Black South Africans traveling from rural to urban areas utilized the church as a loving and familiar way station, a beacon of refuge and hope—a place where before and after facing the brutal realities of life within a nation ruled by White supremacy—Black folk could hear a different message and experience beauty in spite of the ugliness that governed the rest of their journey.

Nku did more than preach and more than welcome. The community also built itself around extended emphasis on bodily rituals. The bodies of Black people afflicted with manifold illnesses, undoubtedly rooted in the stressful social situation in which they lived, came to St. John's to be physically and immediately resurrected—in this life—from the death-dealing system of racial discrimination, through the healing rituals and the community that Mother Nku provided.

Nku developed rituals around one of the most basic natural elements, water, as an all encompassing remedy for spiritual and material illness among poor Black South Africans. Nku situated her survival and resistance ministry at the micro-local level of individual healing. For her the weapons of faith were the rituals of healing. Rituals, again, by definition from my research and for purposes of this chapter are: repetitive acts that connect humanity with the sacred. Rituals of healing took on a strict regiment of purifications and spiritual discipline for Black South African shack dwellers.

Everyday of the week she held Christian healing services. Members of the church and surrounding communities seeking relief from polluted environments (whether polluted from the material effects of apartheid or from lack of spiritual connections to one's ancestors, family, or community) came to her St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission Church to undergo the rigorous regimen of water prescriptions in the form of drinking, bathing, vomiting, and enemas. Spiritual and regularized rituals became manifestations of faith.

The rituals at St. Johns are particularly and exactly located in the body and among the community. Embodied healing and physical ritual function to achieve two results. First, they honor the adherents' bodies, Black bodies, as they are. It reinforces the central tenet of the theology of beauty: that Black Africans are indeed made in the image of God, here, on this earth. Second, the rituals—because they are embodied—conflate and collapse orthodox Christianity's incessant and permeating propensity to separate mind from body. At St. John's, mind and body are one. There is no need to escape the body and every need to see and experience the unity of one's self with one's hands, intestines, shoulders, mouths and torsos. In the spirit of her theology of imago dei, the message is "I am, as a Black South African, here and now, created in the very living image of God." With my hunger pangs, with my tired feet, with my eyes that have seen evil and ears that have heard ugly words—and now, too often, with the HIV virus attacking my cells daily, at St. John's I hear that all of me, all of those things that I feel, taste and touch in my body, these things I am physically and viscerally experiencing as the living image of God.

The critical role of these rituals and specifically that they are embodied cannot be overstated. When Black South Africans forced to live within structural systems permeated by racism demonstrate through ritual that Black bodies are beautiful, it reinforces a framework that says "I am worthy." "I am valuable." It counters the still prevalent dualism that stains orthodox Christianity and was (is) used

to enforce racist practices. That is, Nku's theology rejects any notion of platonic dualism between mind and body. It rejects the vastly promulgated and proselytized theology that souls are what "really" matter, that in the bye and bye, people are equal. Instead, and in severe opposition, the theology and rituals practiced at St. John's claim that immediately and fully, Black South Africans in bodies, right now, are exactly equal, precisely beautiful, and unequivocally deserving of the rights and privileges afforded to their White counterparts. Dualism does not fit. People are embodied; people are bodies, and bodies, as fully containing the image of God, matter most at St. John's.

Despite the circumstances, despite the political, social, and economic realities that send messages that Black bodies, Black persons, are somehow less than with imago dei a little less bright, St. John's stands as a place alive with messages, ritual and social action that ensures survival and empowers resistance. St. John's embodied rituals and emphasis on fully visceral and specifically Black imago dei function as a powerful theology of beauty, life-giving and community-building beauty in the midst of abject poverty, forceful discrimination, and ugliness that rears its head at every turn.

Augustine, in *City of God,* spoke about, hinted at, in his own lingering yet vastly imperfect theology, and identified the complicated relationship of beauty in things labeled as ugly, or considered unworthy, or called destructive. He wrote, "divine providence admonishes us not foolishly to vituperate things, but to investigate their utility with care; and, where our mental capacity or infirmity is at fault, to believe that there is a utility, though hidden,…which we all but failed to discover."[10] Granted, he was talking to his peers of assumed privilege about how to look at those things that had not been considered beautiful. I use it here as a way of speaking about the theology embodied at St. John's. If I were to rephrase Augustine, to fit the theology at St. John's, it would say that "divine providence admonishes us not foolishly to vituperate things—including ourselves—but to investigate our utility with care—and see and know deeply in the marrow of our bones that we are beautiful. We are valuable. We are dignified. Though our beauty seems hidden from too many in our racist surroundings, we will never cease knowing that we are living and breathing and moving as God's image on this earth, in this place, and this discovery will cause us to survive and resist the ugliness with which we must live." The press for indelible beauty, the ability to see it, feel it, taste it and hear it until we know it fully and it changes our world, is at the core of Nku's theology.

Concluding Thoughts

I opened this chapter with a discussion of the Broadway play, "The Color Purple." Although Broadway seems far from the lives of the poorest of poor in South Africa, the play is brilliant at communicating the wild and unruly confluence of simultaneously existing notions of beauty, dignity, depravity, terror and injustice that are timeless. "The Color Purple" is unrelenting in showing the complexity of violence, immorality, depravity, tenderness and beauty wrapped, rolled and exploding in the vivid experiences of lives. That confluence, this intersection, where life's atrocities are rightly named but do not negate life's beauty even in the midst of tremendous and life-stealing ugliness is not only the story of a play, not only the story of the AICs. It is, if I recall, the central story of the Christian heritage. To this end, I suggest that a theological aesthetic, whether translated through ritual or in performance on stage, is core to the Christian tradition and made marvelously manifest in the lives and through the rituals among the people—the Black African people that comprise the community of St. John's and who survive and resist any message other than that they are perfectly created in God's image and absolutely beautiful.

Notes

1. Andries Du Toit, "Chronic and Structural Poverty in South Africa: Challenges for Action and Research," CCSR Working Paper no. 56 and PLAAS Chronic Poverty and Development Policy Series, no. 6, CCSR Working Paper no. 121 (Cape Town: Chronic Poverty Research Centre. University of the Western Cape, South Africa, 2005), 2.
2. Ibid., 4.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 5.
6. Linda Thomas, *Under the Canopy: Ritual Process and Spiritual Resilience in South Africa* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).
7. See James C. Scott's, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992 [1990]) for a detailed cross-cultural presentation about subalterns' response to power and domination.
8. Ramphele, August 12, 1992, personal communication.
9. See bell hooks' *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989) for more detail about the ways that subordinates are empowered when they speak truth to authority.
10. St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. M. Dods (Edinburgh, UK: T.&T. Clark, 1872), xi, 22.

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Aesthetics in African Art: Implications for African Theology

Elias K. Bongmba

In this chapter I argue that to appreciate aesthetics in African art, one needs to consider the function of an art object in addition to theories of beauty. I also discuss the implications of this view on the construction of theological aesthetics.

The idea that aesthetics deals with beauty and knowledge is well known, but what is needed in my view is a broader perspective on aesthetics available if one takes art to include functionality. Mathew Kieran has argued a proper perspective on aesthetics ought to include the experience and articulation of judgments, evaluation, and appreciation of works of art including the opinions people form about the work.[1] "We," Kieran writes, "talk about, amongst other things, doing justice to a work [of art]; the vividness or richness of experience involved; the originality of a work; the imaginativeness of the artists; the expressiveness, beauty, or poignancy of a work; savoring or delighting in our experience of a work; and what we may learn from it."[2] In other words, the notion of aesthetics is not limited to beauty alone. Works of art shape human experience, imaginations, emotions, their perception of the world, and their perception of other people. Kieran has also argued that one can understand aesthetics from within aesthetics or outside it; that is think of aesthetics as a process of articulating a systematic view of "things like the nature of imagination, emotions, artworks and how we engage in them." He also refers to this perspective as an integration approach that brings together metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, and pre-theoretic phenomenology.[3] Aesthetics as a philosophy of art involves a triad: "(1) Creator and the conditions

of creation; (2) Nature and identity of the aesthetic art/object [and] (3) the appreciators, conditions of appreciation."[4] Aesthetic qualities are both objective and subjective. At the subjective level, judging an artwork beautiful could depend mainly on the subjective feelings that the work evokes in an observer although observers do not always have knowledge of art from different cultures.

My work in this chapter focuses on the first dimension of Kieran's aesthetic triad—creators, and especially the conditions under which works of art are created. I further limit the focus of this chapter to the purpose for which certain works of art are created in order to argue that the function of a work of art cannot be ignored in aesthetic considerations. The idea is that in the African context where one could identify certain works as religious or ritual art, one would have to think about the function of that particular object, a process that would affect ones opinions about the beauty or the "charming" qualities of the object to its viewers.[5]

Some studies of African art have overemphasized a one-dimensional view that African art is mostly ritual and religious. I think Dr. K. C. Anyanwu overstates his case when he argues that what is significant about African art is not style but the meaning and the religious ideas that have influenced the production of art.

> The metaphysical roles in African art come from myths which are the timeless sources of African thought. The ancestral world, for example establishes a link between the temporal and spiritual forces. . . . Religion, art and music are some of the mechanism for understanding and expressing the life-forces of the non-visible world. The artist re-creates the forces of the myths and society expresses them. His artistic works have to resemble the mythical forces.[6]

This metaphysical and mystical interpretation of African art ignores the argument that Africans create art that may not have anything to do with the religious. Although I argue that the function of art, especially its religious function, gives us a richer perspective on aesthetics, seeing African art as merely religious is a limiting perspective that does not reflect the artistic tastes and transactions that go on in different African communities. It is important that the religious and nonreligious dimension of art be held together and in doing so, one should not dismiss the religious meaning and the power of an art object to deepen life in a profound manner. Paul Tillich said it well when he argued: "Art indicates what the character of the spiritual situation is; it does this more immediately and directly than do science

and philosophy for it is less burdened by objective considerations. Its symbols have something of a revelatory character while scientific conceptualizations must suppress the symbolic in favor of objective adequacy."[7]

While one can compare ideas across cultures, it is also the case that artists and patrons of art in each community often invest objects with meanings about the past, present, and future activities of that community. For example, one cannot understand much of Yoruba art without taking into consideration its history, rituals, festivals, divination, and public manifestations that honor ancestors and divinities.[8] In effect, ideas of beauty cannot be analyzed in isolation. Here while aesthetics must be understood as broadly as possible, and this includes style, decoration, and size, the function of the art remains crucial for understanding aspects of aesthetics that may not fit the norms of beauty in other communities, especially in the Western world. Therefore, an aesthetic quality such as beauty can be informed by context. In addition to the context, the process of making an art object also offers clues about aesthetic sensitivities in some African communities.[9]

In general, when an object is called beautiful, it might be in reference to the appearance of the object. The beauty of the object results from the work of the artist who in addition to carving or sculpting the object, has worked to refine, polish, and shape the work to fit the viewer's perspective on beauty or meet the criteria of proportionality. Others may say that something is beautiful because it evokes either a feeling of pleasure or pain. For some people beauty might reside in the realism of a work. In the case of a work of fiction, claiming that the work is pleasing might be a reference to the story line, its motif, themes, construction of characters, the events, or the language that the artist employs in telling the story. Thus, I may say the *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ is a beautiful work. I imply that she has used the epistolary style of writing effectively to communicate a variety of themes such as death, polygamy, extended family relations, or the sustaining power of the Muslim faith in difficult circumstances.

Aesthetics is not a mere abstraction but rather points to a concrete work of art, and a particular reaction to the object. In his studies of aesthetics in the Guro and Atutu areas, Hans Himmerlheber found that clients sometimes rejected a mask if they thought that it was not beautiful.[10] If a client thought the work he or she commissioned was not beautiful, the client would pay only part of the price on grounds that the finished work did not meet his or her expectations. People based their judgments on the "beauty of line and power

of expression."[11] In cases where a client commissioned an object to honor a relative, the client who found problems with the work always argued that the work did not conform to the likeness of the relative that is being honored.

Vandenhoute proposed a criterion of beauty that focuses on symmetry with the vertical axis, balance, "rhythm, and harmony between the various masses, surfaces, and lines."[12] The view he has proposed reflects what some people mean when they describe art as making, decorating, or designing. Design is part of the artistic vision and creative process in the Equatorial region of Africa. Jan Vansina, a long time scholar of the Central African region has argued: "Among the Kuba . . . design is the essence of artistic activity; there is no Kuba term for art, but there is one for design *beiin,* and it seems crucial to their aesthetics."[13] Aesthetics therefore involves creation, design as well as the instrumentality of the work.[14] The idea that a work is instrumental suggests artistic intention, but such a view of intention does not rule out the fact that an artist can also create work spontaneously.[15] However, there are also times when the aesthetic quality of an object could indeed be the outcome of the accidental, or what Allen Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts describe as the chancy aspect of aesthetic photographs out of which flows the concrete, solid, and the eternal as the case of the photograph of Amadou Bamba. Therefore, aesthetic quality can also grow out of artistic intentionality.

In a detailed interview with Yoruba artists, Robert Farris Thompson found that they employed specific vocabulary to articulate the aesthetics and criteria of excellence in sculpture.[16] He listed nineteen criteria among which was *jijora,* which refers to resemblance of the object to the subject, and artists told him that figures ought to look like somebody, even thought they do not have to be portraits of specific people. Barry Hallen, a philosopher and a student of Yoruba aesthetics, while agreeing with the methods used by Thompson, claimed that Thompson had exaggerated some of his proposals.[17] From the Thompson study we know that *Ifarahon* refers to visibility and refers to a clear formation of the work from the beginning to the end. *Didon* refers to luminosity, a criteria which requires that the work should have a proper balance of light and shade. *Gigun* refers to the symmetrical balance of the work. *Odo* refers to the representation of the subject in the prime of his or her life, but one that also includes coolness. *Tutu* refers to absence of violence. In *The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful*, Hallen criticizes the view that arts and crafts provide our only criteria for beauty at the expense of other cultural values.[18] The Yoruba people use the idea of beauty when they talk about art

but also use it in human relations: "In virtually every account of the term, however, *ewa* or beauty as a physical attribute was rated superficial and unimportant by comparison with good moral character *iwa rere,* as a…form of inner beauty."[19] When aesthetics refers to the beauty of objects, it is recognized that artists and creators of art use devices such as color, newness, the artists' finish, and other decorative devices to make the work appealing.

Aesthetic qualities are also found in works that some consider strange, ugly, frightening, repulsive, grotesque, or hidden.[20] These features depart from conventional views of aesthetics, which tend to focus on beauty. Art that has such characteristics may be disturbing, but it also has qualities that compel attention from observers and scholars.[21] Studying or reflecting on such art offers an opportunity to take in the message or the different aspects of the world, which that art proposes. In African art, some objects that are considered strange often have a deep meaning and reflect different aspects of human relations. What might be repulsive or "hidden" may hold meaning that brings the community together.[22] The "strangeness" of a work of art often invites observers and interpreters to ask questions about the object itself and the world represented by the object.[23]

Functionality as a Marker of the Aesthetic

I have claimed that the function of a work of art contributes to its aesthetic dimensions. Even what some people may consider ugly works broaden our notion of aesthetics in different ways that are not subordinate to beauty as we think of the aesthetic experience. Therefore, the instrumentality of art shapes its aesthetic qualities. Daniel Biebyuck has argued that the Lega people use the term *bwami* to describe a sculpture as "good" if that work fulfills its function.[24] There are several reasons why works which some people might call ugly are created and considered beautiful.

First, some of these works underscore the authority of rulers and their disciplining power. Bangwa masks in Cameroon are examples of works that some people might consider grotesque, yet these works are beautiful because the mask's function is to create fear and call attention to the power of the council or the chief to punish transgressions.[25] In this case, Bangwa masks that do not look beautiful are very acceptable and appreciated by the community because they create fear and move the people in the community to be law abiding. Members of the community know that if they do not carry out their

obligations, they will be punished. The object itself may not inflict punishment, but the object sends a message that if people do not change their ways, they can expect retribution. In some communities people contend that the ultimate authority to discipline belongs to the ancestors who continue to influence the governance of the community. People hold festivals to honor the ancestors. These festivals which bring members of the community together and are often aesthetic performances whose importance lies not only in the materials that are used, but in the convergence of two worlds, the visible and the invisible world. The invisible world is the abode of God and ancestors. The ancestors maintain a jural relationship with the members of the visible world. Masquerades that come out during festivals like the *ngungun* in Yoruba communities represent ancestors.

Some African communities use art objects to concretize the veneration of their ancestors. In Wimbum society, the masks of the *nwarong* society (a closed society that serves as the judicial arm of village administration) represent ancestors and carry out punishments assessed on members of the community who have violated the ethical codes of the community.[26] The *mbunwarong,* a masked figure that wears a costume made of raffia fiber that covers the body from head to the legs often carries out punishments in the village. The mask in the collection of the *nwarong* society may not look appealing to the eye, but it performs an important function because it helps the community keep alive the memory of the dead ancestors. This purpose makes the object beautiful. Biebuyck points out that the Lega people call a mask *kansusania ka muntu,* what resembles a human being, or *lukungu lwa wakule,* the skull of a dead person. Some people are actually personal about it and call the mask figures, *lukungu lwa tata,* the skull of my father. Masks therefore link those who are alive to the dead, and subsequently generations of initiated relatives.[27] The *lukwakongo* masks are carved to represent, "the Great-Old-Organizers" those who should not be ridiculed; "the Great-Old-Ones-of-the-Truth" who brought goodness from afar; "the Bearded-Folk" a reference to a group where there is equality; or *tumbukutu* insects that look alike to emphasize "oneness and solidarity which guides them."[28]

Art energizes belief in the abiding presence of ancestors, its cultic attachments, and many other ideas that can be packed into the visual iconography of the mask or the masquerade dancer. These artistic manifestations allow communities to construct aesthetic perspective that offers a commentary on the past, present and the future.[29] Writing about the survival of art, John Picton has argued: "Whether as material fact or as the memory of forms (material or ephemeral)

that enables their reinvention, art works are possessed of the uncomfortable habit of surviving beyond, and without necessary reference to, the lifetimes of artists and patrons."[30] They give images of human experience from the past and provide conceptual anchorage for reconfiguring to today to expand possibilities for the future. In all of these cases, the aesthetics of power carried through in objects.

The *Basinjon* of the Banyang and the Ejagham people have eyes that are supposed to detect witches (i.e., anti social people in the community).[31] The *basinjom*'s costume is made up of a large black gown. Its head and part of its body is constructed from a variety of materials such as a crocodile head, feathers, mirrors, knife, quills, raffia, animal skins, etc.[32] The black gown of the *basinjom* signifies the anti witchcraft activities; the feathers make him a war bird with hot and dangerous forces, while the porcupine quills are counter thunder medicine. The headdress also has roots, which help activate possession by *basinjom*.[33] The artwork that is part of the masquerade is intended to frighten people and awake a sense of combat with evil. Its aesthetic qualities cannot be judged mainly by how beautiful it looks, but also on how effective it communicates the idea of the eternal struggle between good and evil.

One also gathers perspective on the aesthetics of function from works of art used in healing and empowerment. The patrons and creators of the art point out that the objects embody the power of Gods, spirits, and ancestors. The aesthetic quality of such work includes what is invested in the work of art. From the conception of a work to the time it is finished, many people can be involved in the mobilization and investing of power in the work of art and these might include the artists, diviners, rulers, crafts and professional people such as blacksmiths, hunters, who make aesthetic decisions on the basis of the power that such a work is going to embody. People think that sometimes the spirit likes an object that is beautiful and good looking to the eyes.[34] However, in some cases like the *minkisi* objects of Kongo, the object is decorated to evoke fear, and awe. Wyatt MacGaffey has argued that the *miniksi* objects that were created in the 1800's "are local habitations and embodiments of personalities from the land of the dead, through which the powers of such spirits are made available to the living."[35] As objects, *minkisi* do not posses power, but they are carriers or "containers" and conveyors of power. They also contain medicines; *bilongo* and the *Mangaaka nkisi* could be described as a cosmogram that stands between life and death.[36] MacGaffey has argued that in Kongo, medicines are often taken from the earth, graves, gullies, and streams because these places are associated with

the world of the dead.[37] The world of the dead is the abode of ancestors who maintain guardianship over their surviving relatives.[38] The dead can be contacted through the earth and therefore, the material from which *minkisi* is constructed include clays, stones and sometimes dirt from the grave. What is important here for our purpose is that the connection that Kongo thought makes with the spiritual realm, the world of the dead (ancestors), the living, the properties of contact and communication, the places of contact, and what seems to be the primary reason for such a connection is the acquisition and management of power.[39] In this respect, Luc de Heusch's description of the *nkisi* as "spirits of the dead metonymically caught in a metaphorical trap" aptly conveys the desire of the living to appropriate and hold on to the powers of the dead through material and metaphorical representation.[40]

These representations of the spirits and ancestors were misunderstood and attacked by colonials and missionaries. Both foreign agents of change fought to eradicate Kongo of objects that were charged with spiritual power because they thought those objects were fetishes. Many objects that survived these attacks were removed from their location so that MacGaffey describes the pieces he studied as "fragments of operation complexes reduced by conquest and looting... Thousands were burned in triumphal holocaust... The rituals for which such objects were part of the material infrastructure are no longer performed, even the vocabulary that described them is archaic and obscure."[41] MacGaffey, in the tradition of Swedish Missionary K. E. Laman and his students, links *nkisi,* spirits and the world of the dead to the discourse on ancestors in the Central African Region and his exploration of Kongo thought highlights beliefs in ancestors whose representation in art make those objects serve as symbol of power for the community, regardless of how one rates those objects from a standard of beauty. Their purpose was to contain power. The *minkisi* were functional objects because the relatives of the deceased created them as spiritual aids to help them stay in touch with their relatives and awaken their power in time of stress and crisis. In a society where there is preoccupation with the power of the dead, these objects served as a focusing device. The construction of these objects was an intentional spiritual praxis.

These material objects also reminded the people of the Lower Kongo that they had an obligation to stay in touch with ancestors because all people owe their existence to extra terrestrial powers. One has no choice but to maintain a connection with one's mythic and historical roots through the ancestors and spirits. One's relatives should be given

a proper and decent burial, and all the mourning rites observed properly. If one does not do this, the dead can come back to punish them. This punishment can manifest itself in different forms of misfortunes. The Wimbum people have an expression for that. Misfortunes that come from the fact that one has failed to carry out his or her praxis to honor a dead relative are often diagnosed and reported by the expression "*nkvusi shi war,*" an expression that simply means, the dead is aggrieved because he or she has not been treated well.

Carrying out obligations to one's ancestors requires the mediation of spiritual experts who varied from place to place. Spiritual experts in Wimbum society include *nga seng,* who serve as diviners. The ritual experts in the Kongo and other areas are called *nganga*. These individuals are able to communicate with the world of the dead and bring messages for members of the community. The *nganga* has a variety of obligations, but in the case of the *nkisi* in the Kongo, the *nganga* was (and is) an initiated expert who was capable of communicating with the spiritual world. This person also had knowledge about the composition and construction of the *nkisi*, the medicines that would be needed and the rituals.[42] Heads of families or senior members of the household also preside over rituals, pour drops of wine on the ground, and ask the blessings of the ancestors. However, in serious matters that involve health, eminent threat to the community, special mediators are needed to bridge the world of the dead with the world of the living.[43]

The aesthetics of artwork in Africa might also be appreciated when we understand the power evoked in the objects as political power given by the ancestors, for example, during rituals of installation. Eugenia Herbert has argued that during the installation of a chief in Eastern Bakongo, the new king wears a bracelet belonging to the former chief and secured from the *corbeille des ancêtres* (baskets of ancestral relics).[44] The new chief also takes the name of the chief whose bracelets he is wearing. Towards the end of the installation ceremony, the chief recites the "names of the ancestral *bisimbi bi nsi* and all the rivers that the ancestors had to cross before reaching the present locality."[45] This investiture of the chief resembles "the ritual followed to create a charm, establishing communion between the living and dead as the source of power that could then be 'constrained to produce extraordinary effects, good or bad.' "[46]

Implications for Theology

Our brief review of aesthetics from the functional view of art suggests some themes that could prove helpful in shaping theological aesthetics.

In other words, since the instrumentality of art brings new meaning because of the claim that every art object that fulfills its purpose is aesthetically appealing, theologians might explore these deeper meanings as they think of theology and aesthetics. In the rest of the chapter, I explore images and meanings that arise out of a broad interpretation of aesthetics in some African contexts. First, art objects that might not look appealing to the eyes, but speak about the power of God remind the human community that there is a divine being whose power and strength cannot be ignored. The aesthetics of power therefore points to that which stands beyond human beings. One way to look at the notion of power here is to eliminate its fetishized form that we find in the writings of earlier ethnographers and missionaries who were so fixated on the idea of life force.[47] An aesthetics that presupposes divine power offers observers new perspectives on divine power.

One might interpret the idea of power as used here in many ways. Divine power which art works capture in different ways gives people something to lean on. Divine power is also used in the African context to overcome illness, which has generated various therapeutic traditions, faith, and spiritual healing practices. We have pointed out already that *Minkisi* objects may not appeal to people or be linked with aesthetics, but their creation is an evocation of divine power.[48] An observer has pointed out in the *New Yorker* that the African art connoisseur in Paris may not be comfortable with Cheri Samba, but Samba's work gets inspiration from human anxiety.[49] The people he paints are not ugly, nor are they strange looking, but rather they reflect a sense of disquiet about life.

A 'mixed' aesthetics that brings together the ugly and beautiful offers a commentary on the human condition. The makers of *minkisi* objects often call on ancestors to protect them and give them power to reverse the negative efforts of witches. Contemporary aesthetics in African art points to a desire by members of the community to overcome the powerlessness that has beseeched society and rendered people weak and helpless. The work of contemporary artists invites theologians to consider aesthetics that point to the ills and problems of society. Even if one were to ignore the ugly, strange, and obnoxious, in the pursuit of beauty in aesthetics, one ought to remember that beauty is not something to be observed, but experienced and lived not only as individuals but also as a community. Thus, the long disquiet reflected in artistic work points to new possibilities regarding the human condition. The aesthetics that reflect the human condition are also aesthetics of possibilities, alternatives, and dreams for better days expressing hope for a better future.

The aesthetics of function tends to highlight performance. Whether one thinks of the Yoruba community with its *Engugun* festivals, or other festivals through out Africa, what one witnesses is the performance of faith. Such performance celebrates the human spirit; its creative genius and power may point to an ancestor, but it is power that is manifested in performance. The performance is not merely a celebration, but a communication that is not logo-centric. Art offers a medium of celebrating and communicating with the forces that have a purchase over human life and habitation. Such a visual communication creates a dialogue that cannot be uttered in words, but in acts of devotion, prostration before a representation or container of power. Herbert Marcuse has stated that art give human beings a way of saying things that we cannot say with words.[50] Such acts of performance are directed to the spiritual being the work of art represents.

Susanne Blier explores the relationship between art and psychotherapy.[51] Blier describes art works she studied in Africa as multi vocal objects that combine words, medicines, trance, and sensations to communicate. Their religious components include family interventions; they may describe individual and metaphoric journeys. Art also conveys aggressive actions in the context of difficulties. This is true of some of the *bocio* arts of Benin. This is possible because the works of art often are the embodiment of power. These works remind us of the power sculptures of Kongo.[52] These art objects are often used in contexts of healing and divination where people seek relief from difficulties. Blier has argued that most of the work she studied remains an enigma, not because people want to hide it, but because the works were tied to the innermost thoughts and fears of the people. Furthermore, it was thought if some one knew how powers of the other person worked, they could have power over the person who commissioned such a work and could weaken it.[53]

In that sense the aesthetics of healing and therapy also offer a commentary on the historical experience of the people. Historical events that have been traumatic are commemorated in art works. Blier argues that many of the *bocio* ("bundles of power") arts deal with the devastation of slavery and the slave trade, depicting the violence of slavery and physical and psychological trauma it caused.[54] In this regard, the works are a response to the social problems of the time. They also speak to individual and social disengagement, a social world where slaves were chained, gagged, and brutalized by the plantation economy and its demands for labor. However, Blier has argued: "Bocio arts, I maintain, were not merely intended to be reflections of violence and danger, but rather were thought to offer important

strategies for responding to the difficult social conditions in which people found themselves at the time."[55] By depicting these historical events, this art offers an invitation to resolve the past crisis.

Finally, theological aesthetics inspired by functional art, point to a different perspective on devotional life. The preparation, decoration, and celebration of culture, belief, and power in artistic works also involve a life of devotion to ancestors. Festivals in this sense are celebrations, and time to worship and pay homage to spiritual powers. Celebrations are spiritual exercises that invite people to examine not only their lives, but also the lives of others in the community. They offer an opportunity for the community to come together and celebrate who they are, but also covenant to move into the future as a united people. Artists make aesthetic judgments about divination objects that reflect the aims and sometimes the specific methods employed in divination. Divination is a system of knowledge through which the diviner explores the social and psychosocial relationships, sometimes using ancient texts, or depending on revelatory knowledge given by higher powers, to determine the cause of misfortune, or explore future possibilities. Some Yaka diviners use a slit-gong on which they have carved a human head. The diviner often taps on it and drinks from it during a divination séance to get strength and a new meaning. This drum, which in some cases is the image of the diviner, symbolizes his role as communicator of messages to people.[56]

Rosalind Hackett points out diviners as artists can fill their work areas with images that may actually be frightening. These objects are used to impress the clients with the spiritual power of the diviner.[57] The diviner, to invite Orunmila into the process and reveal the *ori* (head or psychological make up) of the person, uses the divination tapper or wand. The female wand represents the human race. She is often carved nude to reflect that divination is a solemn occasion.[58] Yoruba diviners also use the *agree ifa,* a container where 16 palm nuts that are used in the divination are kept. The figures that are carved on it represent celebration of life and wishes for a successful divination. A priest often commissions it or a client may present it to the diviner as a gift.[59] The divination tray, *opon,* is carved with a depressed central area for the diviner to record the answers to the question that are posed in the divination session.[60] The *opon* is often elaborately decorated and has the face of *Esu,* because he is the mediator between human beings, divinity, and the one who maintains a balance between forces of good and evil.[61] All sections of the tray are important and the priest praises all of them calling on its powers to

be present in the session. The tray communicates the higher powers of *Olódùmarè* and the orishas.[62] The motifs on the tray often signify the different powers that are invoked during the session.

These elaborate elements, artistic in nature, and having aesthetic value, communicate meaning and purpose through their construction and use. In this regard, as is the case with African art in more general terms, aesthetic value involves more than meets the eye; rather, the beauty of the object involves its use, the manner in which it occupies time and space, and the ways in which those functions speak to our needs and meaning.

Notes

1. Matthew Kieran, "Introduction: A Conceptual Map of Issues in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art,* editor, Matthew Kieran (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 1–8.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., 3.
4. Ibid., 6.
5. H. Gene Blocker has employed the terms developmental and evolutionary to discus the distinctions between what he calls primitive aesthetics and modern aesthetics because he thinks modern aesthetics evolves from the primitive. See H. Gene Blocker, *The Aesthetics of Primitive Art* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992).
6. E. A. Ruch and K. C. Anyanwu, *African Philosophy: An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in contemporary Africa* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1981), 271.
7. Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation,* translated by H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Henry Holt and company, 1932), 53–54.
8. Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton III with Roland Abiodun, *Yourba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought,* editor, Allen Wardwell (New York: Center for African Art, 1989); Rowland Abiodun, Henry J. Drewal, and John Pemberton III, editors, *The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives on African Arts* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).
9. See Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts with Gassia Armenian and Ousmane Gueye, *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2003).
10. Frank Willet, *African Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 193; See Hans Himmelheber, *Nigerkünstler* (Stuttgart, 1935), for original discussion. My references are taken from Willet, 193.
11. Ibid., 193.

12. Willet, *African Art*, 194. See also Jan Vansina, *Art History in Africa* (London: Longman, 1984), 132.
13. Vansina, *Art History in Africa*, 123.
14. James Fernandez has pointed out that in some African communities, some artists work hard to make sure that the surface of the object is smooth and in the case of human images that the body parts show a balance. James Fernandez, "Principles of Opposition and Vitality in Fang Aesthetics," in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 25 (1966): 53–64, 56.
15. Willet has argued that in a study done in Liberia, it was reported that some artists carve spontaneously, and try to represent what they have seen. See, Willet, *African Art*, 195. Fernandez has also argued that James Fernandez has pointed out that in some African communities, some artists work hard to make sure that the surface of the object is smooth and in the case of human images that the body parts show a balance, Fernandez, "Principles of Opposition," 55.
16. Robert Farris Thompson, "Yoruba Artistic Criticism," in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*, editor, W. D'Azevodo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973): 19–61.
17. Barry Hallen, "The Art Historian as Conceptual Analyst," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 37 (1979): 303–313.
18. Barry Hallen, *The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Discourse about Values in Yoruba culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
19. Ibid., 114–115.
20. Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts, with Gassia Armenian and Ousmane Gueye, *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2003), 47.
21. See Mary Price, *The Photograph: A Strange Confined Space* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 7.
22. Roberts and Roberts, *A Saint in the City*, 47.
23. An appreciation of the work of art also involves what Heidegger describes as the canceling power of art that refuses to be unveiled. The wisdom of hidden aesthetics sometimes involves understanding of power and the mysteries behind it that is veiled from the public.
24. Daniel Biebuyck, *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 17.
25. R. Brain, *Art and Society in Africa* (London, 1980), 147–151.
26. M. D. W. Jeffreys, "The Wiya Tribe," Part One, *African Studies* Vol. 21 (1962): 83–104, 91.
27. Daniel Biebuyck, *Lega Culture: Art, Initiation, and Moral Philosophy among a Central African People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 211.
28. Ibid., 212. Perhaps one thing that two different entities like ancestors and art share together is the fact that both are survivors. They have survived a long history, which has often been violent, brutal, and exploitive.

See Johannes Fabian, *Remembering the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

29. See Allen Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts, editors, *Memory: Luba Arts and the Making of History* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1996).
30. John Picton, "Art, Identity, and Identification: A commentary on Yoruba Art Historical Studies," in *The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives on African Arts*, Roland Abiodun, Henry J. Drewal, and John Pemberton III, editors (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 1–34, 1.
31. Rosalind Hackett, *Art and Religion in Africa* (London: Cassell, 1996), 131. See Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 209.
32. Hackett, *Art and Religion in Africa*, 131.
33. Ibid., 133.
34. Martha G. Anderson and Christine Muller Kreamer, in *Wild Spirits, Strong Medicine: African Art and the Wilderness,* editor. Enid Schildkrout (New York: Center for African Art, 1989), 58.
35. Wyatt MacGaffey, "Complexity, Astonishment and Power: The Visual Vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi," in *Journal of Southern African Studies* Vol. 14, No. 2 (Special Issue on Culture and Consciousness in Southern Africa, January 1988): 188–203, 190; See also Wyatt MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo, Commented by Themselves: Minkisi from the Laman Collection/Kikongo texts Translated and Edited by Wyatt MacGaffey* (Stockhom: Folkens Museaum-Etnografiska; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Wyatt MacGaffey, *Astonishment and Power,* Introduction by Sylvia H. Williams and David C. Driskell (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).
36. MacGaffey, *Astonishment and Power*, 44.
37. Ibid., 63.
38. Wyatt MacGaffey, "The Personhood of Ritual Objects: Kongo Minkisi," *Etnofoor* Vol. 3, No. 1 (1990): 45–161, 60.
39. MacGaffey has argued that the people of Kongo did not construct *minkisi* as objects "for contemplation as art. Instead they were intended to create a visual effect in the context of ritual use, heightened by songs, drumming, dances, the distress of the occasion, and various devices constituting to astonishment." *Astonishment and Power*, 89.
40. Luc de Heusch, *Why Marry Her?* (London, 1971), 182.
41. MacGaffey, *Astonishment and Power*, 33.
42. Some of the writings of the students engaged by Swedish Missionary K. E. Laman, reported on the crucial role played by the *ngagas* as intermediaries between the spiritual world and the world of the living. There are times when the head of the family can actually call on the ancestors, especially at times when the family heads preside over family meetings, marriage proposals, or even at social drinking sessions.

43. In the Kongo texts, the writers made clear that the *ngangas* were the ones who owned *minkisis,* and used them to "minister" the powers of the *minkisi* to members of the community. It was thus important that the training of a *nganga* involved making a direct connection between that prospective *nganga* and the world of the dead from which he or she derived the powers they needed to serve, minister and give that power to people. This connection to the dead that I am extending here to include the ancestors meant that the *nganga* had to live a disciplined life and incorporate in his body vestments that would convey the aura and power of ancestors or the world of the dead. MacGaffey, *Astonishment and Power*, 50.
44. See Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The Bakongo of Lower Zaïre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 65.
45. Eugenia W. Herbert, *Iron, Gender, and Power: Rituals of Transformation in African Societies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 136. See also MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 67. See also the mythic accounts of the founding of states in the region in Luc de Heusch, *The Drunken King, or the Origin of the State,* translated and annotated by Roy Willis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
46. Herbert, *Iron, Gender, and Power*, 136.
47. Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959).
48. See, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, *Cheri Samba: The Hybridity of Art,* contemporary African Art Series, #1, edited by Esther A. Dagan (Québec: Galarie Amrad African Art Publications, 1995).
49. Quoted in Jewsiewicki, *Cheri Samba*, 20.
50. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 9.
51. Suzanne Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 14.
52. Robert Farris Thompson, "The Grand Detroit N'kondi." *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* Vol. 56, No. 4 (1978): 207–221; Wyatt MacGaffey, "Complexity, Astonishment, and Power: The Visual Vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi." *Journal of Southern African Studies* Vol. 14 (1988): 188–203; Wyatt MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo.*
53. Blier, *African Vodun*, 21.
54. Ibid., 23–24.
55. Ibid., 27.
56. Hackett, *Art and Religion in Africa*, 121; see Renaat, Devisch, "Mediumistic Divination among the Northern Yaka of Zaire," in *African Divination Systems,* 112–132, Philip Peek, editor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
57. Hackett, *Art and Religion in Africa*, 122.
58. Hackett, Rosalind Hackett, *Art and Religion in* Africa, 125.
59. Ibid.

60. Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton III with Roland Abiodon, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (New York: The Center for African Art, 1989), 17.
61. Hackett, *Art and Religion in Africa*, 125; Roland Abiodon, "Ifa Art Objects: An Interpretation Based on Oral Traditions," in *Yoruba Oral Tradition: Poetry in Music, Dance and Drama*, editor, Wande Abimbola (London: IAP., 1975), 421–558.
62. John Henry Drewal, "Introduction: Yoruba Art and Life as Journeys," in *The Yoruba Artists,* editors, Roland Abiodon, Henry J. Drewal and John Pemberton III (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 196.

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