

The Journal of Interreligious Studies

A Collaboration Between Hebrew College and Boston University School of Theology

Special Issue: The Color of God: Race, Faith, and Interreligious Dialogue

Issue 23

May 2018

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From the Managing Editor

Occasionally, the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* invites a guest editor to create a special issue on a theme of urgent import either in academia or to the public, or both. I am delighted to have worked with Funlayo E. Wood, PhD, a scholar at the intersection of the Study of Religion and African and African American Studies, in bringing forth this special issue. Funlayo researches Yoruba religious concepts and practices and philosophical, theological, and semiotic aspects of the Ifá-Òrìsà tradition as manifested on both sides of the Atlantic. She is also the founding director of the African and Diasporic Religious Studies Association.

In addition to her academic work, and in keeping with the mission of the *JIRS* to bridge the gap between academia and (inter)religious communities, Funlayo is also a practitioner, serving as an Òrìsà priestess and spiritual counselor.

Funlayo invited scholars and practitioners to pen articles for this issue, which is entitled “The Color of God: Race, Faith, and Interreligious Dialogue.” In her introduction to the issue, Funlayo frames these articles within the history of Christian interaction with, and scholarly analysis of, non-Christian religious traditions. The nefarious effects of this exclusivist, expansionist, colonial, Orientalist, and violent history of subjugation and enslavement perdure in academic, public, and socio-political discourse today; these effects sustain an asymmetrical relationship of power in which non-Western and non-Christian intellectual and spiritual practices and traditions remain subordinated to Western, Christian—and white—religio-cultural discourse. Funlayo notes that the racial-religious hierarchy continues to exist today, and that this has ongoing detrimental effects on people of color and their religious communities.

In her opening piece, Funlayo introduces this issue and all of the articles with a clear, cogent, and concise history of the codification and conflation of race and religion. I only wish to add that interreligious discourse has yet to extricate itself wholly from the inherited ideology of white, Christian supremacy. Publications such as this one are far from sufficient, but they do transform the discourse, and this transformation can have positive effects on the social imaginaries of both the public and academia.

As a reminder, a social imaginary is “the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world, the dimension through which human beings create their ways of living together and their ways of representing their collective life.”¹ Social imaginaries produce ideologies that serve in “altering, undermining or reinforcing our relations with others and with the world.”² An ideology is not merely a collection of invisible ideas without material, physical, and economic impact on the lives of human bodies; it is not “a pale image of the social world,” but “a creative and constitutive element of our social lives.”³ Ideology, and thus discourse, produce material, physical, and economic effects in the visible world, in local and global communities, and in society, politics, and culture. It is my humble hope that publications such as this one play a small part in subverting the hegemony of white, Christian discourse both in the field of interreligious

¹ John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 6.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

studies particularly, and generally in the socio-political ideology of white supremacy, which is on the rise of late according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.⁴

I am eminently grateful to Funlayo E. Wood for bringing together an excellent collection of authors and their pieces for this special issue. My gratitude also extends to Silvia Glick for her matchless copyediting abilities.

Axel M. Oaks Takács
Managing Editor

⁴ Joe Heim, “Hate Groups in the U.S. Remain on the Rise, According to New Study,” *Washington Post*, 21 February 2018, <http://wapo.st/2EZsQxe>. See also the “Hate Map,” Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), accessed 7 May 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>; and “White Nationalist,” SPLC, accessed 7 May 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/white-nationalist>.

The Color of God: Race, Faith, and Interreligious Dialogue



“Fè – Faith” — Anse-à-Foleur, Haiti (2015) (Credit: Régine Romain)

This photograph was taken during a Vodou ceremony for the deity/lwa of Saint Anne and is part of “Brooklyn to Benin: A Vodou Pilgrimage,” a mixed-media project documenting the survival, beauty, and power of Vodou in the Americas to Africa. www.RegineRomain.com

From the Guest Editor: Introduction to the Special Issue

Funlayo E. Wood
Guest Editor

Race and religion have been strange bedfellows since the beginning of contact between diverse peoples. While religion is culturally and racially bound, with each group of people traditionally having its own way of conceptualizing and worshiping the Divine, the post-Enlightenment tendency to theorize religion as an unbounded *sui generis* entity has frequently denied these boundaries—this despite the fact that racism and theories of racial difference have historically been expressed in distinctly religious terms. The purported racial inferiority of peoples of African, Indigenous American, and Asian descent vis-a-vis Europeans, for example, was historically buttressed by their religious difference. As a result, the indigenous religions of these groups were classified at the bottom of a hierarchy that placed Christianity at the top, Judaism and Islam somewhere in the middle, and all other faith traditions below.

This racial-religious hierarchy's continued existence—and denial—acts as an oft-unspoken impediment to interreligious dialogue and cooperation whereby those peoples and traditions existing in the lower third of this pyramid frequently go underrepresented. When interchanges do take place between racially and religiously diverse groups, the direct impact of racial and cultural difference and bias on these dialogues—how, for example, racism undergirds Islamophobia and religious bias plays into anti-black racism—often goes undiscussed. As an African American woman, an Ifa-Orisa practitioner, and a scholar who frequents interreligious spaces, I have often been struck by the degree to which both racial and religious privilege go unrecognized even among those who might be expected to “know better.” I have also often been struck by the degree to which African-derived traditions like the one I practice and study are still mischaracterized and misunderstood. As I've discussed elsewhere, whereas it is now understood by most reasonable people that to express racial bias publicly is unacceptable, open discrimination against, and dishonoring of, Africana and other indigenous religions are still widespread: the terms “voodoo” and “hoodoo,” for example, get tossed around as catchalls for all things nonsensical, unreasonable, and nefarious; American businesses from retail outlets to amusement parks use symbols from traditions including Haitian Vodou, Palo Mayombe, and Ifa-Orisa to evoke feelings of “spookiness” during their Halloween season;¹ and practitioners of these traditions are policed and arrested during sacrificial rituals despite a Supreme Court decision upholding their right to perform them.² Practitioners I have interviewed over the years have faced discrimination in every arena, from their professional environments to their own homes. For all the scorn people of color receive in a society where the most dominant paradigms

¹ See Funlayo E. Wood, “Holiday of Horrors: Halloween, Hate, and the (Dis)Honoring of Tradition,” posted on Oct. 31, 2014, *State of Formation*, <http://www.stateofformation.org/2014/10/holiday-of-horrors-halloween-hate-and-the-dishonoring-of-tradition/>.

² The Supreme Court decision, *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520 (1993), struck down a law forbidding the “unnecessary” (i.e., not for food) killing of an animal in a public or private ceremony as unconstitutional. This effectively upheld the rights of practitioners of any religion to engage in animal sacrifice—in public or private rituals—so long as the animals were maintained and killed humanely. Despite this, practitioners of Africana religions frequently have police called on them, with the most recent incident resulting in the arrest of thirteen practitioners in San Antonio, Texas in March 2018. See Elaine Ayala, “S.A. Animal Sacrifice was Santería Practice, but was it Illegal?,” updated March 23, 2018, My SA.com, <https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local/article/S-A-animal-sacrifice-was-Santer-a-practice-but-12773670.php> for more details on the case.

consider them less than, those who dare to practice the indigenous traditions dismissed as “heathen” and “savage” (and still largely perceived as such) face the most scorn of all. I am not alone in wanting to see all of this change, and I believe that discussing and analyzing these issues is critical to moving forward toward real, lasting societal transformation.

In this issue a group of scholars and scholar-practitioners in disciplines including religious studies, literature, legal studies, and education, and traditions including Ifa-Orisa, Haitian Vodou, Palo Mayombe, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, dive into this discussion and reflect on the oft-complex relationship between race and religion, with a focus on the United States and beyond. It is my hope that through these pieces, the reader will gain a deeper understanding of the history of this connection and how its effects still ripple through American society. The rich and diverse pieces also present an opportunity for readers to become more familiar with spiritual traditions and communities about which they may know little, and getting to know one another is an essential first step to engaging in meaningful dialogue.

To begin the conversation, I’d like to reflect for a moment on the circumstances under which the categories of race and religion initially became codified and conflated. The association between the two is, actually, quite natural; religion, being a cultural product, is impossible to divorce from the people who practice it. Religious behaviors, such as birth and death rites, sacred narratives, and “magical thinking” are human universals, as is discrimination, in the psychological sense, meaning the recognition of difference between people and things. While the world’s various peoples did not all use the terms “race” and “religion,” an understanding of differences between peoples and worship of the divine transcends all human communities. This is to say that differences are as old as humanity itself and don’t inherently create a problem.

But human variation does not exist in a vacuum. Competition for resources and hunger for power inform the human experience, and these appetites have led us to use our differences as means through which to decide who should have more or less of both resources and power. Linda Martín Alcoff calls race and gender “visible identities” as they are those aspects of an individual that are the most easily spotted, taken into consideration, and used for classification.³ Although religion is not itself visible, prior to the expansions of Islam and Christianity, both of which engulfed peoples of various ethnicities and cultures, race and national origin more or less indexed religion. By the early modern period it could be reasonably inferred, for example, that Europeans were Christian, Arabs were Muslim, Africans and Native Americans practiced their indigenous religions, and Asians practiced their indigenous religions or were Buddhist or Hindu. And, at the time, these latter two were the most popular religions in the world, with Islam rounding out the top three.

While the health of the soul and morality are the purview of most all religions, so too has expansion and economic interest been a continuous factor for some. Christianity and Islam, in particular, are known for their aggressive expansionism as well as their ties to economy. Muslim traders were known for spreading both goods and Islam across North Africa and down the Swahili coast, and Christian explorers began the transatlantic “triangle trade” that laid the groundwork for modern capitalism. As Europeans became more aware of the world’s resources and more interested in procuring them, religion and race were officially codified by the Catholic Church as points of difference to be used as justification for the annexing of huge swaths of land

³ See Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

on every continent. These lands—and the resources therein, most notably, gold—were claimed in the name of the Church, as the papal bull *Romanus Pontifex* of 1455 declared the following rights of Christians:

[T]o invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens [a term referring to Muslims] and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery.⁴

Following the issuance of this Bull, there was a marked increase in European expansion into other lands—typically known as the “Age of Discovery”—with the most famous of these, the journeys of Cristobal Colon (better known in the US as Christopher Columbus), changing the world in unimaginable ways beginning in 1492.

The brutality of the Spanish incursion into the Americas ushered in by Colon’s “discovery” is well documented. The most famous account comes from the Reverend Friar Bartholome de las Casas’s book *A Short Account of the Destruction of the West Indies*, in which he describes the unspeakable horrors the Spanish inflicted on the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, like the Taino and the Carib, due to their position first and most explicitly as religious others and, only secondly, as racial others. Despite initially supporting the annexation of the Caribbean, De las Casas became concerned with the harshness of Spanish treatment of the Caribbean natives as the former attempted to enslave the latter. Convinced, after some time, that the Tainos and Caribs *did*, in fact, have souls—contrary to the prevailing beliefs of the time—he argued for their more humane treatment. He also infamously suggested that Africans be used as slaves in their stead. This suggestion, though later regrettably rescinded, has been referenced as a contributing factor to the rise of the Transatlantic Slave Trade with some colonists even remarking that they would not have sought to bring Africans to the Americas if not for his suggestion.⁵

With its massive movement of people and goods, the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the period of colonialism that followed changed the texture of the entire world, physically and religiously. Before the fifteenth century, Christianity was the fourth most popular religion in the world; it rose to its current position in first place as a direct result of the slave trade and colonialism, part of the ethos of which included casting all that was non-Christian and non-European (concepts of “whiteness” came later) as inferior, at best, and demonic, at worst. As V. Y. Mudimbe notes, the process of colonization was not only about control over space, but also control over the minds of the natives,⁶ and religious domination, coupled with harsh demonization of indigenous religions, was a primary means through which this control was and still is exerted. In Yorubaland, southwestern Nigeria, for example, translations of the bible from English into Yoruba equated one of the primary indigenous deities (Eṣu) with the biblical Satan.

⁴ “*Romanus Pontifex*,” in *European Treaties bearing on the History of the United States and its Dependencies to 1648*, ed. Frances Gardiner Davenport (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1917), 20-26. Retrieved from <http://www.nativeweb.org/pages/legal/indig-romanus-pontifex.html>, April 1, 2018. Bracketed words added.

⁵ Richard M. Juang and Noelle Morrissette, eds., *Africa and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History*, Vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2008), 243.

⁶ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 15.

This erroneous equation remains in use through the present—despite repeated requests to change it, even Google Translate still features “devil” as the translation for Eṣu—and has prompted Nigerian youth to launch a recent “Eṣu is Not Satan” campaign to help dispel the long-standing association.⁷

As is evidenced by the need for such a campaign, the characterization of people of color and their religions as inferior, wrong, or evil continues into the present, with those cultural and religious products of Africa and people of African descent, in particular, remaining at the very bottom of the religious hierarchy—even on the continent itself. This has real consequences both for practitioners of these traditions and for interreligious dialogue as a practice, a fact to which those leading the charge in interreligious dialogue must be especially attentive if meaningful exchange is to occur. Rev. DeShannon Barnes-Bowens echoes this sentiment in her piece “A Road Less Traveled” by sharing her reflections on being black and a practitioner of an African religion within interreligious spaces. She opens the piece discussing the origins of the racial and religious hierarchy to which most of the world—whether tacitly or explicitly—adheres noting that, despite their best intentions, as products of the larger society, interreligious spaces often replicate the same racial and religious biases present in greater society. She also, importantly, notes that the interfaith movement began in exclusion, with Native Americans and African Americans who were not Christian having been excluded from the World Congress of Religions in 1893. These same groups “are still underrepresented and seen as insignificant in some interfaith and interreligious educational settings and coalitions,” Barnes-Bowens asserts. Ultimately, she concludes, “Those who are called to be of service in this field should feel compelled to do the necessary inner work of becoming aware of the impact that racism has in their lives and the [lives of the] people around them.”

Danielle Boaz and Khytie Brown continue our discussion as they both shed a bit of historical light on the negative characterizations of black religions and peoples. Boaz’s piece focuses on the hysteria that has historically been created around black religion, and “voodoo” in particular, and its connection to American imperialism. In her article, “The Voodoo Cult of Detroit,” she tells the story of an alleged human sacrifice performed by a man who, despite his labeling of himself as a Muslim, was lumped in with all non-Christian practitioners of black religions—who were erroneously thought to engage in human sacrifice—and called a “voodooist.” Boaz notes that this conflation of Islam and so-called “voodoo” was not by chance and that it “must be understood within the context of dialogues about race and political participation, U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean, and the purported prevalence of ritualized human sacrifice among practitioners of African diaspora religions.” Despite its erroneous nature, this characterization as “devil worshipers” and “human sacrificers” continues to haunt practitioners of African and Diasporic religions, and people of African descent more broadly, and to undermine their work towards political independence and empowerment.

Khytie Brown’s piece “Blood on the Stones” continues the historical contextualization by engaging the symbol of blood and asking what its construction and fiction reveal about the role of the body in contemporary theological imaginations. More pressingly and immediately applicable, she interrogates how the symbolism—and reality—of blood inform, sanction, and respond to

⁷ See the “Eṣu is Not Satan” Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/%C3%88%C5%9E%C3%9A-is-NOT-SATAN-467774593417034/>, accessed May 15, 2018.

notions of race and racialized state violence. Expanding on Gil Anidjar's analysis of the conception of Christians as the first "community of blood" and examining the rule of hypodescent in the US which marks anyone with "one drop" of black blood as black, Brown looks at the US obsession with blood and racial purity. Drawing on the late great James Cone's classic *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Brown grapples with the blood congealing at the metaphorical roots of Billie Holiday's famous "strange fruit" tree and asks the important question, "what happens when the love of blood is perverted?"

Furthering the interrogation of the body and blood, Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie explores the realm of dance as a form of cultural memory, which Jeanette Rodriguez and Ted Fortier describe as "blood calling out to blood." Zauditu-Selassie utilizes Rodriguez and Fortier's framework—which defines cultural memory as memory that (1) liberates from oppression; (2) provides a medium for transmission of that memory; (3) informs the emotions of generations; and (4) unites a people through time for a common cause—to analyze the place of dance as an important carrier of African American cultural memory. She explores both formal and informal black dance and concludes that for black people, dancing, in all its forms, "is a way to disrupt the forces that deny Black humanity." By reconnecting to their cultures and their indigenous deities through dance, African Americans, and people of African descent more broadly, reassert their humanity, and express their pain and joy.

If Zauditu-Selassie gives us a long view of African American cultural and spiritual paradigms through literature, Meredith Coleman-Tobias gives us a close-up examination of the spiritual development of one particular literary giant: Audre Lorde. Lorde is one of the best-known African American women writers and, arguably, *the* best-known black lesbian activist, and Coleman-Tobias asserts that "an overarching and undervalued theme" in Lorde's writing is "the interreligious ways that she understood historical and contemporary West African cultures and their relationship to her corners of the African diaspora." Lorde went to various West African countries in 1974 in search of an "ancestral female self" and Coleman-Tobias explores the ensuing years, and Lorde's development of what Coleman-Tobias describes as a "a robust, West African-inspired spirituality" that centered on the invocation and worship of feminine deities from across West Africa including Dahomean Ayida-Weddo, Yoruba Oshumare, and Fon Mawu-Lisa. In so doing, Coleman-Tobias says Lorde "engineered a feminist, interreligious dialogue within her writing practice that still holds imaginative possibility for African Atlantic religious practitioners."

Continuing along the literary vein, moving from written to embodied text, Moira Pirsch's "Lords Above Us and Within Us" reflects on how scholars—many of whom are of African and Indigenous descent—describe how Hip Hop Based Education connects them to their racial identity and spiritual development. While, as she notes, many young people are declining to affiliate with formal religion, these same youths are having deep spiritual experiences and building community in alternate ways. HHBE spaces are a part of the staging grounds for this new spirituality and some of their appeal, as Pirsch asserts, is that participants feel that their *whole* selves are validated: race, class, intelligence, and talent. Hip Hop Based Education takes seriously the Five Pillars of Hip Hop—MC-ing (spoken element), DJ-ing (musical element), Graffiti (visual element), Breakdancing (physical element), and Knowledge of Self and Community (spiritual element)—as pedagogical tools teaching both corporeal and ethereal lessons. Pirsch asserts that while most research on hip hop and spirituality has been focused on the concept of "the God within," taking a cue from Christian theology's focus on personal belief and salvation, the

concept of the cipher and hip hop's concentration on its community of practice more closely follow with the African spirituality that undergirds the culture of many practitioners.

As a white woman from the Midwest, Pirsch notes that she is, perhaps, an unlikely practitioner of and spokesperson for Hip Hop Based Education but she, like many others who are not of African descent, draws strength from practices traditionally engaged by communities of color. Kyrah Malika Daniels' "Whiteness in the Ancestral Waters" examines this underexplored phenomenon of white conversion to "othered" and immigrant religions—specifically, Haitian Vodou and Buddhism—taking a glimpse at the ways in which white participants come to be involved with these traditions and grappling with some of the more challenging aspects of their negotiation of these spaces. In her discussion of Vodou, for example, she raises and analyzes the question of where white spirits go when they depart, given that Vodou's afterworld *Afrik-Ginen* represents "an imagined Africa and spiritual homeland," to which it is unclear if white spirits are permitted citizenship. In Daniels' discussion of white conversion to Buddhism, she voices important concerns about the desire to "sanitize" Buddhism of its Asian roots—much as many argue has happened with Yoga—and what may be lost if and when this is allowed to happen.

Our conversation concludes with Ayodeji Ogunnaike's poignant and instructive "Oyinbo Ọmọ Asogun Dere" in which he uses Yoruba religio-cultural paradigms to analyze the issues of racial injustice, gun violence, and sexual violence in contemporary American society. Ogunnaike notes that whereas it is commonplace for scholars to apply theories born in Europe and the United States to African issues, less common is the application of African theories and paradigms to Western issues, even where they might be quite instructive. Using the title proverb as a conduit, Ogunnaike questions what happens when a society exalts one archetype in an unbalanced way. He notes that the energy of the Yoruba archetype of Ogun, the warrior hunter who, it is said, "bathes in blood," and who is associated with all forms of metallurgy and technology, has been detrimentally favored over the energy of Ọṣun, the feminine archetype with whom he must always coexist in order to keep the destructive potential of his energy at bay. This, Ogunnaike asserts, has resulted in the proliferation of racial, gun, and sexual violence that can only be thwarted if Americans "can learn to embrace Ogun and Ọṣun simultaneously by empowering and respecting women, learning to understand and value the arts, and placing a higher premium on social justice, integration, and interaction than we do on individuality and force." This charge is an instructive one with which to close out the issue and one which, I hope, we can all take to heart as we work toward creating a more truly interreligious society where all peoples and traditions can thrive.

Funlayo E. Wood is the founding director of the African and Diasporic Religious Studies Association.

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A Road Less Traveled: An African American Ifa Priestess' Journey Navigating Joys and Struggles in Interfaith Spaces

DeShannon Barnes-Bowens

This paper offers a glimpse into some of the author's life experiences as an African American Ifa priestess and interfaith minister who finds meaning working in interfaith education in spite of the intersecting dynamics of racial and religious bias that often go unnoticed. It explains which religions were present at the first Parliament of World Religions gathering in 1893, who was excluded based on race and religion, and how the history of that event may influence who we consciously or unconsciously see and value in interreligious and interfaith spaces today.

Keywords: Yoruba, Nigeria, Ifa, African traditional religion, interfaith movement, interfaith ministry, racism

When people of unique religious and racial backgrounds intentionally come together under the banner of an interfaith or interreligious objective, I have learned the importance of assessing whose “God,” theology, or belief is dominant. After I have discovered the governing thought system, I internally ask myself the following questions to assess if the space I am in is safe: 1) Do they respect my identities? 2) Do they want to hear my input? If so, will they value it? 3) Are they interested in the wholeness of who I am? If the answer to any of these questions is “no” I conclude that the environment has the potential to negatively impact my sense of well-being regardless of how noble the intention of the project or task is.

Fortunately, I was able to answer “yes” to all the previous questions throughout my studies at the interfaith seminary I attended. My first exposure to the study of world religions came through interfaith education (learning about the world's sacred wisdom traditions), interspiritual practice (direct transformative inner experiences of sacred wisdom traditions), and interreligious dialogue (communicating with people of various cultural and religious backgrounds). As a practitioner of an African traditional religion that is often marginalized, I know firsthand the power and potential that interfaith education can make in people's lives when the components of interspiritual practice and interreligious dialogue are present. However, I also learned through observation and work that it is a mistake to assume that religious and racial bias does not exist because diverse people have come together for a common cause.

Racial and Religious Foundations in Our Interfaith Landscape

In the United States, religion has historically been used as a tool to support violent oppression and to decide which groups of people are morally superior or inferior.¹ First Nation Native Americans and enslaved Africans suffered the most under Christianity.² Racial justice

¹ Riggins R. Earl, Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003).

² DeShannon Bowens, “Making the Unconscious, Conscious: Why Interfaith Communities Struggle with Racial Diversity,” *State of Formation*, September 23, 2015, <http://www.stateofformation.org/2015/09/making-the-unconscious-conscious-why-interfaith-communities-struggle-with-racial-diversity/>.

advocate and United Church of Christ minister Elizabeth Simson Durant and I discuss this more deeply in our article “If We Stay Silent, Injustice Will Persist.”³ We explore why some interfaith groups and initiatives bypass discussing the intersection of race and religion as well as their avoidance of dismantling racism within their communities. In both of our experiences, interfaith spaces have some religious variety. Racially, they tend to be organized, led, and structured by people who identify as white. Diversity tends to be a common goal rather than inclusion. As a white woman who has worked in interfaith coalitions, Rev. Durant observes:

An Interfaith gathering is already an anxious moment for many whites, who are concerned about using the right words and appearing competent, knowledgeable, and open-minded. This anxiety reflects the drive for perfectionism that is a central component of white supremacy culture.⁴ . . . [W]hite supremacy culture encourages whites to remain ignorant of their racial identities⁵ and ignore the ways that coherence between white culture and religion was achieved through violence and oppression.⁶

In order to have a better understanding of how interfaith and interreligious settings came to be what they are today, it is necessary to travel back to September 11, 1893, when the World Congress of Religions was held in Chicago, Illinois. John Henry Barrows, in his book *The World’s Parliament of Religions, 1893*, describes the event through the eyes of Rev. Dr. Charles William Wendte of Oakland, California.⁷ The minister’s fascination with Japanese and Chinese delegates was apparent. “The most gorgeous group was composed of the Chinese and Japanese delegates, great dignitaries in their own country, arrayed in costly silk vestments of all the colors of the rainbow.”⁸ He was captivated by the style and presence of the other delegates from Asia as well. However, Rev. Wendte’s description of African delegates took a different tone. “The ebon-hued but bright faces of Bishop Arnett, of the African Methodist Church, and of a young African prince, were relieved by the handsome costumes of the ladies of the company, while forming a somber background to all was the dark raiment of the Protestant delegates and invited guests.”⁹

The *Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology* gives more information on this historic event, providing this description of what we now call the first Parliament of World Religions:

³ DeShannon Bowens and Elizabeth Simson Durant, “If We Stay Silent, Injustice Will Persist: A Call to Interfaith Communities to Own Our Racial Realities & Dismantle Racism,” *ILERA*, January 17, 2017 <http://media.virbcdn.com/files/0b/522eba3da6c732aa-IfWeStaySilentlyBowensDurant1-17-17.pdf>.

⁴ See Kenneth Jones & Tema Okun, *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups* (ChangeWork, 2001) for more about white supremacy culture. Excerpt retrieved February 27, 2016 from: http://www.csworkshop.org/PARC_site_B/dr-culture.html. (Footnote is from original article.)

⁵ See especially Rebecca Parker, “Not Somewhere Else, but Here: The Struggle for Racial Justice as a Struggle to Inhabit My Country” in M. Bowers-Wheatley and Palmer N. Jones, ed., *Soul Work: Antiracist Theologies in Dialogue* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003), 171–198. (Footnote is from original article.)

⁶ Bowens and Durant, “If We Stay Silent,” 6.

⁷ John Henry Barrows, ed., *The World’s Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World’s First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893, Vol. I* (Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), 62–64, accessed at <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/11489.html>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*

[A]t 10 o'clock a dozen of representatives from different faiths marched into the hall hand in hand. At the same time, the Columbian Liberty bell in the Court of Honor tolled ten times, honoring the ten great world religions—Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.¹⁰

The *Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia* also details how Native Americans were excluded from participation and African Americans were only allowed to join if they were Christian. For those who may question why African Americans had to be Christian, Tracey Hucks writes in *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, “Africa was perceived as a continent of void and dearth marked by intellectual, religious, and cultural deficiencies.”¹¹ Some Native Americans agreed to be set up in make-believe villages in an exhibit for American anthropologists as a part of the world fair that was taking place during the 1893 World Congress of Religions. Yet, they were not allowed to set up their own display as other groups were.¹² God had a color at the beginning of the interfaith movement and its color was white.

The birthing of the interfaith movement in this country consisted of a majority of white Christian men reaching out to countries primarily in the Eastern hemisphere of the world, while upholding and practicing racial oppression within the United States. Knowing this information, it is clear that the interfaith movement and interreligious dialogue in the United States began with a racialized religious hierarchy that assumed that the color of one’s skin determined the morality and righteousness of one’s God, faith, and race. When we look at the interfaith and interreligious landscape today, a lack of religious and racial inclusion still exists. The groups who were excluded and oppressed during the 1893 World Congress of Religions are still underrepresented and seen as insignificant in some interfaith and interreligious educational settings and coalitions.

A Practitioner of African Traditional Religion Discovers the Interfaith World

Before I became an interfaith minister, I was initiated as a priestess in an African spiritual tradition called Ifa. Ifa is an indigenous religion or way of life that comes from the Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria. It has been practiced for thousands of years. Over sixteen years ago, I was introduced to this spiritual path through a friend in New York City who was studying with a priestess. Through her, I had the opportunity to meet an amazing African American Ifa priest who helped me see the connection between spirituality and my work as a psychotherapist. He dispelled myths of African ignorance and superstition, which was very affirmative for me as an African American woman. As I learned practices that showed me how to honor my ancestors and connect with spiritual forces of nature (or deities) known as Orisas, I knew I had found a spiritual path that felt like home.

¹⁰ Derek Michaud, ed., “World Parliament of Religions (1893),” *Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology* (2004), <http://people.bu.edu/wildman/bce/worldparliamentofreligions1893.htm>.

¹¹ Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 29.

¹² Michaud, ed., “World Parliament of Religions (1893).”

As excited as I was learning how Yoruba people practiced Ifa and how it could be applied in my present-day life, I was advised by my friend’s mentor to keep it to myself in order to avoid the possibility of experiencing exclusion and prejudice. According to Dianne M. Stewart, a fear of all things related to African culture is defined as Afrophobia and it is a product of slavery and colonialism.¹³ The guidance was well intended but it instilled apprehension within me and an expectation to be feared rather than embraced by people who did not practice a traditional African, indigenous, or nature-based spiritual path.

It should be of no surprise that I walked into the doors of seminary carrying unconscious levels of Internalized Oppression and Inferiority¹⁴ that took me the entire first year to work through as it related to the intersection of my racial and religious identity. While the inclusion of African and Native American religions in the seminary’s curriculum confirmed it was a place that would respect my religious and racial identities, I still needed to see the people I would journey with to conclude whether or not it was indeed safe. On the first day of class, I noticed 20% of the students were people of color and the rest were white. I also recognized by style of dress that one of my classmates was probably a practitioner of one of the African spiritual traditions that worshipped Orisas.¹⁵ This was the final confirmation I needed.

Being in a learning environment that encouraged inner expansion through world religions, visiting various places of worship, and having hands-on experiences with sacred traditions profoundly changed me and my fellow classmates. We discussed and analyzed how these practices affected our lives and shaped our view of the world and our place in it. To this end we engaged in two of the motivations for interfaith work that Kusumita Pedersen has described as: 1) engaging in a “common task” and 2) searching for truth and understanding in the context of religious plurality.¹⁶

We were allowed to process and discover our personal truth and hold it without negating or diminishing the truth of those we may serve. To this day, I have not experienced the type of connection and growth with a group of people like those women and men I studied with for two years. The process of becoming an interfaith minister taught me the difference between inter-religious dialogue and the application of interfaith ministry. The latter compels us to actively assist everyday people while honoring the totality of who they are. This is why after completing the seminary program I continue to participate in interfaith work.

¹³ Chika Oduah, “Are Blacks Abandoning Christianity for African Faiths?” *The Grio*, October 19, 2011, <http://thegrio.com/2011/10/19/african-religions-gain-following-among-black-christians/>.

¹⁴ See The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond and its definition of Internalized Racial Oppression at <http://www.pisab.org/our-principles>.

¹⁵ Religious traditions that consist of Orisa worship, such as Ifa, took on different names and variations as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. In Cuba, the worship of Orisas are practiced in Lucumi. In Puerto Rico, Orisa worship is practiced in Santeria. Brazil’s religious traditions are Macumba and Candomble; in Haiti the religious tradition is Vodoun.

¹⁶ Kusumita P. Pedersen, “The Interfaith Movement: An Incomplete Assessment,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 74–94.

Challenges and Opportunities in Interfaith Work Moving Forward

There are many interfaith coalitions doing great work to address the needs of people and the planet. However, forming and participating in multi-religious alliances to disrupt Islamophobia, speak out against immigrant bans, protest the Dakota Access Pipeline, or support the Black Lives Matter movement does not mean racism no longer exists within the structures of our interfaith and interreligious coalitions and educational programs. We must be willing to examine how the history of the interfaith movement's exclusionary racist practices unconsciously shows up in the design of our organizations and interactions with each other.

In my preparation and research for this article, I wondered how many people of African descent are asked to provide their input in interreligious and interfaith settings outside of the topic of race and racism. And for those of us who fit into the category of racial and religious "minority," how often are we given a platform to discuss the religions we practice with the sole purpose of sharing what drew us to our path, the beauty we find in it, and how the implementation of our practices helps us to serve others? I have been through the highs and lows of having both experiences.

Some people have asked me to participate in interreligious dialogue because I am African American and they want to have the appearance of racial diversity. While no one has admitted this as explicitly as I have stated, it is a fact. I accept the invitations as much as I can because I want more people of color to be included to have our voices heard. Declining the invitations would cause me to question if the organizers, who are usually white, would make an uninformed generalization that "people of color are not interested" and therefore discontinue asking us to be involved.

I have felt most appreciated when I am asked to be a part of an interfaith or interreligious event because the organizers respect my racial and religious identities. I treasure these experiences because they serve as reminders that there are people who value the contribution of my service work and religious experience. These sisters and brothers move past tolerating the "other" to full affirmation. The declaration of their inclusive actions easily paves the way for true solidarity to be experienced by everyone who is coming together for a common cause.

Shelly Tochluk addresses the need for spiritualized racial justice in her book *Living in the Tension*.¹⁷ In an essay explaining the philosophical foundation for her book she writes, "For the sake of transcending the pain and difficulty experienced within U.S. society, many people aspire to leave it behind rather than engaging it more fully in order to be part of transforming it."¹⁸ This applies to racism throughout the United States and certainly includes our many interfaith and interreligious configurations.

Last year I was asked to participate in a panel discussion on race and racism at my seminary. This was the first time the organization hosted a public event to discuss this topic. In

¹⁷ Shelly Tochluk, *Living in the Tension: The Quest for a Spiritualized Racial Justice* (Roselle, N.J.: Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books, Inc., 2016).

¹⁸ Shelly Tochluk, "Grounding: The Philosophical Foundation Beneath the Book *Living in the Tension: The Quest for a Spiritualized Racial Justice*," <http://shellytochluk.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Grounding-LITT.pdf>.

my role as facilitator, I was very clear that race and racism would not be analyzed and solved to the satisfaction of 100 people (half of whom participated online) within a two-hour time span. Many attendees had building frustrations of racism being bypassed as a serious topic of discussion while others carried palpable anxiety that the conversation would end up in a heated argument.

By the close of the evening a variety of feelings were expressed. Some were grateful. Others were angry and frustrated. Some were disappointed. Others were inspired and pleasantly surprised. The success of the event in my view was measured by meeting the intention to make space for everyone regardless of how unsatisfied or happy people were in the end. At the very least our first conversation on race and racism was honest and participants expressed the desire to have more forums focusing on this issue. My hope was that the community dialogue would encourage the organization to delve more deeply into racism and racial bias. Fortunately, steps have been made to move in this direction.

I did not become an interfaith minister and educator to teach people about racism. I naively thought that “interfaith” described a place, movement, or philosophy that discovered the solution to this problem. Then I realized people in interreligious and interfaith settings are no less immune to the wider societal issues with which we all wrestle. It is unjust to expect interfaith ministers, educators, and advocates of color to carry this burden when we did not design, nor do we benefit from, institutionalized racial oppression. The first Parliament of World Religions in 1893 never intended to include someone like me—an African American woman who dares to publicly practice an indigenous African religion. Yet here I am.

During seminary, my first-year dean gave me a meaningful teaching that changed the course of all the work I did after I was ordained. My ancestors confirmed her guidance would always be life enhancing in my approach to serve others. The notecard she handed to me with my homework assignment said, “Trust is a matter of feeling safe. Reach out and be a bridge builder with the things you don’t trust.” Because I believe in a Divine presence that has no color other than what we humans project onto it, I consciously choose to stay engaged in interfaith and interreligious work. The inner struggle I went through to release and heal the internalized inferiority and oppression I was carrying has led me to believe it is possible to dismantle racism in our communities, this country, and the world at large.

For those who are interested in deepening the work of making interreligious and interfaith spaces places where all people are fully seen, heard, and affirmed, I offer questions that Reverend Durant and I created during our process of writing “If We Stay Silent, Injustice Will Persist.” The last question comes from the panel that I moderated on race and racism.

- 1) How and when do you experience being an insider or outsider in Interfaith spaces?
- 2) What does Internalized Superiority and Inferiority look and feel like in Interfaith spaces?
- 3) How do we reconcile our personal spiritual experience when we talk about race and religion in Interfaith community?

- 4) How do our places of identity affect/influence how we show up to address issues of racism in Interfaith community?
- 5) How does the silence around racism affect who feels welcome or who feels like they have to be less?
- 6) Does your spiritual practice and/or belief system emphasize a social responsibility that addresses racial oppression, prejudice, and bias?

I have personally witnessed interfaith education, interspiritual practice, and interreligious dialogues transform people's lives in community. I have had the honor to support seminary students as they wrestled with challenges around belonging, exclusion, prejudice, and bias within a variety of situations. To ignore or minimize these issues as they pertain to the social construct of race and racism does a huge disservice to what the essence of an interfaith movement, philosophy, and ministry is supposed to stand for. To believe that it has no effect is to live in an illusion. Those who are called to be of service in this field should feel compelled to do the necessary inner work of becoming aware of the impact that racism has in their lives and the people around them. If some of us are not free from harm, none of us are. We need every heart and soul committed to eradicating racism if an interfaith vision of equality, inclusion, and love is to be a lived experience for everyone.

“Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.” — James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963

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The Voodoo Cult of Detroit: Race, Human Sacrifice, and the Nation of Islam from the 1930s to the 1970s

Danielle N. Boaz

In the 1930s, two African American Muslims committed shocking crimes that led newspapers across the country to declare that the Allah Temple of Islam (the precursor to the Nation of Islam) was a “voodoo cult” and its members were practicing human sacrifice. These allegations resurfaced multiple times in the media and scholarly literature over the next forty years, damaging the Nation’s reputation during the height of their popularity. This article is the first attempt to analyze these sensationalized depictions of the origins of the Nation of Islam within the context of contemporaneous understandings of “voodooism” and the racialized rhetoric of human sacrifice.

Keywords: voodoo, voodooism, Allah Temple of Islam, Nation of Islam, Wallace Fard, Haiti

Introduction

In 1932, in Detroit, Michigan, an African American Muslim named Robert Harris killed his tenant on an altar in his home, as a purported human sacrifice to Allah. In the weeks that followed, as Harris was prosecuted for murder and ultimately sent to an insane asylum, newspapers across the country declared that Detroit was home to a “voodoo cult,” and that black Muslims in the city offered human sacrifices to their “gods.” According to the media, Detroit police asked the Nation of Islam’s founder, Wallace Fard, to leave the city due to suspicions that he encouraged Harris’s actions. Elijah Muhammad, who assumed leadership after Fard’s mysterious departure, changed the name of their organization and moved their headquarters to Chicago, partially to escape these accusations.

Although Fard had already left the city, the Nation of Islam was also blamed for a subsequent attempted sacrifice in 1937, when another African American Muslim, Vernon McQueen, was arrested for preparing to boil his wife and daughter alive. While neither supposed sacrifice could be clearly linked to the teachings of the Nation of Islam nor even to prominent members, these allegations would have a long-lasting and far-reaching impact on public perceptions of this black Islamic organization. Over the next forty years, the media, the police, and even scholars would recount these alleged sinister origins of the Nation of Islam, when their mysterious leader, Wallace Fard, purportedly encouraged the practice of human sacrifice and served as the high priest of a “voodoo cult.”

This article will contextualize these depictions of the Nation of Islam within early twentieth-century narratives about race, religion, and “civilization,” with an emphasis on the significance of the subtle connections the media drew between Haitians and black American Muslims by glossing the latter’s faith as “voodoo.” By this time, European travelers and emissaries had enthralled the American public with their allegations that cannibalism, human sacrifice, and snake worship characterized religious practices in the independent black nation of Haiti. These depictions of Haitian “voodooism” spurred reflections on the intellectual and social capabilities of other persons of African descent because Haiti had become a yardstick for the

potential of independent black societies. The Harris murder occurred during the final years of the U.S. Occupation of Haiti (1915–1934), during the height of North American fascination with “voodooism.” Therefore, this public labeling of black Muslims in the United States as members of a “voodoo cult” must be understood within the context of dialogues about race and political participation, U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean, and the purported prevalence of ritualized human sacrifice among practitioners of African diaspora religions.

This article contributes to the growing literature reflecting on the centrality of negative imagery about “voodooism,” superstition, and human sacrifice in opposition to the political independence and empowerment of persons of African descent in the Americas. For example, Kate Ramsey’s book *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (2011) examines a series of campaigns to suppress spiritual practices in the independent black nation of Haiti.¹ Most significantly for this article, Ramsey explores how the U.S. military forces manipulated rarely-enforced Haitian laws against “sorcery” to solidify and morally defend their occupation of the country.² Similarly, Reinaldo Roman has argued that in early twentieth-century Cuba, anthropologists, criminologists, journalists, police officers, and other members of the legal system collectively invented a hysteria about “brujeria,” a fictional notion that persons of African descent were prone to kidnapping and murdering white children to use their body parts to practice “witchcraft,” to create an “atmosphere that made the repression of Afro-Cubans appear both sensible and necessary.”³ He places this hysteria, which began two years after the end of the U.S. occupation (1898–1902), in the context of struggles over race and political participation on this newly independent Caribbean island.

Based on these well-founded observations of the significance of claims about African-derived human sacrifice in a racially diverse Cuba and predominantly black Haiti, I argue that these narratives of “voodooism” and ritual murder in the Nation of Islam would have redirected the public’s concerns about such practices toward African American populations within the United States. While the U.S. media and authorities had often accused African Americans of retaining “superstitious” beliefs and practices related to the use of charms and medico-religious healing, Robert Harris’s sacrificial murder in 1932 would be the first time that blacks in the United States were suspected of belonging to a religious organization centered on human sacrifice. As stamping out “voodooism” and ritual sacrifice had been one of the justifications for U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean, Detroit police would have been under tremendous pressure to swiftly disband their own “voodoo cult” or risk undermining the notion that the United States was capable of exerting a “civilizing” influence through its occupation of more racially diverse countries.

A Brief History of the Term “Voodoo”

By the time the Detroit police and the media began referring to black Muslims as members of a “voodoo cult,” the phrase had been a part of the vocabulary of the United States for approximately one hundred years. At least as early as the eighteenth century, the French

¹ Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 118–176.

³ Reinaldo L. Román, *Governing Spirits: Religion, Miracles, and Spectacles in Cuba and Puerto Rico, 1898–1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 82–106.

began utilizing the word “voodoo” to refer to African spiritual practices in their Caribbean colonies.⁴ By the 1840s, English-language presses in the United States sporadically published stories regarding Haitian “voodoo,” employing the French spelling. These mid-nineteenth-century articles referenced Haitian Presidents Jean Louis Pierrot and Faustin Soulouque, who were described as chiefs of the “voodoo,” which reporters explained was a “superstition” from Africa that involved the worship of “fetishes.”⁵

The Anglicized version of this term, “voodoo,” began to emerge shortly thereafter in English-language presses in Louisiana. In 1850, a New Orleans newspaper, the *Times Picayune*, published a series of articles describing the arrest of “voodoo” practitioners on various charges including holding unlawful ceremonies and disorderly conduct.⁶ Articles about New Orleans “voodoo” became particularly common after the Union forces captured New Orleans and as the United States moved toward the abolition of slavery. Reporters argued that “voodoo” practices in New Orleans were evidence of the “superstitions” and “barbarism” that blacks would resort to once they had been “freed from all constraint.”⁷ During Reconstruction, newspapers across the country began to refer to African Americans’ unorthodox medical treatments, beliefs about spirits and conjuring, and related practices as “voodoo,” lamenting that this “race of pagans” was now exercising the right to vote and hold public office.⁸ As reporters applied this term to beliefs and practices outside New Orleans, they increasingly employed the spelling “voodoo” rather than “voodoo.”⁹

From the 1840s to the 1860s, reports of “voodoo” in Haiti and “voodoo” or “voodoo” in the United States largely appear to have been distinguished in the media. Newspapers not only used different spellings but accounts of practices in one region did not reference those in the other. However, starting in the late 1870s, references to “voodoo” in Haiti abandoned the spelling “voodoo,” and reporters permanently adopted the Anglicized “voodoo.”¹⁰ Around this time, partially influenced by Sir Spenser St. John’s infamous book, *Hayti; or the Black Republic* (1884), journalists also increasingly began to argue that cannibalism, human sacrifice, and devil worship characterized Haitian “voodoo” and would likewise permeate African American communities in the United States if white Americans did not step in to provide a “civilizing”

⁴ Mederic-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint Méry, *A Civilization that Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule in Haiti*, trans. Ivor D. Spencer (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 15. First published in 1797 by the author.

⁵ “From Cape Hayten. Correspondence of the Philadelphia Exchange,” *Southern Patriot* (Charleston, South Carolina), April 27, 1846; “Things in Hayti- The Emperor Soulouque- The Negro Religion- Voodoo and its Peculiarities- The Burlesque Empire, & c.,” *New York Herald*, April 3, 1858; “The Empire of Haiti,” *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1859; “Paganism,” *Albany Evening Journal* (Albany, New York), March 19, 1859 “Paganism,” *Columbian Register* (New Haven, Connecticut), April 2, 1859.

⁶ “City Intelligence,” *Times-Picayune*, July 6, 1850; “City Intelligence,” *Times-Picayune*, July 7, 1850; “More Of The Voodoo,” *Times-Picayune*, July 30, 1850.

⁷ “Dark Deeds: A Graveyard Violated,” *Times-Picayune*, May 1, 1864.

⁸ “The Black Cloud In The South,” *Crisis* (Columbus, Ohio), July 31, 1867; “The Failure of Southern Colonization,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), Feb. 13, 1868.

⁹ For example, see “A Few Nuts for Democrats to Crack,” *Logansport Journal*, Oct. 6, 1880; John Fisher, “Georgia,” *Coshocton Democrat*, March 8, 1870.

¹⁰ “The St. Domingo Annexation,” *Crisis* (Columbus, Ohio), Jan. 19, 1870; “Political,” *Columbian Register* (New Haven, Connecticut), Feb. 5, 1870; “The St. Domingo Commission,” *New York Herald*, March 31, 1871.

influence.¹¹ These narratives intensified in the early twentieth century, leading up to and during the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934.

Similarly, during the first U.S. occupation of Cuba (1898–1902), the media began to report that “voodooism” and “fetishism” had yet to be eliminated among blacks on the island.¹² These articles became particularly common after eleven Cubans of African descent were charged with the (presumed sacrificial) murder of a child named Zoila in 1904. For example, a special Sunday supplement to *The News Magazine* published in Galveston, Texas, was entitled “Voodooism in the West Indies: Negroes in Cuba and Haiti Condemned to Death for Sacrificing Infants in their Horrid Devil Worship.”¹³ The author asserted that the case of Zoila had brought to light that cannibalism was still practiced in remote areas of the island. Over the next twenty years, the U.S. media made similar claims about the pervasiveness of “voodooism” and human sacrifice in Cuba as it did in Haiti. The authors of most of these articles stressed the purported necessity of American intervention to eradicate these practices.¹⁴

As reporters increasingly linked human sacrifice and “voodoo” in Haiti and Cuba, their descriptions of “voodoo” practices within the U.S. took on a somewhat similar character. By the 1920s and 1930s, in addition to being a descriptor for various kinds of “superstitions” held in black communities, journalists also began to employ the term “voodoo” to report any particularly brutal murder committed by an African American. Newspapers used titles like “Nurse Slain by Voodoo Doctor,” and “Voodoo Doctor Admits Slaying; No Victim Found,” to sensationalize accounts of crime in black communities and subtly link them to reports of the alleged savagery in Haiti and Cuba.¹⁵

At times, there was a vague connection between the alleged murder and some form of spiritual rituals. For example, in 1923, Alonzo Savage was convicted of killing Elsie Barthel in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania after Barthel asked Savage to create a love charm for her but then refused to pay him. Likely because of the purported request for a love charm, the media referred to Savage as a “negro voodoo doctor.”¹⁶ In many cases; however, the link to longstanding stereotypes of “voodooism” was more tenuous. For example, in 1928, police discovered a headless body in Cleveland, Ohio.¹⁷ As the police struggled to determine the identity of the victim and whether the African American who confessed to the crime was actually the murderer,

¹¹ “Nagualism, Voodooism, and Other Forms of Cryptopaganism in the United States,” *The Catholic World: A Monthly Magazine of General Literature and Science* 25 (1877); “Negro Rule in Haiti,” *Aiken Journal*, July 15, 1885; “A Southern View of It,” *Newark Daily Advocate*, April 23, 1892.

¹² For example, see “Fetish Worship in Cuba,” *Daily Advocate*, Nov. 10, 1899.

¹³ “Voodooism in the West Indies: Negroes in Cuba and Haiti Condemned to Death for Sacrificing Infants in their Horrid Devil Worship,” *News Magazine* (Galveston, Texas), May 7, 1905.

¹⁴ For example, see “Cuban Child Butchered By Voodooists,” *Galveston Daily News* (Galveston, Texas), December 28, 1913; “Trying to Stop the ‘Voodoo’ Human Sacrifices in Cuba,” *Lima Daily News* (Lima, Ohio), Jan. 18, 1914.

¹⁵ “Nurse Slain by Voodoo Doctor,” *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune*, Oct. 8, 1923; “Voodoo Doctor Admits Slaying; No Victim Found,” *Billings Gazette*, Dec. 22, 1928.

¹⁶ “Voodoo Man Killed Girl,” *Lincoln State Journal* (Lincoln, Nebraska), Oct. 8, 1923; “Nurse Slain by Voodoo Doctor,” *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune*, Oct. 8, 1923; “Hauley Held in Nurse Murder Case,” *Kingston Daily Freeman* (Kingston, New York), Oct. 9, 1923; Arthur Brisbane, “Today,” *Hamilton Evening Journal* (Hamilton, Ohio), Oct 15, 1923.

¹⁷ “Headless Body Found in Ohio; ‘Doctor’ Held,” *Sheboygan Press* (Sheboygan, Wisconsin), Dec 21, 1928; “Voodoo Doctor Admits Slaying; No Victim Found,” *Billings Gazette*, Dec. 22, 1928.

they quickly jumped to conclusions, stating that they “would assign no other reason for the decapitation other than some Voodoo rite.”¹⁸

While these media accounts of gruesome murders committed by “negro voodoo doctors” portrayed a very racialized and sensationalized image of crime in black communities within the United States, white travelers and marines serving as occupying forces in Haiti published accounts of their experiences abroad that helped maintain the public understandings of “voodooism” as an African-derived religious cult. In 1929, William Seabrook published a book entitled *The Magic Island*, in which he claimed to be the first white man to have undergone initiation into Haitian voodoo.¹⁹ Book reviewers and reporters lauded Seabrook as an expert on “voodoo” and the first white man “to have penetrated the heart of darkness.”²⁰ Seabrook’s tale emphasized the centrality of blood offerings to “voodoo” deities and he claimed to have participated in several ceremonies where the practitioners had sacrificed a large animal as a substitute for a human being.²¹

During the same time period, Faustin Wirkus, a marine who co-authored a book detailing his experience on a Haitian island, La Gonâve, was also reported to be the only white man initiated “into the black arts.”²² When the media advertised Wirkus’s manuscript, they focused not only on the alleged rise of this white American farm boy to the status of emperor of a predominantly black island, they also reminded their readers about the purported human sacrifice occurring in Haiti. For instance, in an article entitled “In the Land of Voodooism,” the author included a series of photos from Wirkus’s experience in Gonâve, one of which was captioned “[a]bove, before this altar, goats, bulls, and sometimes human beings are sacrificed in worship of the old African serpent god.”²³

Between the reports of “negro voodoo doctors” committing brutal murders and white Americans becoming initiated into a “voodoo cult” in Haiti, the U.S. public had competing narratives about the nature of “voodooism” at this time. The domestic murders were typically gruesome—involving decapitation, bludgeoning, etc.—but they were neither ritualized nor a component of a larger religious sect. In fact, since the early Civil War era, there were few, if any, widespread reports of “voodoo cults” existing in the United States. While “superstitions” characterized as “voodoo” were reportedly pervasive among African Americans, the public imagined Haiti as a more extreme example of where “voodooism” had been allowed to run rampant. Therefore, when African American Muslims were accused of forming a “voodoo cult,” this was perhaps the first instance in which a large group of blacks in the United States had ever been linked to ritual murder based on the teachings of a religious organization. In a time period when the imagined practice of human sacrifice as a “voodoo” ritual in Haiti and Cuba played a central role in justifying the need for Americans to provide a “civilizing influence” through occupation, reports of similar domestic practices would have suggested to the public that African Americans had been granted too many liberties and rights since emancipation, and were experiencing regression similar to that which was supposedly occurring in the Caribbean.

¹⁸ “Voodoo Rite Blamed for Beheading,” *Davenport Democrat* (Davenport, Iowa), Dec. 21, 1928.

¹⁹ William Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1929).

²⁰ Stanley E. Babb, “In the Heart of Darkness,” *Galveston Daily News*, Jan. 20, 1929.

²¹ Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, 38, 63–69.

²² O. O. McIntyre, “Well, You Might Get Tired of Some of These,” *The San Antonio Light*, Apr. 19, 1931.

²³ “In the Land of Voodooism,” *Syracuse Herald*, Jan. 6, 1929.

The Voodoo Cult of Detroit

The Nation of Islam's reputation as a "voodoo cult" began in November of 1932 when an African American Muslim named Robert Harris murdered his black tenant, James Smith, as a purported human sacrifice to Allah. According to Harris's confession, Smith voluntarily climbed onto a makeshift altar in a back room of Harris's home, after Harris promised him that his sacrifice would make him the "savior of the world."²⁴ Harris then stabbed Smith in the heart and struck him over the head with an automobile axil.²⁵

Harris was a member of the Allah Temple of Islam, an organization of African American Muslims that had been founded by an immigrant trader named Wallace Fard (also known as W.D. Fard, Wallace Farad, and Fard Muhammad) in Detroit in 1930.²⁶ Like the Moorish Science Temple before it, the Allah Temple of Islam (later renamed the Nation of Islam) taught their followers that Allah would bring about the cataclysmic destruction of white "devils" and empowered African Americans through lessons about the great historical achievements of black people.²⁷ Both Islamic temples had swiftly gained a following in northern U.S. cities like Chicago and Detroit, where numerous African Americans had moved during World War I, to fill labor shortages as well as to escape lynching and other pervasive forms of racial discrimination in the South.²⁸ The murder of James Smith, and the arrest and trial of Robert Harris, was one of the earliest stories that gained widespread media attention for the Allah Temple of Islam, which numbered approximately 8,000 members in the early 1930s, as reports of this "human sacrifice" reached newspapers in every corner of the nation.²⁹

Although Fard was unquestionably the leader of the Allah Temple of Islam in 1932, the media described Robert Harris as the "high priest" of this "voodoo cult" and asserted that hundreds of members gathered in support of Harris throughout the proceedings.³⁰ Other Temple members, including Harris's own family, adamantly denied these claims. Robert Harris's wife asserted that he had a history of mental illness and violent outbursts, and had threatened several times to decapitate her and their children.³¹ Under the misleading title "Leader of Cult Called Insane," *The Detroit News* reported that Harris's brother Edward, who was also a Muslim, explained that Harris had no standing in the Temple and the members were well aware of his mental health issues.³² Edward attributed his brother's erratic behavior to financial concerns, not to their religious beliefs.³³ The homicide investigator assigned to Harris's case seemed to support

²⁴ "Called by Allah to Kill, Negro Slays Neighbor," *Nevada State Journal*, Nov. 22, 1932.

²⁵ "Cult Leader Says Victim Gave Consent," *Daily Mail* (Hagerstown, Maryland), Nov. 22, 1932; "Head of Cult Admits Killing," *Detroit News*, Nov. 21, 1932.

²⁶ Clifton E. Marsh, *From Black Muslims to Muslims: The Resurrection, Transformation, and Change of the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America, 1930-1995* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 37.

²⁷ Vibert L. White Jr., *Inside the Nation of Islam: A Historical and Personal Testimony by a Black Muslim* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 7-9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

²⁹ Marsh, *From Black Muslims to Muslims*, 37.

³⁰ "Cult Crime in Detroit," *Lowell Sun* (Lowell, Massachusetts), Nov. 21, 1932; "Negro Cult Leader Admits Killing Man in Voodoo Worship," *Komoko Tribune* (Komoko, Indiana), Nov. 25, 1932.

³¹ "Leader of Cult Called Insane," *Detroit News*, Nov. 22, 1932.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ "Leader of Cult to Be Quizzed," *Detroit News*, Nov. 23, 1932.

the significance of these economic problems in Harris’s mental breakdown, as he reported that Harris had also intended to harm Gladys Smith, the social worker who had recently terminated welfare benefits to Harris’s family.³⁴

Despite the growing evidence that Robert Harris committed murder because of mental illness and financial stress, the police continued to harass Temple members, seeking to establish a connection to their religious teachings. Homicide detectives questioned Wallace Fard; Ugan Ali, the Temple secretary; and Edward Harris about the tenets of their faith, searching for a relationship to “human sacrifice.”³⁵ Edward reaffirmed that his brother was suffering from a mental breakdown, and that “[n]obody paid much attention to him.”³⁶ Ali expressed a similar opinion, stating that Harris had “no standing” in the Temple and “[m]any people avoided him because of the wild things he sometimes said.”³⁷ Fard responded that he did not know Robert Harris and that nothing in their teachings encouraged human sacrifice.³⁸

The police continued to detain Fard, Ali, and several other Temple members despite their unequivocal denunciations of Harris’s actions. Hundreds of black Muslims marched on the police station in protest of these seemingly unwarranted confinements. Unfortunately, misleading newspaper accounts about these demonstrations fueled speculation that the Temple encouraged Harris’s “human sacrifice.” The *Morning Herald*, a newspaper in Hagerstown, Maryland, published one such distorted report, claiming “five hundred members of the negro Voodoo-Moslem cult recently revealed in Detroit marched to the Central police station today to demand the release of their leaders, held for questioning as a result of the investigation growing out of the ‘sacrificial’ slaying of James H. Smith last Sunday.”³⁹ They failed to mention that Harris was suffering from mental illness and that the Temple leaders had condemned his actions.

While some reporters omitted key facts in the Harris case to suggest the culpability of the entire Temple, others instead persisted in attributing the murder to their religious teachings even while recounting events that contradicted the Temple’s involvement. For example, under the title “Cult Slayer Pleads Guilty,” the *Detroit Press* described Harris’s extremely erratic behavior at his arraignment but still suggested that his crime might be linked to Islamic teachings.⁴⁰ The author claimed that Judge John Scallen ordered Harris to remove his hat in the courtroom, but Harris refused, replying “I’m king here.” This resulted in a dispute between Scallen and Harris about who was “king,” and a court officer was forced to remove the hat from Harris’s head. Amidst this exchange, the judge asked Harris whether he admitted to killing James Smith. Harris replied in the affirmative then, after struggling with the court officer to attempt to replace the hat on his head, explained that Smith had to die because “It was crucifixion time.”⁴¹ Immediately after his confession, Harris informed the judge, “Well, I’ve got to go now,” and attempted to leave the courtroom but officers restrained him and returned him to his cell. While the *Detroit Press*

³⁴ Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 85. Gladys Smith was no relation to the victim, James Smith, and she had no connection to the black Islamic community.

³⁵ “Leader of Cult to Be Quizzed,” *Detroit News*, Nov. 23, 1932.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ “Harris, Cult Slayer, Faces Court Friday,” *Detroit News*, Nov. 24, 1932.

³⁹ “Cult Members Move to Free Their Leaders,” *Morning Herald* (Hagerstown, Maryland) Nov. 25, 1932.

⁴⁰ “Cult Slayer Pleads Guilty,” *Detroit News*, Nov. 25, 1932.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

reported that due to this bizarre behavior it was likely that the judge would appoint a sanity commission to evaluate Harris, it continued to refer to him as the “cult leader,” and claimed that as a result of this murder, the deputy chief of detectives had ordered a special investigation into the “activities of the Order of Islam [referring to the Temple].”⁴²

Similar contradictory articles emerged over the following days, as Harris was transferred to the mental health ward of the local hospital after he became agitated and began destroying things in his cell. Judge Scallen appointed a three-member sanity commission to evaluate Harris and they adjudged him insane and sent him to the state asylum in Ionia, Michigan.⁴³ Even as the media described Harris’s bizarre behavior and the sanity commission’s findings, they continued to characterize him as the leader of a “voodoo cult” and his actions as representative of all black Muslims, employing misleading titles such as “Negro Cult Leader Admits Killing Man in Voodoo Worship,” and “Cult Chief Admits He Killed Victim” to report these events.⁴⁴

The attribution of the actions of one mentally unstable person to the members of the Allah Temple of Islam and its leaders is consistent with the sensationalized depictions of “voodooism” in Cuba and Haiti in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Travelers and reporters conflated isolated allegations of ritual murder on these islands with the beliefs and desires of the entire black population, and emphasized that the rulers of these countries supported “voodooism” and ritual murder or were too afraid to suppress it. St. John asserted that voodooism, human sacrifice, and cannibalism permeated all classes of Haitian society, and claimed “[a] black Government dares not greatly interfere, as its power is founded on the goodwill of the masses, ignorant and deeply tainted with fetish-worship.”⁴⁵ In the 1910s and 1920s, journalists made analogous claims that white government officials and other “persons of influence” were collaborators or “co-worshippers” of voodoo and refused to punish their black counterparts even for heinous crimes like human sacrifice.⁴⁶

As historian Richard Brent Turner has pointed out, following Marcus Garvey’s conviction for mail fraud and deportation to Jamaica in 1927 and the death of Noble Drew Ali, leader of the Moorish Science Temple, in 1929, the Allah Temple of Islam (and its later incarnation as the Nation of Islam) “may have been the most important Pan-Africanist organization in America in the 1930s.”⁴⁷ The Allah Temple of Islam was a significant source of African American empowerment, particularly because of Fard’s teachings about the racial superiority of blacks over whites as well as his encouragement of black self-sufficiency and self-segregation. Linking this organization and its leader to human sacrifice would have been a particularly effective manner of discrediting them in the 1930s.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “Negro Cult Leader Admits Killing Man in Voodoo Worship,” *Komoko Tribune* (Komoko, Indiana), Nov. 25, 1932; Correlation Summary: Wallace D. Fard, Jan. 15, 1958, FBI Files: Wallace D. Fard, Part 2, p. 63.

⁴⁴ “Negro Cult Leader Admits Killing Man in Voodoo Worship,” *Komoko Tribune* (Komoko, Indiana), Nov. 25, 1932; “Cult Chief Admits He Killed Victim,” *Ironwood Daily Globe* (Ironwood, Michigan), Nov. 25, 1932.

⁴⁵ Spenser St. John, *Haiti; or the Black Republic* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1889), xii. First published in 1884.

⁴⁶ For example, see “Cuban Child Butchered By Voodooists,” *Galveston Daily News* (Galveston, Texas), Dec. 28, 1913; “Fear Little Ones May Be Offered In Cannibal Rites,” *Ogden Examiner* (Ogden, Utah), Aug. 11, 1919; “Cuba Has Another Voodoo Mystery,” *Nevada State Journal*, Dec. 3, 1922.

⁴⁷ Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 159.

Because of the widespread public understandings of “voodoo” and human sacrifice as components of uncivilized black societies and the close link between reports of these practices and U.S. imperialism, these repeated claims that the Temple was involved in Harris’s crime had a substantial impact on the organization. First, Wallace Fard was detained by police until May of 1933; he was instructed to leave Detroit immediately upon release.⁴⁸ Although the official reasons for Fard’s detention and banishment from the city are unknown, the media claimed that he was suspected of encouraging Harris’s purported human sacrifice.⁴⁹ After leaving Detroit, Fard spent a short time at the organization’s second temple in Chicago, which had been established by his Chief Minister, Elijah Muhammad, in 1932. However, Fard disappeared in 1934, leaving Muhammad to take over Temple operations.⁵⁰ Muhammad changed the Temple’s name to the Nation of Islam, purportedly to escape their negative reputation from Harris’s so-called human sacrifice. The Chicago temple also became the Nation’s main headquarters. Therefore, these characterizations of black Muslims as a “voodoo cult,” directly or indirectly, led to the first major changes in the organization’s name, location, and leadership.

Despite Fard’s departure and the restructuring and renaming of the Temple, narratives of Muslim “voodoo practices” in Detroit resurfaced in 1937 when a man named Vernon McQueen was charged with preparing to boil his wife and daughter alive at a “gathering of worshippers of Allah.”⁵¹ McQueen’s arrest made front-page headlines across the country, as reporters alleged that the police were forced to hide McQueen’s wife and child out of fear of reprisals from the other members of the “cult.”⁵² The media linked McQueen to Harris’s murder of Smith in 1932 and the arrest of Wallace Fard shortly thereafter.⁵³ They characterized these events as evidence of “a new uprising of Detroit’s Negro voodoo cult,” which police thought had been eradicated when Fard had been ordered to leave the city.⁵⁴ Reporters further alleged that McQueen’s arrest provoked detectives to investigate the rest of the “Voodoo cult,” which had spread to Chicago, New York, and Canada.⁵⁵

The following year, in 1938, Erdmann Beynon published the first scholarly article ever written about the Nation of Islam in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Beynon titled this work “The Voodoo Cult Among the Negro Migrants of Detroit,”⁵⁶ which he explained reflected the name that the police used to describe the Nation of Islam. He clarified that he did not intend “to trace relationship between this cult and Voodooism in Haiti or other West Indian islands;” rather, the

⁴⁸ Marsh, *From Black Muslims to Muslims*, 39.

⁴⁹ “Police Guard Woman, Girl: Negress Says Husband Threatened to ‘Sacrifice Her to Allah,’” *Daily Hawk-Eye Gazette* (Burlington, Iowa), Jan. 19, 1937.

⁵⁰ Marsh, *From Black Muslims to Muslims*, 39.

⁵¹ “Voodoo Leader Scares Couple into Collapse,” *Daily Courier* (Connellsville, Pennsylvania), Jan. 20, 1937.

⁵² “Save Mother and Daughter from Sacrifice,” *Morning Herald* (Uniontown, Pennsylvania), Jan. 20, 1937.

⁵³ “Voodoo Leader Scares Couple into Collapse,” *Daily Courier* (Connellsville, Pennsylvania), Jan. 20, 1937.

⁵⁴ “Police Guard Woman, Girl: Negress Says Husband Threatened to ‘Sacrifice Her to Allah,’” *Daily Hawk-eye Gazette* (Burlington, Iowa), Jan. 19, 1937; “Voodoo Cult’s Sacrifice to Allah Failed,” *Lima News* (Lima, Ohio), Jan. 20, 1937.

⁵⁵ “Voodoo Leader Scares Couple into Collapse,” *Daily Courier* (Connellsville, Pennsylvania), Jan. 20, 1937. However, aside from this initial flurry of articles in the days immediately following McQueen’s arrest, little is known about these events. It is unclear if McQueen was actually a member of the Nation of Islam or if he had ever met Robert Harris, Wallace Fard, or Elijah Muhammad. It is also unknown whether or not McQueen was ultimately charged for the threats he made to his wife and if so, the disposition of McQueen’s case.

⁵⁶ Erdmann Doane Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult Among Negro Migrants in Detroit,” *American Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 6 (May, 1938): 894–907.

name was “solely because of cases of human sacrifice.”⁵⁷ This article would become central to the Nation of Islam’s reputation because virtually every scholar writing about Wallace Fard, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X since the 1930s has relied on Beynon for their work.⁵⁸

Without citing a single source, Beynon recounted the details of the Harris and McQueen cases and the alleged response of other black Muslims. He contended that Robert Harris was “a prominent member” of the Nation of Islam and McQueen was the brother of one of the assistant ministers.⁵⁹ Beynon claimed that these sacrifices caused substantial internal dissension in the organization, leading one group known as “Rebels against the Will of Allah” to break off from the others “to avoid human sacrifice, the necessity of which as an expiation of sin forms one of the most hotly debated subjects among cult members.”⁶⁰ While Beynon conceded that Wallace Fard’s official position on human sacrifice was not known, he suggested that the practice was a natural extension of Fard’s teaching that his followers could gain access to Mecca if they killed four “white devils,” and that members of the Nation were expected to give themselves over to Allah and the movement unto the point of death, if necessary.⁶¹

The Legacy of Human Sacrifice

Over the next forty years, newspaper reports and scholarly publications on the Nation of Islam, Elijah Mohammed, and Malcolm X periodically repeated these allegations that Fard was connected to “voodooism” and human sacrifice, particularly during the height of the organization’s prominence in the early 1960s. For example, C. Eric Lincoln’s book *The Black Muslims in America*, which appears to have been the first monograph published about the Nation of Islam, unquestioningly adopted sensationalized depictions of the Harris murder from the 1930s. Lincoln argued that amidst the Great Depression and the increasing difficulties African Americans faced attempting to secure housing and employment in the North, welfare workers and police officers “became the symbolic targets of a virulent hatred of the white man growing in the breasts of Fard’s Black Nation.”⁶² Citing a lengthy quote from Beynon’s 1938 article, Lincoln contended that Harris’s threats to kill welfare workers “for human sacrifice as infidels” was “one extreme example” of this hatred and targeting.⁶³

While Lincoln depicted Harris’s crime as representative of broader sentiments of a disgruntled and disillusioned African American community, most reporters and scholars writing in the 1960s and 1970s characterized Fard as a criminal and a charlatan who was solely responsible for the formation of this “voodoo cult.” For instance, in February of 1961, dozens of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 894.

⁵⁸ Edward Curtis, a scholar writing on the Nation of Islam in 2002, noted that almost every work on the history of black Islam relies on “a seminal article by sociologist Erdmann Beynon.” Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 69.

⁵⁹ Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult Among Negro Migrants in Detroit,” 903–904.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 904.

⁶² C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 13.

⁶³ Ibid. Later Lincoln merely says, “The Detroit Muslims of the 1930s had a number of bizarre excesses charged against them, including, as we have seen, human sacrifice.” After quoting a newspaper account of the Harris trial, Lincoln continues, “Other reports of sacrifices or attempted sacrifices were current in Detroit as late as 1937.” Ibid., 204.

newspapers circulated a virtually identical story written by George Sokolsky about the Nation of Islam. Sokolsky drafted this article in response to a protest that the Nation, under the leadership of Malcolm X, led in front of the United Nations Security Council meetings in New York City following the death of Patrice Lumumba. Sokolsky emphasized the swift growth of the Nation of Islam, which had at least thirty temples in the United States at this time and claimed 250,000 members. Sokolsky described the Nation as a “Negro Cult” and asserted that their founder was a criminal who taught his followers to hate whites and commit acts of violence:

The organizer, W.D. Fard, who has disappeared and who the votaries of this sect believe is Allah, that is God, was a peddler in Detroit after serving a three year period in San Quentin penitentiary for violating the narcotics law. He went by many names and preached violence.

At first Fard preached the Bible but very soon abandoned and ridiculed the testament and preached racial hatred instead. On Nov. 21, 1932, Detroit was shocked by a frightful story of human sacrifice. Robert Harris induced his roomer, John J. Smith, to present himself as a human sacrifice so that he might become “the savior of the world.” At the appointed time and place, Harris plunged a knife into Smith’s heart. Harris was arrested and adjudged insane. Fard disappeared in May 1933.⁶⁴

Ed Montgomery made similar claims about Fard in his now-infamous article, entitled “Black Muslim Founder Exposed as a White,” published in the *Herald Examiner* in 1963.⁶⁵ Montgomery declared that Fard, who Nation of Islam members believe was from Mecca, was actually named Wallace Dodd, and was born to a British father and a Polynesian mother. He depicted Fard as “an enterprising, racketeering fake” who posed as an Arab and intentionally targeted African Americans to steal their money. Within this multi-page article, Montgomery included a large section entitled “Detroit Ousted Him For Human Sacrifice.” Montgomery claimed that this “human sacrifice” demonstrated “the potential dangerousness and the primitive instincts of some of his followers.”⁶⁶ He asserted that Fard was arrested in connection with the sacrificial murder and then ordered to leave Detroit, but not before he admitted that his teachings were a racket.⁶⁷

Throughout the 1960s and in the early 1970s, both the media and scholars continued to resurrect these allegations that the founders of the Nation of Islam practiced human sacrifice. For example, in 1965, Lee Brown, a member of the San Jose Police Department, published an article entitled “Black Muslims and the Police” in the *Journal of Criminal Law*.⁶⁸ The primary purpose of the article was to describe a series of violent conflicts between African American Muslims and the

⁶⁴ George Sokolsky, “U.S. Negro Cult Preaches Hate, Claims ¼ Million Membership,” *Ogden Standard Examiner* (Ogden, Utah), Feb. 28, 1961; George Sokolsky, “Islam Cult in UN Riot,” *Sunday Light* (San Antonio, Texas), Feb. 26, 1961.

⁶⁵ “Black Muslim Founder Exposed as a White,” *Herald Examiner* (Los Angeles, California), July 28, 1963.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Elijah Muhammad famously responded by declaring the entire article to be a fabrication and offering to pay \$100,000 if someone could prove these claims.

⁶⁸ Lee P. Brown, “Black Muslims and the Police,” *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science* 56, no. 1 (March 1965): 119–126.

police in California; however, Brown inserted a sensationalized version of Robert Harris's murder into his narrative as background information. He recounted these events without mentioning that Harris was declared insane and that Temple leaders denied ordering or supporting his actions. Brown also contended that there were additional unconfirmed reports of human sacrifice associated with the Nation of Islam.⁶⁹ However, despite his negative depictions of the organization's origins, Brown ultimately concluded that the Nation posed no threat to police or society, and had made substantial strides in reducing drug and alcohol abuse as well as criminal recidivism rates among African Americans.⁷⁰

Merv Block was less equivocal in his depictions of the Nation of Islam in a newspaper article he wrote in March of 1972 that was circulated in several papers.⁷¹ In addition to focusing on the departure of several prominent members (such as the late Malcolm X) and on claims that the millions of dollars raised for the poor were being siphoned off for Muhammad's personal use, Block emphasized the criminal history of many of the Nation's leaders, including their controversial founder, Wallace Fard. Block accepted as true the recent contentions that Fard was a white man of New Zealand ancestry who had served time in San Quentin prison. Of Fard's early activities with the Nation of Islam in the 1930s, Block asserted, "The cult came to notice in 1932 after one member sacrificed another. In 1933, Detroit police arrested Fard as chief of the 'Voodoo Cult,' and authorities told him to leave. He soon dropped from sight."

Recent Scholarly Interpretations

Searches of major newspaper databases have produced no recent references to the Nation of Islam as a "voodoo cult;" however, claims that their founder encouraged human sacrifice still haunt this legendary organization in scholarly literature. In the 1990s and 2000s, researchers frequently asserted that the murder of James Smith was an extension of Fard's alleged instructions that his followers should murder four white "devils" to gain access to heaven.⁷² One of the most sensationalized interpretations of Fard's influence on Robert Harris appears in Karl Evanzz's biography of Elijah Muhammad published in 1999:

According to Fard, not only white devils were to be targets for ritual slayings, but also African Americans who placed their loyalty to the American government before their loyalty to the temple and God. Fard referred to these blacks as

⁶⁹ Ibid., 120.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 125–126.

⁷¹ Merv Block, "Muslims Gain Strength Under Paradoxical Leader," *Daily Review* (Hayward, California), March 26, 1972; Merv Block, "The Black Muslims Messengers of Allah," *Stars and Stripes*, March 29, 1972; Merv Block, "The Black Muslims: Leaders Teach Austerity but Live Stylishly, Prosperously," *Register* (Danville, Virginia), March 30, 1972.

⁷² Claude Andrew Clegg III, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 31–32. Clegg argued that "Robert Harris, in his own distorted way, was trying to carry out the literal essence of this [Fard's] teaching." However, Elijah Muhammad's son argued in 1975 that Fard's teachings about the "white devils" were not meant to be taken literally. Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience*, 225. Other researchers repeated Clegg's angle in various recounts of the 1930s events. One scholar, Martha Lee, completely omitted Smith's race and Harris's insanity in her analysis of this crime. Lee stated that although Fard's support of human sacrifice "appears to have been temporary, at least one sacrifice was offered," again treating Smith's murder as an act fulfilling the purported teachings of Fard that followers of Islam must sacrifice four "white devils." Martha F. Lee, *The Nation of Islam: An American Millenarian Movement* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 24.

“imps,” meaning they were “impersonating” white people in their thinking and behavior. Most of Fard’s followers preferred to forgo the rewards he promised for carrying out ritualistic murder, but there was a handful for whom the salvation he assured them meant everything. Robert Harris, whom Fard had renamed Robert Karriem, was one of them. His desire to please Fard led him into an unspeakable act that had the city of Detroit in shock during Thanksgiving week of 1932.⁷³

Without weighing in on the longstanding debate about whether Fard encouraged his followers to kill “white devils,” the purported link between such an instruction and the murder of James Smith or the attempted murder of Vernon McQueen’s wife and children is extremely problematic. Smith and the McQueen family were all African Americans who, at least according to media reports, were Temple members. As neither whites nor African American non-believers, it is unclear how their deaths would further Fard’s purported teachings about murdering “white devils” or “imps.” This is particularly true in the case of James Smith who, according to Robert Harris’s confession, was so devout that he offered himself as a sacrifice to Allah.

Furthermore, there is a substantial distinction between murdering “white devils” or “imps” and engaging in human sacrifice. The above-cited scholars suggest that Fard urged the murder of “white devils” as a type of holy war against the oppressors and their collaborators, and that he claimed that such killings would earn the slayer access to Mecca. Human sacrifice, on the other hand, suggests the believer must utilize a ritualized method of killing in order to make a propitiatory offering to appease a god or gods. This would have been particularly true of public perceptions of voodoo-related human sacrifices in the 1930s. However, despite the contemporaneous descriptions of the Nation of Islam as a “voodoo cult” and the bizarre ritualized crimes of Harris (sacrificing Smith on an altar) and McQueen (attempting to boil his family alive), no reporter or scholar appears to have uncovered any evidence that Fard gave specific instructions about a ceremonial method of killing nor that he ever suggested that the blood or life force of the victim would serve any spiritual purpose beyond proving the follower’s loyalty. One must therefore question whether even recent scholarship continues to deploy racialized stereotypes about “voodooism” and human sacrifice that were common in the 1930s.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to unravel the loaded meaning of the characterization of the Nation of Islam as a “voodoo cult,” a moniker that has been largely unquestioned since the publication of the first scholarly work on this organization in 1938. Emerging at the end of the U.S. occupation of Haiti, which had whet the American public’s appetite for tales of “voodooism” and human sacrifice, these allegations would have had a substantial impact on public perceptions of black Muslims in the 1930s. This trial led to the detention of several leading members of the Allah Temple of Islam, the departure of Wallace Fard from Detroit, and the transition of leadership from Fard to Elijah Muhammad. It also appears to have influenced Muhammad’s decision to transition the primary operations from Detroit to Chicago and encouraged him to change their organization’s name to the Nation of Islam, to escape the reputation that the Temple had incurred as the “voodoo cult of Detroit.” However, the Nation

⁷³ Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 83–84. Evanzz relies exclusively on newspaper archives to establish the purported connection between Fard and Harris. *Ibid.*, 355–356.

was unable to shake off this legacy, and these allegations of human sacrifice re-emerged in the 1960s and 1970s to discredit the organization and its founders as they rapidly gained wealth, influence, and followers.

Rather than accepting these rumors as gospel, scholars should understand “voodooism” and human sacrifice as a stereotype that the media and U.S. officials employed to demean many black religions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From post-emancipation New Orleans to the independent nations of Haiti and Cuba, they utilized the rhetoric of “voodooism” to prove that persons of African descent were incapable of voting, holding public office, and governing themselves. The Nation of Islam, therefore, did not become known as a “voodoo cult” because its leaders encouraged human sacrifice. It earned this designation because it threatened white supremacy by promoting the education and empowerment of black people.

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Blood on the Stones: Race, Epidemiology, and Theology

Khytie Brown

This paper takes up Gil Anidjar's concept of hemophilia—the love of blood—as a defining relational feature of Christianity and expands his critique through an examination of what blood as symbol, construction, and fiction reveals about the role of the racialized human body in contemporary theological and U.S. secular cultural imaginations. It discursively traces how the symbolism (and reality) of blood informs, sanctions, and responds to notions of race and racialized state violence by thinking through the epidermis and the making of race anthropologically, paying attention to the history of science. It moves on to epidemiological and social constructions of blood purity—emblemized in concepts of disease and contagion—and finally draws on the works of contemporary theologians to examine what it might mean to love blood ethically rather than violently and perversely.

Keywords: racialization, black religion, history of science and medicine, police violence, anthropology of religion, African diaspora, Christianity

Sticks beating, hands beating, the rumble of bass drums so bass they sound for all the world like thunder, the rapid-fire crackling of a stick so sharp on a skin so tight it sounds for all the world like gunfire. You could be anywhere: this is a war zone, this is a party. Sticks beating, hands beating, there's a body underfoot in the middle of the crowd, that's the military police beating a man like a drum, that's blood on the stones.

Barbara Browning¹

"Damn, that's Mike's blood. I'm stepping in Mike's blood. I had to leave. It did something to me."

Tef Poe²

In the wake of the non-indictment of the police officers, Darren Wilson and Daniel Pantaleo, who in 2014, under the color of the law murdered the unarmed black men, Michael Brown and Eric Garner respectively, the dreams of a post-racial American society have come to fester and ooze as an unsightly and fetid sore. Left in its place are hands beating, drums beating and *blood*. This blood has a long history. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2014) James Cone invokes Billie Holliday's strange fruit, hanging from the poplar tree with blood soaked leaves and blood saturating the roots. This blood gathers and pools, dries and congeals, erupts and overflows into histories, symbols, interpretations and stories. It is fictional, institutional, mythical and constructed. It is at once a fetish, a sign, a cipher, a citation and a repetition.³ What does blood as symbol, construction and fiction reveal about the role of the body in contemporary theological imaginations? More urgently, how does the symbolism (and reality) of blood inform, sanction and

¹ Barbara Browning, *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1.

² St. Louis rapper, activist and community organizer, at a talk at Harvard's Hip Hop Archive about Ferguson and hip hop activism, December 9, 2014.

³ Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 38.

respond to notions of race and racialized state violence? This paper attempts a precursory investigation of the intersection of racialized epidermis, epidemiology and theology through blood.

Gil Anidjar in *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (2014) contends that “beginning with the conception of humans as ‘flesh and blood’ Christianity was the first community to understand and conceive of itself as a community of blood.”⁴ Anidjar argues that this notion of blood is what deepened and congealed Christianity. He goes as far as to state that Christianity’s relationship to blood is one of *hemophilia*—a love of blood. This hemophilia, he contends, was instilled in the hearts and minds of Christians and on their flesh by “early techniques of mass social operation.”⁵ The love of blood (arguably bedfellows with bloodlust), according to Anidjar, was a product of a disciplinary revolution that “reshaped the bodies of individuals, the collective bodies of families and classes, ultimately of nations and races.”⁶ Pushing forward Anidjar’s assertion, this paper investigates what Anidjar calls “liquid modernity”⁷ (a term he borrows from Zygmunt Bauman) and the aforementioned “techniques of mass operation” in an attempt to make sense of this *hemophilia*, in contemporary US society, asking what happens when the love of blood is perverted?

In discussing the production of mass death during the Holocaust, Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that genocide is an integral aspect of modernity and modernity allowed for the social engineering necessary for the practice of exterminatory racism.⁸ This exterminatory racism of the Holocaust was one in which an artificial order could be created by eliminating alterity. Building upon the work of Zygmunt Bauman, Uli Linke argues that “violent bloodshed creates an observable physical condition: liquidity, sexual contagion, carnal femininity.”⁹ She asserts that the German discourse of liquidation integrated itself into a discourse that feminized the racialized other into woman. Linke’s insight is keen, and I argue that in the American context of the black racialized other, this liquidation and violent bloodshed create an imagined carnal bestiality, particularly for black men, returning them to a nature—not unlike the feminine itself, which is often tied to nature—that must be dominated and controlled through the techniques of mass social operation that allow for and sanction bloodshed as concomitant with this “liquid modernity.” The paper thinks through the epidermis and the making of race, moves on to epidemiology with notions of blood purity, concepts of disease and contagion and finally examines what it might mean to love blood ethically.

The Epidermalizing of Race

In *Enfleshing Freedom: Body Race and Being*, M. Shawn Copeland quotes Mary Douglas and asserts that the human body functions as a code and image for social reality wherein there is both a physical and social body and “the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived.”¹⁰ The social body’s assignment of meaning and significance to race and/or gender or

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Uli Linke, “Gendered Difference, Violent Imagination: Blood, Race, Nation,” *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 3 (1997): 559.

⁹ Ibid., 561.

¹⁰ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 8.

sex and/or sexuality of physical bodies influences and even determines the trajectories of concrete human lives.¹¹ Copeland poses the question: what makes a body black? This question may be confounding as it forces one to come face to face with that which is deemed obvious and common sense—the American axiom that race is self-evident and we inherently know and understand what race means (despite post-racial narratives of color-blindness). When applying to schools, jobs, getting our driver’s licenses or filling out a survey we are required to identify ourselves racially, and even if we choose to opt out of the paper classification we are still interpellated. The question “what makes a body black?” encourages an examination of how race is constructed, specifically how race is constructed through physical bodies. While it is now commonly accepted that race is not a biological fact but a social construction, this does not translate into the freedom to throw off the fetters of race and its implication for the body—since we have both physical and social bodies and, as Erving Goffman posits, *actual* and *virtual* identities. Race, though not biological, is a virtual identity whose construction is interwoven with and impacts the physical body, as well as physiological and epidemiological relations, and social relations specifically.

Copeland theorizes race in terms of skin and investigates how a body comes to be made black. Copeland’s starting point is European Enlightenment, citing Emmanuel Eze who argues that “Enlightenment philosophy was instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing both the scientific and popular European perceptions of the human race.”¹² She points to Kant who located the difference between blacks and whites at the level of their skin pigmentation, which he thought mirrored differences in their mental capacities. The Eurocentric nature of the Enlightenment correlated white skin with reason, civilizations, goodness, purity (especially for women) and intelligence and denigrated non-white skin (the most radically opposite of which was black skin) as savage, depraved, ignorant and only capable of mimicry. Copeland argues that “these evaluations insinuated the idea that white skin functionally accorded absolute supremacy to white men over non-whites and women and legitimated imperial brutality, extermination, slavery, racism and biology as human destiny.”¹³ She also points to what she terms “pornographic pseudoscience” that violated the black body to reveal alleged truths, but seemed to be more rooted in perverse curiosity.¹⁴ The pseudoscientific gaze, as she terms it, normalized, hierarchized and excluded some bodies against others and it was decidedly pornographic in that it “positions, handles and fetishizes.”¹⁵

Copeland quotes historian James Sweet who argues that the “racialized habitus [is]based on perceived phenotypical distinctions . . . [and] results in homogenizing processes that reduce social or cultural ‘difference’ to innate traits, or ‘race.’”¹⁶ This reductionist view, as Copeland contends, allows skin to generate a “privileged and privileging worldview”¹⁷ where “skin morphs into a horizon funded by bias.”¹⁸ These biases, she argues, hold potent currency, rendering race the ultimate trope of difference that is “artificially and arbitrarily contrived to produce and

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 10.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸ Ibid.

maintain relations of power and subordination.”¹⁹ Of central importance is her argument that white racially bias-induced horizons work to define, censor, control and segregate non-white, subaltern bodies. These bodies in the normal routine of this white bias-induced horizon are invisible in terms of historical and cultural production, social creativity and representation; however, they become hypervisible should they “step out of place” and are then subordinated and subjected to literal surveillance, inspection, containment and discrimination.²⁰

Bearing the spoiled identity of black skin allows for W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous *double consciousness*—being both American and black, a contradictory position, and always seeing the self through the eyes of the hegemonic other.²¹ Living in black skin reveals a Janus-faced American society wherein freedom and liberty stand alongside historical slavery and its legacy—*laissez-faire racism*, where the hypervisibility of blackness is concomitant with invisibility, where protection in the form of the police and military comforts some as it implicates and arouses fear and suspicion in others, and where freedom of speech and words are powerful for some but have proven dangerous for others making silence the preferred balm. Goffman, at the outset of his project, explains that the term stigma conceals a double perspective, that of the *discredited* and the *discreditable*. The discredited person assumes his or her differentness is known and evident while the discreditable person may assume his or her differentness is not visible, thus not readily apprehended by others. Whether one is discredited or discreditable directly relates to the type of stigma one possesses. Goffman explains the three types of stigma: 1) abominations of the body 2) “blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs and dishonesty”²² and 3) tribal stigmas like race and religion that are transmitted through lineages. This taxonomy of stigma relates to tangible qualities that can be perceived visually, reading the physical body for example, as well as intangible qualities that are also invariably mapped on to bodies. This double perspective of being both *discredited* and *discreditable* defines the stigma of blackness in America. While Goffman points out that a stigmatized individual may have experiences with being both discredited and discreditable, I must underscore that being both discredited and discreditable is a *necessary* part of racial stigmatization. Further, the stigma of blackness is made operational through the three types of stigma Goffman highlights and no one type is discrete from the others. Black skin is an abomination of the body in a society where white skin is deemed beautiful and normal. In her book *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on African Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (2006), Harriet Washington provides an agonizing illustration of this point. In her chapter “Nuclear Winter” she recounts that in the 1900s “doctors touted radiation to blacks as an escape into whiteness.”²³ Skin bleaching through dangerous radiation, which some Blacks underwent, was advertised as “scientific light” that would efface the dark disability of racial difference.”²⁴ While it did not take off as much as expected, the fact that some Blacks underwent the treatment to escape physical blackness and its deleterious effects on social identity, proves that black skin was cast as a physical abomination. Anti-colonialist revolutionary and psychologist

¹⁹ Ibid., 15.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Touchstone, 1963).

²² Ibid., 4.

²³ Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on African Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Anchor, 2007), 226.

²⁴ Ibid.

Frantz Fanon echoes some of these same notions when he laments in *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952):

For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for “denegrification”; with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction.²⁵

Unfortunately, the desire to throw off the burdensome corporeal malediction of black skin is not merely a misguided fad of a bygone era; it is still a common phenomenon in the African diaspora and the Americas, where radiation is replaced with “whitening creams” with dangerous levels of hydroquinone, and when that does not work Photoshop editing software can lighten one’s skin to a brilliant white, or as white as possible, for commercial purposes. In the same vein, black hair is also a visible marker of difference and abomination and Washington describes how for other non-white ethnic minorities hair also became a marker signaling their abnormality. The other two forms of stigma: blemishes of individual character and the tribal stigma passed through lineage, are also woven into blackness as stigma. Blackness coincides with defective moral character as well as defective cultural characteristics, as argued by Lawrence D. Bobo and Ryan Smith in their article “From Jim Crow Racism to Laissez-Faire Racism,” in which the ideology of laissez-faire racism sees blacks as the “cultural architects of their own disadvantaged status.”²⁶ And more obviously, in the American racial logic, blackness is passed down through lineage, and literally and symbolically through blood, where even “one drop” of black blood taints a person and excludes him or her from the privilege of being a part of the normal. It is here that we turn to blood as the substance that transmits lineage, defines belonging and is the enigma of difference.²⁷

Thinking Blood Epidemiologically

Gil Anidjar discusses blood in his claim that Christianity was the premier community to define itself in terms of blood and argues that blood has come to stand in for community, including Eucharistic ties, kinship and race, and became the “substance, site and marker of collective identity” yet, he is emphatic that neither the Bible nor the rabbis thought of kinship and genealogy in terms of blood.²⁸ He states that “Blood belongs to Christianity, it defines belonging (as membership and as property) in Christianity. It marks and signals Christianity, while governing the way in which it perceives itself as lacking the solidarity of essence.”²⁹ This paper takes Anidjar’s claim that Christianity was the first community to use blood to stand in for community, as an entryway into thinking about the transmission of lineage, notions of belonging

²⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove, 1967), 111.

²⁶ Lawrence D. Bobo and Ryan Smith, “From Jim Crow Racism to Laissez-Faire Racism: The Transformation of Racial Attitudes,” in *Beyond Pluralism: The Conception of Groups and Group Identities in America*, ed. Wendy F. Katkin, Ned Landsman, and Andrea Tyree (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 212.

²⁷ Robert Manning, “Serious Ideas Rooted in Blood: Emmanuel Levinas’s Analysis of the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” in *Postmodernism and the Holocaust*, ed. Alan Rosenberg and Alan Milchman (Amsterdam: Brill Rodopi, 1998), 131.

²⁸ Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 257.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

and difference through blood. Anidjar calls attention to the fact that blood is not a natural carrier of genealogy or sign of community (even though today, particularly because of DNA science, it would appear this way). Blood, he argues, “is only one in an economy of symbols—natural or not—that have appealed to the collective imagination.”³⁰ Blood is constructed and made, and as blood makes us so to do we make blood.

Turning to German racial politics as one of the clearest instantiations of blood as a substance denoting enigmatic difference, Uli Linke in her article “Gendered Difference, Violent Imagination: Blood, Race, Nation” argues that subaltern bodies of outsiders (including foreigners and refugees) in the German political culture became racial constructs that were feminized and claimed as signifiers of race and contagion. Violence thus defined a “new corporal topography, linked to the murderous elimination of refugees and immigrants where ordinary citizens with divergent political commitments participate in the perpetuation of extermination discourses.”³¹ These notions of racial alterity were publicly constructed through what Linke calls “violent iconographic images of blood and liquidation.”³² In order to maintain the health of the German body politic a strict regimen of racial hygiene was enforced and a model of race was employed, not based in skin, but carefully constructed around typologies of blood. She states that “race, disease, and infections were imagined through blood metaphors. Blood became a marker of pathological alterity, a signifier that linked race and difference.”³³ She further argues that a multi-layered discourse of liquidation based in “the consumption by fire and the reduction to blood” was utilized wherein images of blood were invoked genealogically as well as through the “transfiguring of the linguistic construct ‘race’ into its physical signs: blood, pain contagion.”³⁴

Building on Linke’s notion of the iconographic images of blood, liquidation and contagion I turn to how these function epidemiologically in the contemporary American imaginary. While in the American context race largely rests on phenotypical markers (primarily the epidermis), and is wedded to genealogy—evident in the practice of hypodescent, that is the automatic assignment of a child of “mixed-race” (which itself reifies the biological concept of race as referring to actual differences in biology or even species) to the racial category of the parent in the non-privileged group—blood is also a dominant iconographic image marking race. Barbara Browning (1998) argues that the Western account of African diasporic culture relies on metaphors of disease and contagion. She posits that this metaphor is often invoked in the guise of literal threats. Her work focuses on “both vital and violent ways” in which the AIDS pandemic has been associated with African and African diasporic cultural practices. Browning asserts that “while the Western depiction of Africans as virulent and dangerous is certainly not new . . . HIV emerged as a pathogen simultaneously with new anxieties over the risks of these other ‘contagions.’”³⁵ Browning makes use of Arjun Appadurai’s theoretical model of cultural fluidity, which argues that “cultural ‘fluid’ exchanges are also played out in literal fluid exchanges of sexual bodies.”³⁶

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

³¹ Linke, “Gendered Difference, Violent Imagination,” 559.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 560.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Browning, *Infectious Rhythm*, 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

The epidemiological narrative about AIDS—transmitted through bodily fluids, primarily infected blood—is one that presents the U.S. as a body vulnerable to penetration by infected populations, which are largely black and, in the case of AIDS, primarily African and Haitian. The parallels between this narrative and earlier narratives of bestial black manhood penetrating and contaminating white womanhood will be explored later in the paper. Within the United States context HIV is largely painted as a disease overwhelmingly affecting the Black population with daily statistical reminders in commercials and on billboards (whose poster children are often Black women), announcing their vulnerability as well as their status as most likely to be contaminated. While Browning provides that 50% of AIDS cases being reported are among Blacks and Latinos (this was in 1998), she warns that to articulate HIV status is a dangerous thing for minority communities, as articulating the prevalence of HIV infection can result in widespread social discrimination of an already discriminated against group.³⁷ Further, the diseases in these populations, instead of being read as manifestations of “the social atrocities practiced against those afflicted . . . the urban poor, gays, women of color, the African diaspora”³⁸—including inadequate healthcare, lack of access to barrier methods of birth control, the realities of urban poverty leading to substance abuse—are instead interpreted as punishments by the religious or as a result of intrinsic negative characteristics like promiscuity, ignorance and depravity in that group. This harkens back to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments of the 1930s in which the US Public Health authorities instituted its study of “Syphilis in the Untreated Negro Male,”³⁹ which attempted to study how the disease developed in black males because, according to racially biased pseudoscience, Blacks felt and experienced pain and disease differently from whites. Aside from the many atrocities of the experiments, it is noteworthy that the public health services physicians declared that Blacks were a “notoriously syphilis soaked race”⁴⁰ because “morality among these people is a joke”⁴¹ and the “Negro’s well-known sexual impetuosity may account for more abrasions of the integument of the sexual organs and therefore more frequent infections than are found in the white race.”⁴² It was found that the syphilis tests were nonspecific and a disease called yaws, prevalent in West Africa, caused by a similar bacterium to syphilis, affected many of these men diagnosed with syphilis, and their high rates of yaws was due to the conditions of poverty—malnourishment, injuries from broken skin, lack of shoes, exposure to the elements—not race or inherent moral bankruptcy.

Most recently, with the 2014 Ebola scare (a virus also transmitted through blood) narratives of US penetrability and purity against African virulence and contamination circulated publicly. One *Newsweek* cover titled “Smuggled Bushmeat is Ebola’s Backdoor to America” features a chimpanzee on the cover with the title of the article in bright yellow and, appropriately enough, above the picture one of the advertised articles inside reads “Post Post-Racial America.” The article highlighted on the cover begins:

Less than three miles from Yankee Stadium, the colorful storefronts of African markets lining the Grand Concourse are some of the first signs of a bustling Bronx

³⁷ Ibid., 10.

³⁸ Ibid., 23.

³⁹ Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 157.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 161.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

community that includes immigrants from those West African nations hit hardest by the recent and unprecedented outbreak of the Ebola virus.

We are here today looking for bushmeat, the butchered harvest of African wildlife, and an ethnic delicacy in West African expatriate communities all over the world.⁴³

The article goes on to declare that “bushmeat is ‘a potential vector of diseases such as Monkeypox, Ebola Virus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and other communicable diseases’ Seven years later, the worst Ebola epidemic in history is ravaging West Africa.”⁴⁴ It continues and describes airlines canceling all flights to West Africa and countries prohibiting people from “that part of the world to land on their soil.”⁴⁵ The article takes many questionable twists and turns and states that we don’t know how much bush meat is smuggled into the U.S. but for many Africans it is believed to have medicinal and magical properties, apart from being a delicious delicacy, and “bushmeat is, for many West Africans, a cultural touchstone.”⁴⁶ Most dubiously, the article states:

Though researchers cannot identify with absolute certainty the cause of the current Ebola outbreak, they do know the strain of virus, while being similar to the Zaire strain, is indigenous to Guinea, suggesting bushmeat was the source.

Fruit bats are believed to be the “natural reservoir” of Ebola (meaning the virus can live in the bats for years without harming them), and scientists presume the virus makes its way into primates and other animals when they eat fruits half-eaten by and contaminated with the saliva of these bats. From those infected animals, the virus jumps to humans. “Just under 50 percent of Ebola outbreaks have been due to known handling of primate, great ape carcasses,” says Michael Jarvis, a virology and immunology expert at Britain’s Plymouth University.

The most likely scenario for the jump is when an infected animal is being butchered and blood seeps into a cut on the hunter’s (or butcher’s) hand. “But we don’t know precisely.”

Smoked bushmeat may appear safe, but the flesh inside is still juicy—filled with blood, fresh tissue and more: Simian foamy virus and herpes viruses showed up in the samples of the confiscated meats. The researchers didn’t find Ebola, but they tested only a few samples.⁴⁷

In effect, while scientists speculate that blood from a butchered animal seeped into a cut on the hunter or butcher’s hands, they do not know precisely. The article suggests that researchers cannot identify with certainty the cause of the recent Ebola outbreak, but presume it is from

⁴³ Gerard Flynn and Susan Scutti, “Smuggled Bushmeat Is Ebola’s Back Door to America,” *Newsweek*, 21 Aug. 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/08/29/smuggled-bushmeat-ebolas-back-door-america-265668.html>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

bushmeat simply because the strain is indigenous to Guinea. Less than 50 percent of Ebola outbreaks have been due to the known handling of great ape carcasses. None of the confiscated bushmeat tested by researchers was infected with Ebola; yet, *Newsweek* chose to publish a sensationalized cover story on Africans in the U.S.—highlighting their belief in magic and non-western medicine—smuggling dangerous bushmeat into the U.S. and voraciously consuming bloody bushmeat because of their inability to prepare it safely, thus potentially exposing everyone else to Ebola. These epidemiological images and narrative circulated in mainstream media tying Africanness—a metonym for blackness—to tainted blood, contagion and disease represent the violence embedded in the articulation of blood as a marker of enigmatic difference. This enigmatic difference eventually moves from notions of contamination, which lead to exclusion and discrimination, to a reactionary violent blood shedding where the love of blood is perverted and pornographic and results in a liquidation that transforms humans into carnal beasts that must be conquered and exterminated.

La bête noire

I pulled it a third time, it goes off...he looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked...and when I grabbed him the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five year old holding on to Hulk Hogan...he turns and when he looked at me he made like a grunting, like aggravated sound and he starts running...I remember seeing the smoke from the gun and I kind of looked at him and he's still running at me, he hasn't slowed down....I shoot another round of bullets...at this point it looks like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I was shooting at him...and the face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn't even there, I wasn't even anything in his way.⁴⁸

Removed from the context of a grand jury transcript in which Officer Darren Wilson is explaining how he came to fatally shoot (six times) and kill an unarmed teenager, the previous quote reads like a man under attack by an unearthly beast of colossal proportion and of a mutant variety, much like the gorilla-monster King Kong. The film *Kong Kong* (1933) itself is no stranger to critique based on its racial overtones, with a storyline featuring a gigantic black ape falling in love with a tiny white woman, and the fictive African villagers in cultic ecstasy giving over this frail white woman to the lusty and apish black beast. The fear of miscegenation and the mixing of bloods in black-white sexual relationships is not implicit here. Both James Cone and M. Shawn Copeland have explored the symbolic meaning of the cross of Jesus and the lynching tree. In their explications, they underscore the fact that the lynching of Black men was most frequently tied to accusations of raping a white woman. Cone notes that “sexual intercourse between black men and white women was regarded as the worst crime Blacks could commit against Anglo-Saxon civilization. Even when sexual relations were consensual, ‘race mixing,’ mockingly called ‘mongrelization,’ was always translated to mean rape and it was used as the primary justification for lynching.”⁴⁹ It was the responsibility of Christian white men to protect the purity of their race by exterminating Black men to prevent these relations, and Copeland notes that Southern whites

⁴⁸ Krishnadev Calamur, “Ferguson Documents: Officer Darren Wilson's Testimony,” NPR, 25 Nov. 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/11/25/366519644/ferguson-docs-officer-darren-wilsons-testimony>.

⁴⁹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 7–8.

“conflated blacks with a “satanic presence” that must be eliminated.” Lynching was the method by which the white body politic was purged.

Returning to Darren Wilson’s testimony, he characterizes Michael Brown as an aggressive, grunting, demon who was supernaturally strong, running through bullets with unstoppable strength, launching ever forward, while grunting and looking through him as if he were nothing. Although many across the nation, and the world, have had access to these transcripts and find this particular aspect most unbelievable, if not absurd, the non-indictment in many ways points to the fact that it *is* believable. Why are stories of Black men (though similarly sized or smaller than their killers, and unarmed, unlike their killers) who are supernaturally strong, grunting demons who can defy multiple gunshots not only believable, but raise no suspicion as to how it is even humanly possible? I would argue, like Linke, that it is through the perpetuation of iconographic images of bloody violent liquidations of black beasts (like in the movies *King Kong* (1933) and *Birth of a Nation* (1915) for example), woven into the social epidermis of Black skin, articulated through racially loaded symbols, and imprinted upon American imaginations, which allow for a public discourse (though often implicit) that allows for these characterizations to be familiar and normal, rendering white fear rational, which in turn makes extermination justifiable.

Regardless of the veracity of Darren Wilson’s testimony, the unsettling aspect is its almost identical reproduction of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century black brute stereotypes, which instead of being relics of the past, are very much flourishing in the contemporary American imagination. James Cone explains that in their justification for lynching it was purported that “it was necessary to protect the virtue of white women from the ‘unspeakable crime’ of the ‘black male beast,’ who no longer had slavery in place to keep his bestial behavior in check.”⁵⁰ Michael Brown was not only Darren Wilson’s personal demon, warranting elimination, but representative of a familiar specter of white American racial projections, ever-haunting and ever needing to be policed and kept at bay, and his non-indictment reinforced this communal agreement. Once slavery ended, “in the white imagination, the image of Black men was transformed from docile slaves and harmless ‘Sambos,’” to menacing beasts.⁵¹ Cone cites historian Joel Williamson who states, “Their blackness alone was license enough to line them up against walls, to menace them with guns, to search them roughly, beat them, and rob them of every vestige of dignity.”⁵² In the new and rebranded era of lynching, white women’s purity is no longer the ultimate justification, but white fear is. White fear of what is painted as a natural predator, *la bête noire*.

In his discussion of the roots of the Ferguson, Missouri murder of Michael Brown, Peniel Joseph argues that this tragedy is emblematic of American anti-Black racism. He states that Black identity is “the identity that has served as America’s literal and figurative *bête noire*.”⁵³ *Bête noire* translates literally in English as “black beast,” and is a heavily weighted term appropriate for the discussion of the Janus-faced American society within which those bearing the stigma of blackness, particularly Black males, must negotiate their involuntary and hypervisible virtual

⁵⁰ Ibid., 127.

⁵¹ Ibid., 79.

⁵² Ibid., 6.

⁵³ Peniel E. Joseph, “Ferguson Opened the Door to a Discussion of Black Equality,” *The Root*, 26 Aug. 2014, <https://www.theroot.com/ferguson-opened-the-door-to-a-discussion-of-black-equal-1790876832>.

identities as black beasts living in a social body while simultaneously attempting to pass for what America deems normal in their physical bodies. Challenging normative notions of race is an arduous task that does not immediately result in wholesale redefinitions of race by the powerful in society. Rather, it is an ongoing process that must be continually worked and reworked with dexterity as people move between their virtual and actual social identities. Laurence Ralph and Kelley Chance argue that the Black male person is made hypervisible and interpellated by “the production of endangerment and fear.”⁵⁴ They note that Trayvon Martin and Rodney King, one shot to death by a white citizen without having committed a crime and the other beaten and broken by the police also in the absence of a crime, are both victims of the mentality that African Americans should be feared and white Americans should be protected from such fears. They argue that Martin and King become invisible as their actual identities are subsumed by an “illicit appearance,” which is the blackness of their epidermis.⁵⁵ They are read through the stereotype of black criminality and their hypervisibility leads to invisibility as stereotypes fill in the gaps for real knowledge of the person. It would seem as though media representations often work to reinforce notions of stigma rather than challenge them, particularly when the stigmatized are not in control of their media representation. Ralph and Chance raise media coverage of Rodney King’s death as an example of how media portrayals rendered him a criminal and deviant in ways that confirmed the fear and deviancy paradigms, and subsequently absolved American society from investigating routine police violence against Black citizens. Barbara Browning also discusses the possession and reproduction of video image of Rodney King being beaten by the police and notes that the shocking thing about the video was not that the beating had occurred; rather, “the absence of a record of other beatings is what made the reproduction of this one so compelling.”⁵⁶ This point is haunting, particularly given contemporary discussions and implementation of body-worn cameras by police officers—notwithstanding the recent non-indictment of Officer Daniel Pantaleo in the illegal chokehold murder of Eric Garner, even though the murder was videotaped; and further still, the acquittal of Officer Jeronimo Yanez, even though the murder of Philando Castile was captured live on a video posted on Facebook.

In the face of video evidence of the beating of King’s body, the response of the stigmatized is not shock that it happened, as it merely archives what is known to happen; meanwhile, for those not stigmatized by blackness, while the video may or may not have been harrowing, the verdict of the trials, which led to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, laid bare the complete invisibility of blackness and the racist logic of the American justice system. The riots of 1992 and the current uprising against police brutality bear many similarities. Analyses of the riots tried to localize it; however, Browning argues that the problems in Los Angeles were not specific and isolated but virulent. One theorist attempted to characterize it as “social contagion,” but in the end it was concluded that it was “real and reasonable social discontent, which was expressed as meaningful black *protest*.”⁵⁷ Similarly, in public conversation and media discourse on “riots” there has been a tendency by some to paint them as uncontrollable black masses (including a Twitter trending topic hashtagged “#chimpingout” in which black people protesting were referred to as apes, chimpanzees and other non-human primates) burning down businesses and

⁵⁴ Laurence Ralph and Kerry Chance, “Legacies of Fear: From Rodney King’s Beating to Trayvon Martin’s Death,” *Transition*, no. 113 (2014): 139.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁵⁶ Browning, *Infectious Rhythm*, 116.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

looting for no other reason than it being an irrational (but typical given “their nature”) response to an “isolated incidence” of a criminal—a thug who stole cigarettes—getting his rightful reward.

Given the ways in which the blood of the racialized Other has been spilled without compunction—assisted by the circulation of iconographic images and following the logic of a “liquid modernity” (a modernity built on notions of race and blood purity)—is the perversion of a racialized *hemophilia* reconcilable? Is there an ethical way to love blood and to deal in blood?

Theologically Revising Blood

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

(1 Corinthians 11:23–25)

Philosopher Enrique Dussel characterizes bread as the fruit of common labor and links this bread to the body of Jesus the martyr as Eucharistic bread. He connects the economy and the Eucharist as the essence of Christianity. He distinguishes between idolatrous worship and Eucharistic worship, warning that “the same group of people, around the same priest, can offer breads that are alike in their real structure. But some will be paying homage to the Idol . . . while others will be communing in the life of the lamb that is slain.”⁵⁸ Idolatrous worship steals bread from the poor and for this reason this bread is the bread of injustice. He clarifies that this is not merely personal, individual or occasional injustice, but structural injustice and “the historical sin of systems.”⁵⁹ The particular system Dussel indicts is capitalism. While Dussel does not focus much on blood (the transubstantiated substance of Eucharistic wine that goes hand-in-hand with bread), I take his point further and argue that one cannot “commune in the life of the lamb that is slain”⁶⁰ if one’s love of blood is vampiristic, perverse and/or pornographic, and if one relies on blood as a means to discriminate and exterminate. Emmanuel Levinas argues that biological notions of society lead to a commitment to truth based on realities of blood. Robert Manning, reading Levinas, states that “societies not based on biology, not based on ties of blood and heredity, societies for example based on ideals of equality or of the essential dignity of human nature, are viewed as fragile and deceitful.”⁶¹ The biological view of man counters this fragility with a “reality” based in body, blood and consanguinity. Levinas further argues that if the concept of race does not exist one has to invent it. For the racialized other the biological notion of society based on “realities” of blood is not only fragile and deceitful, but also death-dealing! It appears as though a modernity based in blood and biology has run its course and has proven beneficial to some and detrimental to others.

Cone tells us that black people partook in the sacrament of Holy Communion raising their voices to acknowledge “a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel’s vein,” this

⁵⁸ Enrique Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 41–52, 90.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶¹ Manning, “Serious Ideas Rooted in Blood,” 130.

blood from Immanuel’s vein would “never lose its power” and “there is power in the blood, and nothing but the blood.”⁶² He argues that there is a sense of redemption through the Cross of Jesus and this redemption was amazing and salvific because it referenced “an eschatological promise of freedom that gave transcendent meaning to black lives that no lynching tree could take from them.” Cone states that when black folks sang, “Aint you glad, aint you glad that the blood done signed your name,”⁶³ they were singing not only about the blood of Jesus of Nazareth, but also the blood of “raped and castrated black bodies in America—innocent, often nameless, burning and hanging bodies, images of hurt so deep that only God’s ‘amazing grace’ could offer consolation.” He further asserts that “in their spiritual wrestling, black Christians experienced the weakness and power of God’s love revealed in the cross—mysteriously saving them from loneliness and abandonment and ‘the unspeakable violence . . . by blood thirsty mobs.’”⁶⁴ While the blood and biology paradigm has dealt in violent bloodshed, fetishistic worship and unholy sacrifices, it seems as though a critical race theory-focused approach to Jesus’ death, suffering and spilled blood, along with the partaking of Eucharistic blood, might offer a space for an ethical love of blood. This ethical love of blood cannot be rooted in biology, however; rather, it must attend to notions of freedom and community, joined by gratitude for Jesus’ spilled blood while equally committed to not seeing any more blood spilled. Cone suggests that “neither blacks nor whites can be understood fully without reference to the other because of their common religious heritage as well as their joint relationship to the lynching experience . . . we were made brothers and sisters by the blood of the lynching tree, the blood of sexual union and the blood of the cross of Jesus.”⁶⁵ Similarly, Copeland points to freedom and the Eucharist, stating that “Eucharistic solidarity teaches us to imagine, to hope for and to create new possibilities . . . at the table that Jesus prepares, *all* assemble: in his body we are made anew, a community of faith. . . . His Eucharistic banquet re-orders us, re-members us, restores us, and makes us one.”⁶⁶ We must, however, be clear that Cone and Copeland offer a kind of consanguinity that rejects facile understandings of the notion of one-blood, notions that would make it simply another articulation of the fallacious post-racial gospel of color-blindness. This re-ordered relationship with blood, and in blood, rejects virulence, contamination, extermination and contagion and instead embraces intimacies that demand commitment to accountability, courage, community, truth and justice.

⁶² Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 75.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶⁶ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 128.

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Dancing Between Two Realms: Sacred Resistance and Remembrance in African American Culture

Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie

Embedded in a global Black consciousness and spiritual power, dance is a cultural expression that demonstrates and legitimates a universe operating in sacred terms and a site of spiritual memory and resistance. Adapting to the adverse conditions in America, Africans wielded spiritual culture as an ontological imperative. Through dance, Africans in America established familiar and intelligible patterns to preserve their identities and ancestral heritage, expressed their beliefs and values, and related to others within the circle of community as well as to those external to the circle. This paper seeks to highlight the living dynamic of African-derived belief systems grounded in dance practices and the intersections of Black existentialism and resistance in these sacred enactments. I argue that dance allows Black people as a collective to defend their sacred existence, repair and control their bodies, and project their futures. To advance these assertions, I blur the lines between the sacred and the profane and examine forms of popular culture dances, using Beyoncé's half-time performance at the Super Bowl 2016 and her video "Formation," to trace Black ontology and the sacred fractal patterns requisite for spiritual transcendence.

Keywords: dance, memory, resistance, resistance aesthetics, Black ontology, collective practices, coded language, African diasporic culture, African American expression

We
Who have nothing to lose
Must sing and dance . . .

Langston Hughes, "The Black Dancers"

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.

Langston Hughes, "Dream Variations"

One nation under a groove
Gettin' down just for the funk of it
One nation
And we're on the move
Nothin' can stop us now

Parliament Funkadelic, "One Nation Under a Groove"

The Call

Michael Gomez reminds us that to understand the process of African American culture, “[I]t is essential to recover the African cultural, political, and social background, recognizing that Africans came to the New World with certain coherent perspectives and beliefs about the universe and their place in it.”¹ A people’s worldview exists without reference, but as reality, lived as part of the cultural socialization residing in actions, writing, speech, gestures, ritual, or other phenomena. It is non-doctrinal and is first-level discourse necessary for group survival. That is to say, it provides the nucleus of their being, the rationale for determined action and self-defense against some external threat. Early in their contact with the brutalities of oppression, dance became a primary mode for Africans² to maintain a separate cultural reality from the aliens who abducted them. From dances performed on deck to ensure their arrival to the shores of the Americas in commerce-ready physical condition, despite tight-packing and inhumane treatment as captives stowed in the hull of the ship, to dances to highly improvised movements of popular culture, African people have used their bodies as vessels of memory holding on to their cultural codes. Beyond geography, culture endures.

In his depiction of the Middle Passage in *Roots*, Alex Haley describes the Africans’ attempt to create community as they began to decipher unknown languages. He writes:

The steady murmuring that went on in the hold whenever the toubob were gone kept growing in volume and intensity as the men began to communicate better and better with one another. Words not understood were whispered from mouth to ear along the shelves until someone who knew more than one tongue would send back their meanings. In the process, all of the men along each shelf learned new words in tongues they had not spoken before. . . . [T]he men developed a deepening sense of intrigue and of brotherhood. Though they were of different villages and tribes, the feeling grew that they were not from different peoples or places.³

Here, Haley suggests that this pan-African interlocution allows Black people from distinct groups to emerge as a New World African people and constructs the foundation for collective and cultural resistance. In this passage, he reiterates the notion that historical trauma forced Africans to reach across disparate geographic, ethnic, linguistic, and political borders to not only express a sense of shared suffering and shared historical consciousness, but to begin to conceptualize some sense of unity. The formation for community replicated across temporal and geographical

¹ Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 4.

² For the purpose of this study, I am defining “African peoples” as a confederation of various nations of people captured and brought to the western hemisphere. Additionally, I am using the term “African” in its broadest sense to include all people of African descent regardless of national origin. Nell Irvin Painter argues that being “African” Americans is part of a New World identity. “Naming people only by the continent of their origin and ignoring their ethnic identity is a consequence of distance in time and space.” Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.

³ Alex Haley, *Roots* (New York: Dell, 1976), 185–86.

borders articulated, according to Davis, “a coherent cultural identity that could offer meaning in a seemingly meaningless world.”⁴

Diedrich, Gates, and Pedersen remind us, “The Middle Passage thus emerges not as a clean break between past and present but as a spatial continuum between Africa and the Americas, the ship’s deck and the hold, the Great House and the slave quarters, the town and the outlying regions.”⁵ Embedded in a global Black consciousness and spiritual power, dance is a cultural expression that demonstrates and legitimates “important modes of comprehending and operating within a universe perceived of in sacred terms.”⁶ Fundamental to that sense of sacredness is the idea that the material and phenomenal world is endlessly affected by unseen powers.⁷ This spatial continuum includes temporal ideas of *Hantu* within a Ba Kongo frame, where time coheres with space like an ouroboros, an inseparable web of time and space conjoined.

This paper seeks to highlight the living dynamic of African-derived belief systems grounded in dance practices and the intersections of Black existentialism, resistance, and sacred enactment. I argue that the history accompanies the dancer in the performance. The body of the dancer is self-authorizing, a self-determining effort on full throttle to reassemble and repair itself. Sterling Stuckey argues in *Slave Culture* that the vernacular forms of culture, found in art, music, and dance reveal a deeper African spiritual consciousness. Patterson and Kelly see diaspora as “both process and condition.”⁸ The process, which is always in the making, is situated in the condition housing the intersection of race and gender hierarchies. A Diasporic manifestation, dance is foundational to both process and condition of identity formation including the products or cultural activities rooted in a black ontology as Sartre advances in *Being and Nothingness* as individual consciousness and relational consciousness. Victor Anderson argues in *Beyond Ontological Blackness* that ontological blackness delimits individuality and thwarts the spiritual idea of transcendence. Anderson reads ontological blackness as “the blackness that whiteness created.”⁹ He takes exception to blackness being essentialized; like Gates and others he believes these types of cultural representations are forms of idolatry that must be liberated from their particularization. Rodriguez and Fortier maintain that “[t]he *power* of cultural memory rests in the *conscious* decision to choose particular memories, and to give those memories precedence in

⁴ Andrea Davis, “Rearticulations, Reconnections and Reconfigurations: Writing Africa through the Americas,” in Naana Opoku-Agyemang, Paul E. Lovejoy, and David V. Trotman, eds., *Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories: Literary and Aesthetic Manifestations of Diaspora and History* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008), 276. In the preface of *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, Chernoff asserts that the fundamental aesthetic in Africa is participation. He notes, “without participation there is no meaning.” Illustrating the importance of dance to music, he says, “When you ask a friend whether or not he ‘understands’ a certain type of music, he will say yes if he knows the dance that goes with it. The music of Africa invites us in the making of a community.” John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 23.

⁵ Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen, eds., *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8.

⁶ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

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* 43, no. 1 (April 2000): 11.

⁹ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*. (New York: Continuum, 1995), 13.

communal remembrance.”¹⁰ Morrison notes this resistance to essentialisms, especially race. In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” she asserts:

When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as “race,” biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it. . . . It always seemed to me that the people who invented the hierarchy of “race” when it was convenient for them ought not to be the ones to explain it away, now that it does not suit their purposes for it to exist.¹¹

Anderson dismisses this type of reified blackness, remarking “when race is made total, the ontological blackness is idolatrous, approaching racial henotheism.”¹² His fears align with the type of white-created texts of blackness totalized in the white imagination. The 1935 feature film “Princesse Tam Tam,” a Pygmalion-inflected story that stars Josephine Baker as Alwina, *femme sauvage* and petty thief with an impulse to dance exemplifies his concerns. She is taken to Paris tutored to master the language, manage a graceful walk, and demonstrate social manners consistent with European standards. However, she unravels from her previous decorous behavior when she hears the drums and can’t resist their lure. Succumbing to the drums, she dances, revealing her “true” identity. Following the discovery, she returns to Africa, the “Dark Continent,” the land of the drum and dance. The final shot of the film, a close-up of a donkey eating the cover of a book titled *Civilization*, signals at once the end of culture and the end of the film.

Also, in the 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, post-modern writer Ishmael Reed pens a story of dance fever, the pandemic called Jes Grew that causes concern. Also a construction of black essentialism, the carriers, descendants of those who were brought to America to pick cotton, must be stopped. In response, the government launches a campaign to stop it from threatening civilization, by printing thousands of posters that command, “No dancing.” The contagion originates in New Orleans in Congo Square where black bodies left to their own devices danced without restriction during the antebellum south. In *The Dance in Place Congo and Creole Slave Songs*, George Cable describes Bamboula, one of the dances of Congo Square. He writes:

Now for the frantic leaps! Now for frenzy! Another pair are in the ring! The man wears a belt of little bells, or as a substitute, little tin vials of shot. . . . And still another couple enter the circle. What wild—what terrible delight! The ecstasy rises to madness; one—two—three of the dancers fall—bloucoutoum/boum—

¹⁰ Jeanette Rodriguez and Ted Fortier, *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 12 (emphasis in original).

¹¹ Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at the University of Michigan, Oct. 7, 1988, <https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf>.

¹² Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 15.

with foam on their lips and are dragged out by arms and legs from under the tumultuous feet of crowding newcomers.¹³

Similarly, in *Mumbo Jumbo*, the symptoms of the plague include howling, speaking-in-tongues, dancing to the drums—all threats to civilization. The dancers must be stopped. The suppression campaign begins with posters commanding “No Dancing.”¹⁴ For the dancers, Jes Grew is an anti-plague that enlivens the host instead of robbing them of power. In this multi-media, interactive novel, Reed stakes a claim for a black ontology. In these extra-narrative forays, he uses definitions and other insertions to make the case that to dance is to be fully human. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed employs a discursive literary stylistic, and cites Meerloo, in *The Dance: from Ritual to Rock and Roll, Ballet to Ballroom*:

Dance is the universal art, the common joy of expression. Those who cannot dance are imprisoned in their own ego and cannot live well with other people and the world. They have lost the tune of life. They only live in cold thinking. Their feelings are deeply repressed while they attach themselves forlornly to the earth.¹⁵

This idea advances transcendence through the ontological blackness that creates Jes Grew as a cultural phenomenon. Black existentialism is rooted in cultural memory—the insistence to remember to remember.

Although the aforementioned works are fictive renderings, the idea of the Black dancing body as savage, mark the irreconcilable black difference reflective of contemporary critique of black cultural production. To illustrate, Beyoncé Knowles’ Super Bowl 2016 half-time performance of “Formation” ignited a maelstrom of commentary consistent with “Princesse Tam Tam’s” fetishization of the Black body and the fear of the moving without permission described in Reed’s satire, *Mumbo Jumbo*. Giuliani’s response is similar to the reaction to Black dance, and the judgment about Black bodies. Referring to the performance, Giuliani opined, “I think it was outrageous.” He stated, “The halftime show I thought was ridiculous anyway, I don’t know what the heck it was. A bunch of people like bouncing around and doing strange things. I actually don’t even know why we have this.” Beyoncé’s dance, and homage to Michael Jackson, the King of dance, and the 50th anniversary of the Super Bowl was a statement of collective remembering and cultural reinforcement.

Beyoncé’s dancers wearing black and donning black berets performed a dance of memory and demonstrated how much of the present is rooted in the *past*. Rodriguez and Fortier note that transformative historical experiences define a culture, even as time passes and it adapts to new influences.¹⁶ Their dance was at once an homage to the Black Panthers, a praise dance to the martyrs, George Jackson, Fred Hampton, Mark Clark and other victims of state violence: Amadou Diallo, Sean Bell, Oscar Grant, Troy Davis, Ramarley Graham, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Renisha McBride, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and many other Black people in recent times including the victims of the Katrina disaster.

¹³ George W. Cable, *The Dance in Place Congo and Creole Slave Songs*, (n.p.: Faruk von Turk, 1974), 7.

¹⁴ Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁶ Rodriguez and Fortier, *Cultural Memory*, 11.

Rooted in actual events, cultural memory is activated by symbolic expression. Beyoncé’s dance was a form of reparations, a way to restore the body from the assaults of intergenerational poverty and health care disparities, which place Black people disproportionately in the highest percentiles for life-threatening illnesses, mass incarceration, psychic assaults of racism and police brutality, food deserts, and a bankrupt educational system that educates Black people to work against their own interests in service of forces of state, actions that present an impossible history. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth explains the role of history and trauma, stating, “If PTSD must be understood as a pathological symptom, then it is not so much symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history. The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”¹⁷

Rodriguez and Fortier argue, “The deeper the abyss of crisis is, the greater becomes one’s connection to cultural memory and to past generations.”¹⁸ The authors argue that cultural memory connects people; it is “blood calling out to blood.”¹⁹ Defining the collective nature of cultural memory, they assert:

Cultural memory at the collective level is simply there waiting to be recovered in our songs, our rituals, our ceremonies, our stories, or through other mediating elements. The difference between the personal and the collective level is this: personally, the individual discovers his or her cultural memory through crisis, and collectively, the individual recovers his or her cultural memory through songs, rituals, ceremonies, and other mediating forms.²⁰

The performance of dance liberates the dancers from the constraints of the marginalized self, allowing entrée to the center of being. Outside the group, those who objected read the body as contentious as it signed Africa’s enduring power, its flexibility, and its vitality. At odds is the moving Black female body, self-defining and self-signing its blackness in gestures and formation. I read the idea of formation not only as a construction or configuration, but also, as foundation. This foundation inscribed in dance movements, rooted in the Black experience, the oral traditions of the blues, jazz, and a plethora of stylistic sensibilities rendered a hip hop motif that was/is at once secular and sacred. Here the idea of formation connects to the foundational ideas of ontological blackness spinning around the navel of self to commemorate and celebrate insistent being.

For this essay I use the four aspects of cultural memory espoused by Rodriguez and Fortier to delineate dance as a form of cultural memory. They propose that cultural memory is a memory that (1) liberates from oppression; (2) provides a medium for transmission of that memory; (3) informs the emotions of generations; and (4) unites a people through time for a common cause.²¹ I argue that these particularities are sites of memory that have resuscitative

¹⁷ Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5.

¹⁸ Rodriguez and Fortier, *Cultural Memory*, xii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

powers to assist the individual and community to experience anamnesis. Concerning anamnesis, Plato argued that these extra-sensory memorates reflect a continuous web of meaning shared beyond lifetimes and beyond the body. Like the Eucharistic reflection of the Last Supper, Christ's invective to "Do this in remembrance of me," commemorated during the communion ritual of Christian churches, this reiteration and recovery through dance creates transcendence and elevation through memory. Wright's comments in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" discuss this idea of a common core of blackness that arose from the shared experiences of blackness, which can have transcendent qualities. He writes:

Let those who shy at the nationalistic implications of Negro life look at the body of folklore, living and powerful, which rose out of a common fate. Here are those vital beginnings of a recognition of a value in life as it is lived, a recognition that makes the emergence of new culture in the shell of the old. And at the moment that this process starts, at the moment when people begin to realize a meaning in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed.²²

In the realm of Richard Wright's Black existentialism, one's own tradition trumps other cultural forms for liberation. In *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, Aimé Césaire invokes the particularities of Black dance. He writes:

Rally to my side dances
You bad nigger dances
To my side dances
The carcan-cracker dance
The prison-break dance
It -is-beautiful-good—and legitimate-to-be-a nigger-dance
Rally to my side dances.

This entreaty to dance is Césaire's attempt to repair the ruptures and relieve himself. Dancing is a way to disrupt the forces that deny Black humanity. In this invocation, dancing is a way to resist and to build. It exults Black folks to do their "bad nigger dance," and to do their feel good about being Black dance. These injunctions mobilize and create the ritual space to move from the trauma of oppression. At the same time, it builds remembrance, a way to remember that binds Black people together. Larry Neal, a Black Arts Movement critic, notes this tension in Black cultural studies. He remarks:

There is a tension within Black America. And it has its roots in the general history of the race. The manner in which we see this history determines how we act. How should we see this history? What should we feel about it? This is important to know, because the sense of how that history should be felt is what either unites us or separates us.²³

²² Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie Smith, eds., *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2014), 127.

²³ Larry Neal, "And Shine Swam On," in Larry Neal and Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), eds., *Black Fire* (New York: William Morrow, 1969), 639.

I advance that this history is a collective documentation of African people in America, a lesson in memory to bind Black people through shared experience. Amos Wilson discusses the deleterious effects of forgetting:

Simply because we choose to forget a traumatic event, simply because we choose not to learn a traumatic history that may make us feel ashamed, does not mean that that history is not controlling our behavior. Simply, because we don't know our history, and may not of heard of it, does not mean that the history does not control our behavior.²⁴

Dance positions the community as a space of restoration for the dislocated, the neglected, and the dissociated. This self-reflexive, self-defining, and self-determining agency is rooted in remembrance within the circle of community. In the circle, each participant remembers something worth bringing to the present from their collective past. These memories help them to resist the disintegration and fragmentation of identity demanded by oppressive forces. One of those cultural elements foundational to the Black experience, dance endures as a site of a powerful source of memory and self-authorizing narrative. In “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” Zora Neale Hurston’s response to music conveys recovery and the reparative nature of body expression. She writes:

This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen—follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself. I yell within. I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeeooww! I am in the jungle and living the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what, I do not know.²⁵

Hurston’s reaction is juxtaposed to her white companion whose response is to remain motionless. Her return to Africa with strong emotions is a journey she must take towards the past to be well in the present. She reads the sign and is afforded a coded access to its power.

Diasporic performance using the concentric circles of rhythm—the call and response—from sound to movement inform Black aesthetic, spiritual, and cultural expression, a dialogue between movement and song. In this way, music embodies the belief systems and cultural matrices particular to a people. In contexts of oppression and challenges to the African identity, people create to engender unity.²⁶ In *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, Malidoma Somé notes that

²⁴ Amos N. Wilson, *The Falsification of Afrikan Consciousness: Eurocentric History, Psychiatry and the Politics of White Supremacy* (New York: Afrikan World InfoSystems), 34.

²⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: Norton, 1996), 1010.

²⁶ Hip hop as a unifying language is evident in contemporary hip-hop culture blasting in major African cities from Dakar to Dar es Salaam, from Accra to Addis Ababa, and performed in music videos on cable from Cape Town to Cairo. The grammar of the body and the beats of hip-hop culture are articulated like the drum beats making Diop’s words about cultural unity resonate deeply within the cipher. It is a pan-African language.

energy from the spiritual plane must be brought to the physical plane. This is achieved through the use of gateways—where the physical realm meets the spiritual. In Africa, as elsewhere, ritual behavior is a way of communicating with the divine, for the purpose of changing the human situation.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, that space is the Clearing where Baby Suggs performed the ring dance in the sunlight. This "unchurched preacher" led "every black man, woman and child" to the "Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods."²⁷ Similar to experiences in Africa where sacred groves were dwelling places of individual deities and the loci of other supernatural beings, the Clearing represents the space for Africans to repair the ruptures of the past using rhythm to free their bodies from the trauma imposed by enslavement's limited opportunity for mobility. Commanding the men to dance, the women to cry, and the children to laugh. Morrison writes, "In the heat of every Saturday afternoon she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees."²⁸

Additionally, cosmologies refer to memory at the cosmic level—that is, what the universe remembers and how that memory is shared across creation. As Nkira Nzegwu suggests, this idea of trans-spatiality allows us to know things in different ways and suggests a spiritual epistemology and ontological deliberations. In "The Break," Thomas argues:

There are collective subjectivities and individual imaginative landscapes at stake in the formation of diasporas. Diaspora shapes the body that finds itself, or faces the task of finding itself, in sudden traumatic motion (think Transatlantic Slave Trade, Middle Passage, colonialism, genocide, refugees). The motion intrinsic to diaspora means the imaginative horizons are perpetually shifting, that the subjective, conceptual aspects of diaspora are as significant as geographies and material practices.²⁹

Dance in the diaspora serves as a spiritual chiropractic aligning these shifting energies, or in American racial and political politics, oppression that remains the changing same. Because of the ways in which dance engenders collective unity, dance repairs the damage done in these assaults to the psyche, while reformulating the self.

Supplemental to these axiological considerations of unity, Linda James Meyers suggests that African people also employ epistemological formations determined by an awareness of symbolic imagery and rhythm that extend identity to multi-dimensionality. Dance disrupts the objectification of Black people and empowers them to input the cultural and spiritual codes necessary to defend their existence, record their history, and project their future. Re-enacted in these dance performances is the Kongo notion of *simba simbi*, which translates, "hold up that which holds you up." The ultimate statement of inter-mutuality, *simba simbi* iterates the circle as

²⁷ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 87.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁹ Valerie Thomas, "The Break," in Rebecca Walker, ed., *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012), 57.

the major cosmological idea.³⁰ Represented in formations reflective of Bakhtin’s dialogical exchange, these fractal patterns of culture reiterate the shared context of Black subjectivity. The circle/sphere adds dimension to the line as it envelops it. The sphere is multi-dimensional, and it is curved. Sacred time is not “past” because it is not part of a lineal construct. The ancestors live in the present, and the future lives in us.³¹

Those who were brought captive to this land of the Americas prevailed, preserving their identities and ancestral heritage through dance. Using the drum, Africans tapped out familiar and intelligible patterns, key patterns, motifs, and symbols. Answering the call, dance renewed the spiritual and psychic energies needed to endure oppression. Even when the drum was outlawed in South Carolina, after the 1739 Stono Rebellion, in Charleston, with the passing of the Negro Act of 1740 in South Carolina and the 1755 Georgia Slave Codes,³² there was no disruption. Realizing the necessity for unity, Africans supplemented the missing contents of home space and recovered meanings in those spaces or breaches.

Robert Farris Thompson extends the idea, adding that the break restores coolness, the balance, reason, sanity, and gentle character. Everything is possible in this break, the self, a space for restoration, improvisation, and the freestyle, a traditional motif in African music.³³ Valerie Thomas remarks about the break being able to inspire “possibilities and improvisations.”³⁴ Also available in these interstitial spaces is the ontological principle of *Nommo*, a Bantu sacred term, which means the power of the spoken word to create reality. Armed with the power of their *Nommo*, Africans waged a cultural resistance and maintained a spiritual and cultural connection with Africa and its attendant values. Essential to Black culture is the spoken word transmitting important information for cultural continuity.

These rhythms of resistance helped distinct groups of nations to emerge as collective new-world African people. Realizing the necessity for unity, Africans supplemented the missing contents of home space and recovered meanings in those spaces or breaches. In this place where Black people were forbidden to beat a drum, blow horns, bird feathers, cow horns, or conch shells they maintained the sonic rhythms of Africa by tapping their feet, patting juba, playing clap games, and versing spoken word. Bid whist and domino tables, barber shops, beauty parlors, churches, women’s clubs, sororities, fraternities, and lodge halls are archival spaces for cultural mnemonics. In the Black signifying tradition, participants repeat what has been said before and things that are new to keep the circle moving.

³⁰ I employ the term “cosmology” as the body of conceptions that enumerate and classify the phenomena that compose and order the universe as well as the norms and processes that govern it. Accompanying these conceptions are embedded myths and other collective representations.

³¹ Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press), 1994, 60.

³² Louisiana was the only state in America where Africans could legally play drums. In all other states playing drums was outlawed, since the beats were coded languages—insider language that others outside the circle of culture people were not privy to understand. The Bamboula, a Kongo-inspired dance as well as other circular dances were formulated in Congo Square.

³³ Robert Farris Thompson, *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (New York: Periscope Press, 2011).

³⁴ Thomas, “The Break,” 56.

A type of mnemonic in multiple meters, collective dances are the repositories for the living memory. The attempts to destroy Black dance included edicts against African dancing, specifics of how steps could be performed (no crossed feet). The dancing did not stop. Fabre notes the indispensability of dance in its ceremonial capacity, a way to cement shared beliefs and values. She writes, “In the cults honoring the gods or the ancestors, dance was a way of mediating between the godly and the human, the living and the dead.”³⁵ The danced body communicated with and embodied spirits and stored memory. Dance is a tale of memory, a battle between amnesia and total recall while challenging ownership of the body and its brutalization. Dance, as a self-constructed, self-determining, self-authorizing cultural performance that communicates the group ethos, or *Ubuntu*. In dance, this idea of *Ubuntu* triangulates space and time, creating sites of the sacred. Thompson notes that West African dances are “talking dances.”³⁶

Once recovered, the body stores these memories for use in order to access control over spiritual and material wellness. Dancers are able to find satisfaction in the body at the present moment to incorporate acts of resistance. Cultural agency is achieved through the recovery of memory disrupting external forces who attempt to control the body, the production of the body, its labor and delivery. At the foundation of the circle dance are cultural aesthetics—impulses of memory. Dancing out of their own epistemic remembrance prevents one from being lured into amnesia and cultural death. Dancers not only communicate with spirits, but also can impersonate and incorporate them through the repetition of specific body movements.³⁷ Performing the ritual dance through the repetitive movements of tracing and retracing the four quadrants of the circle, dancers recover sacred time and re-claim their nationhood and sense of personhood. Mircea Eliade explains that sacred time is not only recoverable, it is also unchanging, and perpetual.³⁸ Wole Soyinka notes the role of culture in fighting against ideological imposition, reminding us that culture is a primary target of invading forces. To counter annihilation, the oppressed must hold tenaciously to the key patterns of their culture.³⁹

Fanon suggests that the inauthentic life that people of color are forced to live can only be negotiated by the dream state or in the direct practice of their own culture. Finding refuge in the performance of expression of resistance in the form of creation, singing, dancing, cooking, sewing. Rodriguez and Fortier note that religious ideology also constructs pathways for resistance and ensures self-preservation.⁴⁰ Similarly, culture has to survive, if the people are to live. Cultural survival is both biological and ideological. In this way, even with the absence of the drums, the body became the percussive terrain to beat out rhythms and codes unrecognizable to their captors. Africans danced these cosmologies encoded in visual and tactile memory, deep in the recess of steps.

³⁵ Genevieve Fabre, “The Slave Ship Dance,” in Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen, eds., *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33.

³⁶ Thompson, *Aesthetic of the Cool*, 1.

³⁷ Fabre, “The Slave Ship Dance,” 33.

³⁸ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1987), 69.

³⁹ Wole Soyinka, “Theatre in African Traditional Cultures: Survival Pattern,” in Simon Gikandi, ed., *Death and the King's Horseman* (New York: Norton, 2003), 89.

⁴⁰ Rodriguez and Fortier, *Cultural Memory*, 11.

Congo Square

Double consciousness is not possible when dancing to the drums. Dance is the spiritual correlate to the poignant sorrow songs Du Bois so eloquently presented in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. In order to navigate harsh environments, brutal physical and mental abuse, the body had to remember. Dancing is a way of remembering to remember. Housed in those coils of dance memory are visual and kinetic codes: modes of power production. Different than a Du Boisian Double Consciousness, dance drives the circle of time or concentric circles of community of both the living and the dead, which is best expressed in the Adinkra, *Sankofa* which considers nature’s duality, self, community, and the notion of the most comprehensive order of things as ontological. The memories housed in dance are historical, emotional, and aspirational, “blood calling blood.”⁴¹

In the early history of New Orleans, The Place Congo in New Orleans was resplendent with African people dressed in a riot of colors and cloth. During the week, the women may have been nannies, domestics, or sellers of produce, or seafood; the men may have been dockworkers, carpenters, blacksmiths, ordinary laborers, but on Sundays, they shucked off those anonymous identities and exchanged them for their national affiliations. The Lukumi faces marked with three vertical marks incised on their cheeks or in a slant on the jaw midway between the corner of their mouths and the ears spoke Yoruba, Mandingoes whose jet skin shone in the sun, conversed in Bambara with the tall Wolof from Senegambia whose language was mutually intelligible. The Fulani’s high-pitched voices rang out in Pular. Those from Angola and West Central Africa shared the news of the day in one of the Bantu tongues: Kumbundu, Kikongo, or Chiluba. However, the most dominant voices in the square rang out in the Créole spoken by both the descendants of Haiti and those who had been natives of New Orleans for many generations. These transcultural exchanges provided space for corporate wellness and kept the bloodlines opened. Dancing and singing house the cultural values of a group and ritualize their corporate interests, especially in cases of annihilation and external threat to the group.

The center of the square was divided in fours and in each of the resulting quadrants a group of bare-chested drummers drummed. One envisions men with red cloths tied around their foreheads holding drums between their legs; others wearing straw hats sitting on wooden boxes playing the drums with their bare hands. Perhaps sticks resembling mallets, or two pieces of iron forged in a variety of shapes and thickness, produced a cacophony of sounds ranging from the peal of bells to the resonance of chimes and cymbals. Maybe younger boys held rattles, or oyster shells suspended from braided palm fibers. Concordant sounds echoed throughout the square as the men pounded out the primal codes and complex rhythms to invoke the African Gods. Matching the layered parcel of beats, the fervent dancers moved around the circle commemorating the power of stones, bloodlines, and memory. Africans assembled in the square to dance in their nation’s language of movement—their body grammar dancing to the pounding drum rhythms, losing their bodies, to penetrating rhythms.

Dance iterates the notion of there being no survival without memory. Creating familiar and intelligible patterns of movement to preserve their identities and ancestral heritage, Africans

⁴¹ Ibid., 4.

fashioned a unique language, modes of expression, and creative performance. Evans describes New Orleans music as having been influenced by the idea of rhythmic cells derived from Africa via Cuba. These rhythms—habanera, tresillo, cinquillo, and clave and other rhythmic formulae— derived from Haitian Petro, Cuban Lukumi, and other African spiritual systems and reinforce a pan-African identity and connection.⁴² Dance as a form of Sankofic⁴³ behavior stitches past time into a continuous arc of time repeating itself in fractal patterns indicative of its ontological vitality and change-making constancy. The emotionality of the rhythms opens up potential and moves the dancer to a place of strength and power.

Through the overlay of all time, the dancer is equipped to access the spiritual power needed for the crossing. This fluid space is a crossroads or a locus to generate a new thing, a third ontological space, a break where possibility exists. Remembrances of a cultural identity anterior to the “crossing” serve not only to fortify culture upon the initial arrival to the western hemisphere; they also persist as cultural essentials to ensure African people’s continued survival.

Anatomy of a Circle

These crossings continue in dance extending life. Moving the body past the strictures of European time with its linear focus, dance is a spiritual presence locating key memories using the Bantu notion of time. *Hantu*, an African unit of measurement, situates time and space as an indivisible whole insisting on continuities and perpetuities. Disrupting European notions of time, chronologies, periodization, and linear time, *Hantu* is enduring cycles/wheels of time emblematic of the Bantu notions of dams. In “Time in African Culture,” Pennington notes, “Time for Africans does not exist in a vacuum as an entity which can be conceptually isolated. Time is conceived only as it is related to events, and it must be experienced in order to make sense or to become real.”⁴⁴ Measured in major rhythms are concepts such as day and night, seasons, migration of animals, famines, and the movement of the heavens such as phases of the moon and eclipses and minor rhythms, living things of the earth such as humans, animals, plants, etc.⁴⁵ This formulation of time snakes alongside the culture through which African people have expressed their beliefs and values, related to others within the circle of community.

Thompson proposes that “To enter the circle was to enter deep blackness, to receive secret strength in contact with ecstasy.”⁴⁶ In this cypher, enslaved Africans established familiar and intelligible patterns to reserve and preserve their identities and ancestral heritage. Indications of this ancestral heritage are observed most notably in the spiritual practices of music, dance. Africans danced their circle dances signing the value of inter-subjectivity, mutuality, and

⁴² Freddi Williams Evans, *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans* (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press), 2011, 37.

⁴³ The fundamental thesis of the Akan proverb and Adinkra symbol *Sankofa* asserts, “Return and get it.” The primary imperative in this symbol is to learn from the past and to bring those salient spiritual and cultural ideas into the present in order to strengthen one’s life and to insure an unbroken circle. Depicted both as a stylized heart and a bird that looks over its shoulder for elements of a usable past, *Sankofa* reflects the circularity of life and the mutual exchange between old and new, insuring the sacred spiral of time. In the spirituals, African people in America have sung, “My Soul Looks Back and Wonders How I Got Over” as a cultural remembrance of this principle.

⁴⁴ Dorothy L. Pennington, “Time in African Culture,” in Molefi K. Asante and Kariamu Welsh Asante, eds., *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 131.

⁴⁵ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1991), 37.

⁴⁶ Thompson, *Aesthetic of the Cool*, 156.

interdependence, key features of the Bantu expression *umuntu umuntu nagabuntu*—a person is a person because of people.

Thompson calls the circle a “citadel of spirit and certainty, a medicine for continuity and protection.”⁴⁷ As Jahn notes in *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*, “I is always a ‘we,’ and every I-statement includes a binding imperative,”⁴⁸ a way to be in the world from an African cultural sensibility. The legacy of dance created the sign of difference from their captors and helped Africans maintain a sense of unity as a counter to their captivity. As performative sites of spiritual memory and spaces of resistance, dancers perform sacred codes that define African spiritual identity allowing Black people to defend their existence, control their body, and project their future. These sacred rhythms and codes encompass a range of spiritual and aesthetic concepts.

This ritualized return to forever allows for continuous time consistent with the Bantu notion of *hantu*, which is time and space unified. Over time, bodies performed the dances their souls remembered, stepping between realms. Comparable to the mnemonic devices employed in traditional African cultures, each dance is a commemorative site where readers can participate in re-collecting buried knowledge to refortify and restore a sense of identity and cultural connectivity to the village—the community—the world of Black people. This world elides the realm of past and present, sacred and secular. Emerging from the continent of Africa, decks of ships, plantation circles, dances from the cakewalk, the Charleston, the Bamboula, Calinda, Lindy hop, jitterbug, hip-hop dancing, pop lock, Electric Boogaloo, nay nay to dabbin’ have galvanized Black people to remember.

Dance is what the body performs in order to reclaim those things forgotten by the dancer. This durable cultural identity is expressed in the proverb: The leopard only gets wet when it falls into the water; the water does not wash off its spots. Amiri Baraka advances that most of the attitudes and cultural characteristics can be traced directly to Africa and are integral to African identity.⁴⁹ Explaining the role of culture, Cheikh Anta Diop notes:

I consider culture as a rampart, which protects a people, a collectivity. Culture must, above all, play a collective role: It must ensure the cohesion of a group. Following this line of thinking, the vital functions of a body of African human sciences is to develop this sense of collective belonging, through a reinforcement of culture. This can be done by developing the historical consciousness of African and Black people so as to arrive at a common feeling of belonging to the same historical past. Once this is attained, it will become difficult to “divide and rule” and to oppose African communities one against the other (1976).

Beyoncé’s circle dance, a form of prayer, performed in the language of struggle, the language of success, the language of a people whose history in this country has been suppressed, but not surpassed. Maybe dance was her first consciousness, her first language. Using her body,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 156–58.

⁴⁸ Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1961), 149.

⁴⁹ Amiri Baraka, *Blues People* (New York: Perennial, 1998), 7.

she creates a space to recover lost codes of body performance to gather and generate power. Perhaps, derivative circle games and ring shout chants accompanied her childhood where circles of body performance were a GPS system used to triangulate her and tap into a deep and abiding communication with other Black people throughout time.

This is what the Bantu call *Ubuntu*. On the floor, whether it is the pebbled earth, or the waxed wood floors of gymnasias, and dancehalls, salons, jook joints, or basements, Black people dance. They have danced the electric slide, second line giving way to the spirit. Fraternity and sorority folks dance their cryptic steps in formation, break dancers spin in circles on hard earth or concrete.⁵⁰ Black people dance seeking the power of their ancestors to assist them in their current struggle. Dance as a collective ritual provides the renewal necessary to re-establish harmony among the living and those in the ancestral realm. A sacred medium, dance repairs the soul of the dancer and restores the self to equilibrium. These reparations are a manifestation of ancestral awareness and deep statements that have helped Black people to withstand. The circle dance is sufficient enough to explore as a leitmotif to make the case for spiritual reparation and ontological return. In *Slave Culture*, Stuckey notes, “Being on good terms with the ancestral spirits was an overarching conceptual concern for Africans everywhere in slavery.”⁵¹ Removed from western constraints of time, one in which it is possible to end, Africans continued their ring dances and their jubas, worshiping their Gods from distant lands.

The circle dances, ring shouts are reenactments of the Kongo cosmogram, or *dikenga dia Kongo*, a symbolic depiction of the soul’s movement in a counterclockwise fashion signifying everlasting life.⁵² Each ninety-degree turn represents the cyclical journey of the soul moving from birth to puberty, to maturity, to eldership, to begin the cycle of re-births again. The *dikenga*

⁵⁰ African American culture is evident in contemporary Hip Hop music blasting in major African cities from Dakar, to Dar es Salaam, from Accra to Addis Ababa and performed in music videos on cable from Cape Town to Cairo. The grammar of the body and the beats of Hip Hop culture resonate in the Black Diaspora and beyond.

⁵¹ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and The Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 43.

⁵² The Kongo cosmogram, *dikenga dia Kongo*, is represented in many ways in African American material and performance culture. Robert Farris Thompson has documented the repeated influence in painting, quilt making, yard decorations, funerary art, performance styles, and body gestures. The repetition of this structure is a variant of the ring shout, a Kongo sacred dance that African people retained in America. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1984). Also see Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1983); and Robert Farris Thompson, *Faces of the Gods: Arts and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993). In its re-codified form as a popular dance it is called the “electric slide” (a testament to its Kongo origins of which a sub-group of people are referred to as Ba Kuba (the people of lightning)). The dance consists of four 90-degree turns counterclockwise, which recreates the *dikenga dia Kongo* and signs the remembrance of the matrix of spiritual structure of the circle or 360 degrees of existence. Sterling Stuckey posits that the ring shout helped to consolidate Africans’ identity in America. See Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and The Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 12. It is significant that memorates were kept in musical and dance forms as symbolic modes of cosmic perception in the United States of America owing to the manner in which the particularly harsh conditions of American enslavement denied African people access to little other than their physical bodies. Since dance does not have a material artifact as the product, it allowed them to not be completely submerged by Euro-American concepts. Baraka, *Blues People*, 16. Dance is a major archival resource of African people and exists as “symbolic restatements of something sacred the history of something that may be remembered or forgotten.” E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 115. Also see Fabre, “The Slave Ship Dance.” Through the creation of sacred space, Africans re-presented belief systems using the body to inscribe the cultural worlds east and west of the Atlantic.

dia Kongo is structured in four parts, depicted as a circle intersected at the midpoint by two lines, one vertical and the other horizontal. The space above the line is the upper world and the physical world and below the line is the lower world or the spiritual world, the abode of the ancestors. The two intersecting lines form four quadrants epitomizing the four suns constructing the journey of a human being on earth. It is a passage where energy exchanges in the middle creating triadic structures or crossroads of emancipation derived from the two given ideas joined at the center. This biodynamic process imparts new life at the intersection where oppression and resistance interact in order to strengthen sacred functioning.

Versions of this circle dance have been danced continuously, according to Stuckey. As a result of these two intersecting lines, four quadrants are formed epitomizing the four suns constructing the journey of a human being on earth. The participants begin the dance at the midpoint of the cross on the horizontal line dissecting the circle known as *kalunga*, the “balancing plane for all existence.”⁵³ As dancers move three steps to the right on the *kalunga* line, they journey toward *kala*, corresponding to birth, symbolized by the color black. From there they trace the *kalunga* line three steps to the left, arriving at the quadrant known as *luwemba*, which is characterized by the color white, representing the death of an individual. Executing this step prepares them to walk three steps backwards toward the southern axis into the realm of the ancestors to begin again at *musoni*, which represents beginnings, seeds, and the color yellow. From there, the dancers move three beats consisting of a pause at the *kalunga* line, one small step back retracing their steps toward *musoni* and one down, which is actually the northern axis, the space to collect the power at the zenith of the circle or *tukula*, the sun of maturity, signified by the color red.

Finally, the dancers make a counterclockwise turn to trace the circle again. The circle will be traced four times until they arrive at the same point again to complete/begin the dance’s symbolic journey. The dams of time described in each of the cosmogram’s quadrants are delineations within the cosmic realm. From a Bantu perspective, Bunseki K. Fu-Kiau asserts that nothing exists that does not follow the cosmogram.⁵⁴ These mythic symbols hidden in dance steps of the ring shout encircle and contain the spiritual ethos of Kongo-derived beliefs.⁵⁵

⁵³ Fu-Kiau, Kimwandende Kia Bunseki, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo: Principles of Life & Living* (Brooklyn, NY: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2001), 23.

⁵⁴ Fu-Kiau *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo*, 27.

⁵⁵ By no means is this circle as a spiritual frame unique to West and West Central Africans. Native or First People of North America also used the circle as a major cosmological reference. At the height of a severe offensive launched by the U.S. Cavalry against the First Nation People, the spiritual leaders came together in response and adopted the Ghost Dance, a counter-clockwise circle dance. It was employed to engender wellness and the ethos of unity in order to endure external assaults. This dance of nations became a point of contention because of its power to unify the various nations of First People after the shared tragedy of Wounded Knee. Dancing and drum circles had been outlawed over time as external threats to the European’s expansion on their lands. Native religions, traditions, and practices were suppressed by declaring war on dancing as an affront to civilization and their conversion into the Christian faiths demanded by their oppressors. These suppressions were seen as prevention strategies to limit positive identity formation.

This configuration also coheres with the Yoruba traditional notion of *orita meta*, or the sacred crossroads where energy exchanges between realms.⁵⁶ At the intersection sits Elegba, who guards the ingresses and egresses of time and chance. These opportunities at this sacred carrefour provide Black people with the ability to create solutions for the crisis at hand. The strong lean of the shoulders, or in Ki-Kongo language, *yekuka* and the deep knee bends, *fwokama*, represent body movements that suggest the ring shouts performed on the plantation. Thompson explains:

In the classical religion of the Kongo, to bend down while circling is to traverse two worlds. When dancers “get down,” they surge with the spirit. When they stand up they move as themselves.⁵⁷

This exchange of energies between both worlds coupled with the body movements of two hands on the hip, arms akimbo, or in Ki-Kongo, *vonganana* also called by Fu-Kiau, *pakalala* signals authority and challenge, a defensive move to protect Black being.⁵⁸ *Vonganana* is a modality to command the space round the individual; the pose protects the poser from harm. The close-up of Beyoncé’s daughter, Blue Ivy, dancing with hands on hip, is a confrontational pose called *vonganana*, which means to assert oneself and to take control. This gesture links her to the struggle of others that have come before her, insuring the circle of perpetuity. As a visual language, these diverse gestures empower the individual dancer and the community to resist constriction and maintain control of the body, rendering it free and self-authorizing.

Fight the Power

1989 the number another summer (get down)
Sound of the funky drummer
Music hittin’ your heart cause I know you got soul
(Brothers and sisters, hey)
Listen if you’re missin’ y’all
Swingin’ while I’m singin’
Givin’ whatcha gettin’
Knowin’ what I know
While the Black bands sweatin’
And the rhythm rhymes rollin’
Got to give us what we want
Gotta give us what we need
Our freedom of speech is freedom or death
We got to fight the powers that be
Lemme hear you say
Fight the power

Public Enemy—“Fight the Power”

⁵⁶ For more information on the concept of the crossroads, see Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of “Telling the Story”* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); and Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

⁵⁷ Thompson, *Aesthetic of the Cool*, 161.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Kongo spiritual culture pervades the “Formation” video in this ontological fight. A montage of memories frames the dance of exultation and liberation. It begins with the voiceover of deceased rapper Messy Mya and a shot of Beyoncé on the hood of a car, which is half submerged in a large body of water, an analogue of the Kongo idea of the *bakulu*, or deceased ancestors, who continue to interact with the living. Residing below the *kalunga* line, the *bakulu*—or venerated ancestors—dwell under the surface of living waters as manifestation as well as memory. Establishing shots include close-ups of gold-capped teeth, grills gleaming in a wide smile. Using the Kongo concept of *vezima*, or flash, as the major conceit of southern Black identity to indicate spiritual presence, *vezima* relates to spiritual interaction between the material and spiritual realms. Some of the manifestations of this light result in one being able to recognize his or her destiny or to have a moment of spiritual remembrance from past incarnations.

Thompson notes that the flash gleam can arouse the spirit,⁵⁹ represent this impulse of spirit, such as shiny, glitter, gleam, and gold. Fu-Kiau contends that the human soul is “a miniature sun.”⁶⁰ As such, people bring radiance in the form of light from the spirit world. Thompson reports that before the importation of mirrors, Kongo ritual experts used wing case charms constructed from the iridescent wings of a beetle. These charms were “something full of light, like water, that you can see through to the other world.”⁶¹ “The idea of the glitter of the spirit fused with the notion of second sight through symbolized flight in order to expand the beyond—(*vila mu bangula bweno a ku mpemba*),” says Thompson.⁶² Glittering objects and the embedding of spirit became fundamental to African cosmos since the shine “arrests the spirit with its light and hints of movement—to the other world.”⁶³ This reflection equips the person with spiritual energy to fight the oppressive forces and transcend the prevailing external circumstances.

When Beyoncé’s dancers are not dancing in circles or in intersecting lines of formation they are dressed in translucent and diaphanous white cloth, twirling umbrellas creating Kongo spinning circles, signing this spiritual transcendence and journey between the realms. This curation of cultural rudiments reflects the audacity of memory generated by the dance. Even the blue convertible car dances a counter-clockwise metal dance, its rims spinning and double signing the cosmogram and reinforcing the gleam. Created in the San Francisco Bay Area, this metal dance, called “Ghost Riding the Whip,” riffs on the creative energy of Ogun the Yoruba Orisa of metal and the primordial deity of creative destruction. The God of war in the pantheon of Orisa, Ogun represents transformation and spiritual technology as well as mediation to assist his devotees to cut through obstacles in their lives.

The fractal codes in the video reproduce African spiritual values: Mardi Gras Indians, marching bands, umbrellas, women fanning themselves, pictures of shot gun houses, and camera

⁵⁹ Robert Farris Thompson, *Faces of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993), 57.

⁶⁰ Kimwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, quoted in Thompson, *Faces of the Gods*, 49.

⁶¹ Robert Farris Thompson, “Kongo Influences on African American Artistic Culture,” in Joseph E. Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 174.

⁶² Thompson, *Faces of the Gods*, 174.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 175.

angles that recreate the crossroads in the center of the framed shots. Most African-created memory rituals such as marching bands have been absorbed into popular culture as casually as the Kongo gesture for wellness and wellbeing, *yangalala*, known as the global phenomenon of giving a “high-five.” Having been appropriated by those outside of the cultural circle, these memorates endure, re-signed and reclaimed in African body formation.

This reclamation is seen in the final scene of “Formation,” when a young Black boy offers resistance using dance technology. He is confronted by a phalanx of police dressed in full riot gear representing the images that flooded the televisions at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson, Missouri following the murder of Michael Brown, and the Baltimore uprising after the death of Freddie Gray. His dance articulates the thesis of James Cone’s Black power theology, which is complete emancipation of Black people from white oppression by “any means necessary,” similar to Henry Highland Garnet’s idea of challenge, subsequently adopted as a liberatory strategy by Malcolm X. In this encounter—which has a potential for great tragedy—far outnumbered and outgunned, the young boy begins a slow dance of measured hand movements and coordinating body movements to prevail over the forces inimical to his existence. Using the sacred cells of rhythm, he creates power in the body, exercising agency and subjective control over his life.

At the conclusion of his dance, which by then has been ramped up in fervor, the police raise their hands in unison surrendering to the power generated by his dance. Here memory is understood, as Mieke Ball suggests, as a cultural phenomenon, an individual one, and a social idea.⁶⁴ Although an individual dancer, he is not alone. His dance links him with other Africans who have stood at the crossroads of life and death. He invokes the spirit. His victory stands as an homage to Black boys from Emmett Till to Tamir Rice and Black girls like Latasha Harlins of South Central Los Angeles and the four little girls at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama who did not make it. We are encouraged in the circle. In these dances between the realms—like those performed in brush harbors where Africans gathered to keep their bloodlines open, the shuffle steps of prisoners dancing their chains, girls sashaying in ring games, and the steps and leaps of Pentecostal parishioners matching their faith, we are encouraged to let the spirit have its way, the circle is alive and unbroken.

⁶⁴ Mieke Bal, “Introduction,” in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1999), ii.

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Audre and Africa: Reconsidering Lorde's Rites/Rights

Meredith F. Coleman-Tobias

In this paper, I construct a Neo-African religious history of activist, essayist, poet, and writer Audre Lorde from her essays, poetry, and memoirs. I trace Lorde's cosmology through her writings, locate her within two larger American religious cultures, and place her in posthumous conversation with two of her strong socio-religious critics. I advance biographical and creative writings as critical axes for a Neo-African spirituality that Lorde inherits outside of American religious history canons. My analysis ultimately becomes a platform to think through how a religious history emerges from Lorde's multiple genres. Considering more recent scholarship that sheds light on African gender and sexuality diversity within African religious cultures, this paper asks what, if any, literary license African descended persons have to claim and adapt African religion qua African religion in the diaspora.

Keywords: Audre Lorde, Africa, rites, African diaspora religion, Africana spirituality, art and religion

Born in 1934, Audre Lorde—essayist, poet, and writer—was arguably one of the most well-known lesbian activists of the twentieth century. As the Harlem-raised child of Grenadian immigrant parents, Lorde's self-understanding was multi-sited from a young age. While she wrote from the intersections of her “black, feminist, lesbian, mother, poet warrior”¹ identities, an overarching and undervalued theme throughout much of her writing was the interreligious ways that she understood historical and contemporary West African cultures and their relationship to her corners of the African diaspora. Lorde creatively employed her African descent to make sacred meaning and texture the multiple nodes of her spiritual existence.

During 1974, Audre Lorde traveled to Dahomey (now Benin), Ghana, and Togo, searching for “an ancestral female self”² and, upon return, developed a robust, West African-inspired spirituality. As a post-Catholic with Buddhist leanings, Lorde began to connect with “what she believed was the religion of her foremothers.”³ For Lorde, this included a pantheon of several West African divinities, including Dahomean Seboulisa and Ayida-Weddo; Yoruba Oshumare and Yemoja-Oboto; Ewe-Fon Avrekete; and Fon Mawu-Lisa. Biographer Alexis De Veaux affirms that Lorde constructed her own version of “Africa rebleded” when she returned to North America and, indeed, became her own “new religion.”⁴ Lorde transformed a five-week journey through West Africa into a polyreligious synthesis of what spiritually characterized the remainder of her public literary life, fashioning an individualized, Africa-in-diaspora devotion that ran adjacent to an “African American religious nationalism.”⁵ While Lorde's first trip to

¹ Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 179.

² *Ibid.*, 147.

³ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵ Advanced by religious historian Tracey Hucks, the designation “African American religious nationalism” has seven characteristics: 1. Black religious nationalism subverts the association of blackness with deified evil and makes a deliberate attempt to theologically realign blackness with divine essence. 2. A primary motivation is the need to *de-slave* or deobjectify (thus rehumanize) the *historical corporality* of black Atlantic people in the aftermath of traumatic

West Africa would not be her last, it gave her basic religious idioms through which to articulate her own emerging Africa-inspired belief and practice.

Parsing the Africentric spiritualities that Lorde’s writings evoked, this reflection expands upon the work of several Audre Lorde scholars including Gloria Joseph, Sharon Barnes, Katie Cannon, Donna Aza Weir-Soley, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Layli Maparyan, Joan Martin, Heather Russell, and Pamela Ayo Yetunde, who have articulated the spiritual and religious imperatives of Lorde’s oratorical and literary activism. However, the contribution of my approach is its appreciation of Dahomean, Fon, and Yoruba religious vocabularies as Lorde’s artistic medium and worldsense.⁶ Inspired by Alexis DeVeaux’s illustration of a self-fashioned, Africanized Lorde in *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*, I demonstrate how Audre Lorde carves out an African Atlantic spiritual orientation. Tracing Lorde’s spiritual practice through her poetry and prose writing, I locate her along two African American religious continuums in the late twentieth century. Also placing Lorde in posthumous conversation with two of her strongest West African scholarly critics, I advance her writings as one unlikely axis for the study of African diasporic religious traditions.

In “The Winds of Orisha,” published in 1973, Lorde articulates an emergent interpretation of a Yoruba cosmology:

*Impatient legends speak through my flesh
changing this earths formation
spreading
I will become myself
an incantation
dark raucous many-shaped characters
leaping back and forth across bland pages
and Mother Yemonja raises her breasts to begin my labour
near water
the beautiful Oshun and I lie down together
in the heat of her body truth my voice comes stronger
Shango will be my brother roaring out of the sea
earth shakes out darkness swelling into each other*

enslavement, with the goal of redesignating as sacrosanct the spiritual body and essence of postslavery African people. 3. Race becomes a central hermeneutical prism for conceptualizing sacred community and determining religious membership. In this collective community, individual differences are transcended, and direct continuities and links to ancient black communities are envisaged. 4. Religious practices reflect strict moral and ethical codes of behavior and religious expression is often patterned on ancient or traditional interpretations of culture. 5. New modes of creation and primordialism are mythologized and often textualized. History is also used as a “system of narration” in the quest “not only for identification and inspiration” but also for collective “legitimacy.” 6. Iconic renderings of the sacred and the divine are racially recast and rearticulated as affirming of black physicality while subverting the supremacy of an Anglo *imago dei*. New theologies are espoused that emphasize the inherent divinity or primordial universality of blackness. 7. Africa is often revalued and historically honored as a sacred source of ancient philosophies and traditions. The image of Africa and African humanity are deprimativized and rescued from pejorative European typologies. Tracey Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 44–45.

⁶ On the importance of the term “worldsense” to understandings of African cultures, see Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.

*warning winds will announce us living
as Oya, Oya my sister my daughter
destroys the crust of the tidy beaches
and Eshu's black laughter turns up the neat sleeping sand.*⁷

While “The Winds of Orisha” serves as an index of Yoruba energies for Lorde, later Africentric poetry would interpret Lorde’s own past and present through Yoruba cosmological archetypes. Take, for example, her poem entitled simply, “Oya”:

*God of my father discovered at midnight
my mother asleep on her thunders
my father
returning at midnight
out of tightening circles of anger
out of days' punishment
the inelegant safety of power
Now midnight empties your house of bravado
and passion sleeps like a mist
outside desire
your strength splits like a melon
dropped on our prisoners floor
midnight glows
like a jeweled love
at the core of the broken fruit.*

*My mother is sleeping.
Hymns of dream lie like bullets
in her night weapons
the sacred steeples
of nightmare are secret and hidden
in the disguise of fallen altars
I too shall learn how to conquer yes.
Yes yes god
damned
I love you
now free me
quickly
before I destroy us.*⁸

Here, Lorde employs prominent features of Oya—storm, cataclysm, and change—in order to express her own familial and relational turmoil. Seemingly, Lorde expresses her evolving belief and practice through her poetry: “Between Ourselves” (in *Between Ourselves*); “From the House of Yemanja,” “Dahomey,” “125th Street and Abomey,” and “Timepiece” (in *The Black Unicorn*—where she also listed a glossary of “African” names used in her poems); “Mawu” and “Call” (in *Our Dead Behind Us*)—and others. Ewe-Fon Avrekete became inspiration for Lorde’s newfound

⁷ Audre Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 90–91.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

valediction: “In the hands of Afrekete.”⁹ (She also re-named a love interest in her biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Afrekete.) However, Lorde’s Africa-inspired belief is most evident in her later literary corpus, after her breast cancer diagnosis in 1978.

The personal, indeed, became political as she waged battle with healthcare establishments that sought to make her personhood synonymous with her prosthesis. English scholar Sharon L. Barnes notes, “Lorde’s late poetry offers . . . a unique window on Lorde’s spiritual vision, particularly how [she] focused on . . . Seboulisa as the muse of her death journey.”¹⁰ This particular devotion collapsed a contextually wrought Dahomean cosmology and placed Seboulisa and other West African divinities Lorde encountered along a divine continuum of power — Seboulisa, biological and spiritual ancestors, co-journeying activist sisters, and Lorde herself. Lorde and later Barnes named this her “mathematics” of spirituality.¹¹ Lorde calculated the features of the energies most likely to be of assistance in an urgent time of health need. Lorde took this devotion to her writing—making desk, pen, and paper an altar upon and through which lexical devotions could emerge. Writing itself became a spiritual rite.

November 6, 1986
New York City

Black mother goddess, salt dragon of chaos, Seboulisa, Mau.
Attend me, hold me in your muscular flowering arms, protect me from throwing any part of myself away.

Women who have asked me to set these stories down are asking me for my air to breathe, to use in their future, are courting me back to my life as a warrior. Some offer me their bodies, some their enduring patience, some a separate fire, and still others, only a naked need whose face is all too familiar. It is the need to give voice to the complexities of living with cancer, outside of the tissue-thin assurance that they “got it all,” or that the changes we have wrought in our lives will insure that cancer never reoccurs. And it is a need to give voice to living with cancer outside of that numbing acceptance of death as a resignation waiting after fury and before despair.¹²

These musings are one of many requests that Lorde pens, pleading to members of her own selected pantheon for courage and determination—a sharing in what was proving a personal, painful journey with cancer. Lorde had a sense that the in-between space for which she sought divine meaning was nuanced with no easy answers. The spiritual systems to which she had been briefly exposed in her West African sojourns would have untried, unfamiliar antidotes.

Lorde’s West African spiritual inclinations resonate with the African American religious nationalism of her era. En masse, African American activists of the 1960s and 1970s were “reverting” back to West African religions and developing what theologian Dianne Stewart names “black religions of protest.” Stewart observes that, though these religious cultures are typically referenced as cults and sects in most social science literature, the category “black

⁹ De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 151.

¹⁰ Sharon L. Barnes, “Audre Lorde’s Seboulisa: Muse for the Death Journey,” in *Goddesses in World Culture*, Vol. 3, ed. Patricia Monaghan (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 241.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹² *Ibid.* 244–245.

religions of protest” re-frames new religious movements that responded to the self-empowering calls of Black Nationalism and created durable religious cultures in the United States. “Black religions of protest” include movements such as the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem, the Nation of Islam, the Pan African Orthodox Church (Shrines of the Black Madonna), and Yoruba-Ifa religious cultures.¹³ Ostensibly, Lorde would not have been attracted to these communities of like-minded religio-cultural devotees because of the patriarchy and homophobia some of them held as “African-centered.”¹⁴ What distinguished Lorde from this larger African American communal leaning was her insistence on a personal encounter and relationship with African divinities outside of an institutionally endorsed structure; Lorde worked within transnational communities of socio-political advocacy and held like-minded allies as a spiritual accountability network. Lorde’s patronage was more in line with what black feminist scholar-activist Akasha Gloria Hull identifies as a “new spirituality of African American women” that, between the 1970s and 1990s, thrived on non-Christian supernatural encounters, incorporated ancestral reverence, and encouraged enhanced creativity.¹⁵ Hull identifies prominent African American contemporaries of Audre Lorde—Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Lucille Clifton, Octavia Butler, Ntozake Shange, Pauli Marshall, Sonia Sanchez, and others—whose literary works echoed similar spiritual systems. Hull’s tethering of creative genres and spiritual formation is significant for my argument; we know of these women’s unorthodox spirituality because of their extant literature. Of these writers, however, Audre Lorde was one of the few to insist upon a firm West African cosmological cornerstone and its contemporary relevance for African diasporic lives.

Lorde’s spiritual encounter did not end with poetic prayers. Lorde’s socio-religious writings attest to a robust sense of her lesbian identity in conversation with historic West African social structures. Responding to Lorde’s assertion of culturally sanctioned “woman-to-woman” marriages (that, for Lorde, made lesbian identities an “ancient African reality”), two Nigerian scholars—anthropologist Ife Amadiume and sociologist Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí—challenged and critiqued Lorde’s “appropriation,” particularly her “misreading” of West African socio-spiritual structures. Oyèwùmí explains the complicated structure of “woman marriage” and “*ahonsi*”—that which Lorde referenced to make her case—in Dahomean society. “Wives” enter a particular lineage through marriage; husbands enter by birth. For Oyèwùmí, these realities—social, nonsexual relationships—have “no indication that they are associated with homosexuality in theory or in fact.”¹⁶ Oyèwùmí indicates that these practices are living traditions and that Lorde—along with other black feminists—have not taken seriously contemporary, well-documented articulations of this phenomenon. “Unfortunately,” says Oyèwùmí, “the issue is not the reality of African social institutions and cultural practices but the various agendas of ‘blackness’ and ‘womanism’ that Africa is called upon to serve in the United States and other parts of the African Diaspora. Such concerns cannot define African institutions; they must be

¹³ Dianne Stewart Diakité, “Spiritual Dynamics of Afro-America: Black Religions of Protest” Course Syllabus, 2013, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

¹⁴ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “But We Are Not the Same: Generating a Critical Poetics of Diaspora,” in Audre Lorde’s *Transnational Legacies*, Eds. Stella Bolaki and Sabine Broeck (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 163.

¹⁵ Akasha Gloria Hull, *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women* (Rochester, NY: Inner Traditions, 2001), 1.

¹⁶ Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, “Introduction: Feminism, Sisterhood, and Other Foreign Relations,” in *African Women & Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, ed. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2003), 15.

articulated on their own terms.”¹⁷ Here, Oyèwùmí insists that women in the African diaspora think carefully before naming diasporic ways of being “African” *sans* historical or ethnographic evidence.

Certainly, Oyèwùmí’s critique of diasporic “appropriation” within Lorde’s otherwise decentering approach is important. Both Amadiume and Oyèwùmí maintain that Lorde’s African social invocations contribute to a persistent Western intellectual problem: the “invention of Africa” in lieu of rigorous historical scholarship.¹⁸ Amadiume and Oyèwùmí accuse Lorde of white feminism’s “sisterly” alliances with women worldwide who do not necessarily ask for that kinship. While Amadiume and Oyèwùmí never critique Lorde’s claims to West African spiritual systems or energies, the implications of their critique are clear; if Lorde is to use what is “theirs,” they insist that she uses “it” with precision. I argue that Amadiume and Oyèwùmí’s sharp contention recognizes Lorde’s posthumous power in the making of an inaccurate West African history, religious or otherwise.

Building on the insights of anthropologist Stephan Palmie, religious historian Tracey Hucks asks scholars of African Atlantic religions “the crucial question of whether ‘New World conceptions of “Africity” can—or even ought to—be subjected to anthropological or historiographical authentication.”¹⁹ As Ghanaian practical theologian Emmanuel Lartey suggests, African (qua African) experiences transgress the cultural, historical, and geographical confines of the continent. Hucks’ and Palmie’s observation cautiously affirms Lorde’s usable African past as a helpful heuristic device. The category of African diasporic religious cultures can mine existing insights from the field of diaspora theory in order to make sense of Lorde’s profound contribution. Lorde’s poetry creates an *ideological* diaspora—that is, the movement and dispersal of belief divorced from West African migration or so-called “missionary” efforts of West African religious communities outside of the continent. Feminist scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs puts it this way: “[Lorde’s] black transnational feminist praxis, especially as it concerns majority-black spaces . . . interrogate[s] and reconstruct[s] diaspora as a complex political category of solidarity.”²⁰ Yet, as feminist scholar Abena Busia reminds us, “[i]t is one of the hardest things to accept that to work toward a common goal, we are not obliged to choose each other as dance partners, bedfellows, or any other kind of mate.”²¹ For purposes of this argument, I will add that “we” are not obliged to choose each other as spiritual co-journeymen. Yet, Audre Lorde offered one imperfect possibility for sacred camaraderie. Invoking multiple West African religious heritages, Lorde engineered a feminist, interreligious dialogue within her writing practice that still holds imaginative possibility for African Atlantic religious practitioners. Through creative arts, Lorde proffers the improvisational, dynamic possibility within spiritual traditions indigenous to West Africa and re-situated throughout the African diaspora; poetry composes her ritual life.²²

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Oyèwùmí, “Alice in Motherland: Reading Alice Walker on Africa and Screening the Color ‘Black,’” in Oyèwùmí, *African Women & Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, 160.

¹⁹ Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, 5–6.

²⁰ Gumbs, “But We Are Not the Same,” 164.

²¹ Abena Busia, “In Search of Chains Without Iron: On Sisterhood, History, and the Politics of Location,” in Oyèwùmí, *African Women & Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, 258.

²² A contemporary iteration of this Lorde’s black feminist pursuit may be seen in the recent publication of Alexis Pauline Gumbs’ volume, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*. Gumbs utilizes poetry to depict black women and girls seeking liberation from racist and sexist violence. The spiritual imperatives of the work may be understood as an

A first-generation child of Caribbean immigrants, Lorde traveled to West Africa several times, reversing Triangle Trade stops. Arguably her poetic archive maps one spiritual cartography and cosmology. Lorde's archives bow at the feet of black gods and offer scholars of African Atlantic religion a viable means to enter into New World Africas. Borrowing historian of religion Charles Long's language, Africa becomes an "orientational meditation"²³ for Lorde onto which she reads her transnational religious life. Poetry and prose become the primary vehicle through which Lorde's public comes to understand her unique practice.

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African-descended, interreligious extension of Lorde's model. See Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

²³ Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, *NEWS* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1993): 3–4. Cited by Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, 49.

Lords Above Us and Within Us: Exploring Race, Spirituality, and Hip Hop Based Education

Moira E. Pirsch

This article explores selected scholarship, understandings, and practices utilized in Hip Hop culture and Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE) as they relate to conceptions of race and spirituality, ways in which scholars describe the relationship of HHBE to spiritual experiences, and how HHBE connects to racial identity and spiritual development. The article also explores the past and promise of these understandings and recent scholarship on the intersections of HHBE, spirituality, and race. The article closes by highlighting the emerging fields of hip-hop literacies, racial literacy, and spiritual literacy.

Keywords: hip hop, Hip Hop Based Education, hip-hop culture, hip-hop literacy, racial literacy, spiritual literacy

let us, oh lords above us and within
let us be useful to our neighbors
& tender their wounds
let us be more bandage than blade
unless the blade is needed

let us be a sword against what does not
bring us closer to home

let us be dangerous to that which fails us

and bring us a world good to us, all of us
all us all us
amen

From “principles,” by spoken word poet Danez Smith¹

“Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.”²

When I attended the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Festival (BNV) for the first time in New York City in 2006, I was eighteen years old. I, a white middle-class teenager from a midsize city in the Midwest, was being introduced to a network of spoken word and hip-hop poets that was emerging across the country. I remember seeing hundreds of students from all parts of the world (from England to Guam and everywhere in between) huddled into groups, speaking, listening, and performing poems that spoke to their dual realities of oppression and

¹ Danez Smith, “principles,” www.danezsmithpoet.com/a-poem-principles, accessed Oct. 24, 2017.

² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 88.

liberation; all with the previously mentioned Paulo Freire quote on the back of their shirts. I remember not being sure who Paulo Freire was and what this quote really meant. However, even though I had no theoretical framework for understanding my experience, I knew that as we spoke about our teenage views of injustice in our neighborhoods and our world, what I was experiencing was powerful; a process of learning and living that was being built in word, in work, and in action-reflection—or what I now understand (borrowing from Freire) as praxis, or “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”³

Almost a decade later, as our nation faces another round of cyclical crises related to race and politics,⁴ I’ve seen my peers from that day become the directors of their own non-profits, earn degrees at the nation’s top universities, and win established awards and professorships. I am earning my PhD in English education and reflect on those moments as a young poet and wonder how the experiences of spoken word and hip hop based education (HHBE) supported me and my peers in understanding our spiritual and racialized selves within our diverse world.

In our society in general, while fewer young people than ever before are choosing not to affiliate with any formal religion,⁵ these same non-affiliated young people still report having regular deep spiritual experiences and are building what Thurston and Kuilie⁶ call “deep community,” through secular organizations that mirror many of the functions of religious institutions. A pilot study I completed in 2016, along with a tradition of scholarship connecting HHBE to religious and spiritual lineages, points to the possibility that HHBE is one such space that supports spiritual experiences and deep community. When these spiritual experiences occur within critical multiracial environments, such as those facilitated by HHBE, racial justice work often precedes or goes hand in hand with such work.⁷ It is the attempt to understand the connections between the movement of HHBE and recent scholarship that has led me to write this article.

This article is guided by the following questions: 1) *How do scholars of HHBE name and describe the connections between HHBE and spirituality?* 2) *How do scholars describe the connections between HHBE, race, and spirit within diverse educational contexts?* 3) *What are the pedagogical practices employed that support these connections?* In the following, I will frame this work with brief histories of HHBE, spirituality in education, and race in education, and then categorize threads of scholarship that bring together these ideas with the themes of: 1) participatory shine, 2) productive crisis, and 3) forward movement. To close I will focus on the pedagogical potential of such understandings, outlining the emerging fields of hip-hop literacies, racial literacy, and spiritual literacies.⁸

³ Ibid., 51.

⁴ See Jeff Chang, *We Gon’ Be Alright: Notes on Race and Resegregation* (New York: Picador, 2016).

⁵ Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship,” <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/choosing-a-new-church-or-house-of-worship/> (Aug. 23, 2016).

⁶ Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston, *How We Gather* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Divinity School, 2015), 6–7.

⁷ Shelly Tochluk, *Living in the Tension: The Quest for a Spiritualized Racial Justice* (Roselle, NJ: Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books, 2016).

⁸ This inquiry was completed through a literature review of twenty-one sources found by seven sets of terms including “hip hop based education;” “spirituality and education;” “race and education;” “critical spirituality;” “critical race theory and spirituality;” “hip hop based education and race;” and “hip hop and spirituality.” Journal articles were collected from a diverse range of sources, including peer-reviewed journals and books identified through JSTOR, ERIC (EBSCO), and CLIO (Columbia University Libraries Catalog). Key themes will be expanded upon in the findings section.

Framing: Hip Hop Based Education, The Cypher, and Sociocultural Theories of Learning

Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE) refers to the use of hip hop elements as curricular and pedagogical resources.⁹ Hip-hop culture, the basis for HHBE, often has widely varying definitions in literature, however one way that hip-hop culture can be defined is as an encompassing, multidimensional culture, which is expressed through the five elements of: 1) MCing (oral element—spoken word poetry falls within this category); 2) DJing (technological element); 3) graffiti (visual element); 4) breakdancing (physical element); and 5) knowledge of self and community (existential element).¹⁰ Hip hop is often viewed as a way of life and extends into the realms of fashion, language, political sensibilities, and business.¹¹

Hip-hop culture stems from a lineage of ancient African storytelling communities¹² and is grounded in what is popularly known as *the hip hop cypher*. The cypher often acts as a space for opening, or a holding space for discovery and expression literally and figuratively. In a literal practice, the cypher is usually the home of freestyle sessions based in movement or oral practices.¹³ Rhetorically, the word *cypher* describes “the ability to decode and encode,”¹⁴ and may act as an access point for one to get beyond the “codes” of knowledge, human connection, and understanding.¹⁵ Toni Blackmon, in *The Wisdom of the Cypher*, tells us that “the cypher can be the closest thing to a Hip Hop prayer. It is a meditation of sorts, a place to lay down your burdens and open yourself to the possibility of ‘getting open.’”¹⁶

Scholars have illuminated the cypher and HHBE by utilizing a sociocultural lens that understands learning as situated within specific social contexts and communities of practice (CoP).¹⁷ Wilson¹⁸ and Love¹⁹ outline the particulars of Hip Hop Communities of Practice (HHCOP), calling for scholarship to keep moving in the direction of considering HHBE “based on what hip-hop participants ‘do,’”²⁰ in relationship to the theories that underlie such practices.

⁹ Marc Lamont Hill and Emery Petchauer, eds., *Schooling Hip-Hop: Expanding Hip-Hop Based Education Across the Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Samuel Steinberg Seidel, *Hip Hop Genius: Remixing High School Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2011).

¹¹ Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

¹² Jeff Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2006).

¹³ Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107–108.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁶ Toni Blackman, *Wisdom of the Cypher* (Forthcoming, 2017), 1.

¹⁷ Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Lave and Wenger posit that all learning is social learning. A result of these social learning experiences, based in the mutual engagement of practices, artifacts, and interactions by individuals, is not only the creation and development of relationships, but the related shifting of identities of the learner and community.

¹⁸ J. A. Wilson, *Outkast'd and Claimin' True: The Language of Schooling and Education in the Southern Hip-Hop Community of Practice* (unpublished doctoral dissertation), University of Georgia, Athens, 2007.

¹⁹ Bettina L. Love, “What Is Hip-Hop-Based Education Doing in *Nice* Fields Such as Early Childhood and Elementary Education?” *Urban Education* 50, no. 1 (2015): 106-131, doi:10.1177/0042085914563182.

²⁰ Bettina L. Love, “What Is Hip-Hop-Based Education Doing in *Nice* Fields Such as Early Childhood and Elementary Education?” *Urban Education* 50, no. 1 (2015): 106-131, doi:10.1177/0042085914563182.

Further, in utilizing HHBE, there is not a set standard of practices or curriculums that one would need to adhere to in order to engage with HHBE as an educator. Despite the multiple organizations, conferences, anthologies, and curriculums produced about HHBE each year, a consensus on what HHBE is and how it must be practiced among practitioners and scholars has yet to arise, nor would it be welcomed, as one of the key components of hip hop is its ability to hold multiplicity. However, I might venture to say that to call oneself an HHBE practitioner, it might require a full commitment and engagement in the cypher, or community, a commitment that requires not only contribution to the community through whatever element/practice one may engage in, but also a commitment to authenticity, or what we might understand as knowledge of self. Through this sociocultural lens, where we understand the self as socially constructed, this full commitment to self *and* community are actually one in the same.

A Few Notes on Spirituality, Race, and Education

In 2017, the spiritual lives of millennials are taking drastically different shapes than they have before. As mentioned, while there is a growing number of millennials who are choosing not to identify with religious institutions, they still report having regular deep spiritual experiences.²¹ Research on spirituality and education has taken many points of view over time and, outside of the study of religion and schooling, most research has focused on the “God within”²² or the ability of students to access their inner spiritual worlds.²³ Recently, research on spirituality and education has expanded its focus and has begun more thoroughly looking at the internal spiritual lives of students *in relationship* to their greater outside world, or how those individual inner worlds are reflected and expressed in larger social and cultural contexts.²⁴ Further, scholars of psychology are also looking to justify the value and importance of having a spiritual intention when it comes to working with young people, especially as it relates to protecting against challenging aspects of adolescent life. Lisa Miller’s research “shows that spirituality is *the* most robust protective factor against the big three dangers of adolescence: depression, substance abuse, and risk taking.” She emphasizes the measurable psychological benefits of adolescent spirituality and states, “In the entire realm of human experience, there is no single factor that will protect your adolescent like a personal sense of spirituality.”²⁵

Similar to the study of spirituality and education, scholarship on race and education covers a large spectrum, ranging from conversations on eugenics to segregation to psychology. Much of this work has focused on addressing racial disparities in educational achievement. Over the last few decades, scholarship has turned to focus more not only on challenging the measurements that identify such disparities, but also on practices, structures, and pedagogical orientations that can shift the ways students learn, teachers teach, and schools function.²⁶

²¹ Pew Research Center, “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship.”

²² Mike Radford, “Spirituality and Education; Inner and Outer Realities,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 11, no. 3, (2006): 386, doi:10.1080/13644360601014130.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (New York: Picador/St. Martin’s Press, 2016), 208–209.

²⁶ Jeffrey M. R. Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell, *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

While these two fields of study (spirituality in education and race in education) have much overlap, scholarship has only rarely put them in conversation, especially as it relates to classroom pedagogies and practices.²⁷ Dillard discusses how the integration of spirituality in conversations concerning race and culture in education has been a “missing piece” of pedagogical conversations thus far and there is opportunity to radically shift education when we center these intersections.²⁸ Outside of the classroom, Tuchlock²⁹ has described the necessity for people, especially those in dominant racial positions, to engage both their racialized and spiritual identities, in order to serve efforts for racial justice in a holistic way. This growing body of scholarship, of which I have hardly graced the surface, offers great opportunity for further study and pedagogical application.

Walk the Talk: Findings and Implications

Now that we’ve discussed a bit of where this work comes from, I’ll share three overall themes that arose in this brief study of scholarship that brings together hip hop, race in education, and spirituality in education. The three categories of themes that arose are 1) participatory shine, or how *participation* in HHBE communities can facilitate growth in individuals and communities; 2) productive crisis, or how HHBE communities experience challenge as opportunity, and 3) forward movement, or how an HHBE worldview sees unending opportunities for growth and improvement.

Theme 1: Showing Up: Participatory Shine

Hip-hop culture expresses spirituality in direct and indirect ways, both of which include active participation of more than one person. Scholars have noted that this participatory shine, as I’ll call it, is often not doctrine specific and can be expressed implicitly and explicitly in a myriad of ways, including as spiritual overtones in rap music, churches integrating rap in services, interpersonal communications, and digital expressions.³⁰

I often reflect on a moment when I witnessed my brother and six of our male teenage peers perform their original raps at a high school dance. At a time when administrators and teachers looked down upon their academic performance, suspiciously vetting each line of their songs the week prior, I remember standing on a chair, seeing our entire school focused 100% on their dynamic expressions, their faces lit up, each of them jumping up and down on stage as they shared their intricate and overlapping rhymes. Wuthnow describes the essence of spiritual practice as “engaging in a regular pattern of activities to deepen one’s understanding and experience of the sacred, to strengthen one’s relationship to God, or to establish a closer connection with the ultimate ground of being.” He goes on to explain that while some artists practice their art with specific spiritual intentions, others’ work “puts them in contact with

²⁷ Cynthia B. Dillard and Chinwe L. Ezueh Okpalaoka, eds., *Engaging Culture, Race and Spirituality: New Visions* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Tochluk, *Living in the Tension*.

³⁰ Sharon Lauricella, “Performing Spirituality: Lil Wayne’s Letters from a New York Jail,” in Andre E. Johnson, ed., *Urban God Talk: Constructing a Hip Hop Spirituality* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 95–114.

something transcendent.”³¹ While my brother and our friends were not explicitly rapping about God or a higher power, their participating together connected them—and the high school community also participating—to the “ultimate ground of being” that may not have been accessible if the larger community had not been present.

Another, more explicit example of how this theme manifests can be noted in rapper Lil Wayne’s blog from prison, where in his first letter addressed to his fans, he writes, “for my time here, my physical will be confined to the yard. My love and my spirit, however, know no boundaries.”³² Lauricella notes that in Wayne’s nearly year-long series of letters, that prayer was mentioned in all of them, and that he openly conversed with fans around the themes of love, gratitude, and God. This exemplifies not only the shifting acceptance of spiritual communication in hip-hop communities, but also the interactive nature of spirituality in hip hop that goes beyond a singular performance of spirituality.³³

Theme 2: Fall to Fly: Productive Crisis

I used to feel so devastated
At times, I thought we'd never make it
But now we on our way to greatness
and all that ever took was patience

From “Devastated,” by rapper Joey Bada\$\$

Last night took an L [Loss], but tonight I bounce back.

From “Bounce Back,” by rapper Big Sean

Tinson³⁴ explains that hip-hop culture, like all popular culture, must consistently engage with its contradictions. With hip hop in particular being a culture that arose out of marginalized, black and brown communities in the South Bronx that were dealing with and addressing economic and social inequities, the culture engages stark, often irreconcilable, contradictions with its highly commercial, visible presence in mainstream society. However, hip-hop culture continues to and always will toe this thin line, with authentic, transformative hip-hop culture being produced and engaged across the world, in direct opposition to, in concert with, and sometimes in collaboration with more mainstream elements of the culture. What is clear about the tensions of the culture as a whole is that there are not only cycles of challenges, or “devastations,” but also that these same cycles facilitate individuals’ and collectives’ ability to “bounce back,” and that these challenges may be necessary for the journey ahead. Scholars of

³¹ Robert Wuthnow, *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 128.

³² Lauricella, “Performing Spirituality: Lil Wayne’s Letters from a New York Jail.”

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Christopher M. Tinson and Carlos REC McBride, “Hip Hop, Critical Pedagogy, and Radical Education in a Time of Crisis,” *Radical Teacher* 97 (2013): 1–9, doi:10.5195/rt.2013.43.

spiritual development³⁵ have often noted that one must experience the darker moments, sometimes referred to as the dark night of the soul, in order to gain access to the light.

Another example of this theme is illuminated in the first experience I had teaching a hip hop and social justice class at a middle school in St. Paul, Minnesota. Within moments of the class starting, students threw paper at each other, carved their names into desks, started fist fights, and wouldn't listen no matter how many different approaches I tried. Two boys in particular were the most consistently disruptive. I changed my plans, added more energizers, and still encouraged them to write—to share the one thing that they will always have, and the one thing that no one can take away from them—their story. During the last week, we sent invitations home to parents for our final show. At the show, only two mothers showed up. It was the mothers of the two boys. Their mothers told me that their sons came home every day talking about how much they enjoyed the class.

Hip hop offers many lessons about perseverance through struggle. This example is representative of what Emdin describes as the importance for educators to build not only knowledge of *content* of students' culture, but also to remain open to the unknowable impact of classroom and community settings.³⁶ In my own example, I can only speak to my experience that the learning for me was clear. You may not always know the answers and still never give up on your students; never give up on yourself. We always have an opportunity to bounce back.

Theme 3: Stay Building: Forward Movement

Advance and never halt, for advancing is perfection.

From “The Visit of Wisdom,” by Khalil Gibran

The final theme that arose is that of continual advancement, or the theme that practitioners and other individuals who participate in hip-hop culture are reluctant to ever settle on one set of understandings. This connects to the previously mentioned themes and emphasizes an element of movement, especially when addressing, and dealing with, the contradictions and challenges that are bound to arise. Aisha Durham³⁷ discusses how younger members of hip-hop culture, ones who have grown up with hip hop being an unquestionable part of American culture, whom MK Asante calls “the post-hip-hop generation,”³⁸ are actively taking stands against the problematic nature of corporate hip hop, and also social issues in greater society. One such example is how young people are standing up against racial profiling, mass incarceration, and murders of black and brown young people, through the Black Lives Matter movement and other connected movements. Not only does this “standing against” take form in artistic

³⁵ James W. Fowler, Karl Ernst Nipkow, and Friedrich Schweitzer, *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implications for Church, Education and Society* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

³⁶ Christopher Emdin, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood ... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016).

³⁷ Aisha Durham, “_____ While Black: Millennial Race Play and the Post-Hip-Hop Generation,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 15, no. 4 (2015): 253–59, doi:10.1177/1532708615578414.

³⁸ See M. K. Asante, Jr., *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

production, but also more directly in politics and community organizing, or ways that might go beyond what has been traditionally known as civil rights organizing, including innovative and digital strategies.³⁹

This notion of continued engagement in struggle also arises most clearly when it comes to how HHBE practitioners and students deal with issues of race, especially in the classroom. While traditional educational environments often shy away from difficult discussions on race, we see classrooms that engage hip hop can utilize music and cultural production as a vehicle to invite and encourage a discussion concerning race and how it functions in society. Not only does it offer important counter-narratives to the dominant racial discourse, but also examples for students to practice literacy skills of decoding/deconstructing the meanings of sometimes problematic representations in hip hop.⁴⁰ This continued engagement not only has the power to support students as they engage with these complex topics but also as they engage individuals beginning to understand their spiritual and racialized identities. Norton,⁴¹ who shares how hip-hop writing illuminated the spiritualities of students, notes that students viewed their spiritual lives as important sources of support as they worked through difficult and challenging times. There is great potential to map out how this might function in future scholarship, as much has already been noted about how hip hop may be able to support the development of academic culture as a whole, especially as it relates to understandings of race,⁴² however not yet with clear connections to spirituality.

While these themes arose in my search of relevant scholarship, in conversations, and in my experiences, it was not always clear how best to integrate these themes into actual practice, or how we might support educators and students of HHBE to engage with them. In the discipline of English education, scholars and educators often focus on the lens of literacy practices, or the multiple literacies,⁴³ with which students engage when interpreting texts or experiences. Now, I will very briefly explore some possibilities as they relate to supporting students in their journey to 1) shine—or how we might engage hip-hop literacies; 2) fly—or how we might build upon our understandings of racial literacy; and 3) build—or how students and educators may continue to develop a culturally relevant pedagogy that engages a diverse and developing notion of spiritual literacy.

SHINE: Hip-Hop Literacies

When working with HHBE, there are expansive possibilities. Research thus far has shown us that through HHBE, young people are able to move beyond basic literacy practices, of reading and writing texts, and are encouraged to read and write the world.⁴⁴ Elaine Richardson

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Steven Netcoh, “Droppin’ Knowledge on Race: Hip-Hop, White Adolescents, and Anti-Racism Education,” *Radical Teacher* 97 (2013): 10–19, doi:10.5195/rt.2013.39.

⁴¹ Nadjwa E. L. Norton, “Young Children Manifest Spiritualities in Their Hip-Hop Writing,” *Education and Urban Society* 46, no. 3 (2014): 329–51, doi:10.1177/0013124512446216.

⁴² Emery Petchauer, “Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research,” *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 2 (2009): 946–78, doi:10.3102/0034654308330967.

⁴³ New London Group, “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures,” *Harvard Educational Review* 66, no. 1 (1996).

⁴⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

(2006) describes hip-hop literacies as part of a lineage of African American language practices that honor the complex notions of the knowledge-making system prevalent in the “hip-hop generation.”⁴⁵ Similarly, researchers have explored the use of spoken word poetry in school environments as a powerful practice to challenge dominant social structures within classroom settings.⁴⁶ When thinking about how hip-hop literacies can work within notions of race and spirituality, it’s clear that this perspective can offer a new way of looking at education overall. Marc Bamuthi Joseph describes hip hop and spoken word as spaces that center “the living word” in contrast to the “dead scrolls” that have dominated academia for decades.⁴⁷ With this emphasis on life, in relationship to death or dry/dying school communities, students and practitioners have ample opportunity to find valuable ways to engage such practices and important topics.

FLY: Racial Literacy

Racial literacy, as explained by legal scholar Lani Gunier, “requires us to rethink race as an instrument of social, geographic, and economic control of both whites and blacks. Racial literacy offers a more dynamic framework for understanding American racism.”⁴⁸ She calls for treating not just the “symptoms” of racism, but the disease as a whole, and that will take a different set of understandings than previously thought.⁴⁹ Racial literacy allows a better grasp of the context of the world we live in and comparing racial liberalism to racial literacy, Gunier states, “It is about learning rather than knowing.”⁵⁰ This aligns with HHBE’s tendency to always keep moving.

Working with something like HHBE, which is inherently racialized as an African American art form that is utilized by people of all races, we see a clear need for practitioners and students alike (especially white teachers who teach students of color) to engage, as Tinson says, with the “histories, practices, and beliefs that emanate from and are germane to Africana and Latin@ communities today, including their discomfort with ‘experts’ of the culture and encounters that define their daily life experiences.”⁵¹ This often challenging engagement, while working from a lens of racial literacy, can be productive. Sealy-Ruiz tells educators that intentionally teaching about the concepts of race “provides personal and professional fulfillment and insight into the ways in which students struggle to discuss critical issues that affect their lives.”⁵²

⁴⁵ Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*.

⁴⁶ Maisha T. Fisher, “From the Coffee House to the School House: The Promise and Potential of Spoken Word Poetry in School Contexts,” *English Education* 37, no. 2 (2005): 115-31.

⁴⁷ Marc Bamuthi Joseph, “(Yet Another) Letter to a Young Poet,” in Jeff Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2006), 11–17.

⁴⁸ Lani Gunier, “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2004): 114.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵¹ Tinson and McBride, “Hip Hop, Critical Pedagogy, and Radical Education in a Time of Crisis,” 4.

⁵² Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, “Learning to Talk and Write about Race: Developing Racial Literacy in a College English Classroom,” *English Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 24–42.

BUILD: *Spiritual Literacies*

With HHBE, we see that young people are engaging with notions of spirituality in more critical and conceptual ways. Norton states, “Although all children will not self-identify as spiritual beings, a significant number do.”⁵³ Educators from all walks of life are encouraged to begin thinking about what this means for them in their practice, especially because understanding and engaging with the spiritual lives of young people “has the potential to counter many of the inequities within our society and educational system.”⁵⁴

Spiritual literacy is the least understood and explored of the three frameworks discussed. The term was first used in the book *Spiritual Literacy* and is defined as “the ability to read the signs written in the texts of our own experiences. Whether viewed as a gift from God or a skill to be cultivated, this facility enables us to discern and decipher a world full of meaning.”⁵⁵ Further, only a few scholarly articles related to educational practices have used the term, none of which were set explicitly in the field of education or literacy studies.

Only once we begin to understand these three elements (of HHBE, race, and spirituality) individually can we begin to understand how they intersect or build a theory for what a Hip Hop Racial Spiritual Literacy could look like . . . or maybe these elements can always be static, shifting, and overlapping and one such synthesizing lens need not be created. In any case, scholarship thus far has made the case that our students’ spiritual, racialized selves must be engaged if we are to have healthy, productive classrooms moving forward, and hip hop based education offers a worldview that can help support the development of classrooms/cyphers from all parts of the country.

Now, let’s take a minute to think about how we could connect these understandings to a specific educational experience. I must mention again that the field of HHBE is extremely diverse and takes place in multiple types of community spaces and classrooms of all disciplines, so I want to be clear that there might not be such a thing as a representative lesson or experience. In efforts to illuminate what we might call racial and spiritual literacy practices through an HHBE lesson, I will offer a recent experience I had while teaching about hip hop and spoken word to adult educators at an arts center in the state of Hawai’i.

The setting of this lesson was an arts center that aimed to begin incorporating specifically spoken word in their cross-disciplinary arts programming that was led by a group of adult educators. A majority of the participants were not born or raised in Hawai’i although many had been there for over a decade. The lesson was grounded in the pedagogical orientation of understanding self and community or the interrogating of one’s “Life as Primary Text”⁵⁶ in relationship to all other texts, legacies, people, environments, or experiences. The lesson incorporated the following:

⁵³ Norton, “Young Children Manifest Spiritualities in Their Hip-Hop Writing,” 346.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 347.

⁵⁵ Frederic Brussat and Mary Ann Brussat, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 16.

⁵⁶ Vajra M. Watson, “Life as Primary Text: English Classrooms as Sites for Soulful Learning,” *JAEPL* 22 (Winter 2016–2017), 6–18.

- 1) *general introductions* of participants that included naming the intentions they had for the workshop;
- 2) *a brief overview of the histories and traditions* that led to contemporary spoken word poetry and hip hop as it is understood in the United States;⁵⁷
- 3) *the creation of a collective wordbank* intended to stimulate acknowledgement of where participants come from and the land they currently inhabit;⁵⁸
- 4) *the introduction of an exemplar text*, which was a video of the youth spoken-word team of Hawai'i performing a poem in part Hawaiian and part English concerning how people honor indigenous cultures on colonized land;
- 5) *unpacking of the exemplar text* inspired by the Perpich Center for Arts Education's Critical Response Protocol;
- 6) *the creation of a new text written by the participants* that included words and phrases from the previous exercises with the prompt: I am . . . We are . . . ;
- 7) *sharing* the new creation with the group; and
- 8) *creative debrief*, or opportunity for participants to share thoughts, questions, or words that exemplified their experiences within the lesson.

After this workshop, participants were then asked to submit their top lines to be shared publicly through the program's website.

Throughout the experience of this lesson, there were implicit and explicit ways participants acknowledged race and spirituality. Because these two ideas are fluid and often intersect with other concepts, we see these themes arising in conjunction with multiple experiences. It is interesting to note that notions of race arose mostly in explicit conversation and unpacking of texts, while spirituality arose more implicitly through the language that participants chose to use in their writing.

First, a conversation around race indirectly emerged during the unpacking of the text, mostly around understanding language. As mentioned, a portion of the text was spoken in Hawaiian, and some in the group understood and shared what they understood as the translated content of the piece, connecting to the same themes around acknowledging indigenous land and shared histories of colonization. Discussing language and land gave rise to a more explicit conversation about who is responsible for colonization and its effects. A debate among a few members of the group began as they discussed their own understandings of white-skin privilege and how as white people they can address racism in broader society. One white participant

⁵⁷ Joseph, "(Yet Another) Letter to a Young Poet."

⁵⁸ Participants called out words they related to the following prompts: "Who is your community?" "What are locations of your community?" "What are locations around you?" "Things overheard in your community" and "Colors of the ocean."

talked about her emotions not only around addressing the colonization of Hawai'i through utilizing art pieces that speak to the history of the struggle for Hawaiian sovereignty, but also around building partnerships with native Hawaiians who are most affected and bringing them into their classes and workshops. Further, another participant, in her written piece, wrote "We are returning to learning." While it is likely there are many possibilities for what this student was referring to, I am reminded of Gunier's reference to racial literacy as being "about learning rather than knowing."⁵⁹

Understandings of spirituality arose more implicitly, specifically through participants' written responses, often as they referred to their own understandings of themselves as being a part of nature or universal experiences and also the ideal of forward movement. One participant said "I am light in the early morning. . . . We are trying." Participants also spoke to the collective nature of their experiences with one another, or how they viewed the experience of being together as one that was valuable or "a blessing." One participant shared with this group: "We are blessed to share with others." Finally, participants also expressed the idea of understanding life as not being permanent, or how they must humble themselves as artists/educators for, as one participant closed the experience with, "We are passing thru."

In all, this particular lesson highlights a sliver of how we might begin to understand these notions of race and spirituality within an HHBE context. Because of the dual understandings of explicit and implicit practices related to these notions, it is difficult to grasp succinctly how HHBE might function more broadly as a tool for spiritual and racial development, however this study has shown us that it is a worthy study to engage in, and more research and pedagogical inquiry would be valuable.

With that being said, I have only dipped my toe into the vast ocean of scholarship and understandings related to this work. I am comforted knowing that even though my immature teenage self was unaware of the multiple intersections of educational possibilities in which I was engaging, it was a journey on this step I am called to be on; and that today there is very likely something equivalent to a quote by Paulo Friere that I don't understand and it won't be another decade until I am able to flesh out what it means. But I know it's okay, because not only will I continue to participate with my community, but I'll embrace those challenges and possible misunderstandings and will always keep it moving.

With that, I close by offering this quote, by Thomas Merton: "You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them."

⁵⁹ Gunier, "From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy," 115.

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“Lords Above Us and Within Us: Exploring Race, Spirituality, and Hip Hop Based Education”

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**Whiteness in the Ancestral Waters: Race, Religion, and Conversion
within North American Buddhism and Haitian Vodou**

Kyrah Malika Daniels

In the 1950s, Ukrainian American filmmaker Maya Deren traveled to Haiti and became initiated as a manbo (priestess) in Haitian Vodou. How did Deren become drawn to Vodou, and how did she cultivate relationships with fellow devotees? Further, what does her experience as a Vodouizan reveal about other North American whites converting to “exotic” religions practiced largely by people of color? In an exploration of race and religious belonging, this essay offers a theoretical framing of “whiteness,” and considers the history of North American conversions to Buddhism as a precursor to white initiation to African Diasporic traditions. The paper examines Maya Deren’s identity as an immigrant artist, resulting in an alternate experience of whiteness, and allowing her to conceive of her journey to Haiti as a spiritual homecoming. Ultimately, I argue that Deren became enmeshed in a ritual kinship system whose bonds reached far beyond the boundaries of mortal geographies.

Keywords: Haitian Vodou, Buddhism, comparative religion, conversion, whiteness studies

In his 1997 hit track, Hip Hop artist Tupac Shakur considers the racial inclusivity of religious spaces as he muses aloud, “I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto.”¹ Shakur’s song poses a salient question about whether a Christian heaven includes room for impoverished communities and non-white racial groups.² Indeed, as we think about Biblical stories such as the Curse of Ham³ that assert Blacks’ ontological inferiority to whites, Tupac’s inquiry about whether the Divine Kingdom welcomes people of color presents an understandable, if cynical, line of questioning. This leads one to ponder an equally intriguing and inverted question: who populates the heavens and paradise of traditionally Black religions?

In the religious tradition of Haitian Vodou, ancestors, spirits and those unborn are said to live beneath the ocean in a mystic realm known as *Afrik-Ginen*. This underwater world represents an imagined Africa and spiritual homeland, and Vodou devotees claim that every departed spirit will eventually come to rest as a citizen of this region. *Afrik-Ginen* then, is not simply the site of one’s birth, but a womb, graveyard, and *ritual center*.⁴ Ethnographer and filmmaker Maya Deren echoed these sentiments about *Afrik-Ginen*, relaying a creation myth that cites *Ginen* as “the

¹ Tellingly, this song was also Tupac Shakur’s first song released posthumously. See Tupac Shakur, “I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto,” accessed May 22, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Wonder_If_Heaven_Got_a_Ghetto.

² While it is typically unhelpful to define people by their non-entity (i.e. *non-white racial group*), here I highlight the implications of Tupac’s lyrics that *every race* besides whites may not live grandly in heaven.

³ Also known as the Curse of Canaan. See Gen 9:20–27. NRSV.

⁴ For more on *Afrik-Ginen*, see Kyrah Malika Daniels’ “Mirror Mausoleums, Mortuary Arts, and Haitian Religious Unexceptionalism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 85, No. 4 (Dec. 2017): 957–984, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfx012>.

legendary place of racial origin.”⁵ What is striking about this assertion is that it does not explicitly state that residents of *Afrik-Ginen* must be of African descent. We might then ask ourselves, within Vodou cosmology, where do white spirits travel when they depart from this earth?

Haitian Vodou is an African-derived religious tradition grounded in tenets of sacred healing that work to maintain balance and rhythm within the cosmos.⁶ Vodou emerged from the collisions and cohesions between the indigenous religious traditions of Dahomey, Yorùbá, and Kongo⁷ nations from West Africa and West Central Africa; Taíno communities, the original inhabitants of Hispaniola; as well as Catholicism and European mysticism. The Vodou pantheon of spirits exists as a complex matrix, with *Bondyé* serving as the high God and creator. *Bondyé* leaves much of human affairs to intermediaries, spirits known as the *Lwa*,⁸ whom devotees note may number as many as 400.⁹ These many *Lwa* may be understood as manifestations of fifteen to twenty archetypal spirits who belong to several *nanchon* (nations) of spirits.¹⁰ As with many indigenous traditions, the ancestors of Vodou serve as interlocutors between the mortal and spiritual realms, and spirits may act on behalf of the families who tend to them on earth, nourishing the *Lwa* in ritual tributes and sacred rites.¹¹ Vodou also maintains a deeply interwoven if complicated relationship with Catholicism, as various periods of Haitian history involved the active persecution of African religions and Vodou either by French colonizers, local Catholic priests, or the state.¹² Adding even further nuance to Haitian religious history, many Kongolese citizens arrived in the Americas intimately familiar with an Africanized Catholicism,¹³

⁵ Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1953), 35–36.

⁶ See the following works of Haitian Vodou scholars: Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010 [1991 first edition]); Leslie Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, ed., *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Claudine Michel, “Le Vodou Haïtien est-il un Humanisme?” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 12, No. 1 (Spring 2006): 116–136; and Gina Athena Ulysse, *Because When God is Too Busy: Haiti, me & THE WORLD* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017).

⁷ Bantu language orthographies do not include the letter “c.” As such, “Kongo” is used when referring to populations of the ancient Kongo Kingdom (a region encompassing the current-day nations of Angola, the Republic of Congo, and the Democratic Republic of Congo between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries).

⁸ The *Lwa* (both singular and plural) are spirits akin to the *Orisa* of Yorùbá-based traditions in Ifa of Nigeria, *Oricha* in Santería and Lukumí of Cuba, *Orixá* in Candomblé of Brazil, and *Orisha* or Shango worship of Trinidad. See Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Fragments of Bone*.

⁹ See Bellegarde-Smith, *Fragments of Bone*.

¹⁰ These spirits generally fit within one of several *nanchon* or nations of spirits—*Rada*, *Djoubá*, *Ibo*, *Nago*, *Petwo*, *Simbi*, *Congo*, and *Gede*—each with their distinct personas and ritual rhythms in Haitian ceremony.

¹¹ Vodou rites often take three general forms: *fèt*, ritual ceremonies held to honor particular spirits or departed ancestors; initiations for those hoping to further develop their relationships with the spirits and deepen their *konesans* or spiritual knowledge base; and healing rites, in which a community, family, or individual receives prescriptions and curatives to mediate physical, social, and spiritual ailments.

¹² See Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

¹³ The Portuguese arrived in the Kingdom of Kongo in 1486, and in 1491, *one year before Christopher Columbus arrived on the island of Hispaniola*, King Nzinga a Nkuwu became a baptized Catholic, and was christened as King João I. Though King João I would eventually return to indigenous religion, his two sons—one representing indigenous tradition and the other Catholicism—would battle over the kingdom. Eventually King Afonso I prevailed and in 1506, he converted the Kongo Kingdom to Catholicism, which would undergo an Africanization over several centuries. See John K. Thornton, “On the Trail of Voodoo: African Christianity in Africa and the Americas,” *The Americas* 44, No. 3 (Jan. 1988): 261–278; Luc de Heusch, “Kongo in Haiti: A New Approach to Religious Syncretism,” *Man, New Series* 24, No. 2 (June 1989): 290–303; Desmangles, *The Faces of the God*; Hein Vanhee,

and would encounter Vodou as yet another blended tradition of indigenous African religions and European Catholicism.

As new studies emerge to render the experiences of whiteness more visible, one field worth studying is white conversion to “othered” and immigrant religion. Indeed, there exists a notable tension in white subjects as a dominant racial group who *actively choose to convert* to “exotic” religions such as Buddhism of Asia or Vodou of Haiti, practiced up until the twentieth century primarily by people of color. In this age of conversion to “religions of color”¹⁴ in the United States, it might be helpful to invert Tupac’s pressing question: if African-derived religious circles have historically proven to be “*nonwhite zones*,” in what manners does a Black spirit world also carve out the celestial room for whiteness?

Inquiries into Whiteness

What exactly do we look for when trying to identify whiteness? If whiteness in North America represents normativity (very rarely does one speak of “my white friend so-and-so”), then what we aim to locate will be *invisible to eyes that search for racial otherness*. In this way, whiteness might be appropriately read as a thick yet imperceptible pane of glass,¹⁵ at once present and imperceptible for the purposes of reflexive inquiry. As forward-pushing critical race theorists however, we must consider whites as subjects with as complex a racial and religious profile as any other community.

Academically speaking, this question of white North American¹⁶ conversion to religious traditions practiced by people of color proves consequential because despite the emergence of critical studies on whiteness, very little scholarship addresses the topic of religion in depth. (In fact, in the 500-page volume *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, there is only one entry dedicated principally to the topic of whiteness, nationality, and religion.)¹⁷ Practically speaking, this research is important because white women from the U.S., Canada, and France make up the largest percentage of converts to Haitian Vodou today.¹⁸ This leads us to question the deeply intertwined realities of racial experience and religious identity. In particular, my essay considers the unique case of Ukrainian American filmmaker Maya Deren, who traveled to Haiti in the

“Central African Popular Christianity and the Making of Haitian Vodou Religion,” in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, edited by L. Heywood, 243–264 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and John K. Thornton, “The Development of an African Catholic Church in Kingdom of Kongo, 1491–1750,” *The Journal of African History* 25, no. 2 (2008):147–167.

¹⁴ This term indicates religions practiced by people of color. In part, I suggest that faith traditions practiced in North America such as Buddhism and Vodou have become increasingly multicultural with new converts in the latter half of the twentieth century.

¹⁵ This metaphor of whiteness as a pane of glass was introduced by W. E. B. Du Bois, perhaps as an addendum to understanding Blackness as a “veil” of double consciousness. John Hartigan, Jr., “Establishing the Fact of Whiteness,” *American Anthropologist*, New Series 99, No. 3 (Sept., 1997): 502.

¹⁶ Throughout this paper, I will specify the terms “North American” and “U.S. American” as much as possible to acknowledge the reality of “America” as two continents with widely varying geographic and cultural entities. North Americans will refer in these instances to white U.S. Americans and white Canadians.

¹⁷ This is the thought-provoking piece by Karen Brodtkin Sacks, “How did Jews Become White Folks?,” in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 395–401.

¹⁸ See Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, eds., *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

1940s with intentions of filming ritual dance, became initiated as a *manbo* (priestess), and began growing deep roots in Haitian religious communities. How did Deren become drawn to Vodou, and how did she cultivate such meaningful relationships with fellow devotees? Further, what does her own intimate relationship to Haiti reveal about other North American whites converting to “exotic” religions practiced largely by people of color?

In his work on African and African Diaspora religions, cultural historian Ivor Miller encourages us to think more expansively about notions of nationality and belonging, particularly with regard to *ritual kinship patterns*.¹⁹ Miller remarks that in initiations to African-derived religions, all devotees must pledge an oath of solidarity to an African “homeland.” He further suggests that African-derived religions in the Americas “require[s] their members to assume a transnational identity.”²⁰ In doing so, Miller suggests that practitioners do more than align themselves with an actual site of origin; rather, initiates create a myth of origin for themselves, and North Americans begin to relate the story of their (meta)physical birth with an African subjectivity at the core.

Highlighting these notions of racial and religious belonging, I begin this paper by offering a theoretical framing of whiteness as a “racial group,”²¹ however flawed the category of “race” may be.²² I then contextualize Deren’s initiation by considering the history of North American conversions to Buddhism as a precursor to the phenomenon of white initiation into African Diaspora traditions (such as Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé, and Haitian Vodou). I argue that white North Americans often initiate or convert to these “ethnic” religions in hopes of seeking an individualized, personal connection with the divine and reinventing self in a newly “discovered” tradition of their own. Lastly, I examine Maya Deren’s identity as an immigrant artist, which provided her *an alternate experience of whiteness*, and allowed her to conceive of her journeys to Haiti as a *homecoming*. Indeed, in claiming a lineage of Haitian spirits through initiation, Deren eventually came to regard Haiti as a spiritual nation of origin. Ultimately, I argue that Deren became enmeshed in a ritual kinship system whose bonds reached far beyond the boundaries of mortal geographies.

“Spiritual Not Religious” Buddhists

To understand the history of white conversion to “immigrant” religions in the United States, we might begin by examining the case of North American Buddhism. Of the three to six million practitioners living in the U.S. today,²³ the majority fall into one of two categories: “heritage” Buddhists whose families have immigrated from East Asia sometime within the past

¹⁹ Ivor L. Miller, “The Formation of African Identities in the Americas: Spiritual ‘Ethnicity,’” *Contours* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 193–222.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

²¹ Hartigan, “Establishing the Fact of Whiteness,” 502.

²² Along with many other humanities scholars, social science researchers, and scientists, law professor Angela Onwuachi-Willig reminds us that “race” is not a biological category, but a social construct. “Race and Racial Identity Are Social Constructs,” *New York Times*, Sept. 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/06/16/how-fluid-is-racial-identity/race-and-racial-identity-are-social-constructs>.

²³ Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life, “Religious Landscape Study: Buddhists,” accessed Jan. 18, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/buddhist/>.

50 years (still comprising the majority of American Buddhists), and “convert” Buddhists,²⁴ who have become followers of the tradition through the practice of meditation and/or chanting of mantras. As religion scholar Jan Nattier has stated, “American Buddhists at the dawn of the twenty-first century are thus almost all new in one way or another.”²⁵ The same might be said of Haitian Vodou devotees, as the largest wave of Haitian migrants to North America has occurred in the past 50 years, with many seeking economic opportunity and fleeing political unrest during the turbulent changes of state.²⁶ An additional parallel is that Vodou’s North American devotees tend to be either recent immigrants (members of the Haitian diaspora in the U.S. or Canada) or initiates to the religion (primarily white Americans/Canadians and Black Americans).

What has historically motivated white North Americans’ entry into religious spaces of color? Noting today’s common adage that one can be “spiritual, not religious,” many white Americans have avoided active participation in religious institutions during the past fifty to sixty years,²⁷ instead focusing on the development of their own private spirituality. The eminent historian of religion Charles H. Long suggests that unlike spirituality, religion is an *inherently communal act, practice, and belief system*. He notes that on the other hand, the origin of the term “spirituality” derives from Roman Catholic retreats and solitary prayers of the early twentieth century. Long dismisses the idea that that one can practice religion independently of others, arguing that spirituality “presumes that the term it is replacing, ‘religion,’ is simply and only a private belief. . . . [One ought to] see it as an analogue of language. You cannot simply have your ‘private language,’ a language only you speak. You can see how silly that is.”²⁸ Long further asserts that this longing for “spirituality” (rather than religion) among some upper- and middle-class whites represents what he calls “simply a non-efficacious and somewhat vague belief in ‘some kind of something.’”²⁹ This taste for a tradition that we might identify as “secular spirituality”—one that is less tied to collective worship in institutional houses of religion and less rooted in communal expressions of faith—reveals a *spiritual longing* among many North American whites who strive for direct modes of contact with the divine, yet seek fewer obligations to an established religious community.

The majority of white North Americans first became familiar with Buddhism during the late 1960s and early 1970s following the large influx of Asians to the United States with the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. During these decades, Buddhism was introduced to rebellious teens, curious agnostics, and culturally adventurous Americans, many of whom began exploring yoga and meditation practice.³⁰ (Who can forget Tina Turner’s

²⁴ For more on “convert” Buddhists in the Western world, see Sharon Elizabeth Smith’s “Buddhism, Diversity and ‘Race’: Multiculturalism and Western Convert Buddhist Movements in East London—A Qualitative Study.” PhD dissertation, Goldsmiths’ College, University of London, 2008.

²⁵ Jan Nattier, “The Divisions and Direction of Buddhism in America Today,” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, accessed Jan. 18, 2018, <http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma5/tension2.html>.

²⁶ Many Haitians fled to the United States, Canada, and France (and other Caribbean nations) under the totalitarian regime of François Duvalier in the 1960s, as well as during the coup that overthrew his son Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986, and when president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted in the 1990s.

²⁷ See Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁸ Email correspondence between author and Charles H. Long, Feb. 25, 2012.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Jaweed Kaleem, “Buddhism in America: What is the Future?” HuffPost: Religion, updated Sept. 20, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/14/america-buddhism_n_876577.html.

incorporation of a redemptive Buddhist practice into her life in the 1993 biographic film *What’s Love Got to Do with It?*) Over the course of the twentieth century, yoga became a greatly lucrative and commodified industry marketed as an “authentic Oriental tradition” brought to the U.S. However the introduction of these Hindu and Buddhist traditions played on Western imaginaries of the East, as Phillip DeSlippe and several other scholars have demonstrated, “postural yoga depended on bricolage and *imagined origins* . . . posture-based yogic practice in the form and style it is commonly engaged with today is relatively new and not purely Hindu.”³¹ Scholars also developed an interest in Buddhism as a rapidly growing religion, and they highlighted meditation as a ritual act for anyone to explore, overlooking some of the stricter doctrines of traditional practice that included communal activity and temple worship.³² This curation of a Westernized Buddhism attracted great interest from the rebellious baby boomers. As cultural historian Sara Davidson³³ has explained, this generation of baby boomers pursued spiritual self-exploration during a cultural revolution and period of social upheaval in the U.S. We can thus understand how white Americans began to regard Buddhism as a spiritual alternative to Christianity, a tradition offering the opportunity to transcend “old-fashioned” Western notions of religion and community.

With increasing distaste for the “blandness” of Protestant culture and the prohibitive nature of Catholic culture, many white North Americans of the 1960s and 1970s began to seek out othered (read: ethnic) manners of worship.³⁴ Religion scholar Carl Bielefeldt refers to certain affluent North American converts as those “who are still not satisfied with what they have and who want something more; who have all they can eat, but are still searching for that special flavoring, some ‘psycho-spice’ of self-acceptance.”³⁵ The notion of Buddhism as a “spiritual spice of life” offers a helpful framework here, since many white converts describe the tradition as philosophy rather than religion *per se*, as a seasoning rather than the main course. Today, most U.S. religions include a wide cultural range of practitioners, many of whom may not necessarily define themselves as “religious.” For instance, religion scholar Henry Goldschmidt makes note of self-identifying “secular Jews,” who refer to their Jewishness as an ethnic inheritance rather than an active religious affiliation.³⁶ For instance, self-designated “secular” or “cultural” Jews may practice traditions such as Passover and still not identify as *religiously* Jewish.³⁷ In an inverted parallel fashion, many white North Americans identify their meditative practices and chanting of mantras as “Buddhist” (though they did not grow up in this cultural tradition) without calling themselves *religious* followers of Buddhism *per se*. In this way, we recognize how two distinct

³¹ Philip DeSlippe, “The Hindu in Hoodoo: Fake Yogis, Pseudo-Swamis, and the Manufacture of African American Folk Magic,” *Amerasia Journal* 40, no. 1 (2014): 52–53, my emphasis.

³² Carl Bielefeldt, “The Divisions and Direction of Buddhism in America Today,” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, accessed March 9, 2018, <http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma5/tension2.html>.

³³ Sara Davidson, *Loose Change: Three Women of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

³⁴ “Comments on Tensions in American Buddhism,” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, July 6, 2001, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2001/07/06/july-6-2001-comments-on-tensions-in-american-buddhism/15941/>.

³⁵ Kaleem, “Buddhism in America: What is the Future?”

³⁶ See Henry Goldschmidt, *Race and Religion Among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

³⁷ While many Jewish communities have converted or left Judaism due to persecution, Maya Deren identified as “culturally” or “ethnically” Jewish rather than religiously Jewish for personal reasons. Following her fieldwork in Haiti in the 1940s and 1950s, she eventually found her “spiritual home” in the tradition of Haitian Vodou.

groups participate in the intimate rituals of a religious community *without claiming religious affiliation*.

It is critical to consider the ethnic and religious histories of Buddhism in order to fully grasp its cultural worldview(s). I maintain that it is dangerous to divorce the tradition from its historical basis in Asia as a community-oriented culture of rituals and doctrine, regarding it instead as a prescriptive practice for “simple, mindful living” for individual adherents. Long reminds us of certain North Americans’ hesitation about communal aspects of religion, explaining, “One reason that Western modernity does not like religion is not so much because of the supernatural [elements] but because of its *emphasis on the community* while Western modernity has staked everything on individualism.”³⁸ Indeed, Western cultural attention to and fixation on “the self” likely fostered the idea that it was possible to curate one’s own personal Buddhism and fold the practice into other aspects of a spiritual-but-not-religious life. For instance, Americans who do not identify as Buddhists but who engage in meditation and chanting and read Buddhist literature have at times been referred to as “nightstand Buddhists.”³⁹ These individuals typically focus on the private practice or small-group practice with other similarly “non-religious” Buddhists.⁴⁰

I argue that following the rejection of their religion of upbringing, certain white North Americans experience a sense of spiritual longing and avidly pursue self-exploration in “exotic” traditions such as Buddhism and Vodou. However, one might note that part of the appeal of these “new” ethnic traditions is that they do not require one to abandon all previous cultural or religious affiliations. As some North Americans suggest about Buddhist involvement, “One doesn’t have to subscribe to a catechism or creed, or be a vegetarian. Nor do people have to give up their religion. That’s why some Americans speak of being Jewish Buddhists, for instance.”⁴¹ It is also why certain Buddhist religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama have suggested that even if they are intent to study Buddhism in depth, Westerners should remain grounded in their own faith traditions so as not to become “spiritually confused.”⁴² Is it possible that North American converts to Vodou are similarly adding religious flavor to their agnostic lifestyles in a twenty-first century context? It may be that incorporating this “spice” of Vodou into one’s life also greatly appeals to North American converts seeking an individualized connection with the divine. Recalling the “counter-culture” movement that attracted so many white Americans to Buddhism, we might pose the question as to whether experiences of alterity in one’s whiteness render the “ethnic otherness” of Vodou more appealing than other faith traditions of the twentieth century. Indeed, we might surmise that Maya Deren’s initiation to Haitian Vodou and

³⁸ Email correspondence between author and Charles H. Long, Feb. 25, 2012. Long’s emphasis.

³⁹ Thomas A. Tweed, “Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures: Sympathizers, Adherents, and the Study of Religion,” in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, eds. Duncan Ryuken Williams and Christopher S. Queen (New York: Routledge, 1999), 71–90.

⁴⁰ Kenneth K. Tanaka, “Dramatic Growth of Buddhism: An Overview,” *Dharma World Magazine: For Living Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue* (July–Sept. 2011), https://rk-world.org/dharmaworld/dw_2011julyseptdramaticgrowth.aspx.

⁴¹ Jane Lampman, “American Buddhism on the Rise,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, Sept. 14, 2006, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0914/p14s01-lire.html>.

⁴² As Lampman further states, “The Dalai Lama, in fact, often encourages people to stay with the faith of their cultural upbringing, to avoid the confusion that can sometimes result from a mixing of Eastern and Western perspectives.” Lampman, “American Buddhism on the Rise.”

her close rapport with the spirits came about in part due to her “secular but cultural” Jewish identity.⁴³

White, But Not Quite

Maya Deren cites her experience as an artist as foundational to her innovation in studying dance and religion in Haiti. In his foreword to her book *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Joseph Campbell noted of Deren, “‘When the anthropologist arrives, the gods depart.’ So declares, I am told, a Haitian proverb. Maya Deren on the other hand, was an artist.”⁴⁴ Certainly Deren’s orientation as an artist granted her greater access to Vodou circles, as she entered spaces of ceremony as a dancer first and foremost rather than as an anthropologist eager to encounter informants with ready explanations. In fact, Deren sought to learn ritual dance and planned to film ceremonies to bring parts of Haiti back home with her to New York City. She describes her early intentions to craft a narrative out of improvisational ritual services, detailing, “I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations.”⁴⁵ Such humility reveals a profound sensitivity in documenting the devotion of other *Vodouizan*⁴⁶ and an artistic sincerity in recognizing what it meant to be a white person in a ceremonial site of color.

Deren also regarded her identity as an artist as a marker of white “otherness” in the United States. At one point she rationalized, “My own ordeal as an ‘artist-native’ in an industrial culture made it impossible for me to be guilty of similar effronteries towards the Haitian peasants . . . this discretion seemed, to the Haitians, so unique that they early formed the conviction that I was not a foreigner at all, *but a prodigal native daughter finally returned.*”⁴⁷ By casting herself as an “artist-native” in an “industrial culture,” Deren lays claims to a parallel marginalization: her identity as an artist, and we might add an immigrant artist at that.⁴⁸ Deren’s insight about Haitian perceptions of her also divulges an interesting revelation: her intuitive ritual actions proved to many Haitians that, while inhabiting a white body, she must be a “native” spiritual daughter returning home to properly serve the spirits. She later adds a parenthetical note on various Haitian class perceptions of her choice to initiate into Vodou: “(This conviction was shared by much of the Haitian bourgeoisie who felt that only an element of Negro blood in me

⁴³ Such a realization begs the question as to whether “secular” Jews have been more likely to initiate to Haitian Vodou than “areligious” Christians. There is no doubt that Catholics demonstrate greater cosmological understanding of the *Lwa* and/or saints’ role as intermediary entities between humans and God. However, since Jews were historically designated as “ethnic” whites (and many self-identify as a cultural group), I argue that Deren’s Jewish identity allowed her to relate to Haitians through her own experience as a marginalized “ethnic other” in the United States in a way that her white Anglo-Saxon mentors and peers could not identify.

⁴⁴ Joseph Campbell, “Editor’s Foreword,” in Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1953), xiv.

⁴⁵ Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 6.

⁴⁶ There are a few ways to identify devotees of Vodou, most commonly a *sevitè* (one who serves the spirits) or a *Vodouizan* (both singular and plural).

⁴⁷ Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 8, my emphasis.

⁴⁸ Born in 1917 in Kiev, Ukraine (formerly U.S.S.R.) to Jewish parents, Deren moved with her family to Brooklyn, New York as a young girl and lived among other Jewish communities.

would account for the psychological affinity with the peasants....)⁴⁹ Indeed, Haitian elites believed that no other reason besides some latent “Haitianness” could account for Deren’s affinity for the rural Haitian families with whom she stayed, danced, and participated in Vodou ceremony! Undoubtedly, Deren’s marginalized experiences of whiteness as a woman and immigrant artist fostered an ability to forge intimate, respectful connections with Haitian spirits and her religious community, who came to regard her as a member of their ritual kin.

Artistic Initiation and Spirit for Everybody

This project would not be complete without at least briefly discussing Haitian perspectives of white North Americans’ entrance into Vodou sacred spaces and into Haitian *lakou*.⁵⁰ I think it important to consult Haitian Vodou voices and opinions about how certain whites became welcomed into Haitian ritual kinship systems; how they became entwined in the tangled branches of racial and religious identity in the Haitian ritual family tree. While not every *Vodouizan* knew exactly how to categorize Deren, most seemed to agree that she was committed to serving the spirits. Hoping to film some of the ceremonies she attended for her project on ritual dance, Deren described her exchange with an *houngan*, a Vodou priest. Broaching the topic delicately, she beseeched him: “I spoke to him of my desire to capture the beauty and the significance of the ceremonies, so that the rest of the world might become aware. He understood virtually nothing of cinema and I was uncertain of his reaction. . . .”⁵¹ Well aware that her request might appear strange, Deren had difficulty gauging his initial hesitation. The priest shifted his weight: “He hesitated but a moment. Then, offering his hand as one would to a colleague or a collaborator, he said: ‘Each one serves in his own fashion.’”⁵²

Haitian scholar and *Houngan* Patrick Bellegarde-Smith has also noted the importance of spirit blessings in determining who is a “genuine” and well-meaning devotee of Vodou. In conversation with him about the legacies of Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, and Maya Deren, all ethnographers and *Vodouizan* in their own right, he states, “The fact that the women you cite were ARTISTS make[s] it more likely that they would have been ‘kissed’ by the Spirits. . . . They each found their *raison d’être* in the Haitian spiritual tradition.”⁵³ Reflecting on their foreign nationality, Bellegarde-Smith suggests that these women came to Haiti as artists with a *spiritual hunger*, perhaps hoping to be nourished by a nation’s religious tradition where “spirit [is] for everybody!”⁵⁴ Bellegarde-Smith points out the importance of community approval and spiritual blessings for researchers conducting fieldwork in Haiti, and explains that the *Lwa* only reveal what they want researchers to know.

Returning to the discussion of belonging, another implication is that it is one thing to align oneself with a religious tradition that has been denigrated and demonized, or simply

⁴⁹ Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 8.

⁵⁰ A *lakou* is a community sharing physical land, ancestral lineage, and/or spiritual kinship. For more on notions of the *lakou*, see Charlene Désir, “Diasporic Lakou: A Haitian Academic Explores Her Path to Haiti Pre- and Post-Earthquake,” *Harvard Educational Review*, 81, no. 2 (2011): 278–95.

⁵¹ Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 15.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Email correspondence between author and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, Jan. 11, 2012.

⁵⁴ As stated by Mama Lola in Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 315.

misunderstood; it is even more impressive to commit to using one’s privilege of whiteness/Americanness to build intentional community and collectively uplift one’s religious brethren and sistren. In this way, foreigners such as Deren who have been “kissed” by the *Lwa* carry a responsibility as spiritual children of *Afrik-Ginen* and as members of a *ritual kinship system* of Vodou (and thus, Haiti). In their role as initiates, these foreigners are charged with the task of protecting the sacred mysteries of Vodou while sharing the messages of spirits who claim all of humankind as their children.

Ritual Kinship and Whiteness

“How could memory reach back beyond the first thing which might be remembered?”⁵⁵

Grounding ourselves in these broader definitions of ritual kinship, perhaps it is possible that certain whites who have been blessed and chosen as “kissed” by the *Lwa* may have descended from a genealogy of spirits. Indeed, human beings are dynamic and there exists tremendous variation in the ways that humans enact their racial and religious subjectivities. As multi-faceted as any other “racial group” then, we must challenge ourselves to render white populations visible despite their “normativity,” and as worthy a subject of study in religion as any other community. In the words of anthropologist Audrey Smedley, “It is far more accurate and more fruitful to scholarship, and possibly to the future of humankind, to define African American people by their sense of *community*, *consciousness*, and *commitment* than by some mystical ‘racial’ essence.”⁵⁶ If foreigners such as Maya Deren claimed their souls as belonging to the ancestral waters of *Afrik-Ginen*, they already understood the implications of claiming an African ritual heritage. This lineage would mean embracing Haitian communities as an extension of their ritual family tree; the tradition of Vodou would not be a philosophy to be appropriated and folded into one’s private life, but rather a communal worldsense⁵⁷ shared by fellow devotees to shape one’s life, and that of their ritual kin.

⁵⁵ Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 260.

⁵⁶ Audrey Smedley, “‘Race’ and the Construction of Human Identity,” *American Anthropologist*, New Series 100, No. 3 (Sept. 1998), 699, my emphasis.

⁵⁷ As sociologist Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí has insightfully stated, “The term ‘worldview,’ which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West’s *privileging of the visual*. It is Eurocentric to use it to describe cultures that may privilege other senses. The term ‘world-sense’ is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups.” Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí. “Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects,” in *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, ed. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 4, my emphasis.

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**Oyinbo Omo Aşogun Dere:
An Analysis of Racial Injustice, Gun Violence, and Sexual Assault
in America through a Traditional Yoruba Religious Perspective**

Ayodeji Ogunnaike

With all of the violence and death that occurred in America in the summer of 2016, it seems that the discussion of the issues surrounding these and similar events has failed to lead us out of the current predicament. By analyzing the myths, rituals, and traditions of the Yoruba deity Ogun, this paper seeks to provide an indigenous Yoruba perspective on the current issues of violence, death, social isolation, social inequality, and sexual assault and harassment in American society and institutions of higher learning. With American society's emphasis on progress, hard work, technology, and force in the form of guns and military might, it argues that we are living in an "Age of Ogun," but will need to learn to interact with him properly in order to resolve these terrifying and related issues.

Keywords: Ogun, Yoruba, guns, violence, sexual assault, injustice, United States, universities

Ojo Ogun,
Si lo, si lo, silo, ni ma se aiye.
Dugbe dugbe a gba ode oorun keke.
Ipe npe ju a si kun fe kun.
Otopako a si kun fe je.
Parangada ni a da fomodo
Abiri, abihun a simu orişa.
Mo ri faaji re.

*On days when Ogun is angered,
There is always disaster in the world
The World is full of dead people going to heaven
The eyelashes are full of water
Tears stream down the face
A bludgeoning by Ogun causes man's downfall
I see and hear, I fear and respect my orişa
I have seen your (bloody) merriment.¹*

The summer of 2016 was quite difficult for me as it was for many Americans following the series of seemingly senseless killings and shootings including those of Alton Sterling, Philando Castille, and Charles Kinsey at the hands of the police and the mass murder that took place at Pulse in Orlando and Club Blu in Fort Meyers. What made that summer particularly difficult to bear was not just the feeling of helplessness in the face of such violence, the injustice of it all, or the fact that it followed on a long series of prejudice-related and other killings. Rather, as one of my close friends put it just after Philando Castille was killed, it was because "people don't even know what to say, much less do." I admit that at times I have even felt too tired to continue speaking about these events, particularly when black people, gay people, schoolchildren, and

¹ John Pemberton III, "The Dreadful God and the Divine King," in *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New* (2nd ed.), ed. Sandra T. Barnes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 129.

others have been killed with such astonishing frequency, and all efforts at addressing racial prejudice and gun control seem to get us nowhere.² After I expressed this same emotion several years ago, a kind friend encouraged me not to stop talking or the situation would never improve. I have, unfortunately, been reminded of that moment time and time again, but like many others, after more than a year has gone by I have felt like everything has been said, still nothing has been done, and that at this point I too no longer know “what to say, much less do.” However, conducting research with worshippers of the Yoruba deity Ogun in Ede, Nigeria, I found another way of approaching this situation through the rituals, myths, and philosophy associated with this tradition.

Can We Talk about Ogun? A Different Perspective

After the Orlando shooting, an *Atlantic* article opened with the sentence, “Can we talk about men?” and launched a thought-provoking investigation of the role of masculinity—rather than religion, race, mental illness, or any other issue—as the common denominator underlying virtually every mass murder that has taken place in the US in recent times.³ I found this discussion of what has been termed “toxic masculinity”—or a specific model of masculinity characterized by a desire for control and a violent and furious response when that desire is not met—to be very compelling and similar to a presentation I gave at the American Academy of Religion about six months prior. The paper addressed multiple different models of masculinity present in traditional Yoruba culture and what American society could learn from embracing and balancing a more pluralistic sense of masculinity. While I addressed three different models in that paper, I have chosen to focus singularly on the tradition of the Yoruba orisha (or divinity) Ogun in this article because I believe these lessons to be particularly pertinent to several current issues including racial injustice, violence, and sexual assault. While I am personally a Christian and not involved in Ogun’s traditions—although I am a descendant of Ogun priests—and despite the fact that his is not one of the most widely practiced in American society, I have found that thinking about and through Ogun has helped me to find a productive way to talk about these issues when all other methods seem to have failed. This is in part because for devotees of Ogun and many others besides, Ogun is simply a cosmic reality such as gravity or anger, and as a result is not restricted by geographical or religious boundaries, existing in all societies across space and time. As Adeboye Babalola has stated, there is a cosmic “‘space’ over which Ogun ‘presides.’ When human events or circumstances fall into this space, Ogun serves as a metaphor for the experience being related,” hence what is important is whether or not the events fall within

² I have found this particularly disheartening given the fact that acts officially categorized as religious terrorism have claimed far fewer lives, but we have witnessed a rise in Islamophobic discourse since the run-up to the 2016 election, and no one needs to be reminded of the sweeping and controversial legislation that has been instituted since the terrible events of 9/11 to address these acts of senseless violence. Reporting in 2015, CNN noted that “for every life terrorism claimed on American soil (and where Americans abroad were killed by terrorists), more than 1,000 died from firearms inside the US,” and this includes events such as 9/11 as well as others that mostly had nothing to do with Islam like the anthrax mailings in 2011, Julia Jones and Eve Bower, “American Deaths in Terrorism vs. Gun Violence,” CNN, December 30, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/02/us/oregon-shooting-terrorism-gun-violence/index.html>.

³ James Hamblin, “Toxic Masculinity and Murder,” *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/06/toxic-masculinity-and-mass-murder/486983/>.

Ogun’s purview not whether or not the people involved worship him or are even familiar with his tradition.⁴

At the beginning of one my first classes in graduate school on African religion, Prof. Jacob K. Olupona informed us that anthropology and the study of religion and society have traditionally consisted of scholars taking theories from the intellectual traditions of the West and applying them to other parts of the world. He, however, was waiting for the day when theories and models from African intellectual traditions would be used to conduct analyses of Western societies, and I became very curious as to what such a study would look like. This is precisely what I intend to do here, specifically through Olupona’s method of indigenous hermeneutics. By indigenous hermeneutics, Olupona suggests, “a new and responsible hermeneutics that focuses on a culture’s orientation to the transcendent . . . [implying] the development of logical ways to account for events that may nevertheless be perceived by ‘outside’ observers as illogical.”⁵ This means finding frameworks and theories embedded in indigenous traditions themselves to draw out their meaning, much like using Shakespeare to interpret Shakespeare. However, in this instance I plan to employ theories taken from the tradition of Ogun to come to grips not with Yoruba society, but with a series of issues facing American society to see if, as the divine trailblazer, Ogun might clear a path out of our current predicaments. Just as shifting the discourse to men and masculinity may be helpful at this juncture, my hope is that this novel indigenous Yoruba perspective may be productive where current popular discourse has largely been ineffective.

During my time in graduate school, one of my greatest pleasures has been serving as a resident advisor (RA) in an undergraduate dorm for the past five years. While we have fortunately been spared the horror of gun violence, I will also draw from my experience working very closely with students in an environment that has recently sought to address issues of race, sexual assault, mental health, and others that I believe are all linked to and can be addressed by the idioms of the Yoruba deity Ogun.

The Age of Ogun

Ogun is one of the most fascinating deities in traditional Yoruba religion; he enjoys a privileged place as one of a select few deities who is worshipped in all parts of Yorubaland in Southwestern Nigeria and can also be found all along the Atlantic coast from Ghana to the eastern part of Nigeria, albeit in slightly different forms and variations in name and ritual practice.⁶ As the orisha or deity of war, the hunt, farming, blacksmithing, technology, and all human activity that involves iron, it is easy to understand why Ogun enjoys such a privileged position both in West Africa and in African diaspora religions such as Haitian Vodun, Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda, and many others. It is important to point out that for his devotees (as is the case with all orisha), Ogun is not simply an abstract spiritual entity, idea, or principle; he also *is* iron itself and as such, his rituals are often carried out on or to pieces of iron. Thus, Ogun is a concrete reality and not only a metaphysical principle manifest in physical

⁴ Adeboye Babalola, “A Portrait of Ògún as Reflected in Ìjálá Chants,” in Barnes, *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New*, 147–72.

⁵ Jacob K. Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3.

⁶ See Sandra T. Barnes, “The Many Faces of Ogun,” in Barnes, *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New*, 1–26.

form or symbolically represented in tangible material. However, Ogun's usefulness as a cultural and religious symbol also affords him great utility as an archetype for understanding broader events and dynamics of human life.

In describing the great rise in importance of warfare and mobility alongside a decrease in the importance of marital and kinship relations following the fall of the famous West African Oyo Empire around 1830 CE, Matory describes the epoch as an "Age of Ogun" in which his domains, traditions, and idioms ruled the day.⁷ Matory notes that as "god of iron, one of the major imports of the transatlantic trade, . . . [Ogun] is closely associated with guns, warfare, and mobility, all of which were central features of life in this region during the nineteenth century."⁸ Indeed Ogun was the most important deity of the all-important new class of warlords during the period, and the city of Ibadan—the prevailing political and military power of the time—had Ogun and war at the heart of its foundation, rise to power, and domination of the region. Matory is not alone in identifying the rise in relevance of Ogun in the period as two Yoruba babalawo (traditional diviners) are recorded as describing the times in which they lived in similar terms. According to one, Ogun was the source of punishment for men's disobedience to God's will as well as the supply of European guns and gunpowder.⁹ The other had a vision in which he saw Ogun "armed with 400 short swords . . . [going] out daily on the earth to slay, for his meat is to drink the blood of the slain."¹⁰ Clearly the increased importance of the domains in which Ogun reigned supreme made him emblematic of the period, and although the internecine wars of nineteenth-century Yorubaland are quite different from modern life in the United States, I believe Ogun plays a prominent—if not preeminent—role in both societies.

While many traditional African religions no longer enjoy the privileged position or number of adherents they did in the past, Barnes estimates that "more than 70 million African and New World peoples participate in, or are closely familiar with, religious systems that include Ogun, and the number is increasing rather than declining."¹¹ Ogun has enjoyed so much popularity in modern times that Barnes has described him elsewhere as "an old god for a new age."¹² The famous Nobel Laureate and Ogun devotee Wole Soyinka has also extolled the timeless virtues and relevance of Ogun,¹³ and in many Yoruba cities where other orisha traditions have died out, Ogun's remains one of the most common and popular. Clearly something about Ogun's nature makes his tradition particularly well-suited for the modern world, and I have identified several features of American society in particular over which he reigns supreme.

⁷ James Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 13–25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

⁹ J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 50; and J. D. Y. Peel, "A Comparative Analysis of Ogun in Precolonial Yorubaland," in Barnes, *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, 263–89.

¹⁰ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 94; and Peel, "A Comparative Analysis," 278.

¹¹ Barnes, "The Many Faces of Ogun," 1.

¹² Sandra T. Barnes, *Ogun: An Old God for a New Age* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980).

¹³ Wole Soyinka, "Tolerant Gods," in *Òrìsà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture*, eds. Jacob K. Olupona and Terry Rey (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 42–44; and Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

Oyinbo Omo Şogun Dere: The Present Age of Ogun

First and foremost, I believe Ogun’s increased relevance in our world today to be linked to his nature as an embodiment of progress and forward motion. Even in our use of the word “progress” or the way societies are often described—such as advanced or developing/developed—a high premium is placed on breaking new ground, innovation, and forward movement and advancement. J. D. Y. Peel has also noted this convergence with ideas brought by the European Enlightenment,¹⁴ and I have chosen my words carefully as breaking new ground and innovation carry connotations of both farming and technology, which are also common domains of Ogun. There is a natural link between technology and iron/blacksmithing, and modern science and technology have surely become some of the most powerful forces of the contemporary era. This is particularly evident to those in the world of education where a very strong emphasis is placed on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). Apart from having recently received the university’s largest ever donation of \$400 million for a new School of Engineering and Applied Sciences,¹⁵ students at Harvard rarely go anywhere without carrying Ogun with them in the form of their laptop computers or phones. Although farming may no longer be the quintessential American occupation,¹⁶ Ogun’s association with fertility evinces his nature as sexually virile and potent,¹⁷ which correlates with the pervasiveness of sex in popular culture, particularly as transmitted through modern media technology such as radios, televisions, movie theaters, and/or computers. As a solitary hunter and trailblazer in an otherwise community-oriented society, Ogun is also a forceful archetype of independence and a “self-made man” who has a strong—and at times obsessive—work ethic, perhaps even reminiscent of Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* and American capitalism.

While most of these characteristics have been presented in a generally positive light, they certainly have a darker side to them as well. For example, while a strong work ethic is an admirable quality, Americans work more hours than the populations of most other industrialized countries,¹⁸ and one of the perennial issues we face in advising at Harvard College is students taking on far too much work in terms of courseload, extracurriculars, and employment. Such an overemphasis on work often leaves some students isolated and lonely, characteristics of Ogun that I believe have contributed to a general, growing concern for student mental health.¹⁹ Those who work on college campuses will surely be familiar with the trope of the isolated student who

¹⁴ Peel, “A Comparative Analysis of Ogun,” 281.

¹⁵ “Harvard Receives Its Largest Gift,” *Harvard Gazette*, June 3, 2015, <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/06/harvard-receives-its-largest-gift/>.

¹⁶ Harvardians will be able to relate to this as the academic calendar was only recently changed from a previous model that allowed students to stay home long enough to harvest the fall crops!

¹⁷ It is also worth noting that his iron tools are used in the rituals of circumcision of sexual organs.

¹⁸ A recent study even suggests that Americans may work more than Europeans because they are happier to work longer hours and place a higher premium on work than leisure activities. Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn, “Europeans Work to Live and Americans Live to Work (Who is Happy to Work More: Americans or Europeans?)” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 12, no. 2 (April 11, 2011): 229; and Benjamin Snyder and Stacy Jones, “Americans Work Hard, But People In These 15 Countries Work Longer Hours,” *Fortune*, Nov. 11, 2015, <http://fortune.com/2015/11/11/chart-work-week-oecd/>.

¹⁹ In fact, mental health and sexual assault were two of the central issues discussed during a recent Harvard student government election and received a great deal of coverage in our newspaper, *The Crimson*. Aafreen Amzi and Jesper Ke, “Greenlaw and Morris Focus on Mental Health and Social Life,” *Harvard Crimson*, Sept. 10, 2016, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2015/11/16/greenlaw-morris-uc-profile/>.

lives on the computer and the internet and has limited personal and social interactions, making integration into broader social life both difficult and anxiety-inducing.

Next, while Ogun is sexually virile, his interactions with women are practically always fraught, and divorce and sexual assault are not uncommon themes in his mythology. Again, recent concern over the prevalence of sexual assault and gender-based prejudice—overwhelmingly against women—drove nine universities including my own to take part in the Association of American Universities’ (AAU) Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct, whose results were very sobering and disturbing.²⁰ When the effect of alcohol on this harrowing state of affairs is paired with Ogun’s tendency toward intoxication through his favorite drink of palm wine, the connection becomes even clearer. Finally, to bring up the issues raised at the beginning of this article, Ogun’s myths are rife with accounts of multiple deaths at his hand, many of which seem completely senseless and unjust.

With the increasing demands that jobs and careers make on our time, our obsession with technology and industrialization, the emphasis on individuality, our constant movement like the hunters of ancient Yorubaland, the prevalence of sex and sexuality in so many aspects of life, and the ubiquitous nature of metal and guns, from a traditional Yoruba point of view, the modern world has put Ogun on a pedestal. Even those who react *against* the modern world (such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram in Nigeria) have adopted his technology, isolationist lifestyle, violence, and strict and harsh perspective on retributive justice. It appears that even the most seemingly contradictory modern philosophies must still express themselves through the idioms of Ogun.²¹

I initially began to think of applying Yoruba indigenous hermeneutics to conceptualize contemporary American society as an Age of Ogun when translating a verse from the vast oral corpus called Ifa that is chanted by *babalawo* (Yoruba diviners and priests of the orisha Ọrunmila) in the process of divination. In one verse of Eji Ogbe, the most senior and prominent section of this oral corpus, Oyinbo (or white people/foreigners) are described as “*ọmọ aṣogun dere*” or *children of those who made Ogun into an idol*.²² This is significant for many reasons. Dating using Ifa narratives is very tricky,²³ and although we cannot know exactly when this verse came into being, it is clear that at some point after Ifa practitioners came into contact with Western Europeans, they looked for a suitable way to describe this foreign culture and identity using Yoruba idioms. The cult of Ogun, characterized by high mobility, advanced technology, industriousness, metal, and displays of force seemed like the best framework through which to understand and depict these strange people. After all, they traveled a long distance in impressive ships with advanced military technology that they were not afraid to use both in the service of and against their Yoruba interlocutors. From a traditional Yoruba perspective, as Ogun simply *is* all of these things

²⁰ “AAU Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct,” Association of American Universities, accessed August 31, 2016, <https://www.aau.edu/Climate-Survey.aspx?id=16525>.

²¹ Interestingly enough, Plato depicts Socrates as predicting that the last political order of society will be characterized by “children of iron,” who are preoccupied with physical force and acquiring wealth. Plato and C. D. C. Reeve, *Republic*, 242 (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004).

²² A recitation by a Yoruba diviner, a transcription and translation of this verse, and a fascinating story can be found here: <http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/content/10-eji-ogbe-oyinbo>.

²³ See Wande Abimbola, “The Literature of the Ifa Cult,” in *Sources of Yoruba History*, ed. S. O. Biobaku (Ibadan, Nigeria: Oxford University Press, 1973), 41–62.

(weapons, mobility, technology, displays of force, etc.), the Oyinbo were serving and revering him/his spirit whether they knew it or not.

Still, Ifa does not describe Oyinbo as children of Ogun (ọmọ Ogun), as his devotees would usually be called, or even as the ones who made Ogun into an orisha or deity, which might also be reasonably expected. Rather, Ifa says Oyinbo are the descendants of those who “made Ogun into an idol/statue,” indicating that something was out of place. Not only was Ogun not quite treated as the orisha that he is, making him into an idol runs against tradition as in Yorubaland Ogun is *never* depicted as a statue or idol, as are some orisha. Instead his sacrifices are offered to objects like metal weapons, tools, a blacksmith’s anvil, and so on.²⁴ Hence, from Ifa’s perspective, Oyinbo had been closely linked and involved with Ogun and had been for a long time since they are the *descendants* of those who made Ogun into an idol, but they clearly did not understand how to function as his “children” and interact with him properly, which, as we shall see presently, can have disastrous effects.

Keeping A Respectful Distance

Despite the fact that Ogun is one of the most popular traditional Yoruba deities and can be found over such a vast geographical area, the Yoruba fear him as much as they love and respect him. As his myths and praise songs indicate, while Ogun is a strong protector and deity of justice, his impressive power can at times wreak havoc on even those who serve him.²⁵ Hence, although being essential to the functioning of society, he—like the hunters who follow his traditions—is usually a marginal figure who spends most of his time outside of the city fighting wars, hunting, and collecting materials for powerful magic charms. In fact, while almost every orisha or orisha shrine is kept inside the devotee’s house (and usually next to each other when there are multiple orisha present), Ogun is one of the few that is kept *outside* of the house. Eṣu, another orisha who is usually kept outside the house, is kept there because he is a protector and also because his domain is chaos, which is something better kept at a distance as well. For reasons addressed below, although these two popular orisha are both kept outside at a safe distance, they cannot be too close to each other, further emphasizing the ambiguous need to keep Ogun close, but not too close.

Ogun is understood to be a bit volatile, dangerous, and “hot,” much like the weapons made from his iron. His cutlass is both a literal and figurative double-edged sword that can clear a path, plant crops, execute justice, and defend human life, but at the same time (and sometimes to the same ends) it can also destroy human life, as we will soon see. One common ritual in the worship of Ogun and the various forms he takes in societies other than the Yoruba is a rite of purification in which his hot influence and nature must be “washed” from the face or body of a person who has taken life.²⁶ This is because the power of Ogun that gives him its great utility must be controlled and applied properly or chaos and destruction will surely ensue. Those familiar with the Bible will likely be reminded of the similar rituals ancient Hebrew warriors had to perform before they could become reintegrated into society,²⁷ and I can not help but wonder if

²⁴ This is most likely because as iron itself, there is simply no need to re-present him. A depiction of his qualities will always be inferior to his qualities and nature themselves. Peel, “A Comparative Analysis of Ogun,” 268.

²⁵ Adeboye Babalola, “A Portrait of Ọ̀gún as Reflected in Ijala Chants,” in *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New*, 147–72.

²⁶ Robert G. Armstrong, “The Etymology of the Word ‘Ogun,’” in *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New*, 29–38.

²⁷ Numbers 31:19–24.

American soldiers who suffer from PTSD after experiencing the awesome and awful power of Ogun might also benefit from such ritual processes as well.

However, one might still ask the question that if Ogun is a deity of justice and a protector, why is he implicated in instances of senseless killing and injustice as I have suggested here? The fact of the matter is that as a whole domain of life and philosophy of human nature, Ogun cannot be fully expressed in only positive or only negative terms. As Barnes rightly observes:

In West Africa, positive and negative power is not separate. Power is singular, and therefore what we in the West see as dual and capable of being divided into two mystical notions cannot be divided in African thought. For the latter, power exists in a single supernatural representation.²⁸

Hence, just like great Greek heroes such as Hercules, Ogun's faults are as supernatural as his virtues, and he encompasses an entire domain or sphere of life. If Ogun is justice, serving him well will ensure that you receive the justice you deserve. If however, you do not serve him well, justice will remain elusive, and his fury may be visited upon both guilty and innocent alike. This is why it is so important to respect Ogun but not to turn him into an idol or interact with him inappropriately; finding yourself on the wrong side of his powerful machete has devastating implications as we will now see.

Lessons from Ogun's Mythology

As perhaps the best way to understand Ogun's character and nature (apart from being engaged in his tradition itself) is through the myths and narratives that depict his actions, I will now analyze Ogun's mythology to draw out some of the most powerful and pertinent lessons about what commonly occurs when the power of Ogun is not understood and addressed appropriately. Because these myths are told frequently and often adapted to new contexts, there is considerable variation within some accounts, so I will present the most essential and common features as the dynamics displayed rarely change along with the specific details. These myths are told and retold because they are timeless representations of metaphysical archetypes that occur over and over again, so after a brief recounting of the myths, I will expound on how I have come to understand them playing out in the United States today.

Senseless Killing

Senseless, unjust frenzied killing is frequently found in Ogun's praise poetry, and is the theme of perhaps the most well-known myth about him. Ogun once returned from war tired and thirsty, and found the people of his town celebrating a festival. He asked them to give him his favorite drink of palm wine to quench his thirst, and when he received none (either because there was a taboo on drinking palm wine at that particular festival or because they had simply consumed all of it), Ogun flew into a rage and slaughtered countless people around him. When his anger subsided, Ogun realized what he had done, and filled with remorse, he either committed ritual suicide or removed himself for his people's own good by descending into the ground or retreating to a hill outside of town. In another similar and commonly told myth, Ogun

²⁸ Barnes, "The Many Faces of Ogun," 19.

has in fact entered the ground and left an iron staff or chain where he did so, instructing his people that if they ever need his assistance in war, they need only call his name and pull on the chain or staff. One day, many years later, some people got drunk and decided to call Ogun and pull on the chain. Ogun then burst out of the ground and flew into action as he promised he would. Only after he had killed everyone in sight did he realize that they were the ones he had in fact sworn to protect, and grief-stricken, he retreated again into the earth, promising never to come back lest this catastrophe repeat itself.²⁹

Given the events that have happened over the past few years, particularly seeing the harrowing video of Philando Castille’s murder, to me this myth speaks volumes about what we have observed in America since the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012, but has surely been occurring before this particular instance brought the issue to the fore. In both instances and numerous others, Ogun has attempted to perform his role as protector of his people, but instead he ends up slaying those he has sworn to protect (and serve?) in terrifying numbers. Particularly in the second myth, he was in fact called to the scene, feared for those he was to protect, and believed he was going about his duty as best as he could. However, in each instance, when the dust settled, he was overcome with grief, regretted the carnage he had created, and took immediate action to ensure that these events would never occur again.³⁰ Not only have we seen a horrifying number of deaths at the hand of Ogun through guns and police officers as his representatives in recent times, we have also heard many people crying out for him in the form of justice,³¹ and many others describing racial tensions in particular as a kind of “race war.” After these battle lines were seemingly drawn at Charlottesville protests, Ogun was again enlisted to take the life of Heather Heyer,³² and it seems like practically every national tragedy in recent history is related to the traditions of Ogun in one way or another.

Unfortunately, calling on Ogun without simultaneously addressing the issues of injustice at hand has only led to more polarization and more killing, as the equally heartbreaking case of the five dead police officers in Dallas, Texas demonstrates. I do not mean to criticize those who call for justice or the manner in which they do so, but rather note that Ogun’s justice is swift, terrible, and destructive when society *as a whole* does not take measures to ensure that just behavior is upheld. Furthermore, just as police officers time and again have claimed that they used Ogun’s deadly force only because they were afraid—much as Ogun was—I am inclined to believe them. However, as the deity of justice, Ogun immediately mourned his actions, recognized that even righteous fear was not a moral excuse, claimed responsibility for the tragic events, and took swift action—at great cost to himself I should add—to ensure that the safety of his people would not be compromised again. After all, this is what he and/as our police force

²⁹ This myth is also often told with many other powerful warrior and cultural heroes as the protagonist such as Oramiyani in Ile-Ife where his “staff” can still be seen today.

³⁰ It is also worth noting here that the potential guilt of the people who pulled on Ogun’s chain or staff was not brought into question because their execution was surely not merited and Ogun simply assumed responsibility. However, the criminality (perceived or real) of victims of police violence is constantly invoked when this myth is reenacted in American society.

³¹ Here I am specifically thinking of movements such as Black Lives Matter and also “I Too Am Harvard” from our own campus that inspired several other similar movements at institutions of higher learning in the US and the UK. See “I, Too, Am Harvard,” accessed March 5, 2018, [itooamharvard.tumblr](https://itooamharvard.tumblr.com/); and Bethonie Butler, “‘I, Too, Am Harvard’: Black Students Show They Belong,” *Washington Post*, March 5, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2014/03/05/i-too-am-harvard-black-students-show-they-belong/>.

³² This time it was in the form of a car, not a gun.

exists to accomplish. Unfortunately, this has not been the case with most such instances in the United States as the now almost inevitable acquittal of police officers after racially inflected shootings demonstrates, as do statements such as there being “very fine people on both sides” after the violence that erupted at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The failure to recognize, repent, and atone for such injustice will only stoke the flames of Ogun’s forge and lead to even more death, destruction, and devastation.

Ogun and Eṣu: Violence and Chaos

In another powerful myth about Ogun that can also be compared to those of Hercules, Ogun once became too confident in his power and declared that he had absolute authority because he could not be defeated in combat by anyone. Eṣu, as a trickster deity who loves to put people in their place, gladly accepted the challenge and stepped up to face Ogun. Ogun pulled out his mighty machete and to his surprise, Eṣu did nothing. He simply let himself get split in two! However, Eṣu is also a powerful magician, and instead of dying, there were two identical Eṣus standing on either side of Ogun’s machete. In his characteristic rage, Ogun began hacking at the two new Eṣus, but only succeeded in creating four, then eight, then sixteen. Eventually there were so many Eṣus that they easily overpowered even the mighty Ogun, and it took the ashamed deity of iron a long time to heal and recover.

This myth beautifully depicts the way violence, when combined with fury (embodied in Ogun), usually only leads to a vicious cycle of chaos (embodied by the multiplying Eṣus). Furthermore, this myth makes it clear that simply applying more and more of Ogun’s admittedly supreme strength will never solve our problems, but usually makes them worse and turns them into a poly-headed hydra. Again, this myth makes me reflect on how the militarized nature of the Unite the Right protest solved (and could only solve) nothing but creating more chaos and death or how the use of Ogun’s deadly force created a breakdown in (or violation of) law and order in places like Ferguson and Baltimore, creating a military-police state that only exacerbated racial tensions. Particularly in a country such as the United States that emerged from a similar resistance to violence and oppression, this should not be a difficult narrative to recognize and apply.

In addition, when guns are used to restore order and protect life but only end up causing death and more chaos, increasing their number will only multiply the number of Eṣus present, and statistics have shown time and again that this is precisely what happens.³³ This is a good place to recall that while the shrines of Eṣu and Ogun are both kept outside the household, they are never too close to each other because the combination of violent power and chaos is always dangerous. Rather, a better way to approach the situation is to appease Ogun, calm him down, and seek alternative means to ensure that justice can be met. This of course is not easy, but another Ogun myth provides a sense of how it can be done.

³³ This is particularly the case with homicide and suicide. It appears that in instances of relative decline in gun ownership, homicide rates dropped significantly also. See Mark Duggan, “More Guns, More Crime,” *Journal of Political Economy* 109, no. 5 (Oct. 2001): 1086–1114; Michael Siegel, Craig S. Ross, and Charles King III, “The Relationship Between Gun Ownership and Firearm Homicide Rates in the United States, 1981–2010,” *Am J Public Health* 103, no. 11 (Nov. 2013): 2098–2105; and Michael C. Monuteaux, Lois K. Lee, David Hemenway, Rebekah Mannix, and Eric W. Fleegler, “Firearm Ownership and Violent Crime in the U.S.,” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 49, no. 2 (June 16, 2015): 207–14.

Ogun and Oşun: Balancing Male/Female, Work/Play, and Violence/Love

As stated earlier Ogun often leaves the city to go live in the woods, but once when he left the primordial city of Ile-Ife—the origin of the world in Yoruba mythology and the city where all of the deities lived—life became difficult without him. Without his tools, building and farming became impossible, nobody else could bring back as much game from the forest as he previously did, they were vulnerable to attack, and society generally began to fall apart. Several of the most important male orişa went into the forest and found Ogun there smelting iron. When they asked him to come back to Ile-Ife, he refused and said that he was too focused on the work at hand. After these orişa came back emptyhanded, they held a large meeting and ultimately decided that Oşun (the female deity of love, beauty, fresh water, and the arts) might succeed where they had failed. Pretending not to know where Ogun was, she went into the forest, and started bathing and singing in a nearby pool. Her beautiful singing attracted Ogun, who put down his tools and followed her enchanting voice. When he saw her bathing, his nature as a virile deity also associated with fertility was aroused, and Oşun had him right where she wanted him. It did not take long for her to persuade him to come back with her at least for some time, and Ogun, calmed and tamed by Oşun’s influence, returned to Ile-Ife to set everything right again.

This is one of my favorite myths about Ogun because it involves so much of his ambiguous nature. He is supposed to be kept at a distance and *should* leave the city, but he must not be kept too far away or removed entirely. As a hunter he must spend significant time alone and isolated as well, but a complete withdrawal from society causes problems also. His work ethic is one of his greatest qualities, but it can be taken too far and must be checked. Ogun is perhaps the quintessential male deity, but he must be balanced by Oşun, the quintessential female deity. Finally, his often hyper-active sex drive can cause problems, but if approached correctly it can be a blessing for all.

Although a significant part of Ogun’s strength comes from his independence, no man is an island as the Iremoje chants sung at his hunters’ funerals demonstrate.³⁴ Hunters need their towns just as the towns need the hunters, and their exploits should always be performed for the good of others. When people, particularly Ogun’s people, become too isolated as they are wont to do, all of society begins to fall apart and Ogun becomes imbalanced. As an RA I have observed many students become isolated and feel lonely and depressed often because they work too hard and feel like they have too much pressure on them, much like iron subjected to too much heat and too many hammer strokes. This frequently coincides with a further and often crippling retreat into the world of technology, and I believe this lack of human interaction only makes the issue more difficult to address. I have similarly noticed friends who have fallen victim to overly demanding work schedules feel as if they have become removed from the other aspects of their lives, and one even told me that he was concerned his career had been turned into a kind of false idol!³⁵ Perhaps our obsession with productivity and work (while far from negative characteristics in and of themselves) has been taken a bit too far, and our culture of individualism, independence, and the trope of the “self-made man” have started to cause more problems than they solve.

³⁴ 'Bade Ajuwon, “Ogun’s Iremoje: A Philosophy of Living and Dying,” in *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New*, 173–98.

³⁵ Precisely as the Ifa verse stated Oyinbo people had done.

To return to the horrifying events of mass shootings that have become all too common, this myth also calls to mind the recurring theme of the “lone wolf” who perpetrates such atrocities. One need only think of events in South Carolina, Denver, Santa Barbara, and more recently Las Vegas, or men like the Unabomber among others, to recall that those who are or who feel isolated for too long can be driven to commit horrific acts of violence and destruction. Clearly social isolation and toxic masculinity are common factors in too many of these tragedies, and although identifying those who commit such acts as “lone wolves” is often an attempt to situate the tragedy outside of the context of certain groups or social issues such as racism, it does appear that America has fallen prey to a surprisingly active group of lone wolves who are not afraid to devour its citizens for any number of ideological reasons or lack thereof. I do not believe it is a coincidence that isolation, confusion, and senseless death are all linked and contained within the nature of Ogun.

The nature of this isolation is not purely social either. The United States has witnessed increasing political and racial isolation and segregation in recent years as well.³⁶ The killings in South Carolina represented a desire to preserve a certain racial identity in America by eliminating another, and the stabbing on the Portland train and killing of Indian engineers in Kansas demonstrated a desire to isolate and separate America from those perceived to be Muslim. Even the Pizzagate shooting, inspired by out-of-touch fake news spread through Ogun’s medium of technology, demonstrates a certain type of political isolation and lack of effective communication that inevitably resulted in senseless violence as well. Similarly, the racially charged desire to build a wall along the southern border of the US can only serve to further isolate America, driving it further away from any mutually beneficial interactions.

Fortunately, Oṣun is there to help. By effectively balancing Ogun’s hypermasculinity and sex-drive with her own cooler femininity, Oṣun was able to restore balance and enlist Ogun’s positive qualities to work for everyone’s benefit. To me, this common trope in Oṣun’s tradition implies that in order to balance and complement (but not necessarily combat) Ogun’s nature, we must support and pay close attention to the qualities associated with Oṣun. While discussing her term paper, a brilliant female student in one of my classes and a leader in the Women in Business club on campus informed me that some of our most celebrated corporations had effectively begun paying women not to have children so they could focus on their careers instead.³⁷ I was shocked and learned a great deal from our discussion about how this emphasis on a particular way of working in essence pressured some women to be more like men who take no maternity/paternity leave. Interestingly enough, Matory also describes the most powerful and celebrated Yoruba women during his Age of Ogun as “unwifely” and “antiproductive” but able to advance themselves through the exploitation of labor and trade, which makes me think that

³⁶ Alvin Chang, “White America is Quietly Self-Segregating,” *Vox*, Jan. 18, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/1/18/14296126/white-segregated-suburb-neighborhood-cartoon>.

³⁷ Sabrina Parsons, herself a CEO, makes some very compelling arguments about how the corporate world need not encourage women to make drastic changes to their lifestyles and how such policies make implicit statements about how women fit into the workplace. She suggests that companies could adapt themselves to be more accommodating to women rather than forcing women to adapt their lifestyles to be more accommodating to a patriarchal corporate system. Sabrina Parsons, “Female Tech CEO: Egg-Freezing ‘Benefit’ Sends The Wrong Message To Women,” *Business Insider*, Oct. 20, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/apple-facebook-egg-freezing-benefit-is-bad-for-women-2014-10>.

these Yoruba women may have been “leaning in” long before Sheryl Sandberg ever did.³⁸ I do not mean to criticise these women;³⁹ quite the contrary as their ability to succeed against the odds in an overtly male-oriented society is to be admired.⁴⁰ Instead I would suggest that we should also recognize, encourage, and be open to additional ways in which women can succeed and be understood as successful as well. After all, Oşun is also a goddess of wealth, and Yoruba women are traditionally famous for their business acumen.

Furthermore, as matron of the arts, Oşun represents the importance of the aesthetic side of life. Ogun usually lives a very spartan lifestyle when in the forest (which should not be a surprise given Spartan traditions), but Oşun perhaps can help us to understand that our obsession with science, technology, engineering, and work and productivity should also be balanced with play, joy, and beauty. Although many of our students at Harvard are classic workaholics, the best—and sometimes only—ways they can be lured away from their homework and extracurriculars is through movies in our dining hall, playing games, listening to music, enjoying (usually sweet) food we make for them, and other activities that Oşun surely loves as well.⁴¹ Time and time again, I have observed fun, beauty, and social integration help struggling students and seem to salvage situations that would likely have fallen apart if each issue were to be addressed in isolation. Additionally, when Daryl Davis was frustrated by the hatred of the KKK, his response was not to organize an armed racial rally, but rather to sit down and calmly listen to, and befriend, Klan members. Music was what first brought him together with one of them who had never had a drink with a black man before, and after Davis established relationships with many Klan members in spite of their differences, 200 of them decided to leave the Klan and be open to associating with other races.⁴²

By embracing Oşun’s domain through the arts, beauty, calm reconciliation, and empowering women, Ogun need not be challenged or combatted, but can rather flourish more than he could in isolation.⁴³ However, caution must be taken again, as Ogun’s powerful emphasis on a particular type of masculinity can be “toxic,” as James Hamblin from *The Atlantic* observes and as these next Ogun myths remind us.

³⁸ Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More*, 19.

³⁹ Although I certainly do not approve of the way some of these Yoruba women advanced themselves through the dominant economic activity of the time, namely the slave trade.

⁴⁰ Additionally, it is worth noting again that in this case Ogun’s nature and male gendered characteristics are manifested in women, demonstrating how the amplification of his sphere of life can engage and affect all members of society, not just men.

⁴¹ It is also not lost on me that performing practically all of these activities involves combining Ogun’s technology with Oşun’s playfulness.

⁴² Dwane Brown, “How One Man Convinced 200 Ku Klux Klan Members to Give Up Their Robes,” NPR, Aug. 20, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544861933/how-one-man-convinced-200-ku-klux-klan-members-to-give-up-their-robos>.

⁴³ To return to Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates also provides a beautiful account of how iron can be softened and made more useful by the arts: “So when someone gives himself over to musical training and lets the flute pour into his soul through his ears, as through a funnel, those sweet, soft, and plaintive harmonies we mentioned; and when he spends his whole life humming, entranced by song, the first result is that whatever spirit he had, he softens the way he would iron and makes useful, rather than useless and brittle.” *Republic*, 95.

Ogun and “Toxic Masculinity”

“Because Ogun fails to recognize the complementary distinctiveness of the wifely role,” Matory notes that “[his] relations with wives are clumsy.”⁴⁴ I would add that the combination of his impressive force, short temper, and active sex-drive create the potential for his interactions with the opposite sex to transcend mere clumsiness and become violent, dangerous, abusive, and toxic. Just as Ogun—as the forces of iron, technology, mobility, etc.—is not limited to any specific society, his shortcomings in this area are not limited to only one gender or biological sex. However, Ogun is more closely associated with masculinity in the traditional Yoruba context, and in this respect, Ogun’s shortcomings in romantic life have close parallels with a certain type of masculinity in contemporary American society as well. Matory also cites a myth in which Ogun fell in love with another prominent female deity named Yẹmoja and married her. Ogun grabbed Yẹmoja and reassured her that although everyone fears him and he has a terrifying appearance, he would never hurt her. Later, wanting to please his wife, Ogun tried to cook for her, but only succeeded in breaking a pot and making a mess. Yẹmoja was understandably upset, insulted Ogun in a way she promised never to do, and the enraged Ogun struck her! Again feeling remorse for his act of violence, Ogun tried to make amends by stroking her breast—an action Yẹmoja made him promise never to do. At this point Yẹmoja turned into water and slipped through his fingers.⁴⁵

Ogun’s failed relationships with women are not limited to Yẹmoja, however, and his mythological interactions with two other women, the oriṣa Ọya and Adi (or a kind of oil in the Yoruba language), have also been disastrous. In a popular myth that revolves around Şango (the royal oriṣa of thunder and lightning), Ogun lost the affection of his wife Ọya (oriṣa of tornados, storms, and buffaloes) to Şango. Defeated and ashamed, he ran into his beloved forest, while Şango and Ọya went on to become the most famous couple in Yoruba mythology. In another myth taken from the oral Ifa corpus, Ogun married a woman named Epo, but later overpowered and forced himself on her younger sister Adi after taking her to work with him on his farm. He ordered Adi not to tell anyone, and the girl became depressed and reclusive. However, when it became clear that Adi was pregnant, Ogun was brought before the king and submitted himself to judgment.⁴⁶

These three myths display three of Ogun’s issues with women that I have noticed time and again both in American society at large and on college campuses in particular. First, Ogun quite sincerely wishes to be a loving husband, but is so unprepared to deal with women and the feminine side of life—represented by cooking and breaking the pot—that Ogun ends up literally destroying whatever he touches, much as he has in previous myths as well. Second, the fact that some men are polite and well-intentioned does not mean that they are incapable of, or not responsible for, acts of sexual abuse and assault. Ogun had only the best of intentions toward Yẹmoja, but as a result of his inability to interact appropriately with women he was directly responsible for uninvited violent and sexual contact. Clearly good, honest intentions are not an

⁴⁴ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 18.

⁴⁵ Ulli Beier, *Yoruba Myths*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 45–46; and Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 17–18.

⁴⁶ Epo and Adi are both names for kinds of oil taken from palm kernels, and this myth explains why adi is now a taboo for some oriṣa. “Ogunda-Di,” African Language Program at Harvard University, accessed March 5, 2018, <http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/content/94-ogunda-di-odi>.

excuse or sufficient cause for trust as the second myth illustrates. This may be, in part, why Şango was able to win Oya’s affection so easily, leaving Ogun feeling humiliated and frustrated as he lost a relationship that he believed should have been assured to him. Finally, Ogun’s desire for sex coupled with his great strength make it possible for him to *choose* to take advantage of a young woman whom he knew quite well and who was subsequently traumatized by the ordeal she survived and was ordered not to speak about it.

For all adolescents learning to manage romantic relationships can be confusing, frustrating, and difficult, but as an RA, many young men in particular have come to me to ask how they should approach and interact with young women. However, I have heard from even more young women—but also young men as well—about how they are disappointed in the way their male significant others have behaved, and I know I am likely to have been the subject of that discussion also. Although I have also encountered women who struggle to manage their romantic relationships appropriately, it seems to me that perhaps more so than our young women, many of our young men are often not properly prepared to interact with their romantic interests appropriately.

While this can take the form of simple funny stories of awkward interactions (of which I have heard many!), particularly—but not exclusively—when men are the perpetrators, it can also result in emotional, physical, and sexual abuse as represented in Ogun’s mythology. All of the RAs in our dorm recently went through training on how to help students have discussions about what is acceptable and consensual behavior in sexual settings as our college has recently made this issue a priority. It became clear to us that a lack of understanding and communication (recall that Ogun and Yemoja have a breakdown in communication) is one of the central issues that must be addressed as students are likely not to be fully prepared in this regard. Of course not all instances of abuse and assault are accidental or unintentional as Ogun’s interactions with Yemoja and Adi illustrate; I simply mean to draw attention to the fact that when it comes to issues of consent, a lack of proper and effective communication and interaction often has truly devastating results.

Furthermore, Ogun’s loss of his relationship with Oya and the way he must have seen Şango and Oya’s relationship flourish surely left him feeling sexually frustrated considering that all of his dealings with women seem to end in disaster. Moreover, Ogun again retreats into his beloved forest and isolates himself from society. Yet again, these issues of isolation and sexuality and their prevalence in our society seem to be a toxic mixture. One need only recall that the isolated and frustrated Santa Barbara killer confessed that he felt “forced to endure an existence of loneliness and insignificance, all because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in [him],” and that the tragedy in Orlando was similarly linked to issues of sexuality, frustration, and also inebriation—another trait associated with Ogun.⁴⁷ When one

⁴⁷ The shooter at Pulse had a long history related to law enforcement and violent outbursts, and the Santa Barbara shooter’s extensive manifesto expresses how he felt isolated and frustrated by the lack of attention he received from women when compared to other men. This of course does not place responsibility at the feet of women but rather illustrates the skewed perspective that may emerge from such conditions of isolation and frustration. Gal Tziperman Lotan, Paul Brinkmann, and Rene Stutzman, “Witness: Omar Mateen Had Been at Orlando Gay Nightclub Many Times,” *Orlando Sentinel*, June 13, 2016, <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/pulse-orlando-nightclub-shooting/os-orlando-nightclub-omar-mateen-profile-20160613-story.html>; and “Inside Santa Barbara

takes the tradition of Ogun as a comprehensive whole, these struggles with isolation, violence, sexuality, substance abuse, and most importantly, masculinity are inherently linked and particularly present on college campuses.

Perhaps most tragically, the third myth about Ogun seems to sum up what many on college campuses have come to know about sexual assault. It is usually perpetrated by men,⁴⁸ the survivors are usually female,⁴⁹ the perpetrators are most often known by the survivors,⁵⁰ and one of the most difficult challenges after the horribly traumatic experience is finding a way to talk about it. The last time I remember crying is when I learned that a young woman I know, love, and had hoped to care for as an RA had been raped while a student in our dorm.⁵¹ Not only did she survive this experience, just like Adi in the myth, she knew the perpetrator, had to live in close proximity to him, and also was limited in what she could and wanted to discuss with others. In addition to going through an excruciating disciplinary procedure, she cited the experience of marginalization and lack of support as even more horrifying.

Her experience has stressed to me that retribution is not necessarily what is needed most, but just as the only instance of Ogun's pacification came through the power of Oṣun, it is only through the empowerment of and attention to the place of women (but also all survivors) in our society that we can properly address these issues. One of the greatest challenges in being able to respond on an institutional level is simply knowing when sexual assault has taken place as so many survivors are rightfully afraid of what will happen to them if they speak, find it too difficult to describe and relive the experience, and are unsure if they will find any justice even if they do.⁵² This is particularly the case when survivors are forced to live near those who assaulted them, as too often occurs.

Killer's Manifesto," ABC News, May 25, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/inside-santa-barbara-killers-manifesto/story?id=23860511>.

⁴⁸ Sofi Sinozich and Lynn Langton, *Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization Among College-Age Females, 1995–2013*, (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, Dec. 2014), 8.

⁴⁹ Ninety percent of adult survivors are female, and one in every six women in America has survived attempted or completed rape at least once in her lifetime. This, however, should not detract from the fact that one in every ten survivors is male, or that TGQN (Transgender, Genderqueer, Questioning, Nonconforming) students and adults are particularly vulnerable. "Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics," RAINN, accessed Aug. 31, 2016, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>.

⁵⁰ Some estimate that in as many as 80% of sexual assault and rape cases the assailant is known to the survivor, and the rate can be as high as 93% with teenagers and juveniles. "Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization" and "Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics," accessed Aug. 31, 2016, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>.

⁵¹ She has bravely spoken out about her experience, and has published a petition with Rise Up to lobby the government to approve a Bill of Rights for survivors of sexual assault. The petition may be found here: <https://www.change.org/p/richard-neal-secure-basic-civil-rights-for-sexual-assault-survivors>. In October 2016, the "Survivors' Bill of Rights Act of 2016" was passed by the US Congress and signed by President Obama, and similar legislation was enacted on the state level in Massachusetts. Lauren Libby, "Secure Basic Civil Rights for Sexual Assault Survivors," Change.org., accessed August 31, 2016.

⁵² It is estimated that a full 4/5 of female survivors on college and university campuses never report their assault, and the number is only slightly higher for the general public. "Campus Sexual Violence: Statistics," RAINN, accessed Aug. 31, 2016, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/campus-sexual-violence>; and "Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization," 9. Written before the AAU survey and university response, a similar experience of living near an assailant is described here by one anonymous student. Anonymous, "Dear Harvard: You Win," *Harvard Crimson*, March 31, 2014, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2014/3/31/Harvard-sexual-assault/>.

In another enlightening—if distressing—discussion I had with a different young woman in our dorm, I learned about how masculinity has become perceived by many as almost synonymous with aggressive sexuality. She informed me that one of her friends has learned to emphasize his identity as a gay male so that women could feel comfortable and safe around him. She thought it was a shame that a singular default identity of “male” often elicits fear of assault and that her friend would deliberately have to perform a specific identity in order to put women at ease. These fears seem justified as the recent AAU survey results revealed that about 25% of all women at our college (compared to 23% nationwide) reported being sexually abused or harassed at some point, again usually at the hands of males with whom they were familiar.⁵³ To move beyond college campuses, the #metoo campaign and the recent string of male celebrities accused of sexual assault demonstrate that this has been a serious issue for quite a while, but it seems like the floodgates are just now opening and bringing it to light for all of society. Although the effectiveness with which this issue is being tackled at colleges across the country is and should be debated, the fact is that it can no longer be denied that this is one of the most serious problems at American institutions of higher learning and beyond and is inextricably tied up in issues of masculinity and substance abuse.⁵⁴

The theme of injustice and silencing unfortunately runs through other areas as well, as the Take A Knee protests launched by Colin Kaepernick demonstrate. It is fascinating that in the face of the violence and injustice faced by black people in the United States, Kaepernick opted for a *silent* form of protest, and even so many of differing political leanings still sought to have him and all subsequent players silenced and censored. Even the president called for these players to be silenced or fired and for spectators to isolate them further, and many believe that Kaepernick is currently out of contract as a direct result of his protests.⁵⁵ As football is quite possibly the most Ogun-like sport, Kaepernick and others have engaged in muted protests in the face of injustice, and those who are implicit in the injustice they resist seek to silence and isolate them further, an important lesson can be learned from all of these myths about Ogun. A failure to recognize and account for unjust killings and oppression is likely only to anger Ogun and result in more conflict. When such arrogance and displays of strength are calmly and quietly challenged, rash and forceful reactions only multiply the problems, as when Ogun attacked Esu, and the other football players—both black and white—who have subsequently joined in the Take A Knee campaign reveal. The tendency to seek further isolation and a retreat into comfortable and familiar surroundings only causes a societal breakdown, and a failure to communicate properly and effectively only exacerbates issues. All of these factors can further contribute to issues of sexual- and gender-based harassment and discrimination, and despite efforts to sweep these issues under

⁵³ Although the total percentage is surely higher as is the percentage of women who report having faced some form of gender-based discrimination. David Cantor, Bonnie Fisher, Susan Chibnall, Carol Bruce, Reanne Townsend, Gail Thomas, and Hyunshik Lee, *Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct* (Rockville, MD: Westat, 2015), 14; and “Fact Sheet: AAU Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct,” Association of American Universities, accessed March 5, 2018, https://www.aau.edu/sites/default/files/%40%20Files/Climate%20Survey/Fact%20Sheet%20for%20AAU%20Climate%20Survey%209-21-15_0.pdf, 1.

⁵⁴ Although I have opted not to explore the related issue of substance abuse fully here, it is one that was singled out by the AAU in its survey report, is another common feature of Ogun’s tradition, and one I have unfortunately witnessed first-hand many times as an RA. “Fact Sheet,” 3; and “Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization,” 8.

⁵⁵ Tom Porter, “Trump Wants ‘Son of A Bitch’ NFL Players Fired but Colin Kaepernick—and His Mom—Are Fighting Back,” *Newsweek*, Sept. 23, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/trump-wants-nfl-police-brutality-protesters-colin-kaepernick-sacked-heres-670001>.

the rug and silence those oppressed, the truth ultimately comes out with severe consequences for those implicated. Ultimately this situation leaves neither the oppressed nor the oppressor better off, and with respect to all of the current issues related to racial injustice, gun violence, and sexual assault, that certainly seems to be the current state of affairs.

Justice and Resolution

Just as the student I know who survived sexual assault—and the countless others of whom I am unaware—has not received the justice she rightfully sought, and just as the families of Philando Castille, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and countless others have not received the justice that they sought, it appears that Ogun, the supposed deity of justice, has failed us and is in fact the source of the problem itself. In speaking with the Oluṣe or high priest of Ogun in Èdè, I learned that he (and I as the descendant of an Ogun priest myself) would certainly agree with this assessment. In fact, when I described some of these events to the Oluṣe, he shook his head and exclaimed, “*ibinu Ogun ni!*” This is the wrath of Ogun! However, as noted above, all Yoruba deities encompass the positive and negative aspects of their domains, and when one *oriṣa* causes serious issues in society, (s)he is also understood to be simultaneously the source of and solution to the problem. In this way, the existence of the problem is merely a sign of the deity’s righteous displeasure and not his inherent malevolence. For example, when 35 people died within just a few days in Èdè as a result of car accidents, the people finally heeded the advice of the Oluṣe, went to the traditional king and performed an elaborate set of rituals to appease Ogun. When the accidents and deaths stopped abruptly, many naturally attributed this to the town having set matters right with Ogun.

The issue is not that American society (or *Oyinbo* as *Ifa* called Westerners) has put Ogun on a pedestal. The issue is that he has been turned into an idol, which he was never meant to be. If Ogun is served properly and his idioms and traditions are observed appropriately and put in their proper context, all of life is more orderly and benefits from his influence. However, if these interactions with Ogun and his power are not properly ordered, we will only feel the negative aspects of his nature, and feel them forcefully as the people of Èdè did. A good friend of mine who is a devotee of Ogun once neglected to perform his customary rituals for a brief period of time, and when this friend set glasses down on a metal counter (read Ogun), they broke, almost inexplicably. Although my friend, through this system of indigenous hermeneutics, recognized Ogun as the source of the recurring problem, properly (re)organizing interactions with him was also the solution. After Ogun’s rituals were performed, the problem ceased, and my friend again experienced his benevolence.

I have argued that perhaps more than through any other *oriṣa*, the modern era and American society can be effectively understood through the idioms and characteristics of Ogun. Our obsession with work and productivity, dedication to progress, the emphasis placed on independence and individuality, and the ubiquitous nature of technology that has infiltrated every part of our lives has led me to believe that Ogun reigns supreme in contemporary America. Perhaps this is not without good reason as he has so much to offer in these areas. However, making Ogun so powerful and prevalent is not without its dangers. Over the past few years I have felt as if America has collectively summoned and angered Ogun who is consequently slaughtering those who revere him, just as the Yoruba *babalawo* 150 years ago described Ogun

coming to the earth with his 400 short swords to shed blood,⁵⁶ or as Ogun’s drunk devotees did when they inappropriately pulled on his chain. Furthermore, particularly with respect to the related issues of gun violence and mass shootings, and racial injustice, it feels as if we are getting nowhere while the problem gets worse, and some are even suggesting that the best way forward is to get more cutlasses so we can create even more chaos and violence and cut Eṣu in half yet again. Almost daily, our government sends out Ogun in the form of completely mechanized planes that drop death on others, and I have seen firsthand how our young people have been subjected to the horrors of social isolation and sexual assault. I feel as if I am living in the “day of Ogun’s anger” referenced at the opening of this article when the dead are going to heaven and eyelashes (including my own) are full of water.

On different occasions, when I have seen a dead chicken and goat that were killed by cars on the road, those with me exclaimed, “Ah, Ogun ti pa a!”—*Ah! Ogun has killed them*, because as mentioned before, Ogun is the metal technology that caused their death. In a similar way, to employ indigenous Yoruba heurmenetics, Ogun is also the police, the weapons, and even the automobiles that have claimed the lives of our brothers and sisters of different colors, orientations, and sexes. But this also means that within Ogun there is also the power to resolve these issues. In Ogun’s praise poetry, he is also the one called upon to stay senseless violence,⁵⁷ and he is as much a protector and creator as he is a destroyer. In response to the shooting at Sandy Hook, the Oluṣe stated that such a thing could never happen in Eḍe for two reasons. First, every year the king performs Ogun’s rituals on behalf of the whole town and has his devotees pray for his benevolence and then follow his commandments. This ritual action effectively prevents the misuse of Ogun and ensures that his tools are only employed for social benefit. Second, in addition to having secured Ogun’s favor, they allow only hunters and soldiers to carry guns because his destructive power in the form of guns does not belong in ordinary civil situations.⁵⁸ I believe America may need to appeal to Ogun’s creative, nurturing, and protective nature just as enthusiastically as we have embraced his destructive nature through our obsession with firearms, unparalleled military force, independence, pride, almost militarized partisanship, and refusal to acknowledge and address injustice.

In our call for justice we must also make sure that we first please Ogun before we can expect it to be heard. In other myths Ogun brings his swift wrath to bear on entire towns when stealing goes unpunished, and to this day even Yoruba Christians and Muslims are afraid to take oaths on pieces of iron because of the belief that if they themselves are not blameless, they only invite the terrible wrath of Ogun. Babalọla notes that “Ogun is quick to protect the honest, the innocent poor, [and] the victims of military attack,”⁵⁹ and that he is a “crusader against injustice.”⁶⁰ He is praised as “the divinity who takes from the rich and gives to the poor . . . [to] guard the dwelling place of each one of us,”⁶¹ and he seems to be particularly concerned with economic justice and equality. Consequently, a response must address all of these issues (such as killing innocent people through drone strikes, severe and growing economic disparity, gender discrimination, racial inequality, and social isolation and frustration) before we can expect Ogun

⁵⁶ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 94.

⁵⁷ Babalola, “A Portrait of Ògún as Reflected in Ìjálá Chants,” 161–62.

⁵⁸ Ileadì Atoyebi Ogundìgi, interview with author, Eḍe, Nigeria, September 2, 2016.

⁵⁹ Babalola, “A Portrait of Ògún as Reflected in Ìjálá Chants,” 156.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

to smile on us.⁶² After all, if he protects the victims of military attack, this implies that those who do not refrain from attacking the innocent (domestically or abroad) are likely to find themselves on the wrong side of his machete. If our society continues to prey on the vulnerable and marginalized we cannot expect him to guard us, no matter how many guns we have. If we do not first and foremost address these issues of injustice, increasing Ogun's power would be tantamount to taking a false oath on an even bigger piece of iron or the people of Èdè putting more cars on the road after a series of deadly accidents.

The fact that Ogun's rituals are carried out at a respectful distance must not be overlooked either, and perhaps our lives would be a bit better if we restrained our obsession with technology, guns, productivity, and violence and learned to revere them without making them so central to our lives and identities. We must also not forget that while applying more of Ogun in the same way will only make matters worse, the other male orisha were not able to bring him into the fold either. In the only myth analyzed here that has a happy ending, this was accomplished through Oṣun's role in cooling and pacifying Ogun. Just as a blacksmith working with iron must quickly cool it in water so that it does not become deformed or burn those who come into contact with it, the hot and aggressive energies of Ogun must always be tempered by the coolness and soothing nature of Oṣun. This again underlines the importance—and absence in American society—of rituals of cleansing and cooling for those who participate in Ogun's ambiguously destructive and creative violence that can be used either to protect and mold or to kill and destroy. If we can learn to embrace Ogun and Oṣun simultaneously by empowering and respecting women, learning to understand and value the arts, and placing a higher premium on social justice, integration, and interaction than we do on individuality and force, then perhaps we can transcend the identity of those who made Ogun into a sacreligious idol beset by his wrath and become true children of Ogun whom he blesses and protects from all of the horrors that have made the past few years so difficult for us all.

⁶² Again, Socrates supposedly also predicts that this Age of Iron will be characterized by those who “engender lack of likeness and unharmonious inequality, and these always breed war and hostility.” *Republic*, 242.

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