

The Sacred Act of Reading: Spirituality, Performance, and Power in Afro-Diasporic Literature

By

Anne Margaret Castro

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Approved:

Vera Kutzinski, Ph.D.

Ifeoma Nwankwo, Ph.D.

Hortense Spillers, Ph.D.

Marzia Milazzo, Ph.D.

Victor Anderson, Ph.D.

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To Annette, who taught me the steps.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

And my prayer
is versed with
what you call obscene language.
God within is a poet.
Goddess within is a poet with action.
Is she a performer?
Poetic license well employed.

- Josefina Báez *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing*, np

Josefina Báez's performance text, *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* (2013) invites its reader to actively participate in the reading process, often by both visually and sonically tracing the poem's word-play, as "up-down-and center, some kind of Scrabble / is encountered" (np). On the copyright page of her printed work, Báez describes her text as "performance theatre text; performance poetry, non-denominational spiritual practice of urban devotee; Dominican artist inner diary" (np). The author manipulates the cataloguing mechanisms of published texts to frame her work in generic multiplicity. Similarly, interpreting *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* becomes an exercise in multiplicity as the reader becomes performer and audience, closely following the shifting rhythms and rhymes embedded within the complex "Dancing Syntax" of this first-person performance poem. Báez's poetic "Secular prayer" uses the lens of her personal spiritual experiences to ruminate on the intricacies of social, economic, and political power relations between individuals and collective institutions.

"The Sacred Act of Reading" examines representations of religion and socio-political power in multi-genre texts of the modern and contemporary Afro-disaporic Americas. Religion,

like culture and politics, signifies a wide variety of practices, beliefs, and organizations aimed at the dispersal, consolidation, and maintenance of power. I align spiritual and socio-political discourses by critically reading depictions of both metaphysical and physical relationships of dominance, dependence, and interdependence that manifest through performed, bodily practices.

My dissertation adopts what I call a “performative textual hermeneutics,” which focuses on the active, reflective processes of textual creation and interpretation. I consider the methodologies of reading and interpretation presented in scribal novels, audiobooks, and written plays. Crossing the bounds of discipline, genre, and medium, my dissertation studies not only the performative behaviors of characters or performers, but also the embodied rituals of reading and listening themselves. By analyzing depictions of Afro-diasporic spirituality through a performative textual hermeneutics, my dissertation illuminates the embodied practices that physically actualize seemingly abstract mechanisms of socio-political oppression, which continue to mark the lived experiences of Afro-diasporic persons in the Americas. My dissertation’s expansive focus on spirituality and power ultimately challenges the false binary between oppression and liberation often invoked by US American literary scholars studying the works of Afro-diasporic artists. I examine how the primary texts themselves question this binary by complicating the very definitions of personhood and agency through the use of Euro-American and African cosmologies and ideologies.

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP

In many ways, this dissertation's interest in spirituality harkens back to the very origins of modern literary study in the “West” by way of hermeneutics, a term likely derived from the

Greek deity Hermes, who acted as a mediator between the gods and men. Gerhard Ebeling distinguishes three senses of ancient philosophies of hermeneutics, or “hermeneuein” as “expression (utterance, speaking), explication (interpretation, explanation) and translation (acting as an interpreter),” all aspects of meaning-making that I explore throughout this dissertation (qtd in Grondin 4). Jean Grondin (translated by Joel Weinsheimer) explains that each of the senses of “hermeneuein” attempt to encapsulate “similar movements of spirit” through language (21). While it is a fool’s errand to assign a clear lineage to hermeneutics -- just as it would be for any such capacious and foundational philosophical endeavor from our contemporary perspective -- the sacred frameworks from which practices of textual interpretation arose are difficult to deny.

In explicitly theological terms, the study of interpretation as practiced today in English still bears hallmarks from Jewish exegetical practices dating as far back as 515BCE. English scholars echo a key principle of Talmudic exegesis when they agree that textual meaning can be gleaned by interpreting a passage by referring to another passage in that same text where the same word appears. While I was generally conscious of the divinely-oriented origins of literary studies before writing this project, I still found myself surprised at the extent to which interpretive issues at the heart of theological debates resonate in the methodological arguments I present in this dissertation. For example, my contention that the formal aspects of the texts I study here instruct readers on how to engage with them, an idea I introduce in my first chapter on mediums, bears a striking resemblance to Martin Luther and John Calvin’s Protestant Christian emphasis that *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, or scripture interprets itself.¹ “The Sacred Act of Reading” builds upon a tradition as old as scripture, and as contentious as scriptural debates. At

¹ This phrase has also been used by Catholic figures, such as Thomas of Aquinas to claim that one part of scripture can be used to explain another part of scripture, another key element in literary criticism today. See James T. Bretzke’s *Consecrated Phrases, A Latin Theological Dictionary* (1998)

the same time, my decision to academically value texts and practices of Afro-diasporic spirituality with the same kind of literary attention bestowed upon biblical hermeneutics is, unfortunately, still fairly new in English scholarship of the United States.

African and Afro-diasporic spiritual concepts, particularly those of the West African messenger deity Esu-Elegbara, have indeed been taken up by literary scholars as hermeneutical tools, though usually with minimal analyses of their theoretical insights as spiritual concepts. In *The Signifying Monkey* (1989), Henry Louis Gates holds that the Yoruban Esu-Elegbara is

Our metaphor for the uncertainties of explication, for the open-endedness of every literary text ... Esu rules the process of disclosure, a process that is never-ending, that is dominated by multiplicity. Esu is discourse upon a text; it is the process of interpretation he rules (21).

Gates uses the mythological legacies of Esu to metaphorize his deconstructive hermeneutics of textual engagement in African American literature. In *Legba's Crossing*, Heather Russell takes up Legba as a theoretical tool for exploring Afro-Caribbean narratology. She explains, "According to the Yoruba, Esu-Elegbara is the god of the crossing. He is the gateway god. He is the god who is the divine linguist, vested with the power to govern over hermeneutic and heuristic processes" (9)². Like Gates and Russell, I am using African-derived spiritual figures as heuristic tools, but extending their interpretive methodologies to imagine how a variety of spiritual phenomena, including mediumship, prophesy, possession, and preaching, theorize the relations of power embedded within every instance of such linguistic meaning-making.

Traditionally, English literary studies that have taken up religion overwhelmingly

² Russell adds, "For the Fon of Benin, Esu/Eshu's corollary is Legba. Eshu and Legba are often interchangeably used; they serve ostensibly the same function in relation to discourse" (9). Dianne Stewart also presents Legba for theological hermeneutics "that epitomizes the Word of the African Ancestors" (227).

concentrated on Christian theologies and themes, sometimes extending beyond Christianity to concepts associated with Judaism and Islam. The ubiquity of Christian topics in literary studies is perhaps best exemplified by the ease with which my freshmen undergraduates can identify almost any character as symbolic of Christ. Indeed, “The Sacred Act of Reading” extensively discusses Christian exegesis (admittedly identifying a few Christ-figures along the way), along with theology and liturgical practices of the Afro-Caribbean and African American church. This dissertation builds upon a rich canon of scholarship on the African American Christian church. For example, I draw on C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya’s sociological work on the political and social power of religious institutions in African USAmerica, and in complicating representations of power and liberation, I take up theologian Victor Anderson’s call to extend scholarship on black churches beyond paradigms of resistance.³ By approaching black women’s literature as potential sources for theological discourse, Womanist scholars such as Kelly Brown Douglas and Katie Geneva Cannon have paved the way for the kind of literary studies of theology and power that I provide here.⁴ Tuire Valkeakari’s *Religious Idiom and the African American Novel* (2007) exemplifies what I hope is a growing trend of in-depth analysis on Afro-diasporic spirituality (primarily Christianity in her analysis) in English literary studies. As may be expected, the marginalization of Afro-diasporic spirituality is far more apparent when discussing non-Christian religions and spiritual practices of the African diaspora. In chapters one and three, I examine representations of spirit possession, mediumship, and zombification in four novels by Caribbean, South American, and Caribbean-Canadian authors. In analyzing these

³ See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (1990) and Victor Anderson *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (1995) and *Creative Exchange: Theology of African American Religious Experience* (2008).

⁴ For example, see Kelly Brown Douglas *The Black Christ* (1993) and Katie Geneva Canon *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988).

narratives of possession and dispossession, I draw on sociological, historical, and theological scholarship on Afro-Caribbean religious practices including Christianity, Myal, Vodou⁵, Obeah, and Kumina, as well as Yoruban African cosmologies.⁶ In chapters two and four, I closely read performances of prophecy and preaching in scripted plays, print novels, and an audiobook by USAfrican American and Caribbean authors. My examinations of spiritual performance and leadership also look to scholarship across disciplines on religious traditions and theologies, with particular emphasis on Afro-diasporic Christianity in the Caribbean and US.

Thanks largely to Talal Asad's scholarship on the myth of secularization in higher education, there is increasing academic interest in interrogating terms such as "religion" and "spirituality" in literary studies.⁷ That being said, there are still very real difficulties for USAmerican literary scholars embedded in Euro-centric discourse on religion to intellectually engage with the Afro-diasporic religious practices I discuss in this dissertation. These difficulties, including the growing, but still limited body of works on Afro-diasporic religions in literary scholarship and the resulting lack of informed interlocutors within that discipline, were illustrated to me when I participated in a workshop on "Religion and Modernism" at the Modernist Studies Association Conference in 2014. At MSA, I was disappointed to discover that out of the fourteen short papers circulated, my reading of zombies and duppies in Zora Neale Hurston's ethnography *Tell My Horse* was the only one that discussed African or Afro-diasporic

⁵ There are many available spellings for Vodou, including Vodoo, Vodoun, etc. I use the spelling Vodou except when quoting other authors, because this version appears most often by recent religious scholars including Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, Yvonne Daniel, and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith. I am compelled to quote Alessandra Benedicty-Kokker on this note: "To take account of an intellectual history of possession is to note that "Voodoo," "Vaudou," "Vodou" are themselves products not only of languages, but of the epistemologies of the scholarly world, which cannot free itself from the compulsion to name" (2).

⁶ I choose to capitalize each of these religious traditions throughout this dissertation except when quoting other authors.

⁷ See Talal Asad *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003)

religious concepts at all.⁸ Though I did receive several encouraging comments after the formal discussion about how "interesting" and "important" my approach to religion and literature was, the workshop experience demonstrated to me the continuing marginalization of Afro-diasporic spiritualities in English studies, even in a subcategory that considers itself under siege. Clearly, English studies continue to elide the significant spiritual contributions of Afro-diasporic communities in the Americas, particularly those that require research beyond Christian traditions in the African American church, which in turn causes all of us to miss out on fascinating avenues of theoretical knowledge.

The continuing marginalization of Afro-diasporic spiritual practices in US higher education is as old as early European colonialism. Indeed, African and Afro-diasporic (including Christian) religious sects have for centuries been derided and even demonized by intellectual figures who sought to distinguish western culture from that of the populations they enslaved and colonized. Joseph Murphy cautions any readers who encounter colonial European texts about Afro-diasporic, particularly Afro-Caribbean religious practices, that not only were they perceived as disruptions for European masters, "they were also a direct threat to these white authorities" (121). The fear engendered by such religious communities belies the history of rebellions often fomented through spiritual communities of enslaved Africans and their descendents across the western hemisphere. In almost every area of the colonial Americas, African-descended religious practices were deemed illegal, demonic, and punishable by white authority figures.⁹

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind the ways in which European colonialists wielded

⁸ Interestingly enough, the only other paper discussing an Afro-diasporic author also made mention of Zora Neale Hurston, focusing on her autobiographical relationship with Protestant Christianity.

⁹ For a variety of historical overviews, see *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* edited by Cornell West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (2003)

interpretations of Christian scripture and praxis as weapons for subjugating African peoples, religions, and knowledge.

The manner by which the contemporary scholarship marginalizes Afro-diasporic religion primarily occurs through disciplinary classifications. Theologian of Afro-Caribbean religious practices Dianne Stewart explains, "To date, studies on the African religious traditions of the Caribbean and the Americas have been conducted primarily under the influence of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and history" (xiii). While "The Sacred Act of Reading" insists on treating Afro-diasporic religious philosophies as theology in the manner put forward by Dianne Stewart, it also draws on the works of anthropologists and historians such as Maureen Warner-Lewis, Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, and Leonard Barrett, who have written extensively on these practices.¹⁰ By studying the conceptual complexities of theologies alongside their material and cultural contexts, this dissertation draws upon the work of Charles H. Long's methodology for religious historiography. In *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (1986), Long argues, "a total hermeneutical discussion cannot overlook the role of signification in the creation of theoretical formulations" (2).

The disciplinary relegation of Afro-diasporic religion to the social sciences and cultural studies is a contemporary manifestation of a long history of institutionalized bias against these spiritual traditions. Because conventions of worship in African and Afro-diasporic communities have not historically been recognized as legitimate religious practices by Euro-American

¹⁰ See Nathaniel Samuel Murrell's *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions* (2010), Maureen Warner Lewis's *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Culture* (2003), and Leonard Barrett's *Soul Force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion* (1976). Anthropology is a vexed field for Afro-diasporic religious studies because it has been both crucial for documenting certain practices, and yet the field is also steeped in a lineage of western discourse that treats African-derived religion as exotic and even primitive.

academic authorities, literary representations of the sacred that align with African and Afro-diasporic metaphysical paradigms are often categorized strictly as “spirituality.” While “The Sacred Act of Reading” does focus on the spiritual nature of such representations, it does so with consideration to how these philosophies, rituals, and themes stem from established religions. While spiritual phenomena in these texts often occur outside the bounds of traditional religious institutions and hierarchies, the vocabulary the authors employ for communicating such experiences of the divine in the physical world still draw heavily from religious discourse. For this reason, “The Sacred Act of Reading” uses the terms “religious” and “spiritual” interchangeably except when it is necessary to clarify distinctions between the spiritual experience and its institutional frameworks.

This predominance of Christianity, and to a lesser extent Judaism and Islam, in literary criticism reflects the cultural demographics of the US American academy and moreover, appears to make logical sense considering that, like literary studies, these Abrahamic religions are text-centric.¹¹ Afro-diasporic religions, as a result of the limited resources during enslavement and continuation of African oral traditions, are not primarily located in sacred texts, but rather in the performances of worshippers. As Kwame Anthony Appiah states, “there are many devices for supporting the transmission of a complex and nuanced body of practice and belief without writing” (*In My Father’s House* 132). In “The Sacred Act of Reading,” a project inextricably tied to all of the ideological trappings of the US American academy, I adopt a performative hermeneutics of reading as a means of contending with this seeming disjuncture between English literary scholarship and Afro-diasporic methods of articulating religious thought. This dissertation brings together insights from African American theology, Stewart’s insistence that

¹¹ And yet there is no paucity of scholarship on Greek oral traditions.

non-Christian practices also be studied with the rigor of theology, and Gates and Russell's claims that Afro-diasporic spiritual concepts are themselves performing literary theory. I weave these literary insights with key revelations of anthropologists and foundational performance studies scholars such as Joseph Roach, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Victor Turner, who identify a hermeneutics of performance already at play in spiritually-motivated ritual practices.¹²

PERFORMATIVE TEXTUAL HERMENEUTICS

Performative textual hermeneutics is a mode of interpretation that uses issues of performance as a means of reading written text. The term hermeneutics refers to the study of textual interpretation – either specific practices of biblical exegesis or more general issues of literary interpretation. Hermeneutics is the study of how we read and derive meaning from written texts, or in the words of Joseph Roach, “it means a way of interpreting interpretations” (353). The adjective “performative,” on the other hand, “inflects what it modifies with performance-like qualities” (Schechner 123).¹³ What might we learn by inflecting the process of textual interpretation with the qualities of a performance? Because hermeneutics is most often associated with the interpretation of *texts*, and the term “performative” usually refers to either J.L. Austin and John Searle’s “speech acts” or to the study of similarly *non-textual* practices and traditions generally known as performance, my positing of a performative hermeneutics asks

¹² See Joseph Roach *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1993), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's “Notes Towards a Performance Theory of Orature” (2007), and Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969).

¹³ For example, Peggy Phelan coins the term “performative writing” in order to posit a method of writing that intends to “enact the affective force of the performance event again” (*Mourning Sex* 11). Unlike Phelan's performative writing, which works to textually re-present a performed event, my performative method of interpreting texts considers the ways that written works evoke meaning through methods of performance.

scholars to embrace and explore a paradoxical approach to reading. This approach brings theoretical quandaries found in performance studies, theater studies, and work on different religious philosophies and rituals practiced by Afro-diasporic American communities to bear on the discipline of English literary scholarship, specifically foregrounding issues of embodied action, effectiveness, audience, and citation.

The term performance always implies the process of doing an action. Illustrating the centrality of action in the field of performance studies, the first definition Richard Schechner provides in his introductory textbook to performance studies reads succinctly: “Performances are actions” (1). The focus on action is a defining characteristic of performance studies, which in many ways developed as a field in an effort to de-center the text or “archive” in favor of the “repertoire,” or activities of people (Diana Taylor *The Archive and the Repertoire*). By focusing on the spiritual vocabularies of Afro-diasporic texts in the Americas and particularly the Caribbean, I show that Taylor’s call to study the repertoire is both new for literary studies in the United States and quite old for Caribbean and Latin American cultural scholars such as Fernando Ortiz and Melville Herskovitz who recognized the crucial influence of non-textual African religious traditions in Afro-diasporic art. In terms of scholarship on theater and religious ritual, to perform a particular role, be it a scripted character or an ecclesiastical position, means to corporeally *enact* the expected movements and utterances of that role. These actions always incorporate some kind of bodily movement ranging from a slight manipulation of the mouth and vocal chords to walking across the dramatic stage, to complex bodily practices such as dance or specialized gestures indicating an experience of spiritual possession. To interpret a written text through a performance-inspired lens means reading in a way that considers how the work imagines and actualizes forms of embodied action, even when it is not meant to be staged.

"The Sacred Act of Reading" takes this focus on embodied action even further as it considers not only the movements of characters or performers (which can be both imagined and/or material), but also the embodied actions of each text's readers and listeners. This dissertation's performative method of reading keeps the audience in focus, reminding us that just as every performance needs a spectator to witness the event, every text needs a reader. By employing a performance-oriented lens for textual interpretation, "The Sacred Act of Reading" presents what Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgwick articulate as an "interrogation of the space of reception" and "interpellation" (7). In his poststructuralist theorization of Caribbean literature, Antonio Benítez Rojo adopts similarly performative rhetoric to describe the shifting relationships between audience and literature,

One might think that literature is a solitary art as private and quiet as prayer. Not true. Literature is one of the most exhibitionistic expressions in the world. This is because it is a stream of texts and there are few things as exhibitionist as a text. It should be remembered that what a performer writes -- the word *author* has justifiably fallen into disuse -- is not a text, but something previous and qualitatively different: a pre-text. ... [A] text is born when it is read by the Other: the reader. From this moment on text and reader connect with each other like a machine of reciprocal seductions.

The texts I study in this analysis not only seduce, but insistently distance readers with confounding stories of spiritual knowledge that both implicate and yet alienate them. The text's audience becomes a ritual participant in the textual performance by means of their own embodied acts of interpretation,¹⁴ and yet is also routinely alienated from the meaning-making event, enacting a play on avant-garde dramaturge Bertolt Brecht's theatre of alienation. In each of these situations, the readers' recognitions of themselves as audience make this a particularly

¹⁴ Kimberly Benston theorizes this form of ritual participation as *methexis* in African American theatrical experiments.

performative textual hermeneutics. Marvin Carlson writes, “Performance implies not just doing or even re-doing, but a self-consciousness about doing and re-doing on part of both performers and spectators” (Marvin Carlson ix).

In addition to the actions of characters and audience, a performative textual hermeneutics encourages readers to consider how words themselves become actions, or how language is performative. In a series of 1955 lectures posthumously published under the title *How to Do Things with Words*, linguistic philosopher J. L. Austin coined the term “performative” to describe a statement that when uttered, performs an act. Austin’s deceptively-simple theory that in some cases, “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (7) has inspired decades of philosophical debate about topics central to this dissertation such as the body, interpellation, agency, and sovereignty. I use the term “performative” to describe my dissertation’s methodology as a direct nod to Austin’s linguistic concepts, but even more so, I use it in order to capitalize on the term’s inherent tensions between abstract thought, speech, and action. “The Sacred Act of Reading” uses close readings of spiritual phenomena to explore these tensions, with the recognition that spirituality always signals a confluence of metaphysical and physical phenomena.

The texts I study here repeatedly demonstrate how spiritual phenomena throw into relief the arbitrary nature of dominant, Enlightenment-based epistemologies.¹⁵ By presenting metaphysical phenomena as physical, factual reality, the authors I study call into question the predominant “western” scientific methodologies derivative of the Enlightenment’s presumption that an objective, “transcendental verity” can be determined based on measurements of physical

¹⁵ See Charles Landesman *An Introduction to Epistemology* (1997)

evidence.¹⁶ By analyzing processes of interpretation through a performative lens, we can see the ways in which the texts implicate their readers in the ritual of interpretation, and render readers conscious of their participation in the creation of worlds that transcend the bounds of commonly assumed logic. In this way, these authors play on the divisions between art and reality, echoing centuries of debate surrounding the dangerous possibilities of performances that through manipulations of theatrical artifice, potentially obscure objective truth. These texts, like theatrical productions, are “imagination made flesh,” artistic events which illuminate the tangled relationships between the supposedly factual physical world and the fantastical realms of metaphysical spirituality (Schechner 124).

SITUATING THE AFRO-DIASPORIC AMERICAS

Yet the religious traditions of the African diaspora are alike in that each shares a social history of enslavement and racial discrimination. Each tradition became the focus for an extraordinary struggle for survival against and triumph over brutal systems of exploitation. They share an elevated sense of solidarity against injustice and a commitment to the protection and advancement of their communities.

- Joseph Murphy *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*, 2

"The Sacred Act of Reading" is both an Afro-diasporic and hemispheric American project that examines works written by authors in Canada, the United States, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Colombia. As a result, this project engages with scholarship on American, Caribbean, and

¹⁶ Enlightenment philosophies that privilege reason and presume objectivity are also critiqued by postcolonial scholars Aimé Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955, translated 1972) and Edouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* (1990, translated 1997).

Latin American literature, as well as scholarship focused on the African Diaspora within and beyond national boundaries, like African American and Black Atlantic studies. In studying the literary works produced by Afro-diasporic artists in the Americas, I explore aesthetic traditions informed by the traumatic displacement of enslaved Africans across a “cultural and political geography” that itself “has been the result of translational displacements” (Kutzinski 227). In other words, the labels “Afro-diasporic literature” and “literature of the Americas” are both attempting to encapsulate and create a place in the university for collections of work inherently defined by a lack of fixity and place. Thus, this dissertation enters deeply ethical, disciplinary conversations about the ways in which scholars group and interpret literature of the Afro-diasporic Americas.¹⁷

“The Sacred Act of Reading” is an Afro-diasporic literary project founded in the contention that works by authors across the Americas offer distinct and significant artistic artifacts that provide theoretical insights into relations of power. By focusing specifically on Afro-diasporic literature in the western hemisphere, this dissertation allows us to think through African resonances in these “New World” literatures, resonances that allow us to identify connections between authors who would usually be relegated to national or regional canons. For example, the US American works by Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison I study, which are set in the US South and Midwest evidence the cultural resonances of African traditions that permeate African American culture and literature. Similarly, Derek Walcott’s Trinidadian play is set on an unspecified colonial Caribbean island, but reflects African aesthetics as it calls upon

¹⁷ Throughout this dissertation, I commonly invoke the prefix “Afro-” to distinguish the African lineage and racialization of authors, communities, and characters. Because the experience of racial difference, as well as African-derived philosophies and spiritual practices are key to this project, it is important that race and cultural heritage are considered in my analysis. I also employ the term “black” in the US American context to describe racial identity when crucial to interpretation, as well as when the term is explicitly employed by non-US American authors.

Afro-diasporic histories and political imperatives that extend to the entire conceptual geography of diasporic movement termed the black Atlantic by Paul Gilroy.

The historical particularities of the African diaspora in the Americas are central to the interpretive arguments of “The Sacred Act of Reading.” My focus on Afro-diasporic authors always keeps in mind the influence of historical and contemporary experiences such as enslavement, oppression, and racial prejudice that African-descended people in the Americas encountered and continue to encounter. These shared historical experiences, which evidence differences according to region and community, ubiquitously worked to enforce oppressive power relations for persons of African descent in the Americas and greatly influenced the contours of Afro-diasporic religious practices.

This dissertation operates under the guiding assumption of hemispheric studies, namely that the contemporary nations of the western hemisphere are connected through “histories of conquest, colonialism, slavery, indigenous rights, imperialism, migration, and globalization (to name some of the issues) throughout the Americas” (Landers and Robinson xvii). Founded in this historical reality, hemispheric and other trans-American studies scholars in the field of literature have largely focused on the writings and biographies of prominent historical figures in order to correct popular misunderstandings in literary scholarship (particularly for US Americanists). Though the concept of the hemisphere is itself a product of colonial discourse, scholars of hemispheric studies attempt to present cultural analyses of the United States and other American nations without perpetuating the same “exceptionalist self-imaginings” that undergird the presiding narratives of those national literatures (Levander and Levine 7).

Hemispheric literary studies, like those focused on the African diaspora in the Americas, attempt to present a transnational perspective that does not subsume categories of region or nation. The texts I study here present narratives that are both local and transnational. For example, one novel is both Afro-Caribbean and metropolitan Canadian, while another is both Southern US American and Jamaican. The constant presence of hemispheric exchange in these texts exemplify the interconnectedness of American nations, an interconnectedness that insists on recognizing the web of cultural, material, and political movements that constitute what are considered national literatures.

"The Sacred Act of Reading" affirms the intricate and complex interchange of Afro-diasporic persons, ideas, and discourse across the western hemisphere that critics have identified, but maps those out through spiritual practices. Like hemispheric studies, much of the existing scholarly work examining networks of Afro-diasporic discourse across the Americas focuses on the exchange of socio-political ideas amongst prominent black figures in an effort to evidence the rich history of the trans-national Afro-Americas. On the other hand, most scholarship that critically engages with representations of religion in Afro-diasporic texts is deeply rooted in ethnographic cultural studies, and so focuses on local geographic areas, inevitably maintaining colonial and national boundaries challenged by hemispheric literary scholars.

My dissertation's hemispheric scope of spirituality and power brings these two scholarly traditions into conversation by identifying the spiritual in addition to the political strains of thought explicitly and/or implicitly connecting these black authors and artists. Several of the texts I study, namely those by Manuel Zapata-Olivella, Erna Brodber, and Louis Marriott use spiritual concepts to explain the historical experiences of Afro-diasporic populations in the Americas, and theorize contemporary political and social issues for black movements in the

modern and contemporary Americas. By using spiritual concepts as a means of connecting Afro-Diasporic characters from across the Americas, these authors echo the voices of black scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Martin Delaney, who saw in the effort of black Cubans the importance of locating “the racial nation-state within the larger flows of hemispheric culture” (Levander and Levine 2).

SITUATING MYSELF

In the interest of divesting myself from the potential objectification of Afro-diasporic wisdoms, I acknowledge the market structures that invite me to position myself as an intellectual authority who professionally profits from packaging this collection of art for consumption by the academy. I also acknowledge that this recognition, fueled by my desire to perform respectful and ethical scholarship, does not forbid any representational violence in which I may be participating despite my best efforts.

My arrival at this particular dissertation topic is a winding, yet now seemingly inevitable journey. I am a white Latina woman who grew up in an affluent, white, and overwhelmingly Protestant suburb of Houston, Texas. Like other young white individuals living in an ethnically-split household in south-eastern Texas, I recognized at a relatively young age that ethnicity and race were sometimes socially illegible and sometimes contingent experiences of self that could inform social standing. The social geography of Houston, my experience as an interpreter and ESL instructor in New Orleans, and my family's history also taught me that "America" was a far more fluid concept than what was described in the fearful nationalistic rhetoric that dominated the media after September 11th, 2001.

I knew that to some degree, all of our defining categories of community and self were

determined through shifting interpretations, and that in a few cases, these interpretations could be manipulated in an effort to secure a tenuous sense of social belonging. Over the years, I anxiously adopted whatever hermeneutics of living seemed to be expected of me at that moment by figures I assumed held power over my life. This, as you can imagine, was exhausting. Though I now realize how much hegemonic privilege I experienced as a result of my racial coding and parents' socio-economic status, I always felt myself to be a poorly-veiled non-subject, a person never quite at home in any place or even in any ideological paradigm. This internal conflict of belonging is likely the reason why I have always been drawn to narratives of liminality, marginalization, and diasporic consciousness.

As an inquisitive, justice-oriented, and at times passionately religious child, I also experienced great ideological conflict in regards to the disjunctures that characterize life in a wealthy, politically conservative, Christian community indebted to the inequities inherent in neo-liberal capitalism. This dissertation's interest in the rhetorical and physical mechanisms of institutionalized power was born in the cognitive dissonance of my childhood. I constantly struggled to reconcile material examples of inequity with the belief systems taught to me by educational and spiritual authority figures. For example, the uplift narrative of the American Dream never seemed to mesh with Jesus's imperatives for aiding the poor, and furthermore, neither of these discourses could explain why the authorities in my community, adults who so publicly declared their dedication to American and Christian values, were choosing to build a new deluxe mall less than a mile from a community that still lacked in-door plumbing.

I was overwhelmed with excitement and gratitude when, in undergrad at the University of Texas at Austin, I first read Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, which described gender identity as a culturally-constructed idea whose supposed permanence was only an interpretive consequence of

repeated performative behaviors. Butler's basic proposition that subjectivity and social structures are manifested through performances rife with contradictions and ideological negotiations has become a foundational presumption for my current work, which like Butler's philosophy, explores the interstices of belief and embodiment, but unlike Butler, does so through spiritual paradigms. While this dissertation is deeply indebted to Euro-American philosophical discourse, I hope that it effectively privileges the theoretical maneuvers presented in Afro-diasporic American texts, which I believe are deserving of far greater attention and intellectual regard in the academy.

I have come to see my gravitation towards topics of religion and spirituality in the process of crafting this dissertation as a playful nod to my own youthful desires to become a preacher, as well as my family history, which is marked by strong religious feeling. My grandfather, for example, converted from Catholicism to Presbyterianism after moving from his original Mexico to the United States, after which he became a missionary-minister in rural Colombia, where my father grew up. The intersections of race, gender, social power, literacy, and colonialism have always shaped my understandings of spirituality. In the construction of this dissertation, I have been given the opportunity to critically reflect on the rich complexities of the truly *spiritual* life of power, along with the powerful life of spirituality.

CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

In my first dissertation chapter entitled, “The Hermeneutics of Spirit Possession: Interpreting Mediums in *Changó, The Biggest Badass* and *Louisiana*,” I analyze the stories of two mediums in Afro-Colombian Manuel Zapata –Olivella’s epic novel, *Changó, the Biggest Badass* (1983, 1985, translation 2010), and Afro-Jamaican Erna Brodber’s novel *Louisiana*

(1997). Both women recognize that they have been chosen by supernatural entities after experiencing spirit possession, causing each woman to grapple with her new identity as spiritual medium by considering multiple epistemologies of historical inquiry. This chapter's focus on modes of translation and interpretation develops the dissertation's performative textual hermeneutics, which considers how each text instructs its reader/audience to engage with it. Through the critical frameworks of translation and opacity, I demonstrate how these two characters come to understand themselves and the world around them through interpretive modes of uncertainty. I contend that the protagonist's role as medium in "Ancestral Combatants" from Zapata Olivella's *Changó* is analogous to the mediating work of literary translators, specifically the Spanish-English translator of the work in question, Jonathan Tittler. Agne's mediumship personifies the crises of interpretation and meaning in a world of spiritual and linguistic translation. I then study opacity in *Louisiana* in order to argue that by resisting the dominance of any one epistemology for understanding the spiritual workings of her novel, Erna Brodber presents a mode of interpretation that I call engaged surrender, which calls for the active labor of letting go of totalizing understanding through interpretation. The protagonist's journey into engaged surrender also instructs Brodber's readers to accept their own positions as mediums, crucial pieces of a collective story that no one person completely controls.

My second dissertation chapter entitled "Reading the Prophetic Stage: Imagining the Limits of the Possible in *Bedward* and *Dream on Monkey Mountain*," mobilizes the interpretive methodology formulated in the previous chapter to present prophecy as a mode of collective interpretation. By aligning the possibilities and limitations of prophetic time and hermeneutics with the generic parameters of staged drama, I demonstrate how the dramatic works manage to actualize power through their own interpretive practices. Specifically, I follow the vastly

different prophetic careers of Alexander Bedward in Louise Marriott's 1960 Jamaican play *Bedward*, and Felix Hobain, who is always referred to as Makak in Derek Walcott's avant garde drama *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, which was written for the Trinidad Theatre Workshop and first produced at the Central Library Theatre in Toronto in 1967. Through the critical framework of millennial and messianic time, along with charismatic prophecy conceptualized in sociology and religious studies, I contend that these two plays demonstrate how prophesy challenges existing power structures by usurping traditional methods for legitimating authority and by encouraging followers to imagine alternative modes of viewing the world. I demonstrate how *Bedward's* theatrical form complicates the narrative's emphasis on the impossibility of the protagonist's millennialist vision by transforming the prophet's legacy into a continual messianic event. I then argue that Derek Walcott's 1967 play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, demonstrates how claims to prophecy are always substantiated through audience participation in interpreting the world through the lens of prophet's radical cosmology.

In the third chapter of my dissertation entitled "The Spiritual Life of Power: Zombies in *Myal* and *Brown Girl in the Ring*," I analyze novelistic representations of zombification and healing in order to demonstrate how spiritual and socio-political power are constituted through not only collective, but acutely embodied practices of engagement and interpretation. I read zombification as a theoretical apparatus that illuminates the embodied nature of larger systems of seemingly abstract subjugation in Erna Brodber's *Myal* (1988) and Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1997). By reading the two novels with a focus on the spiritual practices of zombification and healing alongside issues of textual interpretation, this chapter extends my dissertation's methodology to consider the embodied nature of collective, interpretive practices.

“The Spiritual Life of Power” studies these two novels in conversation with postcolonial and political critical theory in order to show how zombification reveals the material nature of abstract concepts such as political power and spirituality. Specifically, I argue that Hopkinson’s speculative fiction novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, details the bodily process of spiritual zombification in horrific detail in order to demonstrate the bodily violations that underpin political and social subjugation in a setting of dystopian capitalism. Hopkinson’s use of zombification uses the mythical to reveal the ideologies of this neoliberal dystopia. I then argue that Erna Brodber’s representations of sound in *Myal* demonstrate the concurrently abstract and material experiences of spirit thievery (zombification) and spirit reclamation. I show how Anita’s possession narrative uses sound to illustrate the materiality of thought, while Ella’s use and retention of voice demonstrates how power operates through the embodied performances of abstract ideas.

The fourth chapter of my dissertation, “You Preached Today!: Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison’s Sermonic Performances” explores how Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison portray the performative art of preaching in their texts. I contend that these two canonical black women authors differently manipulate the interpretive possibilities of their written and performed texts in order to portray spiritual power as a fluid entity constituted through the collective bodies of worshippers. “You Preached Today!” continues the interpretive methodology developed in previous chapters to analyze the ways in which authors theorize power by actualizing those processes of power in the bodies of readers, listeners, and audience members. In reading these printed and performed texts as theoretical explorations of preaching, liturgy, and performance, this chapter shows how Hurston and Morrison manipulate the mechanisms of their media to represent and manifest relationships of spiritual power. I analyze

Hurston's editorial practices with one thrice-published sermon to illuminate her liturgical theory of preaching. By close reading Hurston's ethnographic, theatrical, and novelistic writings on religion, particularly that of preaching in the Sanctified Church, I contend that Hurston uses editorial practices to de-center the spiritual power of preaching, portraying it as a performative event constituted through embodied collaboration centered on rhythmic breath. I then turn to Toni Morrison's textual and audiobook presentation of a sermon in *Beloved* (1987 and 2007) in order to demonstrate the novel's heart-centered theory of effective preaching as communal embodiment.

I conclude this project by briefly returning to Josefina Báez's *Comrade, Bliss Ain't Playing* in conversation with the final scene of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1976). I show how Shange and Báez dramatize the relational dance between author, audience, message, and medium that this dissertation continually explores. I suggest that the collective, embodied act of interpretations employed and represented throughout this project can be used to meditate on the sacred possibilities inherent in every act of reading.

CHAPTER II

THE HERMENEUTICS OF SPIRIT POSSESSION: INTERPRETING MEDIUMS IN *CHANGÓ: THE BIGGEST BADASS* AND *LOUISIANA*

So Dad has joined the others up there. I feel that they do watch and guide, and I also feel that they join me in the hope that this story of our people can help alleviate the legacies of the fact that preponderantly the histories have been written by the winners.

- Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that puteth aside the curtain that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water.

- Translators of 1611 King James Version of the Christian Bible

In a 2014 episode of the American Public Radio show “On Being,” Vodou priest and scholar of Africology Patrick Bellegarde-Smith says that being “ridden” in a possession trance is “the equivalent of handing the keys to your car to a very good friend... and then hoping the car will not be mangled, and it will come back to you in one piece at some point” (Bellegarde-Smith and Tippet). In this analogy, the car is the human medium’s body, and the driving friend is the dominant possessing agent, an external force who temporarily takes control of the medium’s being in order to communicate a message to the gathered worshipping community.¹⁸ It is, as host, Krista Tippet reflects, a “real releasing of self” for the medium (Bellegarde-Smith and Tippet). This non-rigidity of “self” is integral to what anthropologists call spirit possession or

¹⁸ In the context in which Bellegarde-Smith is describing trance, the possessing agent is a diety, or lwa (Murrell 74).

possession trance.¹⁹ Janice Boddy defines the wide array of disparate practices that academics categorize as possession as

an integration of spirit and matter, force or power and corporeal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable. (407)

Perhaps it is because this formulation of reality so thoroughly challenges western philosophical tenets of self-knowledge and individualistic subjectivity that the ideas of mediumship and trance have long fascinated and perplexed Euro-American audiences, like those who may encounter Bellegarde-Smith's interview on National Public Radio. The intellectual history of spirit possession in EuroAmerican discourse evidences centuries of ethnocentrism and racism. At the same time, the figure of the occupied body in Afro-Caribbean media (including literature) deserves respectful academic analysis, which takes seriously the theoretical implications of perhaps unfamiliar cosmologies.

Inspired by George Balandier's "premise that possession is a form of intellectual communication," I read two fictional representations of spirit possession as literary meditations on the nature of interpreting and understanding the self and the external world (qtd in Stoller 19).

¹⁹ For most of the past century, written studies of spirit possession have been the purview of academically-trained anthropologists and ethnographers whose own relationships to their Eurocentric definitions of subjectivity, religion, epistemology, and social experience have naturally inflected the manner in which they discuss unfamiliar phenomena within non-western geographies and cultures. This is not to say that we must eschew the information provided in these studies, but rather that all can be taken with a grain of postcolonial salt. I emulate Benedicty-Kokker, Bellegarde-Smith, Stewart, Johnson, Murphy, and Murrell by citing an array of studies on spirit possession while carefully resisting the urge to treat a western lens as an authority. For examples of anthropological studies not referenced in the body of this chapter, see L. De Heusch *Why Marry Her? Society and Symbolic Structures* (1971) and I.M. Lewis *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (1971).

I begin by studying the character Agne Brown, a spiritual medium, in Afro-Colombian Manuel Zapata Olivella's epic novel, *Changó, The Biggest Badass* (1983 trans. 2010). Using translation studies as a theoretical guide, I analyze the novel's hermeneutics of uncertainty, which extends to Agne Brown's interpretive struggles with her own subjectivity. In the chapter's second section, I follow the story of another fictional spiritual medium, Ella Townsend (later Ella Kohl, then Louisiana) in Afro-Jamaican Erna Brodber's historical fiction, *Louisiana* (1994). I extend my hermeneutical explorations developed in the study of *Changó* to reveal the novel's theorization of interpretation through what I call engaged surrender, which calls for the active passivity of the reader.

CHANGÓ: TRANSLATION AS MEDIUM, TRANSLATION AS MESSAGE

Changó: The Biggest Badass is undoubtedly a book of translations.²⁰ When Zapata Olivella originally wrote *Changó: El Gran Putas* in Spanish, the geographical and chronological breadth of his narrative required a series of translations across language, media, and culture. Zapata Olivella's expansive epic brings together disparate Afro-diasporic histories into one bound volume and thematically ties all of the different customs, cultures, and religions imbedded within each history together with the single thread of one Yoruban god, Changó. In his introduction to the English edition, William Luis writes,

Zapata Olivella immerses himself, and by extension the reader, in the lives, customs, cultures, and religions of the peoples who inhabit the Sub-Saharan African continent, those whose origins can be traced to the Ashanti, Yoruba, Wolof, Kru, Fon, Mandingo, Hausa, Fulani, Congo, Bib, Ganga, Ibos, and Bushmen, among many other tribes. (xvi)

²⁰ In order to create the sense of constant translational activity for this analysis, and to give Spanish-language readers the opportunity to check Tittler's translational choices without too much effort, I include Zapata-Olivella's original text in the footnotes.

The author does not limit himself to the philosophy or mythology of African Religions, but discusses an array of traditions throughout the lengthy book including but not limited to Christian Catholicism, North African and USAmerican Islam and Haitian Vodou. In bringing all of these disparate religious and cultural paradigms together in one novel, Zapata Olivella performs “cultural translations”²¹ as he transmutes images and ideas from one system of thought into another, a process that the author always enacts through the medium of the written word. For the 1983 publication, Zapata Olivella also translated in the traditional, linguistic sense, rendering in Spanish written historical and literary documents from languages including English, Portuguese, French, and Dutch. Furthermore, because the author chooses to use a written text to depict African and Afro-diasporic oral religious traditions, *Changó* is also consistently translating across media, performing religio-cultural translations through what Ramon Jakobson would call “intersemiotic translation” (“Linguistic Aspects of Translation” 139).

Perhaps the most distinct translatorial action Zapata Olivella demonstrates in the 1983 *Changó* is his selective *inaction*, those instances when he chooses to retain a non-Spanish term rather than transpose it. Zapata Olivella particularly refuses to linguistically translate words that carry spiritual connotations for the novel. For example, the author employs the English form of “soul” (rather than the Spanish “alma”) when the word is embedded within the USAfrican American (English-speaking) context. Similarly, Zapata Olivella employs the African designation “Bantú” throughout the novel. While the term Bantú generally denotes peoples within the Niger-Congo language families (i.e. Yoruba, Igbo, Fula, Swahili, etc), Zapata Olivella

²¹ This term became popular in literary studies thanks to the work of Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), but was also a concept being developed in the realms of ethnography, anthropology, and sociology. See William F. Hanks and Carlo Severi “Translation Worlds: The Epistemological Space of Translation” (2014) for an overview.

gives it a particular spiritual connotation, saying that it “alludes to the force that joins in a single knot mankind with its forebears and offspring, all immersed in the present, past, and future universe” (449).²² The author’s retention of “Bantú” and the metaphysical thinking the African word is meant to indicate for readers demonstrates how Zapata Olivella treats both translation and non-translation as a site for “knowledge-production, or insight, somehow beyond the boundaries of equivalence” (Pym 101). This is to say that Zapata Olivella recognizes how translatorial action, the series of decisions and maneuvers undertaken by a translator, can create new forms of understanding for the source material.

By providing a glossary at the end of his novel, Zapata Olivella acknowledges that “texts are not immediately meaningful and need to be actively interpreted” (Pym 103) agreeing with the foundational tenet of nineteenth-century German hermeneutics, which influenced almost all our contemporary theories on translation in the western academy today.²³ Like hermeneutical philosopher, Christian theologian, and translator Friedrich Schleiermacher, Zapata Olivella recognizes translatorial action as a kind of interpretive action and recognizes how translations inevitably direct readers’ interpretations of a target text. And yet, despite providing a glossary, *Changó’s* preface “To the fellow traveler” instructs,

If you come upon a mysterious term, give it your own meaning, reinvent it. Don’t consult the glossary at the end of the book, because that serves only to show the

²² “alude a la fuerza que une en un solo nudo al hombre con su ascendencia y descendencia inmersos en el universo presente, pasado, y futuro” (730)

²³ Pym adds, “The nineteenth-century development of hermeneutics was closely linked to way of making sense of the Bible, especially in view of the growing scientific knowledge that contested literal readings of what was supposed to be God’s word” (103). Clearly translation and interpretation become especially pressing questions in regards to spiritual and religious matters.

landmarks you have already passed; it will not orient you along the paths ahead.
(1)²⁴

What kind of hermeneutical practice is Zapata Olivella encouraging here? Surely the author is chuckling at his reader's inevitable "failure" to resist taking advantage of the much-needed "navigation" key offered in the back of the book. On the one hand, Zapata Olivella is didactic in his paratextual guidance, going so far as to define the abstract "sense" of words, taking advantage of the knowledge-production he can create through translation. For example, Zapata Olivella defines "soul" as "the most authentic expression of black feeling" in a "North American text" (461).²⁵ On the other hand, he tells the reader to ignore the vocabulary instructions and create new meaning for foreign terms altogether. In this way, Zapata Olivella dares his reader to embrace the instability of language and read like a radical deconstructionist, constantly questioning the creation of meaning through interpretation. These interpretive quandaries within translation are then magnified in the case of the 2010 English edition of the novel.

Because the 1983 *Changó, El Gran Putas* already presents a complex puzzle of translational meaning-making, the 2010 English edition of Manuel Zapata Olivella's *Changó: The Biggest Badass* is nothing less than a palimpsest of translations and interpretive possibilities. The Spanish-to-English translator, Jonathon Tittler, a white professor of Spanish at Rutgers University in Camden, spent 15 years translating *Changó* in the hopes that the text would "be known by English speaking readers," particularly by graduate students in English literary studies ("Rutgers-Camden Spanish Professor Translates Prize-Winning Latin American Novel"). While

²⁴ "Si descubres un vocablo misteriosos, dale tu propia connotación, reinvéntala. No acudas al «Cuaderno de bitácora» al final del libro, porque este solo tiene por objeto mostrar los riscos por donde has andado; no es una brújula para descubrir caminos" (35).

²⁵ "En referencia al contexto norteamericano, alude a la mayor autenticidad del sentimiento del negro" (665).

Tittler sought to introduce Zapata Olivella's epic to more readers, especially within a pedagogical setting, his methods of translation do not necessarily make it easy for his intended English-speaking audience to "know" the novel *Changó*. For example, Tittler strove to maintain the novel's "non-Western worldview with regard to time" by alternating between disparate verb tenses in English that attempt to match the disorienting changes Zapata Olivella makes in Spanish (*Changó* xi). This technique results in sentences such as, "We always contemplate the already known becoming of our children" (423) from "Siempre contemplamos el devenir ya conocido de nuestros hijos" (611). Tittler explains that his approach to translating *Changó* into English was informed by what he perceived as Zapata Olivella's "resistance to Western, scripture-based thinking" as evidenced in the "relentlessly skewed" narrative techniques employed in the original Spanish-language novel (6, 5).²⁶ Referencing the translation theories of Lawrence Venuti, Tittler calls his English version of *Changó* a "likewise resistant translation, which attempts to return opacity to the invisible translation" (6). By rendering the translation of *Changó* opaque, Tittler eschews the illusion of an easily-conquered text, and promotes labor-intensive reading practices for his target audience. In fact, correspondence between Tittler and Zapata Olivella reveal that the translator's insistence on retaining the author's confusing grammatical style often impeded the publication of this novel in English by publishers including the African World Press (Letter to Zapata Olivella 1995).

²⁶ It should be noted that Zapata Olivella expressed great interest in having his novel published in other languages, as well as the quality of translation performed. The author's investment in the translations of his novel are evidenced in his correspondence with Jonathon Tittler, as well the French translators of his texts, with whom he hoped "colaborar en resolver los muchos problemas de carácter idiomática que tiene la obra" (Letter to Dorita Piquero de Nouhaud 1985). In addition, Zapata Olivella explains in a March 1985 letter to Jean-Luc Pidoux-Payot that he has requested that Oveja Negra, who published the second Spanish edition of his work, "revert to him all rights to translate and publish his work in other languages": "revertieran a mi todos los derechos para traducción y publicación en otras lenguas" (1985).

Tittler says that he performs his “resistant translation” through the use of “archaisms, foreignisms, literalisms, and the like, thus reminding the monolingual and perhaps ethnocentric reader that the text is indeed a translation and not ‘just the same’ as domestic texts” (6).²⁷ For example, Tittler adopts what Phillip E. Lewis terms “abusive fidelity” by following the source text so closely that it seems strange to target readers (1985, 2005 263). Tittler employs abusive fidelity when he chooses to literally translate Zapata Olivella’s Spanish translation of lines from Claude McKay’s English-language poem “If We Must Die” rather than render it in its original English form.²⁸

McKay original:

If we must die – let it not be like hogs

...

Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

Zapata Olivella Spanish translation:

Si hemos de morir

que no sea como cerdos...

...

y frente al muro

morir matando:

¡Disparad hacia atrás!

Tittler translation:

If we must die,

Let it not be like swine ...

But with our backs to the wall

Die killing:

Fire back!

²⁷ Tittler’s approach also speaks to the translational theories of Friedrich Schleiermacher on choosing “foreignizing” translations and French translator Antoine Berman who advocates for translations that “recogniz[e] and receive the Other as Other” (Pym 104).

²⁸ See Vera Kutzinski *The Worlds of Langston Hughes* (2012) for an in-depth look at Tittler’s translation of Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.”

This literary translation via “back-translation” from McKay’s original English to Tittler’s translated English highlights the extensive mediations and interpretations that underpin all of *Changó: The Biggest Badass*, implicating the reader in an ongoing process of knowledge creation. Tittler’s use of back-translation for this poem ultimately reminds his audience of trained English scholars, who will likely be familiar with McKay’s canonical poem, that they cannot simply rely on traditional literary knowledge when reading this novel. Rather, the target graduate student readers must constantly interrogate their assumptions about what counts as a source text, and about how we determine a source text’s meaning. Tittler’s back-translation, like Zapata Olivella’s paradoxical paratext, embraces the ways that translation creates new meaning and methods of meaning-making.

I demonstrate how explorations of translation and interpretation actualized and narrated throughout the English version of *Changó* privilege a hermeneutics of uncertainty that extends beyond translational equivalence. As Ramon Jakobson explains, “the meaning of a word is nothing but its translation by another sign which can be substituted for it” (“Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics”). That being the case, linguistic translation is simply one piece of a more expansive field of questions regarding how we come to interpret and understand any form of communication. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet's *The Craft of Translation* (1989) states,

the translation process affirms the “how” and not the “what” of reading and understanding. If one asks, “what does something mean,” one expects a statement-like answer. If one asks the question, “how does something come to mean,” avenues are opened that lead to the exploration of the complexities inherent in a text.

The visibility of translation in Tittler's rendering of *Changó*, according to this logic, leads to the subsequent visibility of hermeneutics. Tittler's insistence on visibility for translation, I later demonstrate, reveals a unique take on textual opacity. The resistant translation, like Zapata Olivella's contradictory directions on interpretation, requires that a reader must adopt a hermeneutics that foregrounds the inherent instabilities of any linguistic translation.

The hermeneutical performances of translation and more generally communication that permeate Tittler's version of *Changó* are made exaggeratedly manifest through the character Agne Brown's experiences as a spiritual medium in the novel's final section set in USAmerica, "Ancestral Combatants." Agne Brown, a character likely inspired by Angela Davis,²⁹ becomes a medium as a result of spirit possession when she is mentally and bodily overwhelmed by the power of external metaphysical forces, namely the god Changó. Agne Brown's experiences of spirit possession are reminiscent of trance experiences in several Afro-diasporic traditions, including Vodou, Candomblé, Santería, and Myal. It comes as no surprise that the depiction of spirit possession in Zapata Olivella's novel does not squarely fit into any one Afro-diasporic religious tradition, considering that the epic also brings together diverse languages, cultures, religions, and communities. The phrase spirit possession is itself a concept that emerged "as translation and comparative class" amongst western anthropologists overwhelmingly studying

²⁹ See Julian Garavito in *Centro Virtual Cervantes* (327) and Antonio D. Tillis in *Manuel Zapata Olivella and the "Darkening" of Latin American Literature*. Like Agne Brown, Angela Davis was a professor at an elite university, a leader in the black power movement and was incarcerated. Angela Davis was a well-known scholar and activist at University of California at Los Angeles when she was imprisoned for her suspected collaboration with the Soledad Brothers in 1971, but was acquitted. *Changó's* Agne Brown, on the other hand, is not treated as a scholar, but rather is considered a "preacher of a new cult" when she is convicted of "procuring and promiscuity" possibly connected to "depraved mysticism" (317). Vera Kutzinski has noted Agne Brown's resonances with Zora Neale Hurston along with Angela Davis (*Langston Hughes* 51). While Hurston does appear later in the text as a character and Davis does not, the connection between Agne and Hurston makes sense considering that both studied Anthropology and were associated with Columbia University.

what were considered cultural “others” (Johnson 394). In his genealogical study of spirit possession, Paul Christopher Johnson notes that in early colonial trading between European and African communities, “possession, the spirit speaking through the sorcerer ... presented crises of transparency, *translation*, and confidence” (408, emphasis mine). How can the reader ever come to fully understand Agne’s meaning or that of the novel she represents if, as a result of spirit possession, she is always an embodiment of multiple, conflicting voices? To put this in terms of translation: how can we ever reconcile the inherent uncertainty of all communication that translation makes discomfortingly apparent?

Agne physically and metaphorically embodies the translatorial actions of mediation, and all of the hermeneutical anxieties such actions engender. In his (pointedly Euro-centric) text on spirit-channeling and translation theory, Douglas Robinson (2001) explains,

in many significant ways translating resembles, or has been commonly thought of in terms that resemble, spirit-channeling – communicating with and/or mediating for others the spirits of dead people, or, as spiritualist writers like to put it, “discarante spirits.” (21)³⁰

As a spiritual medium, Agne translates messages and herself as she crosses time and space in order to bring divine knowledge from the gods and ancestors to the living Bantu. Marked with the sign of the “divine linguist” Eleggba, Agne represents the processes of translation, tasked with communicating supernatural messages in a semiotic code that her fellow humans can understand (Russell 9). Just as translation scholars still deliberate over the extent to which a translator’s own authorship should be considered a “faithful” rendering of a text, Agne’s claims to authorship and

³⁰ Unfortunately Robinson’s monograph never once considers the African traditional and African-derived spiritual paradigms that characterize the metaphysical world of *Changó*.

agency oscillate throughout her experiences with mediumship. In one encounter with her white (and implicitly racist) professor of African anthropology, Dr. Harrington, Agne explains, “I pronounce the words, dictated by another,” attesting to her position as the medium through which another’s words are expressed (307). In Tittler’s translation, Agne claims to have no authorship over the words she pronounces, and to act simply as the instrument of expression. In Zapata Olivella’s Spanish version however, Agne’s authorial position is far less clear. She says, “moduladas por otro, pronunciaré las palabras” (literally “modulated by another, I will pronounce the words”) (450). Unlike Tittler’s mediumship as dictation, here Agne is the translator who allows the “spirit” of the source author to calibrate her transmission of meaning.

Agne is not only a translator in this novel; she herself becomes a textual medium, which, like the novel *Changó*, is the culmination of many translations. Chango's messenger (a fellow translator of sorts), Ngafúa, tells Agne Brown,

Among all the ekobios, Chango has chosen you – woman, daughter, sister, and lover – so you may gather the broken, persecuted, murdered family of the Muntu [singular of Bantu] in the great crucible of all bloodlines. (301)³¹

Agne, like the novel *Changó*, acts as a site for collecting, translating, and communicating the memories of the Afro-diasporic persons who have come before. She is the substance that contains and carries on ancestral wisdom; she embodies the process of translatorial “afterlife” (*Fortleben*, or “prolonged life”) that Walter Benjamin identifies in “The Task of the Translator” (76). Like the book *Changó*, Agne holds together and passes on generations of translation and

³¹ “Changó, entre todos los ekobios, te ha escogido a ti: mujer, hija, hermana y amante para que reúnas la rota, preseguida, asesinada familia del muntu en la gran caldera de todas las sangres” (443).

communication. Throughout “Ancestral Combatants,” Agne is visited by famous figures such as Nat Turner (343) and Sojourner Truth (371), as well as lesser-known African Americans like Osborn Perry Anderson (381), the only surviving black combatant in the raid on Harper’s Ferry. Agne then, collects each visiting ekobio’s story. She is the “crucible of all bloodlines” by way of storylines.³²

Agne becomes like a translated text, but moreover, she is analogous to Tittler’s resistant, English translation of *Changó*. The multiplicity of voices that Agne comes to embody is reflected in the style of her mediumship, just as the dynamic complexity of Zapata Olivella’s Afro-diasporic novel is reflected in Tittler’s style of translation. Malcolm X comments on the layers of voices he recognizes in Agne’s mediumship. He describes her style of communication:

It was your voice, Agne Brown. You spoke with the old accents of ekobios I have heard speak only here in the House of the Dead. Benkos Biojo, Gunga Zumbi, The Aleijadinho, L’Ouverture, José María Morelos, Bolívar, Nat Turner.” (375-76)³³

Agne embodies all of these Ancestors, and so her voice expresses this long lineage. The medium’s voice is a bridge between the physical and abstract as it makes alive again the timbres

³² Though not the only medium in the section, Agne Brown is the most prominent one, and the one with the most polyvalent role throughout the text. Because Agne’s visitors sometimes claim to embody the messenger-god Ngafúa, Agne is not the only “medium” or translator in this section. In addition, the text creates a parallel between Agne’s channeling of Changó and Sojourner Truth’s statement that the Christian “Lord spoke through me” (372), “el Señor habló por mí” (540). While Agne’s role as a character in *Changó*’s plot-line is not always at the fore of the novel’s final section (particularly in the chapters “The Thunderbolt Makers” and “The Civil War Gave Us Freedom”), her narrative position as the person who listens to and brings together these many historical messages remains consistent throughout.

³³ “Era tu voz, Agne Brown. Tenías viejos acentos de ekobios a quienes solo he oído hablar aquí en la Casa de los Muertos. Benkos Biojó, Gunga Zumbi, el Aleijadinho, L’Ouverture, José María Morelos, Bolívar, Nat Turner... “ (545).

and tones of the dead. Agne's mediumship acknowledges the previous translators and authors that came before her, mirroring Tittler's dedication to including the symphony of voices and transpositions that characterize Zapata Olivella's epic undertaking. As the medium, Agne physically embodies the textual afterlives of translation; and in her performances of mediumship, she repeatedly actualizes those sonic resurrections.

One paradigmatic illustration of Agne's mediumship occurs when she is only a child. After she witnesses the lynching of her African American father, Agne delivers an impassioned speech about Changó's prophecy of racial justice from the pulpit of her white stepfather's Christian church while under a possession trance. Agne's heterodox utterances in this scene beg Robinson's question: "what forces are active within [the translator's subjectivity], and to what extent are those forces channeled into it from without?" (3). Changó's messenger Ngafúa tells Agne that as she climbs the pulpit, "Changó's fire has already set your tongue aflame," suggesting that the following act of pronouncement is not exclusively her own, but to a certain extent the product of Changó channeled through her (305).³⁴ Agne's speech is also seen as the translation of an external entity's message, though a nefarious one, by her Reverend stepfather. Horrified at Agne's violent speech, Reverend Robert begs her to "pronounce the word God," and "let the force of light overcome the dark shadows that invade" her (305).³⁵ Reverend Robert's view of possession here evokes "Christian discourses of demonology" (Johnson 396) in which the possessing force is assumed to be satanic and can only be exorcised by a speech act that calls on the dominant metaphysical force of the Christian God. Both Ngafúa and Reverend Robert

³⁴ "Calladamente subes al púlpito pero ya el fuego de Changó encendía tu lengua" (448). Zapata Olivella uses the past imperfect here to distinguish that the action of Changó's tongue happened long before Agne walks up to speak.

³⁵ "Pronuncia la palabra Dios ... Agnes, por última vez te ruego sobrepongas la fuerza de la luz las oscuras tinieblas que te invaden" (448)

consider Agne as the embodied translator of another entity's message. Thanks to the juxtaposition of Agne's childish innocence and the vehement hostility of the message she speaks, her role as medium or translator appears particularly diminished of personal agency and subjectivity. The seeming displacement of the medium's agency for that of the possessing deity in this moment is reminiscent of Orisha possession trance in the southern Caribbean (Murrell 219) as well as Vodou trances in Haiti (Deren 16).

Just as translation reveals the *process* of meaning-making through language, Agne's experiences with spirit possession and mediumship reveal the methods of interpretation through which we come to know ourselves as subjects. Agne's experiences of mediumship through possession create constant uncertainty for the reader about her subjectivity, which comes to represent the identity of the translator and the translated text. As Michel Foucault explains in the essay "Religious Deviations and Medical Knowledge," determining who and what possesses you demands an articulated system of interior life (50-57). And yet, the experience of mediumship through spirit possession (like the resistant translation) makes it impossible to ever rely on what Brazilian translation theorist Rosemary Arrojo would consider the illusion of stable meanings ("Asymmetrical Relations of Power and the Ethics of Translation"). This hermeneutics of uncertainty applies to Agne's journey in coming to know herself as a newly formed subject.

Even in the case of her own story, Agne has to act as a kind of translator, finding ways to newly articulate the memories of her own childhood told to her by Ngafúa. "Everything I remember," Agnes tells the reader, "is just a borrowed memory" (312). Here Agne is pressed to navigate the layers of distance between herself and her story, which is only "prestada," (literally rendered or borrowed). Ngafúa addresses Agne with the imperative, "You have to remember

everything” (312),³⁶ insisting that like the novel *Changó*, Agne must attempt to “recordar” (literally remember or record) all the translated histories of her people, which can never be fully captured in translation. Zapata Olivella particularly develops this self-directed hermeneutics of uncertainty for Agne by toggling between narrative perspective and voice. At the beginning of “Ancestral Combatants,” readers bounce between Ngafúa’s seemingly omniscient narration that addresses Agne in the second person to Agne’s limited first-person perspective.

Even when Agne appears to be speaking for herself in the first-person, the unpredictable transitions between narrative voices creates more confusion than clarity about Agne’s subjectivity. Because spirit possession assumes “the possibility of separating the self into one of more elements,” (Bourguignon 4), her identity can never be considered static and understandable. For example, when Agne's new "Aunt" Harriet, a racist white woman, hears her Reverend brother call Agne his "daughter," the text enigmatically begins in first person and ends in the second: "Aunt Harriet casts her eyes over my insignificant presence. She had seen me. But it was as if you did not exist" (314).³⁷ It is up for interpretation whether or not the second person here is Agne speaking to herself, illustrating her sense of split identity, or if it is Ngafúa, the messenger, giving Agne back her own buried memories to translate into a narrative of self. When Agne’s subjectivity becomes tangled like this in the narrative, it questions the solidity of the “I” and “you” completely, “as if *you* did not exist.”

By analyzing “the *idea* of the occupied body and spoken-through person,” that is, in considering Agne’s mediumship through “possession as an episteme,” (Johnson 395) we can also

³⁶ “Todo cuanto recuerdo no es más que la memoria prestada ... Tienes que recordar todo” (457)

³⁷ This turn of grammar is even more difficult to consider in Spanish, “La tía Harriet vuelve la vista sobre mi insignificante presencia. Me había visto. Pero eras algo así como si no existieras” (460)

recognize how the formulation of static subjectivity is itself an interpretive construct.³⁸ The concept of solid subjectivity is actually the result of a hermeneutical process. We create the idea of a stable self by interpreting our experiences, our stories, into a cohesive whole. Spirit possession, which involves the integration (or possibly total domination) of external forces within the boundaries of the human, necessarily undermines the belief in perfectly sustained personhood over time. Agne's hermeneutical crisis of personal subjectivity as a result of spirit possession sheds light on the extent to which concepts of identity are founded on narratives of individualistic autonomy.

In the case of *Changó*, Agne's individualistic autonomy is rendered obsolete when she realizes that she cannot control the boundaries of her own body and mind. The sense of being constituted by possibly conflicting agents is exemplified in the scene during which Agne recognizes that her body is marked with a "stain between [her] breasts" representing Elegba's snakes while in the shower" (302). At first Agne is frightened by the uninvited marking on her skin, and responds by trying to "brush it away," so as to regain control of the boundaries of her physical body. After the physical marking is revealed, certain mental objects – knowledge and memories – begin to trespass into her mind. At this point, Agne loses control of her own mental states. Ngafúa narrates Agne's experiences to her,

You turn on the light. The living and fleshy root persisted there between your breast. A vague feeling stirs the memory of past anguish, the smell of burning flesh. You intuit the stain's shape: two snakes biting each other's tail. You try to

³⁸ In his historical work on the episteme spirit possession, Johnson writes, "Via the labor of the negative "spirit possession" defined the rational, autonomous, self-possessed individual imagined as the foundation of the modern state, in canonical texts from Hobbes, Jean Bodin, Locke, Charles de Brosses, Hume, Kant, and many others, as those texts constructed the free individual and citizen against the backdrop of colonial horizons and slavery" (398).

relieve your unease with the pious idea that you are drowning in a nightmare.
(302)³⁹

This disintegration of external boundaries and personal control is not a pleasant experience for Agne, but rather a disorienting one, rife with the terror of losing one's own mind and sense of self. Agne's role as medium is made manifest here in several respects: the stain of Elegba's serpents makes her body the means and material by which something is communicated and a host substance to alien life, all while graphically connecting the frightened protagonist to the medium-like Oricha Elegba, who is "the link between the living and the dead" (308). Furthermore, the image of the Oricha tells the message that "to be reborn you have to die," signaling the death of any illusion Agne had of a bounded, knowable self. According to Joseph Murphy, in several "diasporan" traditions in the Americas including Vodoun, Candomblé, Santería, Revival Zion, and ecstatic African American churches in the United States,

to be mounted, crowned, or converted by the spirit is to die to a former life and be reborn in to a new one "in the spirit." When an individual receives the spirit, a part his or her inner nature is also transformed to partake of the spirit's divinity.
(*Working the Spirit* 185)

For our protagonist, resurrection into new life as the medium working for her community's liberation requires the death of her former sense of self. That is, she must abandon her previous methods of interpreting her own subjectivity.

³⁹ "Enciendes la luz. Allí persistía entre tus senos el vivo y encarnado cuajarón. Un vago sentimiento revive el olvido de pasadas angustias, el olor a carne quemada. Intuirás la forma de la mancha: dos serpientes mordiéndose las colas. Tratas de aliviar tu desazón con la piadosa idea de que te ahogas en una pesadillas" (444).

What Agne represents, then, is the radical unfamiliarity of self that occurs in the process of mediumship through spirit possession. This experience of alienation brings to mind Benjamin's theorizations about the disorienting repercussions of linguistic translation. He writes in "The Task of the Translator,"

We think we are at ease in our own language, we feel a coziness, a familiarity, a shelter in the language we call our own, in which we think that we are not alienated. What the translation reveals is that this alienation is at its strongest in our relation to our own original language, that the original language within which we are engaged is disarticulated in a way which imposes upon us a particular alienation, a particular suffering. (24)

This alienation through translation reminds us of Tittler's unfamiliar rendering of McKay's poem within the familiar semiotic landscape of English. Tittler's back-translation ultimately alienates the academic English audience while inviting them to join Agne's struggles of hermeneutical re-imagining. Surely there is no better demonstration of the particular suffering experienced in a process of self-alienation than the terrified Agne in the shower. The stains on Agne's breasts make visible the hermeneutical disorientation of translation and mediumship. There could be no better symbol for Agne's destabilized subjectivity as translator and translation than the "ambiguous messenger trickster deity" Elegba, an Oricha whose cross-dressing in Santería and androgyny in Vodoun illustrate the fluidity of identity (Murrell 35, 78, 110).

Though Agne's death and resurrection in the shower appears horrifying, Zapata Olivella challenges a simplistic reading of Agne's journey into mediumship through suffering. When Agne discovers the stain of Elegba's snakes, the stain that marks her as belonging to Changó's mission for the Muntu, she paradoxically "slowly take[s] possession of [her] body" (302).⁴⁰ In a logical contradiction, Agne begins to truly possess her own body just as she recognizes the signs

⁴⁰ "Lentamente entras en posesión de tu cuerpo" (444)

of Changó having already staked possession of her. And when the reader meets Agne in a Harlem jail for another moment of mediumship at the end of the novel, she is a notably altered character from the frightened child and young adult first introduced. Rather than Ngafúa addressing a young woman afraid of losing her sense of identity and agency, this woman describes herself in the first-person as, “certain that I am not a stranger to myself,” (420-421).⁴¹ Somehow Agne’s self-alienation through spirit-possession also becomes her gateway into heightened self-connection. This simultaneously mystical idealization of translation and mediumship reminds the reader of the way in which the translators of the King James version of the Christian bible describe the process of translation. This chapter’s epigraph cites the religious translators, who describe their linguistic work as the removal of a shell or curtain so that readers/worshippers may find nourishment and visual access “into the most holy place,” in this case new understandings of the self.

Ultimately, Agne engages in an interpretive act I call “engaged surrender,” which is the conscious decisions to let go of a totalizing sense of personal will power. Agne becomes the active participant in her own possession by external forces, in the process becoming more herself by also allowing herself to be objectified, turned into a text of translations. I expand this concept of engaged surrender through analysis of Erna Brodber’s novel, *Louisiana*.

ENGAGED SURRENDER IN LOUISIANA

Like *Changó*, Erna Brodber’s 1994 fiction, *Louisiana*, is a disorienting novel, which challenges readers to consider their own interpretive practices. *Louisiana* takes readers across geographies, time periods, and metaphysical realms as it gradually illuminates the interconnected

⁴¹ “segura de que no soy una extraña a mí misma” (608)

fragments of personal stories. While *Changó* voices the convergent narratives of “Ancestral Combatants” together through the articulated mediumship of Agne Brown, *Louisiana* uses the sensorial perceptions of the medium, Ella Townsend/ Louisiana, to reveal the expansive narrative mosaic that encompasses several Afro-diasporic biographies.

Louisiana narrates the metaphysical journey of Ella Townsend, a Jamaican-born woman raised in the United States, who is “ridden,” or possessed, by metaphysical powers during anthropological research. Ella begins the novel as a data-oriented graduate student of anthropology in Chicago, but is forced to question her scientific assumptions about reality after a supernatural oral-history interview in Louisiana with an elderly black woman, Anna “Mammy” King. Upon reviewing the recording, Ella discovers that she has become a reluctant spiritual medium as a result of ancestral possession by Louise “Lowly,” a deceased Afro-Jamaican woman and the USAfrican American Anna, who dies shortly after the Works Project Administration interview. She and the novel’s readers then spend the majority of the text attempting to understand Ella’s incredible experiences, ultimately struggling to reconcile seemingly contradictory epistemologies in the process. Like Agne Brown’s, Ella’s presumptions about her personal subjectivity are all up for question as a result of spirit possession. At first this disorientation of personal subjectivity frustrates Ella, as it upends her existing hermeneutics of reality. That is, until she, like Agne, becomes an active participant in her own capitulation to the power of spirit possession. Ella ultimately consents to the “hegemony of the spirit,” and becomes a conjure woman and spiritual memory keeper in New Orleans. At the end of the novel, Ella grows too frail to continue recording her personal journey of mediating in a world of opacity, at which point her husband, Reuben, who has also left his career as an anthropologist, takes over for her.

Louisiana is Brodber's first novel set predominately in the United States (rather than her home country of Jamaica) and published by an academic USAmerican press (The University of Mississippi Press), again making it an optimal analytical companion to "Ancestral Combatants" in the 2010 edition of *Changó, The Biggest Badass*, which is also set in the United States and published by Texas Tech University Press.⁴² Both *Louisiana* and *Changó* are marketed to a USAmerican academic audience, dominated by readers who are most likely unfamiliar with the Afro-Caribbean religious concept of spirit possession that foregrounds the novels' cosmological events. In other words, *Louisiana* can be considered a vehicle of cultural translation just like *Changó*. Also like the "skewed" and "resistant" *Changó*, *Louisiana* does not pander to passive readers hoping to learn about foreign events in a domesticated fashion. On the contrary, Brodber calls for an engaged hermeneutics, which ultimately also requires a paradoxical hermeneutics of engaged surrender. In other words, *Louisiana* sets the reader up to work very hard at letting go of interpretation.

Similar to the authors and translators of the immense and tortuous *Changó*, Brodber narrates this enigmatic story with appropriately complex literary devices such as non-chronological plot structures, dialogic formatting without indication of the speaker, and shifting narrative perspectives, not to mention oblique references to music, politics, folk-tales, Euro-centric academic discourse, and of course, religion from across the globe in mixtures of *patois* and "standard" written English. Because *Louisiana*, like *Changó*, does not attempt to "domesticate" unfamiliar ideas and concepts for the western academic audience, the reader embarks on a journey of interpretive frustration. Brodber explains her intentionally disorienting

⁴² The previous publications of *Changó* were by the now-defunct Editorial Oveja Negra press in Bogotá, Colombia in 1983 and 1985, then again in 1992 by Rei Andes Ltda. This third one includes a scholarly introduction, and touts itself as a "edición crítica" (*Changó* xi).

writing style for several of her novels in terms of her hopes for such active reading: “I put the words on the page in unusual ways in the hope that people would ask why and in the process pay attention and get to my meaning” (“Me an My Head-Hurting” 121). What might “meaning” signify in a novel like *Louisiana*, which is deeply dedicated to accepting that which is not easily known? At the heart of the question of meaning in *Louisiana* is an exploration of epistemological uncertainty. The overwhelming disorientation of epistemological uncertainty in *Louisiana* is reminiscent of Zapata Olivella’s “skewed” narrative techniques and Tittler’s “resistant” translatorial actions, which encourage English-speaking academic readers to see their own epistemological assumptions as unstable.

I argue that in creating sustained epistemological uncertainty for her readers and characters, Brodber’s novel advocates for a hermeneutical practice that welcomes what Martinican scholar Edouard Glissant terms opacity. In order to engage Glissant’s concept of opacity with regards to Brodber’s *Louisiana*, it is first crucial to elucidate his philosophical tenet of “Relation,” which is foregrounded in “respect for the Other as *different* from oneself” (Britton 11). In *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory* (1999), Celia Britton explains that Glissant conceptualizes Relation as “a fluid and unsystematic system whose elements are engaged in a radically nonhierarchical free play of interrelatedness” (11). Brodber’s reader finds that in *Louisiana*, characters, cultures, and plot-lines exist in a similarly fluid dance, where narrative structure slowly arises out of a seemingly unsystematic choreography of moving bodies and voices. For Glissant, in order to respect our interconnection with *and* separation from the Other (be that an individual human or unfamiliar religious tradition), we must protect the Other’s right to opacity, to be outside of our totalizing understanding. Like Brodber’s readers, the protagonist Ella must learn to embrace “the welcome opaqueness, through which the other escapes me”

(*Caribbean Discourse* 162, translated Britton). Spirit possession is an apt theme for creating narrative opacity, considering that for early modern western colonizers, spirit possession signified “the problem of interpreting and controlling interior lives of peoples encountered in newly occupied lands” (Johnson 396). So spirit possession, with its negation of clearly identifiable subjectivities through stable identity or clear agency becomes a ready tool for literary opacity. After all, how can you easily interpret the interior life of a person who is not always the same person? In this way, Brodber shares with Zapata Olivella and Tittler a commitment to creating new interpretive and epistemological formulations by means of the trope of spirit possession, as well as narrative and linguistic confusion.

Ultimately, Ella accepts that while she must actively participate in the discovery and transmission of knowledge through her own work as a medium, part of that work is done by purposefully waiting for the revelation of knowledge “in the fullness of time” (115). This formulation creates the hermeneutical paradigm of engaged surrender, which encompasses a deep respect for not only the Other’s right to opacity, but also the realization of our own personal opacity to ourselves. In a deeply ironic twist, Ella’s journey into letting go of her need to understand and categorize others leads her to also let go of her previous assumptions about her own subjectivity. Ella accepts that to truly come into understanding of the “community tale,” and in doing so, to see herself as integral to that narrative, she must also recognize the instability of her own identity, which she cannot render fully legible to even herself (161). The protagonist ritualizes this shift in self-understanding when she renames herself Louisiana and devotes her life to what she calls the “hegemony of the spirit,” representing her active consent to being

dominated by metaphysical forces that she cannot understand.⁴³ In the following pages I illustrate the ways in which Brodber creates disorientation for her readers and characters through conflicting epistemologies, then explore the implications of welcoming opacity, and finally I extend an anecdote Ella tells about deciphering a religious picture in a church's stained glass window as a trope for engaged surrender, the active waiting required in spiritual investigation through possession.

Louisiana establishes the prominence of the unknown before the plot even begins. An editorial letter from the office of E.R. Anderson at The Black World Press frames the body of the novel, presenting the text's origins, plot, and protagonists as enigmas. This editorial framing technique ironically draws on the eighteenth and nineteenth-century practice of using authenticating paratextual devices such as introductory letters to legitimate slave narratives. It is worth noting this connection considering that the protagonist will ultimately piece together the forgotten stories of enslaved persons in the United States and Jamaica. Like this legacy, the editor offers Ella's academic and publishing credentials. However, unlike traditional authentications by white editors for narratives by black authors, *Louisiana's* introductory letter makes it clear that the fragmented personal stories documented in the novel will not be so easily assembled. The prologue tells the reader that while the manuscript simply "appeared" on their desks from unknown origins, the manuscript's primary author Ella Townsend seems to have "disappeared" into unknown territories, which are not systematized in the realms of the public record (3). Ella somehow came "under the influence of psychic forces," after which she was no longer identifiable in the academic records of rational epistemologies (4). Anderson's letter

⁴³ In discussing Ella's active surrender to "the hegemony of the spirit," I pull from Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony as the "formation and organization of consent" (Ives 2).

therefore flips the genre expectations of such “authenticating” paratext on its head by only authenticating the text’s disorienting narrative style, and the difficulties of “knowing” the opaque character.

In addition to foreshadowing Ella’s enigmatic identity throughout the novel, E.R. Anderson’s paratext demonstrates the pitfalls of imposing one, straight-forward narrative meaning to Brodber’s historical novel. Anderson proffers a conjectured chronological structure for the manuscript by cobbling together the text’s sections into one story-line with the addition of his or her own words in parentheses. Anderson explains that the anonymous manuscript was “divided into six part,” each section’s title possibly contributing to a message that reads: “I heard the voice from Heaven say, “first the goat must be killed (and you get) out of Eden and get over (to be) Louisiana.’ Den a who sey Sammy dead, (if this can happen)”” (5).⁴⁴ Alas, even this confounding editorial suggestion, which itself ends with the conditional of “if this can happen,” is only “a hypothesis,” one informed guess among many (5). In addition, the term “hypothesis” introduces a rationalist method of examining the non-rationalist theme of spiritual possession. This epistemological disjuncture predicts Ella’s early attempts to understand her situation scientifically, and predictively undermines the expected methods of investigation for many of Brodber’s USAmerican, academic readers. At the same time, because the hypothesis ends in conjecture, and so fails to clarify the plot, the editorial mocks the publisher’s inability to impress logical transparency on the story through an impetus to narrative closure. This fictionalized framing structure is akin to Zapata Olivella’s contradictory reading advice to readers in the prologue of *Changó*. Both paratexts present a hermeneutics of uncertainty.

⁴⁴ It is never explained why the editors writes “sey” rather than “seh,” which appears in the novel’s chapter title. Perhaps it is an additional comment on the authorial privileges taken by editors.

While the framing narrative glimpses a world where “there are more ways of knowing than are accessible to the five senses,”⁴⁵ and the scientific method falters, the body’s first scene engulfs the reader in that world with all its inevitable confusion. The first section of the body of *Louisiana*, “I heard a voice from Heaven say,” is a transcript from Ella’s mystical recording machine. In this scene, a deceased Afro-Jamaican woman, known by several names including Louise and Lowly, tells her still-living friend, whom I refer to as Anna (the intended subject of Ella’s WPA interview) about being “translated” into the next realm after death. By referring to death as translation, *Louisiana* privileges an Afro-centric concept of the afterlife, which sees death as primarily a transition into a new, ancestral realm that can still communicate to some extent with the living (Pradel, Idowu). At the same time, the concept of translation into a form of life after death also aligns well with Christian discourse on eternal life through salvation.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Benjamin’s work on the “after lives” of source texts through translation resonates with the active role Louise will take throughout the novel, making Ella the medium through which Louise may attain her “latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding” in the afterlife (“The Task” 255). Brodber’s use of the literary term “translation” in this moment encourages readers to connect the hermeneutics with the syncretic Afro-Christian spiritual experiences of mediumship, resurrection, possession, and revelation. Louise’s “translation” into the after-life illustrates the ways in which, as Friedrich Nietzsche and J. Habermas would contend, hermeneutics apply not only to literature, but to the horizons of our “interpretations of

⁴⁵ This phrase “beyond the five senses” brings to mind *Newsweek* editor Jean Strouse’s oft-cited praise for the works of African American author Toni Morrison, whose novel *Beloved* I discuss in my fourth chapter. Strouse’s article, “Toni Morrison’s Black Magic” came out in 1994, the same year *Louisiana* was published.

⁴⁶ In fact, Paul’s epistle to the Colossians 1:12-13 in the KJV uses the term translation to refer to spiritual movement in a prayer of thanksgiving, “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated *us* into the kingdom of his dear Son” (1793).

reality” (Grondin 14). The reader joins the story *in medias res*, while the deceased Louise is already speaking telepathically to Anna. Louise begins, fittingly, with questions about memories that the reader cannot yet access. “Anna, do you remember? Can you still hear me singing it?” (9). From the outset, Brodber turns the reader’s attention towards the yet-inaccessible knowledge that resides within present perceptions (hearing) of the ongoing ancestral past.⁴⁷

This orientation towards non-western concepts of time echoes the non-chronological narratives techniques of Zapata Olivella’s epic novel of Afro-diasporic spirituality. In fact, much of the novel’s plot is dedicated to the anthropologist protagonist’s attempts to culturally translate the spiritual events she witnesses and experiences into a secular, scholarly idiom. As Vera Kutzinski has explained, the character of Ella is linked to early twentieth-century African American ethnographer, Zora Neale Hurston, who studied under Franz Boas at Columbia, and whose work I discuss in my fourth chapter on preaching (“Borders and Bodies: The United States, America, and the Caribbean” 70).⁴⁸ For a social anthropologist like Ella or Hurston,⁴⁹ the research process is inherently a translational exercise, “where the task of the ethnographer is to describe the foreign culture,” usually considered a non-western “other” in such a way that western academic audiences can analyze their traditions and customs (Pym 144). The concept of spirit possession, as I have noted, emerged “as translation and comparative class” among western

⁴⁷ In “When Spirits Talk” (2012), Jenny Sharpe claims, “Ella’s psychic abilities interject supernatural signification into the term *medium*, which alludes to the material used for recording data as well as a person who can communicate with the dead” (91). Sharpe’s article considers how material archives in anthropology can communicate unacknowledged histories through affect. I agree with Sharpe that the recording machine becomes a supernatural medium in *Louisiana*, though I concentrate on the interpretive mediumship of Ella herself.

⁴⁸ Zora Neale Hurston also appears in Zapata Olivella’s “Ancestral Combatants” as an ethnographer. Her portrayal in the novel is pointedly negative, suggesting she perceives her fellow African Americans as objectified creatures of study.

⁴⁹ During the early twentieth century when this novel is set, there were not defined distinctions between the fields of anthropology and ethnography.

anthropologists studying what were considered cultural “others” (Johnson 394).⁵⁰ In this way, spirit possession is an optimal subject for a social anthropologist like Ella to try and culturally translate for “the white people” she reports to back in Chicago (21). But Ella’s unexpected personal experiences with mediumship and spirit possession ultimately render her observations opaque, and thwart all of her attempts to culturally translate the “important data” she witnesses while performing her field work in the southern United States (21).

Louisiana’s readers join Ella in her anthropological research, and indirectly experience the difficulties she encounters when applying the interpretive techniques of western social science to a reality whose horizons are structured by African-derived religious philosophies. By beginning the novel’s plot with a dialogue between the living and the dead, Brodber invokes “an African, ancestrally oriented hermeneutics” pivotal to African-derived Jamaican religious practices (Stewart 227). This method of meaning-making “brings into focus a critical interpretation of messages from the Divine Community, a “community of venerated deities and invisible beings” sometimes including ancestors like Louise (24, 227).⁵¹ After those first two questions, the text jumps to a verse of the song that Louise hears at her own funeral, a Nine-Night ceremony:

It is the voice I hear
the gentle voice I hear
that calls me home? (9)

⁵⁰ To discuss spirit possession and mediumship is to acknowledge that while the events of such phenomena may be material and specific for particular persons, the terms spirit possession and mediumship were adopted by anthropologists who wanted to group together disparate practices with a few common elements in order to study them (Cohen and Barrett 246).

⁵¹ Stewart also uses the diety Legbay to symbolize this hermeneutic strategy. Stewart refers to Legba as Esu.-Elegba, combining two of the god’s common monikers.

Again, the reader is confronted with a question beyond rational logic or previous knowledge, this time in the form of a song.⁵² Generally speaking, Nine-Nights are community-wide funerals characteristic of syncretic Jamaican-Christian religions such as Pukumina, Jamaican Baptist and Revival Zion (Simpson 329). Nine-nights last nine nights, and ultimately serve to usher the deceased's spirit into the next world (their translation) through practices such as singing, vigil-keeping, ritual cleaning, and offering of foods and items special to the recently deceased (Murrell 264-265, Simpson 329). By having Louise discuss the events of her own Nine-Night, Brodber sets *Louisiana* within a novelistic reality structured by syncretic Afro-Christian religious paradigms that resist rationalist, western-scientific conceptions of finite death and chronological time.⁵³ Furthermore, because Louise (Lowly) hails from St. Mary, Louisiana, Jamaica, and Anna (Mammy) King is from St. Mary, Louisiana, USA, the topic of "home" is inherently disorienting as well.⁵⁴

Even for those readers well-versed in religious concepts such as ancestral-orientation and resurrection, *Louisiana's* plot exceeds any singular interpretive framework. By having Louise refer to Ella as the "horse" that Anna can ride into the next life, Brodber points her readers to Haitian Vodou rituals of spirit possession (17).⁵⁵ However, the idea of Ella's incorporation of

⁵² I will explore at greater length the performative hermeneutics of aurality that Brodber invokes in her novels, specifically *Myal* (1988).

⁵³ The Nine-Night tradition brings together Christian and West African theological elements of animation after death – namely Christological resurrection (the buried are expected to arise on the third night after death) and variations of the West African, especially Yoruban understandings of interaction between the risen dead and living, particularly with family (Pradel, Simpson, Mbiti).

⁵⁴ Since many African-derived religious theologies in the Caribbean, particularly during times of enslavement, approach the afterlife through a lens of "repatriation," home may symbolize an abstract or physical idealized landscape of liberation (Stewart 33).

⁵⁵ As Alessandra Benedicty-Kokker points out, "the word 'possession' is not how Voudouyizans in the past generally have designated the experience of receiving another spirit, another subjectivity into their corporeal bodies" (1).

multiple others would not coincide with that context (Montilus 3, Deren 16, Herskovitz 66).⁵⁶ On the transcript, we see Anna ask Louise, “who is this gal with some bits of me and some bits of you?” (17). Unlike a trance in Vodou spirit possession, Ella is described not as the woman embodied in another form, but rather somehow as a particularly unique possession created by the two women. Brodber repeatedly describes Ella as a product of both Anna and Louise; a queer, spiritual child generated when “two women sire another” (17). Brodber refuses to allow one single paradigm to guide the interpretive world of *Louisiana*.

Because readers cannot categorize the spiritual practices in *Louisiana* according to existing anthropological paradigms, the metaphysical events cannot be rendered “knowable” and therefore objectifiable through western academic narratives. During a particularly difficult interview with the stubborn Anna King, Ella reminds herself that Anna both “has important data” and “is important data” for the “history of the struggle of the lower class negro they want to write” (21). Ella notes Anna’s value as academic data in order to remind herself that the assignment, both facilitated and frustrated by her and Anna’s racial similarities is an “honour” (21). What is more, the results of Anna’s interview serve as a barometer for Ella’s continued value in her field, “put[ting] [her] name and job at stake” (22). Anna and Louise, as evidenced in throughout their telepathic conversations, refuse to cooperate with the purely scholarly pursuit as they probe Ella about her own past and present values, making the interview “personal and certainly unscholastic” (22). In making the interview unscholastic, they are implicitly also making it less “transparent” and “legitimate” for the intended white audiences. In *Poetics of Relation* (1990, trans. 1997), Glissant explains that “understanding” in western society is often

⁵⁶ For example, Melville Herskovitz describes spirit possession among Haitians as “a psychological state wherein a displacement of personality occurs when the god “comes into the head” of the worshipper. The individual thereupon is held to be the deity himself” (1948:66-67 from Cohen and Barrett). Maya Deren

“founded on an insistence on ... transparency,” which reduces the “density” of the Other in order to give the western observer “a basis for comparisons and perhaps for judgment “ (204). Here, Anna and Louise resist the social science propensity to turn Anna’s human experiences into abstracted “data” for white scholars to analyze. With this, *Louisiana* suggests that unlike the engaged surrender that Ella enacts by choosing to become an objectified medium, academic scholars often force “othered” subjects into objectified roles without their consent.

By having Ella’s anthropological techniques fail to culturally translate Anna and Louise, *Louisiana* insists on a hermeneutics that acknowledges the opacity of fictional subjects. When Glissant “demand[s] for all the right to opacity” (209), he is resisting the imperial prerogative to “understand” the colonial Other and in doing so, to render him or “transparent” to the colonial regime. Ella’s commitment to the interpretive tools of the Euro-American academy implicate her as a complicit agent of the humanistic intellectual regimes that fueled imperialist projects. This brings to mind Anotnio Benítez-Rojo’s claim that western interpretations of the Caribbean project onto it “dogmas and methods” only relevant to western societies, and so “they get into the habit of defining the Caribbean in terms of its resistance to the different methodologies summoned to investigate it” (2). Jonathon Tittler also references this opacity along with Venuti’s resistant translation when discussing his translational techniques for *Changó*, saying he intends to “return opacity to the invisible translation” (6). Tittler’s use of opacity is paradoxical in that he employs the mechanisms of non-transparency in his translation in order to make more visible the workings of literary translation.⁵⁷ The opacity of Brodber’s novel disallows readers who may

⁵⁷ Tittler’s use of opacity appears to be directly derivative of Venuti’s writings, which do not cite Glissant. However, it is unlikely that Tittler would not be familiar with Glissant’s postcolonial theories.

attempt to render characters like Anna King or Ella Townsend transparent to the readers or to each other, which could diminish the dynamic complexity of their identities.

In order to not commit what Gayatri Spivak calls the “epistemic violence” (*In Other Worlds* 209) of imposing colonial paradigms of understanding on herself and her subjects, Ella must learn to adopt a hermeneutics that allows for the opacity of the other, and even for herself. To adopt a hermeneutics that embraces opacity means also learning to let go of overwhelming commitment to any one epistemology. Accepting the Other’s opacity, Glissant adds,

moves me away from the absolute truths which I might otherwise believe that I possess. Far from confining me to useless inactivity, opacity relativizes in me the possibilities of all action, by sensitizing me to the limitations of all methods. (206)

Opacity reveals that all epistemological methods are limited. In *Louisiana*, Ella must repeatedly abandon or modify the methods of knowledge-gathering she has acquired in social scientific study, marking her journey into engaged surrender. At the beginning of the novel, Ella is a strong adherent to the paradigms of the white academy. For example, when Ella first hears her own possessed voice singing back to her on the interview tape, “she cannot think ‘ghost’” thanks to “so many years of formal schooling,” which have forced such supernatural, and therefore non-scientific concepts from her cognitive repertoire (28). Indeed, Janice Boddy writes that recent studies on spirit possession suggest that these experiences require, “epistemic premises quite different from the infinitely differentiating, rationalizing, and reifying thrust of global materialism and its attendant scholarly traditions,” such as the burgeoning fields of social science in which Ella participates (407). In the introductory letter, editor E.R. Anderson assures readers that Ella began her anthropological project with “some evidence of scientific intent and action,”

just as Ella at first attempts to banish personal reflection about her own spiritual possession by telling herself to “let discipline prevail” (4, 62). But of course, what prevails is not the discipline, but the metaphysical force of the unknown.

In one particularly ironic twist, Ella’s attempts to use sociological methodologies as a means of understanding the unfamiliar world around her ultimately move her beyond the paradigms of that method, and back to the “hungry black box” that initiated this confounding journey in the first place. Still living in St. Mary with her sociologist husband after Anna’s death, Ella realizes that she “knew so little of the sociology of the place” (48). The lack of space between the article “the” and “sociology” suggests that at this time, Ella considers sociology to be a distinct epistemological lens that can be applied to any particular “place” such as St. Mary, Louisiana. At first Ella and Reuben are drawn “into the sociology” by way of other people’s houses as they attempt to avoid their “odd roommate,” that is the black recording machine in their own temporary residence. Upon noting the villagers’ discomfort with her and not her husband, Ella mobilizes her sociological methodologies and alters her own behaviors according to the gendered social structures she witnesses around her, ultimately spending more time inside the cottage performing domestic chores. In this way, Ella’s sociological conclusions lead her back inside with the recording machine, which she talks to and treats as an antagonist, daughter, and lover at different times (49,50). By anthropomorphizing the recording machine, Ella begins to let go of her commitment to scientific objectivity and open herself up to a hermeneutics that accepts opacity. Furthermore, Ella opens up a conceptual dialogue with her own spiritual domination.

Spending the time actively avoiding and then tenderly cleaning the mysterious machine leads Ella to “let go” of her preconceived epistemological assumptions, and become “all ears” to

the supernatural recording (61). Ella's openness to the opaque technological box signals her growing capacity to welcome a hermeneutics of uncertainty. As a result, Ella discovers new words and voices on the tape's reel with each listen, benefitting from her decision to surrender to the spiritual forces. Going through the new information provided by the machine reel, Ella asks herself what field she has stepped into –

anthropology of the dead? Celestial ethnography Crazy. I turned myself back with that break to thinking about the subject I had been paid to come to Louisiana to study. Mammy. (61)

And so Ella's interpretive flexibility is short-lived at first. She cuts herself off from creatively engaging with her shifting epistemologies by calling herself and her new ways of thinking insane. She again focuses on the academically-sanctioned aspects of her present tasks, those related to gathering data for scholarly audiences. Ella does eventually begin to accept methods of understanding at which she would have previously scoffed after she repeatedly experiences spirit possession and mediumship with Louise and Anna, followed by a traumatic psychological collapse, and then prophetic mediumship for visiting sailors.

Ella's journey into knowing beyond the academically-sanctioned epistemologies to which she first adheres requires a psychological death with similar characteristics to the one Agne Brown experiences in *Changó*. Just like Agne, Ella's transition into her role as a medium requires her to newly "remember" her own childhood experiences of pain and isolation. Ella's transformation of identity is in many ways pushed to a tipping point after she experiences a traumatic flashback after hearing West Indian sailors begin to sing the same spiritual Ella had unknowingly sung in the WPA interview: "Sammy dead, Sammy dead, Sammy dead oh" (88).

At hearing this, Ella loses control of her body, which “slid from [her] chair to the floor, fluttering like a decapitated fowl” (88). She then spoke, while “seeing things as if on a rolling screen, a movie screen,” including the Jamaican setting she grew up in. Finally, Ella sees herself as “a baby no more than nine months,” literally becoming both observer and observed, anthropological historian and subject. Ella then witnesses her own traumatic memory of standing in her crib, watching her Granny, then her primary caretaker, fall and lay incapacitated for hours before dying in front of the grandchild. At this point, Ella again watches herself but this time it is her adult self re-living the infantile trauma, speaking in the voice of a nine-month-old to the gathered crowd. In this moment, Ella is possessed by her past self, which challenges the narrative of static identity over time. What is more, Ella appears to be the witness of her own death and rebirth as described by Joseph Murphy in *Working the Spirit*. Ella is the interpreting reader and anthropologist researcher of her own journey into knowing.

Having had this experience of psychological death and rebirth, Ella begins immediately “prophesying” to the traveling men. She explains,

I looked at the faces of the men sitting around me and I saw stories. I saw long deep stories, stretching back and back on stacked, ruled, six by eight cards. The first cards said ‘name’, ‘place of birth’, ‘date of birth’ I read that off for nearly all of the men gathered in that room. (91)

At this point, Ella clearly acts as a medium much like Agne, except that she is not articulating one god’s prophecy, but rather interpreting and re-telling the spiritual stories of different, living men. The strength of Ella’s remembered childhood pain continues to overwhelm her in bouts of sobbing as her personal story returns to her consciousness. Ella believes that “only now it was safe to know the loneliness and the despair, and to react” (92). Ella’s simultaneous experience of

relived pain from her own life story and her newly acquired medium abilities for telling others' stories demonstrates the ways that our own identities are implicated in the attainment of knowledge about others. Knowledge, and the power of that which cannot be known, truly does possess Ella in this moment. Rather than simply an "integration of spirit and matter" that Boddy describes in her study of spirit possession, Ella's surrender to opacity occurs through what she calls "hegemony of the spirit," or "Getting over" (98). In this situation, Ella's body is "depressed into physical collapse" and her mental boundaries are trespassed as "something is activated, rather like an injection needle is pushed forward," breaking the "shell" of subjectivity (98). Ella will adopt the name Louisiana, signaling the place of her resurrection, and the death of her past interpretation of self. Hegemony of the spirit again reminds us of the King James translators who imagined the shell that must be cracked to reveal the kernel of new life.

In order to understand Ella's acquisition of knowledge through submission to the hegemony of spirit, I look closely at a scene prior to Ella's psychic and spiritual "break." The novel's third chapter, "Out of Eden," begins as Ella remembers the stained glass window in her mother's Anglican church, which she attended as a child in Brooklyn. Ella describes the window with the impressionistic specificity of childhood memories. She writes,

My mother's church had a stained glass window with a thorn-headed picture of Jesus the Christ, his head slightly leaned to one side, his arms open and his fingers delicately cocked reminding me somehow of the proper way of drinking tea. You could see his heart – it was heart shaped and had, I think, a dart going through it. At his feet in halos were women, the Marys I presumed. (57)

The image of the halo-ed Marys immediately calls to mind the "venerable sisters" (22) of Anna and Louise, who like the Marys in the picture, are connected through the sacrificed body of

another person. In fact, Brodber prepares the reader to imagine sophisticated, academic Ella as “Jesus the Christ” in this tableaux thanks to her position as medium for the venerable sisters between the celestial and material worlds, her “proper” status as a sanctioned scholar and most importantly, by Anna’s command to Ella on the first recording transcript, “Don’t say it child. Don’t say you are not the Christ” (22). Furthermore, the dart through Christ’s heart in this picture foreshadows Ella’s description of divine clarity as “a silver spear that goes slowly from one side of the head and through to the other, leaving silver dust in its path” (105-106).

Like the stories of Ella, Anna, and Louise, along with *Louisiana*’s fragmented narrative structure, the stained glass picture exists in separate pieces joined back together. Ella recalls,

the picture was a mosaic, like a jigsaw puzzle. Someone must have painted it on glass, broken it into pieces of uneven sizes then stuck the parts together in that large window sited over the altar. How did they do this and why? (57)

Already an analytical thinker interested in process and human motivations, or as Brodber once put it, “awareness of the insides of people’s heads,” Ella wonders, perhaps like a number of Brodber’s readers, why the artist would choose to fragment his or her own work (qtd in O’Callaghan 70).⁵⁸ Assuming the connection between the novel’s female subjects and those depicted in the stained glass, it becomes illuminating to consider how young Ella goes about “understanding” this picture, in order to relate her epistemological process to the way older, anthropologist Ella goes about understanding the stories of herself, Anna, and Louise.

Remembering the stained glass, Ella continues,

⁵⁸ In her 1998 review of *Louisiana*, Evelyn O’Callaghan connects the telepathic conversations throughout *Louisiana* to Brodber’s academic interests in psychology and psychiatry, which she studied for a stint at McGill University.

The picture responded to light, so that bits of it or the whole were only visible as it was directed towards them. There was no street lamp or beacon close by, revelation had to depend on God's natural light. In winter therefore, there was hardly more of this picture to be seen than the raised lines of the mosaic where the parts were joined. With the coming of the sun and the summer, the whole picture was there and for a considerable time. (57)

For the Episcopalian worshipers just as for Ella, those who wish to see the and understand the meaning complete message must first show up and be present to see the picture, and then they must wait for a supernatural power to illuminate the separate pieces. In other words, they must make the choice to receive the image that God's light may transmit. At first the churchgoers only see the "raised lines of the mosaic where the parts are joined," which could symbolize the lines of tape from the recording machine, where the voices are brought into conversation together, or Ella's own body, which acts as a joining of places and people. Ella learns to accept herself as the passive, mediating object bridging persons and realms, as well as the active interpreter, perceiving and rearticulating new formulations of knowledge. It is no coincidence that Ella remembers this stained glass window at the top of a chapter that contains several new revelations from the mystical recording machine. Ella "scour[s] the reel again for any escaped gems," an appropriately prismatic image for knowledge acquisition (64).⁵⁹

Ella's stained glass metaphor for her hermeneutics of engaged surrender brings to mind the theories of language presented by fourth and fifth-century Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (Aurelius Augustinus). Augustine recognizes the indeterminacy of linguistic meaning by referring to ideas as light, and language as simply a trace of that light. For the theologian,

⁵⁹ The stained glass connects to the metaphor of the spyglass that Ella carries around. Jenny Sharpe connects that spyglass with Zora Neale Hurston's "spyglass of anthropology," though Brodber says she didn't know about that reference.

communication must still be ventured because our words may provide sense for another person who has also experienced that light, or in Ella's case, that *divine* light. Ella's prophetic cards, like Augustine's texts, are instruments that "help receivers to recall the illuminations that they have previously found for themselves" (Pym 102).

It is only after Ella and Reuben move to New Orleans and Ella takes up conjure work with Madam Marie that she comes to see her work with Anna and Louise as an active process of waiting, or engaged surrender. Ella searches for relatable stories to her own experiences in the Christian Bible, and finds many possible companions in the form of prophets such as Jonah, the Witch of Endor, and Elijah/Elisha. In connecting herself to these figures, Ella realizes that "prophets wait for God" (101). When Ella shares this realization with Madam Marie, the conjure woman responds, "That's why we are so fat... We eat while we wait" (102). And with that, Ella further transforms herself through diet, "vow[ing] then and there to be a vegetarian seer" (102). Ultimately, Ella does not fit herself entirely with the biblical precedents for prophets, just as she cannot fit her experience or identity within any one episteme. Ella comes to conclusions about her own identity and spiritual role while reflecting on her interactions with a trouble Jamaican sailor, Ben, whose sad life story she had spoken back to him so that he may work through his past wounds. Ella comments,

I know now, that my practice had defined itself and with divine blessing. The silver sparkles are about my head at their most powerful as I write and I know that I am not Elisha; I am not the unfortunate lady of Endor. I am a soothsayer, yes, but one who looks behind, sees and will see the past. I see that clearly. (106)

Ella now clearly sees her own mediumship as a process of actively allowing herself to be possessed by knowledge. Paradoxically, Ella may only receive that knowledge so long as she

accepts the opacity of the Other. She must be blessed with divine revelation of Others' prophetic past; she cannot force their legible transparency. Ella demonstrates that proper interpretation requires the agential willingness to be possessed by the other, to let herself be carried not away, but home. Just as Agne somehow feels herself no longer a stranger after re-interpreting her personal narrative, Ella discovers that by surrendering to the opacity of herself and others, she can experience a liberating form of subjectivity.

CONCLUSION

Both *Changó* and *Louisiana* imagine new formulations of Afro-diasporic community built on the communal struggle for liberation through spiritual forces, and ancestral knowledge. The ancestrally-oriented formulations of liberation in *Changó* exists in a tension between inevitability and free will, which Tittler calls "this delicate balance among determinism, free will, and messianism" (3). The living are called to liberate themselves and fulfill Changó's prophecy, but they are also defined by and confined to the powerful source of the dead. What's the point of the living rising up if they are circumscribed by the fates and prophecy?

Zapata Olivella answers this question in a few different ways throughout "Ancestral Combatants." First, Osborn Perry Anderson tells Agne that the conspirators of the Harpers Ferry Raid choose to gather every night to discuss the events that have already been determined because "to take past events and fuse them with the present is not only something that brings us comfort but is a necessity if we are not to die altogether" (401-02).⁶⁰ A few pages later, as the

⁶⁰ "Retomar los hechos pasados y volverlos a refundir en el presente, no solo es algo que nos reconforta, sino que es una necesidad para no morirnos" (581).

group tries to shoot at the White Wolf (a white oppressor) who is gunning down members of the spiritual brotherhood, they find that

the hammer and the guns does not detonate the old gunpowder. Disillusioned, we realize that death only permits us to influence events to the extent that the living are willing to learn from our experience. (406)⁶¹

Here we see the relationship between author and reader paralleled in the relationship between the living and the dead. That is, the power of the author and dead's message can only be made manifest so long as the reader labors to understand. In order to bring that message to future readers and ekobios, there must be a medium who can translate the message into a new context. And so if we are to believe that there is merit in the fight that may already be predetermined for the Muntu, we must also see that there is merit in the engaged act of translation, even though we can recognize the instability of all meaning. It is not the source meaning that matters, but the impetus to continued interpretation. Both acts are circumscribed by the author's original message, and yet both acts are necessary for those who came before to impact the present.

Brodber explains that *Louisiana* was designed to "invite the reader to participate in the research process," aligning the reader with the book's researcher-protagonist, Ella. Whereas Agne represents the literary and cultural translator in *Changó*, Ella personifies the USAmerican academic reader of *Louisiana*. In resisting the dominance of any one epistemology, and assigning hegemony to the spirit, *Louisiana* encourages readers to reflect on their own experiences as both active and passive interpreters of the text. Brodber encourages her readers to, like Ella, consider their own positions as spiritual mediums, crucial pieces of a collective story

⁶¹ "Desilusionados comprendimos que la muerte solo nos permitía regresar a la acción en la medida en que los vivos quieran o no aprovecharse de nuestra experiencia" (588).

that no one person completely controls. At the same time that *Louisiana* reveals the personal empowerment of active inquiry, it also shows the illusion of individualistic knowledge-possession.

At the end of the novel, Ella describes her translation across the “rainbow’s mist” to join Anna and Louise in the ancestral world of the dead as a “pentecost” (161). It is an explosive spiritual event which releases divine energy to all those in its presence, creating a blessed community that transcends the bounds of language (161). The liberation illustrated here is one grounded in the freedom to belong, the hard-won capacity to find meaning as one voice in the “community song” (161). And yet the reader who has traveled alongside Ella through seas of opacity cannot easily forget the pain that mediums like the protagonist inevitably endure for the sake of community liberation. Ella’s personal story is not pleasant, nor is it easy. Rather, she illustrates the vulnerability of abandoning those individualistic interpretations of self that both protect and isolate all of us. To act as a medium between the metaphysical and physical worlds means choosing to abandon these preconceived paradigms, and to submit to the overwhelming power of the community song. In the case of Brodber’s reader, this may begin by letting the novel “ride” you.

CHAPTER III

READING THE PROPHETIC STAGE: IMAGINING THE LIMITS OF THE POSSIBLE IN *BEDWARD* AND *DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN*

In this great future, you can't forget your past.
- Bob Marley "No Woman No Cry"

[P]rophetic speech announces an impossible future, or makes the future it announces, because it announces it, something impossible, a future one would not know how to live and that must upset all the sure givens of existence. When speech becomes prophetic, it is not the future that is given, it is the present that is taken away, and with it any possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence.
- Maurice Blanchot "Prophetic Speech"

For Maurice Blanchot, the prophetic speech act, in the moment of its performance, precludes the very future it makes known. This prophetic future is one that could never occur because to live within it would require disassembling the foundational assumptions by which we order our lives. According to Blanchot, even glimpsing into this impossible future so profoundly disorients us that we can no longer rely on the firm belief in a permanent, static present state of affairs. And yet, later in the same text, Blanchot complicates his theorization of prophetic impossibility by adding, "When everything is impossible ... then prophetic speech, which tells of the impossible future, also tells of the "nonetheless" that breaks the impossible and restores time" (81). In a seeming contradiction, prophetic speech also introduces the "nonetheless," that expression of radical possibility that punctures a totalizing vision of how reality can be constructed.

In this chapter, I look at two theatrical examples of prophetic speech announced by unlikely prophets. Specifically, I follow the vastly different prophetic careers of Alexander

Bedward in Louis Marriott's 1960 Jamaican play *Bedward*, and Felix Hobain, who is referred to as Makak in Derek Walcott's 1967 avant garde drama *Dream on Monkey Mountain*.⁶² Both dramas illustrate the impossibility of their protagonists' prophetic futures, which challenge existing power structures and methods of substantiating authority and knowledge. According to each drama's narrative, the prophetic futures espoused by each protagonist is either doomed to fail, or has already historically proven defunct. And yet each drama also plays with the hermeneutical practices that allow us to recognize the "nonetheless" that accompanies all moments of seeming impossibility on the stage.

The act of collectively articulating the radical possibility of a seemingly impossible future is a long-held religious and political tradition for African-descended communities in the Americas. As scholars of religion in the Afro-diasporic Americas have well-noted, the "prophetic tradition," which focuses on issues of "justice," has always been a key component to Christian and Afro-Christian religion thanks to the unjust historical contingencies of enslavement in which these racially-coded religious sects were born (West xi, Floyd Thomas et al 204).⁶³ Prophetic speech is not limited to the annals of recognized (often male-centric) scholarship,⁶⁴ though the

⁶² *Dream on Monkey Mountain* was written for the Trinidad Theatre Workshop and first produced at the Central Library Theatre in Toronto in 1967.

⁶³ See *Prophecy Deliverance!* (1982) *Keeping Faith* (1994), which he describes as "an attempt at prophetic criticism" (xi), and *Black Prophetic Fire* with Christa Buschendorf (2014).

⁶⁴ For example, the prophetic tradition put forward in Cornel West and Christa Buschendorf's 2014 text *Black Prophetic Fire* features prominent AfroUSAmericans such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois and Ella Baker. Often, these leaders in the USAmerican context found their prophetic discourse in the Christian tradition with the notable exception of Malcolm X, who founded his in the nation of Islam.

more politically-powerful the spiritual figure becomes, the more likely that voice is to be regarded posthumously as a “prophet” by scholars.⁶⁵

In the Caribbean context where these dramas are staged, prophetic figures like Marcus Garvey or Rastafari Robert Nesta “Bob” Marley often ground their rhetoric in Afro-Christian paradigms, which bring together biblical prophetic hermeneutics with African traditions of oral divination, mediumship, and revelation.⁶⁶ In most Christian theologies, prophet is used as “a general term for the human agent involved in the giving of a revelation,” though most recognition of such prophecy is restricted to Early Christianity (Evans n.p. and Hill n.p.). Prophecy most often occurs in the Old Testament, or Hebrew texts of the Christian Bible set in Ancient Israel, in which prophets were generally said to be “men or women believed to be recipients through audition, vision or dream of divine messages that they passed on to others by means of speech or symbolic action” (Whybray n.p.). In much West and Central African religious practices, the priest (often also a social or political authority such as chief or clan-head) embodies the role of prophet as well as diviner, medium, sorcerers, magicians, and healers (Murrell 41). In every one of these paradigms, we see prophets as persons who assume for themselves considerable social, religious, and political power by merit of having been “chosen” (via charisma) to speak and perform on behalf of some authority greater than those on earth.

In the case of *Bedward* and *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, the prophetic protagonists adopt messianic belief systems that imagine alternative realities, which inspire and threaten those

⁶⁵ In fact, there is a considerable contingency of contemporary religious figures, often women, who prophesy in the ecstatic tradition in the Caribbean. Media discourse on these figures often centers on the implications of spiritual labor for profit and the rise of what is often termed the “prosperity gospel” among black churches throughout late capitalism.

⁶⁶ For a particularly political text on prophets in the Caribbean, see Anthony Bogues *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (2015).

around them. I demonstrate how Louise Marriott's *Bedward* presents a narrative of impossible futurity, as the protagonist adopts an increasingly millennialist messianic vision that, thanks to its historical setting, audiences know never came to pass. And yet, I complicate this reading by considering how the mechanisms of the theatrical stage continually enact Bedward's prophetic speech, and in doing so portray his legacy as a messianic event within an African-oriented temporal framework. I then analyze Derek Walcott's use of the dramatic "dream structure" in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* to argue that the play presents prophecy as a form of collective hermeneutics. In *Dream*, prophecy engenders a mode of interpretation that allows believers and doubters alike to imagine the world anew. I conclude by examining how Derek Walcott portrays himself as a besieged prophet-figure, who benefits and carries the burdens of galvanizing followers.

BEDWARD'S IMPOSSIBLE NARRATIVE OF THEATRICAL POSSIBILITY

Louis Marriott, like most Jamaicans, had only heard of Alexander Bedward as a "figure of ridicule" until he stumbled across conflicting narratives of the Revivalist preacher in archived newspapers at the Kingston West Indian Reference Library (138). To this day, Bedward is usually remembered as the lunatic preacher who broke his leg when he tried to fly to heaven.⁶⁷ Inspired by the written archive, interviews with a small group of surviving Bedwardites in August Town in 1957, and his own fictional machinations, Marriott's playscript *Bedward* (originally produced as radio drama *The Shepherd*) presents the prophet's legacy as a story of

⁶⁷ A recent presentation on "Redeeming Alexander Bedward" (uploaded to YouTube April 2016) that followed a symbolic march in Kingston by the Jamaica Theological Seminary evidences the persistence of Bedward's legacy as the "preacher who tried to fly" but fantastically failed. Interestingly, one of the presenters at this march reads from Veront Satchell's 2004 article on Bedward that I quote here. This myth of the flying preacher is likely buttressed by the song, "Bedward the Flying Preacher" by the Singers and Players featuring Prince Four I.

religious zealotry, anti-African prejudice, and overwhelming charismatic authority.⁶⁸ The dramatized Bedward is a complex character; he is a rigidly principled, idealistic, and egomaniacal prophet who eventually prophesies to his dispossessed followers that there will be an imminent and catastrophic eschatological event. The protagonist repeatedly claims he is the black messiah destined to initiate the eschatological event that will destroy the white oppressors (and the black Jamaicans who support them) and ultimately lead to his faithful followers' collective salvation.

While much is still to be learned about the enigmatic Alexander Bedward, historians typically describe his spiritual movement as a precursor to Marcus Garvey's social politics and an inspiration to the messianic Rastafari religion. The son of emancipated Africans, Alexander Bedward (1859-1930) labored as a cooper on the Mona Estate until an illness forced him to migrate to Colón, Panama, where he is said to have received two visions. In these dreams, Bedward was supposedly instructed to return to August Town in Jamaica in order to receive baptism and begin fasting.⁶⁹ These dreams initiated Bedward's subsequent religious trajectory marked by divine revelations, including those regarding the healing properties of the Mona River

⁶⁸ Intrigued by the discrepancies between the oral and written histories of Alexander Bedward, Marriott interviewed the small group of still-practicing Bedwardites at the commune Union Camp in 1957. While Marriott made efforts to "sympathize" with the Bedwardites who still venerated their culturally disgraced prophet, his description of the community as paranoid "simple folk" (139) and his complex dramatization of Alexander Bedward suggest that his interest in re-staging the prophet's story were neither strictly complimentary nor derogatory. His interest in revisiting the rebellious prophet does speak to the influence of his father, whom Marriott describes as a "passionate nationalist with great pride in Jamaican heritage" (138).

⁶⁹ Bedward's conversion story as described by himself to Martha Beckwith in 1969, and by his contemporary and sympathizer A.A. Brooks in "A History of Bedward," a text from which Marriott extensively quotes in his play, charts the archetypal trajectory that Ted Daniels identifies for prophets. Bedward is first an adulterous sinner, outsider, and insignificant person who undergoes a crisis [his illness] that leads to a conversion. This realization of a divine calling leads to the subsequent "total and perhaps inexplicable change in [the prophet's] character," exemplified by Bedward's refusal of all "flesh" after receiving his mission from God, including sexual intimacy with his beleaguered wife (Daniels 6, Marriott 147).

and earthquake tremors that hit Jamaica in the early 20th century (Beckwith 167, Brooks 6-8, Murrell 285).⁷⁰ In 1889, Harrison “Shakespeare” Woods, an African USAmerican prophet and founder of the Jamaica Native Baptist Free Church ordained Bedward as a Native Baptist minister and in 1891 chose Bedward as his successor (Satchell 80, Watson 232). Bedward was arrested for sedition in 1895 on the grounds that his speech advocated overthrowing the white government by force (Watson 231, Chevannes 421), but was acquitted after he was diagnosed as insane. Over the next decade, the Jamaica Native Baptist Free Church came to be known as Bedwardism as it grew exponentially in size, becoming a nationwide phenomenon for proletariat and agro-proletariat black Jamaicans (Satchell 83, Taylor 423). Bedward began to claim that he was Jesus and prophesied the millenarian end of the world on December 31st, 1920, when he and his followers would ascend to heaven and the remaining white people in Jamaica would be destroyed (Beckwith 178, Chevannes 421). Bedward never did make his flight to heaven, postponing the date at least twice. In 1921, he was arrested for leading a protest march from Union Camp in August Town to Kingston, and spent the remainder of his life in an asylum, where he died in 1930 (Burton 118, Watson 246). It would make sense that, in order to challenge the predominant cultural narratives that mock the “failed” prophecies of Alexander Bedward and Bedwardism, historians like those cited here would choose to de-emphasize Bedward’s religious legacy in favor of his political influences.⁷¹ Rather, we see Caribbean scholars focus on the ways

⁷⁰ According to Satchell, this shift may have also been a conversion, since “Prior to his ordination as a minister in the Jamaica Native Baptist Free Church, [Bedward] was a staunch member of the Wesleyan/ Methodist church” (80).

⁷¹ Veront Satchell writes that Bedward “must be considered a politico-religious nationalist, a political priest who, in a society marked by racial discrimination, economic oppression, and social and political inequality for the black majority, valiantly challenged white minority rule on behalf of the oppressed” (77). Ken Post argues, “Bedward’s movement was not only a religious one, its doctrines had profound political implications as well, and be complex – the prophetic descendant of “Shakespeare,” his assured manner, his message of assurance and healing, and the

in which Bedward and his religious movements did bring about real socio-political change by inspiring other revolutionary leaders and movements, namely the Rastafarian leader Robert Hinds, who was at one point a Bedwardite. Unlike these historians, Marriott emphasizes Bedward's controversial messianism throughout the play.

In hearing Bedward's story, we are invited to consider what the past can tell us about an impossible future. Marriott's decision to dramatize this story— to present a time-bending narrative within the temporal constraints of live theater — amplifies the paradoxical nature of prophetic temporalities. What would it mean to stage an historical account of an impossible future? In the analysis that follows, I demonstrate how the text's narrative insists on the impossibility of Bedward's prophetic future by illustrating the necessary "failure" of Bedward's millennialist project, along with the state's impetus to contain and delegitimize Bedward's charismatic authority when it becomes threatening. I then argue that the dramatic form of the text re-presents that same narrative of failure as a continuous messianic event, repeatedly performing Blanchot's "nonetheless."⁷² This ongoing theatrical enactment of messianic prophecy, I

latent black nationalism that was developing caused him to attract thousands" (71). Roscoe Pierson does connect the historical Bedward's fight for racial justice with his charismatic nature, but still does so in a more secular than religious context.

⁷² Marriott does not provide extensive reasoning for why he adapted his research on Bedward into a play rather than a journalistic piece, which was another one of his occupations. He writes, "As a very active member of the continuously busy Caribbean Thespians Dramatic Society ... I made a successful debut as a playwright that year [*Public Mischief* 1957]. I then added a Bedward drama to my to-do list" (139). Here it appears that Marriott chose to formulate Bedward as a drama because it was convenient given his successful participation in the dramatic society. And yet, the script did not first appear for the Dramatic Society, but was produced in 1960 as the radio drama *The Shepherd*, and (according to Marriott) turned into a theatrical drama after the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation's producer encouraged the playwright to do so. The theatrical drama premiered at the Ward Theater the same year, also as *The Shepherd*, later to be renamed *Bedward* in the published copy I study here. Though Marriott's generic choice appears to have resulted from convenience and encouragement, the play *The Shepherd/ Bedward* has likely been produced and staged the most of any of his dramas. *The Shepherd/ Bedward* has been performed in 1960 at the Ward Theatre in Kingston Jamaica, in 1984 at the Little Theatre in

conclude, allows us to re-imagine Bedward's prophecy through an African-derived temporal framework, which challenges the notion of chronological finitude upon which a failure narrative must rely.

Marriott represents Bedward's prophetic trajectory as a swift march towards impossible futurity and inevitable failure as his rhetoric takes on increasingly insurgent and eschatological qualities. Like most plays, *Bedward* must condense historical time so as to create a narrative that can be enacted on a stage in approximately two hours. Within the first act of Marriott's play, the audience sees the Jamaican prophet Bedward transition from a reticent pastor experiencing promotion in the Jamaica Native Baptist Free Church to a besieged, self-proclaimed black messiah and creator of the millenarian religion Bedwardism, which boasts a following of thousands within and beyond Jamaica. Bedward's claims to being the "Son [of God] and the Holy Ghost... sent to redeem the sins of the world" are met with religious fervor by his largely impoverished Afro-Caribbean followers and accusations of sedition, then lunacy by colonial Jamaican authorities (175). The whirlwind pace of Marriott's drama reflects Bedward's meteoric rise to power through charisma, alongside the amounting burdens of maintaining charismatic authority. Such a quick ascension to power, Marriott suggests, threatens legal authorities, driving them to orchestrate the prophet's demise.

Marriott's Bedward exemplifies prophetic leadership through charisma.⁷³ Divinely-gifted, Bedward's charisma bypasses traditional methods of legitimating power, and is instead

Kingston Jamaica, in 1993 again at the Ward Theatre, and in 2012 at the Karl Hendrickson Auditorium in Kingston, Jamaica. Clearly *Bedward* has had a relatively successful production history in Kingston. It is also clear that the play has not received as much, if any of the same interest outside of Jamaica.

⁷³ Max Weber writes, "the concept of charisma ('the gift of grace') is taken from the vocabulary of early Christianity" (1968,47) and prior to his usage had been adapted by church historians,

sustained by the reverence of his followers. Sociologist Max Weber writes, "It is characteristic of prophets that they do not receive their mission from any human agency, but seize it, as it were" (258). As Bedward attests, "For I have the love of my people and therefore no force on earth can stop Alexander Bedward" (161). So long as enough people interpret Bedward's words and actions as those of a venerable prophet, he can exercise power without institutional sanctions.⁷⁴ The downside of such charisma is that it "can exist only in the process of originating," and so the charismatic prophet must somehow continually reinvent the character of his own charismatic authority (Weber 54). For Bedward, whose rise to power among the socially and economically dispossessed occurs as a result of his healing powers and anti-establishment politics, this means that he must convince his followers that he can provide more healing through salvation and more antagonism to the oppressive government. This trajectory will finally lead him to apocalyptic predictions that, paradoxically, must be interminably deferred for his church to continue operating on earth.

Marriott signals Bedward's growing insurgency towards the colonial regime by quoting portions of an 1895 sermon, transcribed at the time by *Gleaner* reporter John Lanigan, which led to Bedward's arrest for sedition. In the sermon, Bedward exclaims in front of a crowd of government representatives and officers, "there is a black wall and a white wall, and the white wall has been closing round the black wall. But now the black wall is growing, and it shall crush

notably Rudolph Sohm from whom he adopted the term. Nonetheless, the development of charisma as a theory begins with Weber who detached the concept from its Christian roots and applied it to political life.

⁷⁴ Marriott does have Shakespeare Woods legitimate Bedward's authority through prophesy, which varies from the historical accounts. Rather, Veront Satchell explains that at an 1889 convention the Afro-American prophet Harrison "Shakespeare" Woods convened in St. Andrew Parish, he ordained 12 male parishioners (including Bedward) and a number of women to lead his congregation after he returned to the United States, also predicting that there would be one stand-out leader (80).

the white wall” (156). When Bedward performs his infamous prediction in Marriott’s drama, he has already connected religion with politics. Bedward identifies the entanglement of class, race, and religion when he tells his bishop Dawson, “in this Church, the needs of the body and the spirit are one. In the white man’s church they can separate these things ... we have to be concerned about the condition of the poor” (152). This political consciousness becomes threatening to the government when it takes on a tone of prophetic imminence. Bedward’s proclamation predicts the radical dualism (us-versus-them mentality) that will characterize his millennialism, and which the representatives of state power will perceive as potentially militant (Wessinger 721).

In the play, every time that Bedward’s political radicalism grows, he also raises the stakes of his religious rhetoric, reinventing his charismatic authority through both avenues of his popularity (Weber 54). Directly after the rebellious sermon, he tells his exuberant flock,

Your reward is great in heaven. But we may not have to wait for death to get to heaven, for if a man have enough faith he will be able to fly like the birds. Fly away over the heads of our enemies. They better stop troubling me or I will fly.

This moment marks a turning-point in Bedward’s religious message because it promises a terrestrial (because they do not have to die in order to experience it) and imminent “rescue from evil... for a small community of believers,” one of the key components to any millennial theology (Daniels 4).⁷⁵ At this point Bedward has not yet fully coupled the two components of his millennial prophecy: the destruction of white political rule, and the physical and spiritual liberation of his followers through flight. These two ideas come together once Bedward has

⁷⁵ Ted Daniels is using Norman Cohn’s (1962) writings on millennialism here.

envisioned and prophesied the final component to his millennialism, that is, his own messianic identity.

Marriott showcases Bedward's particular form of messianic millennialism during the climax of the sermon in which the prophet calls his church Bedwardism and reveals his newly-envisioned divinity as Son and Holy Ghost, the "black man to save the black race" (Marriott 174-75).⁷⁶ Introduced by congregational singing of the appropriately militaristic spiritual, "Onward Christian Soldiers," Bedward begins by prophecying an imminent eschatological battle between good and evil, which he compares with the historical Morant Bay Rebellion and Marcus Garvey's contemporary movement. Bedward ends by calling his followers to prepare to fly into heaven with him before God "send[s] down fire to rain upon the earth" (175). Bedward enures his own failure when he sets a date for his millennial prophecy:

on Christmas Even, 1920, I shall ascend to my Father. ... Three days later, I shall return for such of my people as are found in Union Camp; and we shall all soar into the blue beyond together ... But on the 30th day of December, 1920, the Lord will send down his fire to scorch the earth, to destroy cities, countries, continents and all mankind. So woe unto any sinner who is found wanting (175-76).

Here Bedward becomes explicitly eschatological, apocalyptic, and therefore doomed to fail so long as the world continues to exist. The audience and readers know that the world did not end on December 30th, 1920, and so Bedward has fallen prey "to the peril of all messianisms: the belief in the chosen people and the finality of 'history.'" (Fritsch 80). Marriott's *Bedward* illustrates the inevitable paradox of failure-through-survival that Bedward must experience

⁷⁶ Patrick E Bryan writes, "The Bedwardian movement was ... a formal church with a theology defined. Contrary to the supposed Old Testament consciousness ... there was a very strong 'New Testament' consciousness. Bedwardian theology accepted the Trinity" (*The Jamaica People* 42).

thanks to his eschatological millennialism, which itself results from his need to substantiate his charismatic authority.

In addition to the impossible futurity that Bedward creates for himself, Marriott reveals how Bedward's claims to power, particularly his messianic claims, so deeply upset the "sure givens of existence" in Jamaica, that the ruling classes must ensure his prophetic impossibility. Even before Bedward claims to be the reincarnated Christ, he poses a threat to traditional hierarchies of power because he receives his mission from God, rather than any human agency.⁷⁷ For example, when the Governor tells Bedward that the church must "obey the authority of the state," Bedward retorts, "the only authority we obey is the authority of God" (171). The Governor interprets Bedward's refusal to recognize state authority as an attempt to create an "empire" that will rival the British crown via the Revivalist religious movement. Bedward grows even more dangerous to existing authority as he swiftly transitions from the more general category of charismatic prophet to that of messianic prophet because this shift attempts to grant Bedward the divine agency from which he claims to receive his messages. After Bedward recognizes himself as incarnations of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, he implies that not only does he speak for a God that transcends recognized hierarchies of power, but is now himself two parts of the three-part God, personally transcending those hierarchies of power. While the governor, magistrate, and other colonial officials mock Bedward's self-proclaimed messianism, his assertions still place them in a tricky legal bind; they want to erase this radical's popular power while not crediting his agential authority.

⁷⁷ According to Weber, charismatic authority like Bedward's, almost always endangers the boundaries set by traditional (coercive) or rational (legal) authority. In the case of colonial Jamaica, traditional authority constitutes social structures of white supremacy, and coercive forms of authority are the legal structures that maintain the British regime.

The court's decisions to rule Bedward insane and institutionalize him become evidence of the necessary illegibility of Bedward's political agency according to the ideological paradigms of British rule. If the magistrate Burke were to claim that Bedward had consciously chosen to undermine governmental authority figures by imprisoning him for sedition, then he would also be implicitly admitting that Bedward manifests charismatic power as a prophet, be that in a religious sense or not. To recognize Bedward's illegitimate authority would be subversive for the maintenance of existing power structures; it would question the "possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence" for colonial rule (Blanchot 79). In Marriott's fictionalization of the Bedward legal cases, Burke acquits the prophet on account of his being insane, then has him almost immediately "*bundle[d] ... back into court*" on the charge that "being a person of unsound mind, you were found wandering at large" (195).⁷⁸ Blanchot writes, "Prophetic speech is a wandering speech that returns to the original demand of movement by opposing all stillness, all settling, any taking root that would be rest" (79). Marriott's portrayal of the colonial court implies that those in power hope to contain Bedward as a means of containing the opposition to stillness that his prophetic speech reveals.

On the one hand, millennial narratives like Bedward's are based on a novelistic hermeneutics of closure, an attempt to create meaning of the past and present by knowing how the story finally ends (Gutierrez 47). The apocalypse is the ultimate narrative resolution, a plot-point by which all previous events can be ordered and made logical. But of course Bedward's

⁷⁸ According to historical records, the district medical officer called to testify on Bedward's health claimed that he "was suffering from 'mental intoxication,' more from amentia than dementia... That he spoke without thought like a little child" (Satchell 88). So we see Marriott's play staging this transition visible in the historical records – the attempt to cast Bedward not as an intentional (aka agential) powerful figure who desired and was becoming successful at hurting the colonial government but rather as a lunatic, a buffoon who was only dangerous because he so lacked the personal power to control his own thoughts and actions.

millennial prophecy is never confirmed nor denied, because he deferred his flight date until he was incarcerated in Kingston. Thus, the colonially-sponsored media outlets had to craft narrative closure for Bedward's legacy by claiming that he flew and broke his leg in order to bind up the end of that story.

Marriott's story of Bedward refuses to offer the closure that his millennial prophecies might suggest. Roxanne Watson notes the ambivalence of Marriott's play, saying the author "painted a more sympathetic image of Bedward's movement," but "portrayed Bedward as eccentric due to his alleged attempt to ascend into heaven and as having a big ego" (235). On the one hand, the drama *Bedward* mythologizes its protagonist in ways that present him as a possible prophet and even messiah through layers of biblical references.⁷⁹ On the other hand, Marriott's enigmatic psychological rendering of Bedward nuances polemical readings of the prophet, particularly when he questions followers' loyalty, and when he betrays doubt about his supernatural abilities to his confidant Bishop Henry just before he is to fly in front of six thousand followers. Marriott endows the drama with a tone of ambivalence that disallows

⁷⁹ In addition to Bedward's constant citation of biblical scripture, Marriott signifies the character's connection to Judeo-Christian prophecy through implicit and explicit biblical allusions. For example, when Shakespeare Woods, the existing pastor of Bedward's church prophesies about Bedward's rise to power, he riffs on the structure of the beatitudes as found in the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew. Even Bedward's reticence to become a religious leader can be read as a gesture towards Old Testament prophet narratives, wherein several prophets, notably Jeremiah, recorded their reluctance and even strong resistance to this divine constraint (Whybray n.p.) Even though Shakespeare Woods does not prophesy Bedward's godliness in Marriott's version, the drama still foreshadows the protagonist's messianic calling in the drama by creating connections between Woods and the New Testament zealot John the Baptist, through references to John's biblical declarations, his hermit existence, fasting, and residence in the "woods." After Bedward claims to embody Jesus's second coming, he leads a procession to Kingston, where he and his flock are ultimately trapped by police officers in the Half Way Tree Courthouse, and jailed for holding an illegal manifestation. Marriott's stage directions indicate, "*Some of the women wave palm leaves*" during the march, referencing Jesus's entry in Jerusalem. Parallels between Bedward and Jesus continue in the courtroom scenes, where Bedward responds to linguistic traps with rhetorical evasion, and is mocked for his messianic visions and sarcastically called "the Lord and Master of August Town."

dualistic readings. Despite Bedward's clear psychological weaknesses, and the increasingly fantastical nature of his prophetic claims, Marriott portrays his protagonist as a character worth supporting during his legal conflicts with the colonial elite. While Marriott's Bedward may not be the millennialist black messiah of his visions, his prophetic speech still manages to interrupt the illusion of a stable and static present. Bedward's final speech in the play exemplifies his desires to disrupt imperial narratives of stability:

All of you in high places sought to destroy me because of the love they have for me. Well, you have succeeded to a point, because now you are using the brute force of the law to separate the Shepherd from his flock. But that separation is only temporary. There will come a time, Judge, when the brute force of the law will not be enough to stop the march of the people. You can put space between me and my people for the time being, Your Honour, but you will never win the battle for their souls. Brothers and Sisters, keep on singing. Sing until that day when we are ready to bring the Judge to his final judgment. (203)

In Marriott's play, it looks as though the only way to ensure that the subversive potential of his prophetic teachings and charismatic storyline were put to rest was to declare him insane and censure him from the public stage through the legal theater, then re-write his narrative in the public media, namely the *Daily Gleaner*.⁸⁰ The extent to which Jamaican oral culture maligned Bedward in Marriott's memory evidences how successfully cultural authorities diffused any dangerous, interpretive openings in Jamaican history that his legacy may leave. Marriott portrays Bedward's accusation of lunacy as an excuse on the part of the government to erase the prophet's powerful voice and story from the public realm, to ensure that his future is indeed impossible to

⁸⁰ Marriott found that historical documents revealed the validity of Bedward's "claim of race prejudice and fear of his influence" by the colonial legal authorities (138).

even imagine.⁸¹ When Bedward protests at his second trial, “what kind of justice is this where I cannot even speak in my own defense?”, the magistrate Burke retorts,

You heard the doctor’s evidence. You are a person of unsound mind. A man of unsound mind is not responsible for his actions, his thoughts or his utterances. How can I therefore listen to you? You are a lunatic, Sir, and I cannot listen to any incoherent story. (202)

Burke’s tautological argument here not only empties Bedward of legal responsibility, but also legal rights and agency through mental control. Like I will show in Erna Brodber’s *Myal* (chapter 2), the phrase “unsound mind,” which references Second Timothy 1:7 in the KJV of the Christian bible, plays on the connection between sound and recognizable subjectivity. According to Burke’s argument, Bedward’s diagnosis by state representatives as being without a sound mind also denies him the right to have his voiced sound received and heard by others. Considering that what defines a prophet is the performance of prophetic speech acts, then Burke’s refusal to allow Bedward an audience also refuses his continued prophecy. In continually re-presenting Bedward’s revolutionary speeches throughout the drama, however, Marriott makes heard and seen what the colonial government has deemed “obscene” in the legal theater of the courtroom and on the public stage.

By presenting Bedward's revised history as a theatrical play, Marriott ensures that Bedward's prophecies for social revolution are spoken, enacted, and witnessed repeatedly in

⁸¹ This brings to mind William J. Maxwell’s recent monograph, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (2015), which mines the United States FBI’s renderings of African American Literature while under the leadership of J. Edgar Hoover. Maxwell recognizes the ways in which fear of black political agitation also worked to frame contemporary reception of black literature.

staged performances, giving Bedward's legacy the audience that the courts had denied.⁸² As Daniel Keegan recognizes in his analysis of prophecy on the early modern stage, to understand prophetic activity in its original meaning of "speaking out" or "speaking before [an audience]" (citing Edward L. Risdén), is to consider the phenomenon "in theatrical terms" (Keegan 422). In other words, there can be no prophetic speech without an audience to witness it. Bedward believes this prophetic dependence on audience reception when he announces his "greatest vision of all" to his elder, Henry.

Bedward: In this vision, Henry, I came face to face with God, and God said to me, 'Who do you say that you are?' And I answered, 'Why? I am Alexander Bedward.' And God the Father said unto me. 'You are Alexander Bedward to men. But you are my messenger on earth. And they that follow you will know that you are a part of the Holy Trinity. You are Jesus come again to redeem the sins of the world. And you are the Holy Ghost the Comforter'

Henry: Yes, Shepherd.

Bedward: You hear me, Henry? In the vision God told me I am Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost ... Redeemer and Comforter

...

Bedward: ... Call the people. Let me tell them about the wonderful visitation of the Father unto the Son and the Holy Ghost. (172-73)

In a potentially comedic moment, Bedward cannot accept Henry's mild affirmative response to his most heterodoxical assertion yet, that of his incarnation as Jesus Christ. Instead, Bedward must confirm that his disciple aurally witnessed the prophetic speech act ("You hear me, Henry?"), after which he must repeat the pronouncement to his disciple and then the larger audience, substantiating the prophetic speech act through repetition and re-presentation.

⁸² We should not elide the likely class differences between Bedward's agro-proletariat audience and those who are likely to attend theatrical performances at the Kingston Ward Theatre.

While all performances “consist of twice-behaved, coded, transmittable behaviors” (Schechner 52), theatrical performances consist of a network of twice-behaved behaviors that have been scripted, choreographed, then repeatedly rehearsed and enacted before shifting audiences.⁸³ Theatre is a genre of repetition. In the case of Marriott's *Bedward*, this generic imperative of repetition for the theatrical playscript reframes the August Town prophet's cultural narrative by turning his story of "failed millennialism" into an ongoing prophetic event. Rather than a terminable history of prophetic failure, Bedward's dramatized story becomes a continual performance of messianism localized on the stage.

Every performance re-introduces Blanchot's “nonetheless,” not only referring, but enacting “a time of interruption, that *other* time that is always present in all time” (81). In turning Bedward's story into a drama, Marriott opens Walter Benjamin's metaphorical gate “through which the Messiah might enter,” if for only a set amount of time during rehearsals and performances (264).⁸⁴ Giorgio Agamben, greatly influenced by Benjamin's writings on Jewish messianism, uses the apostle Paul's writings in the New Testament to define messianic time as “a condensed present, an urgent “now”” (62).⁸⁵ For Agamben, messianic time is not about the end of time, but rather “the time that contracts itself and begins to end,” that is, the suspended climax of the ever-approaching impossible future (62). *Bedward's* audience, knowing that their protagonists' doom is swiftly approaching as he amplifies his messianic claims, collectively

⁸³ In “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation” (1978) , Jacques Derrida argues that Antonin Artaud's search for a theatre of immediate and visceral experience in *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938, 1958) is pointless because theatre is grounded in repetition, or representation. For Derrida, finding a pure presence in theatre would mean the end of theatre.

⁸⁴ Benjamin is discussing Jewish constructions of time in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

⁸⁵ Agamben's definition of messianic time in “The Time that Remains” comes out of his distinctions between eschatological time and messianic time. Thank you to Shelby Johnson for pointing me to these messianic theories.

dwells in a state similar to that experienced by Bedward's followers waiting the apocalypse, as they increasingly anticipate the time the time that begins to end. Theatre scholar Yair Lipshitz notes that in the Western theatrical tradition, "dramatic time bears a resemblance to Benjamin and Agamben's messianic 'now-time,' contracted through action" (240).⁸⁶ The parameters of staged performances, particularly for the historically-sweeping *Bedward* engender this temporal sensation of distilled action.

Marriott uses the contracted "now-time" of the live theater to re-introduce Bedward's now-forgotten voice from the past. I suggest that this temporal reconfiguration results in a form of messianic "now-time" that incorporates a key element of African-derived religious philosophy: the ever-presence of the past. Just as "the beliefs and structure of Revival Zion are steeped in classical African ideas" (Stewart 107), Marriott's dramatization of the Revival Zion prophet couples Christian terminology with the practice of the African-derived Myal religion. Dianne Stewart explains that the most significant characteristics "uniting traditional Myalism, Native Baptist Christian Myalism, and Revival traditions" are "divination, visions, prophecy, and healing," all of which feature prominently in Marriott's *Bedward* (108).⁸⁷ Marriott portrays Bedward as a typical Native Baptist or Revival Zion preacher⁸⁸ of the late nineteenth century in that his roles as spiritual healer⁸⁹ and diviner are of equal if not greater importance to his pastoral

⁸⁶ Lipshitz is using the ideas of Israeli director Yossi Yzraely, whose dramatic theory draws from Jewish mystical traditions, including those of redemption.

⁸⁷ In addition, Bedward evidences what Samuel Murrell notes about how Revival groups found Baptist organizational structure and immersion baptism amenable to African traditional practices (283).

⁸⁸ In historical and theological writings on Bedward, he is referred to as a Native Baptist, Revivalist, or Revival Zion preacher. In the play, he is simply referred to as a prophet, shepherd, preacher, and messiah. Marriott does not distinguish his particular denomination.

⁸⁹ Bedward's prophetic vision about the Mona River reveals that his connection to divinity also imbues him with supernatural understanding of the medicinal properties of nature, one of the foundational tenets of Myal.

and homiletic performances. In fact, Marriott repeatedly quotes *Gleaner* articles throughout the play that attempt to disparage Bedwardism because of its connection with African traditions, calling the worship services “scenes rivaling those of darkest superstition in any part of the Old World” meaning Africa (161). One running joke throughout the drama is the colonial officials’ frustrated attempts to discover incidents of “orgiastic” activity in Bedward’s church. While Marriott’s Bedward does not play into the anti-African tropes that he satirizes throughout the drama, actual practices and beliefs of the African-derived religion Myal, which permeates Revivalist Christian religions in Jamaica, are present throughout the text.

Bedward also uses biblical interpretive practices as a means of affirming African religiosity, another cornerstone of Revivalist churches in the late nineteenth-century Caribbean. This hermeneutical maneuvering occurs throughout the drama, and figures prominently in Bedward’s “black and white wall” sermon described earlier. Referencing Matthew 16:1-8, Bedward compares the white dissenters who have interrupted worship to chemically test the Mona River to the “Pharisees and Sadducees” who asked Jesus for a sign (156). By likening the dubious colonial officials to the dubious Jewish officials, Bedward uses Christian scripture to criticize disbelief in “African ideas of the spiritual properties of water” (Murrell 285). The protagonist additionally demonstrates the Myal-inspired “anti-establishment preaching” of Christian Baptists when he criticizes the government for stealing from the poor and demands the white interlopers leave his balmyard by quoting Matthew 7:23 - “Depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (156). After a “*Great emotional reaction from the Congregation,*” the white officials disperse, making Bedward appear like a victorious incarnation of Jesus with the ability to clear the stage for only his message.

Crudely stated, African-derived temporal frameworks are cyclical and oriented towards the past, while western frameworks are linear and oriented towards the future. Granted, philosophical writings on time in western scholarship (particularly those I invoke in this chapter) usually focus on the ways in which a totalizing view of linear time experiences rupture. Fittingly, these scholars, including Agamben and Derrida, often invoke supernatural and theatrical references to explore these questions- namely, the moment in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which time is "out of joint," and Hamlet becomes oriented to his dead father, his "ancestor." Similarly, scholars of African religion nuance John S. Mbiti's canonical assertion in *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) that in African religion, the future does not exist, and time is conceived as only a continual accumulation of the past in an ongoing present moment. It is not that there is no future in African religious thought, but rather that the general orientation of the present is not towards the future, as it would be in progressive concepts of linear time in the West, but rather that it attunes to the past, constantly cycling back to what, and to whom has come before. Dominique Zahan refigures this temporal framework as an orientation towards the ancestors. He writes,

For the African, time is inconceivable without generations as its framework. The succession of human beings issuing one from another offers to African thought the ideal basis for establishing the three fundamental correlative stages of duration: past, present, and future. However, contrary to what we might expect, a succession of individuals linked by ties of birth appears on the ideal axis of time facing not the future but the past. The human being goes backward in time: [the human being] is oriented toward the world of the ancestors towards those who no longer belong to the world of the living. (45)

Marriott's staging of Bedward's future-oriented messianism actually enables the audience and reader to orient themselves towards the past, towards the ancestors. Thus we can see *Bedward* as

form of what Jacques Derrida calls “revolutionary memory,” a “mourning work in the course of which the living maintain the dead” (*Specters of Marx* 113,185). Marriott mourns, honors, and maintains the prophetic past by re-animating the legacy of Bedward on the stage.

Just as Revival Zion enacted African-derived religious philosophies and customs by way of adopting tropes and thoughts from Christianity, Marriott’s play features the terminology of Judeo-Christian messianism, and yet presents that vocabulary in a format that materially rehearses African religious orientation towards the ancestors. The belief in ancestral participation in the present necessarily negates a narrative of temporal finitude and closure. The play may be theatrically resurrecting Bedward by refusing his own historical emphasis on apocalypse. Instead, the repeated performances of Bedward’s prophetic speech situate his story in an African temporal universe, thus successfully incorporating him into the Divine Community as an ancestor, rather than as two parts of the Christian Trinity he had once claimed.⁹⁰ In this configuration, Bedward’s legacy characterized on the stage serves as an ancestral reminder of the prophetic “nonetheless” that Blanchot reminds us “is always present in all time” (81).

PROPHECY AS HERMENEUTICS IN *DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN*

Like Marriott’s Bedward, Derek Walcott’s prophetic protagonist, Makak, must confront the legal ramifications of his spiritually-inspired actions while being imprisoned by representatives of a colonial, Caribbean government. Both men are considered insane and dangerous. In his literary analysis of Makak’s seeming “lunacy,” Patrick Colm Hogan cites the historical biography of Alexander Bedward to illustrate how Afro-Caribbean religious leaders’

⁹⁰ The theatrical performances of *Bedward* should not be conflated with ancestral incarnations through spirit possession, for to do so would be to minimize the religious weight of such rituals.

“[r]esistance to unjust authority is often characterized by those in authority as madness” (46). In Marriott’s play, I contend, the Jamaican state deems Bedward insane so as to dilute the popular figure’s claims to agential subjectivity, and thus make him and his messianic prophecy appear impotent. In *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, however, it is the possible prophet Makak who attempts to convince his jailer that because he suffers from madness resulting from divine possession, he cannot be held responsible for his own actions under the court of law. What is more, unlike Bedward, Makak claims to be mad as he begs to be *released* from jail, seeking refuge from punishment in the very diagnosis used to imprison Bedward. Makak intones, "I am an old man. Send me home, Corporal. I suffer from madness. I does see things. Spirits does talk to me. All I have is my dreams and they don't trouble your soul" (225). And yet through an extended dream sequence, Walcott stages Makak’s dreams, which in turn trouble his fellow characters’ souls greatly. I contend that *Dream on Monkey Mountain*’s use of what I call the theatrical “dream structure” demonstrates how prophecy operates through a process of collaborative interpretation. While *Bedward* also illustrated the necessary participation of others to create a “successful” prophetic movement, *Dream* takes this idea further by implicating the theatrical audience in the prophet’s cosmology. Furthermore, Walcott’s drama imagines how Makak’s prophetic hermeneutics can be employed to imagine a future of “nonetheless” that even the original prophet cannot foresee.

Before analyzing the drama’s tricky use of generic form, it is important to understand the basic contours of this avant garde play’s confounding plot. *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is a surreal play whose plot is structured around a dream of prophetic charisma. This dream acts much like a play-within-a-play with added ambiguity about the reality of the meta-theatrical event. While in a local Caribbean jail, the protagonist Makak (monkey) is pressured to tell his

story of messianic divinity as a “deposition” to Corporal Lestrade, a mulatto enforcer of white laws, along with fellow prisoners Tigre (tiger) and Souris (rat). All of these men, who constitute Makak’s immediate audience, taunt the impoverished dream-prophet. In his dream, Makak is visited by a white feminine Apparition, who declares his royal African genealogy and says he should return to Africa; Makak’s prophetic speech act occurs as he pronounces his vision in the juridical theater.⁹¹ Makak becomes empowered by this designation, and begins fulfilling his role as prophet with his friend-turned-disciple and later impersonator Moustique (mosquito). Makak becomes well-known for his healing powers when he cures a village of fever. Like Bedward, Makak is both empowered and greatly endangered when he embraces his position as prophet.

After Makak’s disciple Moustique is killed by an angry mob for swindling villagers by impersonating Makak, the plot returns to “real time” with Makak in his jail cell. Makak escapes the cell after wounding Corporal Lestrade and with his fellow prisoners sets off for Africa (actually Monkey Mountain) to claim his kingship. Lestrade pursues the prisoners to the foot of Monkey Mountain where he experiences a revelation that leads him to accept his blackness and become an advocate for black law, condemning all that is white. At this point Walcott does not explicitly signal that his play has again turned to dream, which suggests that Makak’s prophecy may be operating in the “real world” of the fictional stage, or may be another dream which has become indistinguishable from reality. Caught up in his spiritual conversion and new-found adoration for Makak, Lestrade kills the prisoner Tigre with a spear. Meanwhile, Makak rethinks

⁹¹ This back-to-Africa plot recalls the previously discussed texts, *Changó*, *The Biggest Badass* and *Louisiana* (chapter 1); and predicts the prominence of this concept in chapter 3 on *Myal* and *Brown Girl in the Ring*, which represents Africa as a metaphysical “Guinea Land.” In addition, the idealization of Africa as a point of spiritual and physical return in *Dream* harkens to the historical legacy of Alexander Bedward, who talked about a return to Ethiopia, which would become a key tenet in Rastafari.

his back-to-Africa decision and, in a moment of prophetic divination, foresees the violence that will result from the frenzy for power and revenge.

In his "Note on Production," Walcott emphasizes the importance of the dream concept in his work. He writes,

The play is a dream, one that exists as much in the given minds of its principal characters as in that of its writer, and as such it is illogical, derivative, contradictory. Its source is metaphor and it is best treated as a physical poem with all the subconscious and deliberate borrowings of poetry. (208)

Scott Crossley writes that because *Dream* is so difficult to follow, it depends on the "the language of the dream," specifically metaphors, to "illustrate the key concept in his play: the reclaiming of blackness in order to forge an independent West Indian identity" (15). William S. Haney also emphasizes genre, calling Walcott's drama a "dream play" and connecting it with other twentieth-century works by playwrights August Strindberg, John Synge, and Wole Soyinka. Haney calls the play's main characters "schizophrenic," thus extending the madness beyond Makak to all those who are somehow implicated in the dream that subtends this plot. Haney argues that

Walcott's dream play suggests that a visionary experience is perhaps the most effective way to achieve cultural hybridity, an in-between-ness defined in terms both of an international subjects as well as a conceptual void immanent within yet beyond culturally constructed identity. In other words, hybridity is less a state of mind than a state of being beyond conceptual boundaries. (81)

Therefore, Haney's concentration on hybridity uses Makak's dream to accomplish a typical line of argument for Walcott's work – a postcolonial reading of what Omotayo Olorunjoba-Oju calls Walcott's "mulatto aesthetics." Similarly, Robert Fox focuses on the mythological aspect of

Walcott's drama for a post-colonial reading, arguing that it goes beyond promoting the oppressed to dramatize "the disparities between a consciousness that is creative and metaphoric, and one that is straightforward and imprisoning (204). In this chapter, I consider Makak's dream a meditation on colonialism as do previous scholars, but choose to concentrate on what the dream can tell us about the nature of prophecy as the paradoxical hermeneutics of nonetheless that subtends the plot of anti-colonial and pro-black revolution.

A frail, destitute man begging to be released on account of madness, Makak at the opening of *Dream* appears like a study in contrast to the deftly defiant Alexander Bedward that Marriott represents in his court scene. The contrast is illusory; however, when we consider the foundational tenets of each man's argument. Both Bedward and Makak claim that they have been divinely appointed to bring about action on the earth, and both insist that this divine power exists outside of the purview of the state's authority. At being accused of perversion and unlawful behavior, Makak exclaims,

Sirs, I does catch fits. I fall in a frenzy every full-moon night. I does be possessed. And after that, sir, I am not responsible. I responsible only to God who once speak to me in the form of a woman on Monkey Mountain. I am God's warrior. (226)

Here the character Makak attempts to repeal himself of legal penalty for his actions by stating that those actions were not his, but rather those given to him by God in a state of supernatural "possession." Makak then seeks to dis-claim human responsibility by instead claiming his

position as a possessed “warrior” of God, therefore giving God the blame for Makak’s human actions.⁹²

The term “warrior” also belies the antagonistic potential of Makak’s impossible future. Unlike the majority of the vocabulary Makak uses in this scene in his attempts at garnering pity, the phrase “I am God's warrior” rings out like a threat to do battle for the good of a millennial cause. The bellicose tone of the term predicts the overtly antagonistic manner in which Makak and Lestrade will later discuss the prophetic prowess of Afro-derived persons and spirits, and reminds readers of Bedward’s millennialism, which is “a form of social mysticism that is deeply politically subversive,” even if touted by a self-proclaimed lunatic (Landes 23). For example, Makak will pray to the ironically white apparition he later sees to “Help poor crazy Makak, help Makak / To scatter his enemies, to slaughter those / That standing around him. / So, thy hosts shall be scattered, / And the hyena shall feed on their bones!” (229). In this prayer, which mimics the more exaggeratedly vengeful Psalms in the Hebrew scriptures, we see Makak begin with the seemingly self-deprecating label of “poor crazy Makak” only to contrast that tone with the request to “slaughter” his enemies so that animals will feed on their remains. This is like Marriott’s discussion of the need to “crush” the white man, and also brings to mind the pugilist rhetoric of Zapata Olivella’s *Changó* discussed in the previous chapter.

While Marriott’s sentence of lunacy is used as a way to erase his voice from the legal stage and ensure the “impossibility” of his prophetic future, Makak’s attempts to “prove” his own madness become the launching place for the “nonetheless” of the dream sequence physically performed out on the theatrical stage. In short, his claims to illegitimacy are his key to

⁹² This formulation of agency also reminds the reader of Patrick Bellegarde-Smith’s description of possession trance in Vodou, which opens chapter 1.

making physically real what may only be in the landscape of his mind. After Lestrade says to “let the prisoner make his deposition,” Makak begins to speak and “*during this speech, the cage [that had been holding him] is raised out of sight,*” making the act of speaking on his own behalf a liberating gesture for the protagonist.

When Makak launches into the story of the dream, he does so in the imperative voice, in a way directing his listeners on the stage just as the script of the play directs those who produce and consume it. He says,

I will tell you my dream. Sirs, make a white mist
In the mind; make that mist hang like cloth
From the dress of a woman, on prickles, on branches,
Make it rise from the earth, like the breath of the dead
On resurrection morning, and I walking through it
On my way to the charcoal pit on the mountain.
Make the web of the spider heavy with diamonds
And when my hand brush it, let the chain break.
226-27

As Makak tells the Corporal and the other two prisoners to “make a white mist in the mind,” he becomes the director of their mental theatres, an authority figure over their thoughts. What Makak orders his witnesses to mentally create is actually a mist, a symbol of confusion and obscurity. In having his audience create a fog of confusion in their own minds, Makak prepares them for the suspension of disbelief all theater-goers agree to participate in at the physical performance. The dream within the dream acts like a play within a play. Walcott emphasizes Makak’s mental authority over his jailer by repeating the imperative “make” four times, followed by the seemingly less forceful verb “let.” With this phrase “let the chain break,” Walcott again

plays with the freedom of theatrical representation, a theme he introduced with the raising of the cage at the beginning of the speech.

Unlike Bedward's straight-forward path towards self-proclaimed messianism, Makak's conversion narrative, a "prime motif" of all prophetic careers, overflows with contradictions, and establishes the enigmatic nature of his prophetic hermeneutics (6). Prefiguring his messianic mission, Makak introduces himself as a risen figure who walks "on resurrection morning," and whose hands can break heavy chains. Makak continues his speech by switching into a first-person voice of retrospective reflection:

I remember, in my mind, the cigale sawing,
Sawing, sawing wood before the woodcutter,
...
And this old man walking, ugly as sin,
In a confusion of vapour,
Till I feel I was God self, walking through cloud.
In the heaven on my mind. Then I hear this song.
...
As I brush through the branches, shaking the dew,
A man swimming through smoke,
And the bandage of fog unpeeling my eyes,
As I reach to this spot,
I see this woman singing
And my feet grow roots. I could move no more.
227

In this portion of the narration, we see Makak describe himself in seemingly contradicting ways. He is "ugly as sin" and yet also feels that he is as divine as "God self, walking through cloud," becoming the mystical figure of "a man swimming through smoke." Haney argues that the revelation of seeing himself as God self makes Makak's experience a mystical one as defined by scholars such as Forman and William James. I find Haney's argument compelling in this sense,

but feel that by then promoting an idealized concept of hybridity (one popular at the time of this publication), Haney's argument falls short of keeping in mind all the contradictions and complexities of Walcott's drama. These contradictions exemplify the paradoxical authority that Makak manifests through the play. Moments after minimizing himself to those who persecute him, he suggests that they imagine him appearing like God. Similarly paradoxical, the mist acts as both "a confusion of vapour" and a clarifying instrument as "the bandage of fog unpeel[s] [his] eyes." All of these smaller paradoxes will lead to the ultimate confusion of violence in the final scenes, in which it is unclear whether or not characters are in a dream, finding liberation through violence, or simply imagining an alternative construction of reality within the interpretive lens of Makak's prophecy gone wild.

Directly under Makak's speech, the stage directions read, "*During this, the apparition appears and withdraws*" (227) Walcott intends for Makak's madness to be made manifest on the stage, for what he says happened in his memory to actually occur on the stage. In this way, *Dream* is akin to *Bedward*, which also enacts the "nonetheless" of a prophetic past. Only moments after the apparition appears and withdraws, Makak exclaims, "You don't see her? Look, I see her! She standing right there. [*He points at nothing*] Like the moon had climbed down the steps of heaven, and was standing in front of me" (227). The Corporal responds, "I can see nothing," then asks the judges what they see, to which they respond "Nothing. Nothing" (228). Because Walcott includes the textual direction for the apparition, even though the other actors don't "see" the "white Goddess" performed by "a dancer" and end up making fun of Makak for it, the audience is meant to (209). Therefore, the audience is brought into the world according to Makak's prophetic lens, and those who "see nothing" become symbols of ignorance

and otherness. The audience is meant to believe in the validity of Makak's dream - we become his disciples whether we like it or not.

By performing the story of Makak's prophetic calling on the stage, Walcott actually portrays the elderly charcoal-burner as a prophet and spiritual healer. During the dream sequence, the audience sees Makak appear to cure a village of fever through the use of healing charcoals, and cure an abscess in a little boy among other miracles (249, 258). Makak's rise to prophecy is bestowed upon him by a supernatural authority, in this case the apparition, but is not realized among his own peers until he performs certain miracles. Weber explains this particular category of prophetic figures, saying, "It is only under very unusual circumstances that a prophet succeeded in establishing his authority without charismatic authentication, which in practice meant magic" (254). Like the following, Walcott's audience must "see" Makak's powers in order to "believe" them.⁹³ This necessity and power of witnessing miracles culminates when the mulatto jailer Corporal Lestrade is so deeply affected by becoming a witness to Makak's deposition of prophetic reality, that he ultimately experiences a radical conversion, turning away from his previous love of the white man's law to the newfound desire for black dominance and vengeance, reflecting his adoption of Makak's "vision for a new social order" (Legesse 315).

By structuring his protagonist's prophecy in a dream structure, Walcott manages to simultaneously promote an interpretive mode of suspicion towards prophecy (and I will show in turn his own artistic authority) all while submerging his theatrical audience into the alternative

⁹³ Weber argues that even for prophets, like Bedward, who clearly seize their spiritual authority through primarily charisma, also find themselves needing to prove themselves through physical feats in order to maintain that authority. "Later, as the prophet actively begins to build up a following, it becomes necessary for him to validate his calling, his claim, or his special powers by performing feats of magic or healing. "It is validity of charisma... If proof of his charismatic qualification fails him for long, the leader endowed with charisma tends to think his god and his magical or heroic powers have deserted him" (Weber 1968a [1947]:49).

reality of the prophet's cosmological understanding. This dream setup, I suggest, harkens Anthony F.C. Wallace's expansion of the Weberian concept of prophetism, namely his concept of "mazeway resynthesis." Wallace codifies the revitalization process found in prophetism, saying that at the center of this process "is a phenomenon of cognitive transformation" called "mazeway resynthesis." The prophet offers his followers a new and totally meaningful cognitive model that seeks to render the universe intelligible. In short, he offers a new cosmology" (Wallace). Walcott inspires this form of watching by first having Makak preface his dream sequence with self-doubt and dismissal.⁹⁴ At the same time, the stage directions in *Dream* present exactly the apparition and prophetic miracles that Makak denies. In this way, Walcott manages to introduce suspicion all while giving the audience no choice but to participate in the prophetic cosmology no matter how skeptical Makak is of his own reality. In short, *Dream* presents prophecy as a hermeneutics, a method of interpreting the dramatic world of the stage and in turn, the world at large.

What is perhaps most ironic about Makak's turning into a prophet is that the "dream" is only told because Corporal Lestrade pushes the prisoner to explain himself, to "make his deposition" in response to having been "charged with certain things" (226). These certain things, Corporal Lestrade has already told the audience, include engaging in "a blasphemous, obscene debate with two other villagers" and "describing in a foul, incomprehensible manner ... a dream which he claims to have experienced, a vile, ambitious, and obscene dream" (224). At this point, Makak's prophetic experiences only exist in the realm of that which is incomprehensible and

⁹⁴ This performance of doubt also echoes the seemingly apologetic introductions to many nineteenth-century slave narratives. Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*, which I discuss in the previous chapter, also draws on this deferential narrative tradition in ways that both perform and satirize the ways in which Afro-diasporic authors are expected to negate their own authority to speak to larger audiences all while still bringing those audiences into the world of the story.

obscene in the social order, signaling an impossible future that in its very articulation threatens the stability of the present (Blanchot 79). Makak's visions are like Bedward's spiritual proclamations: too threatening to the social order to be recognized at all, and yet also necessarily criminalized in order that they be contained. In the case of *Dream*, this obscene dream becomes seen and scene as it gets acted out on the stage. Makak's prophecy is seen because Lestrade, the representative of the English, which he explicitly connects to the Roman law in a nod to the story of Jesus' crucifixion, forces Makak to communicate, to manifest in the prophetic speech act. Makak does not want to – he even says that he is mad and his dream need not trouble Lestrade's soul. Therefore it is actually Lestrade's putting Makak on trial that forces Makak's prophecy to trouble the Corporal's soul, which it greatly does. Lestrade and the law are forcing the “scenening” of the obscene, forcing Makak to take his stage audience and the larger theatrical audience back into his dream and forcing all of these witnesses to exist within the dream world with Makak for that time being.

When the action of *Dream* moves to the forest below Monkey Mountain in the second scene of Part Two, Walcott demonstrates how the interpretive methods of prophecy are actualized by consistent participation of actors and audience. *Dream* illustrates that a prophetic hermeneutics is a collective performance of interpretation. Tigre, Souris, and Makak arrive in the forest after Tigre, intent on getting to Makak's buried gold. Tigre convinces the old man to stab Corporal Lestrade and flee with the two thieves to his home. While Makak waxes poetic about his ability to “prophesy from one crystal of dew” on their way to Monkey Mountain, Tigre becomes impatient with his musings, and worries that Makak will wake up from his prophetic fantasy before they can find and steal his money. In order to keep Makak from “coming back” from what Tigre sees as a state of madness, the cunning criminal tells his comrade Souris to

encourage Makak's fantasy of prophecy. Tigre tells Souris, "let's mix ourselves in this madness. Let's dissolve in his dream" (289). Tigre's command to his partner suggests that like the suspension of disbelief required in the "successful" theatrical event, the prophetic reality also requires all who are a part of it, including the key actor Makak be committed to that alternate cosmology. This insistence of interrelated participation in the prophetic/theatrical event harkens to the paragraph-long epigraph Walcott provides from Sartre's introduction to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1963) for Part Two of his play. Walcott quotes Sartre on the "witchery of ... Western culture," which discusses the "two bewitchings" of colonization, in which persons betray their brothers and become accomplices to the colonizers. This split existence is well exemplified in the mulatto character of Corporal Lestrade. Walcott ends with Sartre saying, "The status of "native" is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people *with their consent*" (277). Just like the collaborative interpretation of prophecy and theatre, colonial ideology requires the active participation of all those involved.

Like the theatrical event and colonialism according to Sartre, in the prophetic mode of interpretation here, even if the person is skeptical like the two men Tigre and Souris (though Walcott makes it unclear whether or not they both stay skeptical), they must choose to invest themselves in the belief system of the prophecy in order to create a world where the alternative reality is actualized. Walcott makes this phenomenon even more connected to ideas about performance when he has Souris act so convincingly that he has fallen into the "madness" of Makak's alternative reality, that within a few lines it is unclear whether or not Souris truly does feel "really frighten ... like a child again," as he says, remembering how he was taught "to be black like coal, and to dream. of milk. To love God, and obey the white man" (290). The dissolving of Souris' subjectivity through acting harkens to Constantin Stanislavski's

theorization of method acting, in which the actor temporarily loses personal consciousness in the process of “living a part” (13) as well as the possessed medium’s loss of self while being “ridden” in a trance.⁹⁵ Tigre is so disturbed by his mate's seeming sudden cognitive transformation that he whispers to him admonishingly, "Enough! Enough! You going crazy too?" (290). It appears that Souris still sees Makak as a delusional person when he calls him "mad, mad, mad." (294) However, when Tigre seeks to steal Makak's gold after Corporal Lestrade has had his conversion, Souris refuses to follow his friend and plainly states, "I believe this old man," attesting to his cognitive conversion. Tigre then asks, "What the hell you talking about?" to which Souris adds, "I believe I am better than I am. He teach me that.[*Picks up a rock*] Now you know me, Tigre. You will have to shoot" (302). Souris’s new-found claim to belief signals his conversion and repentance as those terms signal a “change of mind,” literally a transition into the interpretive mode of Makak’s prophecy.⁹⁶ Souris’s conversion to belief in Makak and turning against Tigre preface the even more radical revolution of faith experienced by Corporal Lestrade.

Corporal Lestrade experiences an overwhelming conversion to Makak’s cosmology through a process of “repentance” that Walcott stages by showing the character appear to lose his mind as it changes and recognizes the alternate reality of Makak’s cosmology. When the Corporal Lestrade reaches the escaped prisoners, he approaches while performing a monologue that appears to communicate his erratic stream-of-consciousness with phrases suffused with imperial imagery and hints of his upcoming psychological break. For example, Lestrade utters a

⁹⁵ Well-versed in European theatrical theory, Walcott was likely familiar with the work of Stanislavski, including his racist anecdote about enacting the role of the African Othello, which supposedly required the European actor mimic an animal, becoming “primitive... perhaps like a tiger” (4).

⁹⁶ In the Septuagint, *metanoia* and *metanoieō* (literally, “a change of mind”) often express “repentance” and “repent,” and both appear frequently in the New Testament.

Freudian slip revealing his own racial identity as he mutters, “Oh I knew this jungle like the black of my hand” (296). When Lestrade encounters Basil the carpenter (previously seen in Makak’s memory scenes), Basil states, “I am Basil, the carpenter, the charcoal seller. I do not exist. A figment of the imagination, a banana of the mind” (297). Because the audience has to this point only encountered Basil as a character of Makak’s dream-theatre, the enigmatic figure’s sudden appearance to Corporal Lestrade outside of the dream context could mean that the Corporal has now fully adopted the prophetic paradigm of his former prisoner, which could in turn suggest that the jailer is either going mad or perhaps going into the reality in which Walcott’s audience has already been operating. Basil then adds, “You have one minute to repent. To recant. To renounce” (297). When Lestrade asks Basil what he should repent, the cabinet-maker and now “figure of death” answers cryptically, “you know, Lestrade. You know.” By telling Lestrade that he already possesses the knowledge of his own repentance, Basil makes the Corporal’s turning towards a greater truth, a turning inward. At this point, Lestrade asks “what happened to my mind?” as he recognizes that his mind is in the process of transitioning into a new method of understanding the world around him. Ultimately, Lestrade performs an apostrophe to “Africa of [his] mind,” repenting for having turned his back on his heritage and now seeing “a new light,” recognizing “the glories of Makak!” (299). Interestingly, the stage directions specify that this speech be performed “*Flatly, like an accustomed prayer*” (299). The familiarity of this devotion suggests that like the theatrical performance, the prophetic script is constituted through repeated enactments over time.

By having Makak unable to see Basil on the stage, Walcott shows that Makak’s prophecy now has taken on a life of its own within the mental theatres of his followers, therefore exceeding the elderly man’s original authority and even cosmology. Lestrade’s anguished shift

into the prophetic world-view reenacts Makak's earlier pleas in the jail. Just as Walcott stages the white apparition for the audience, but denies Lestrade, Tigre, and Souris the capacity to see her, so do Makak, Tigre, and Souris believe that Lestrade is "talking to nothing" in this moment, while the audience can clearly recognize that the embodied figure of Basil stands on the stage with the Corporal (299). Yet again, Walcott has his audience operate as converted followers to the prophetic lens of interpretation adopted by his characters, giving the audience no choice but to imagine the world through a new vantage point. Interestingly, in the case of Lestrade's perception of the world, Makak is not included in the group of those who can see the prophecy playing out. In *Dream*, to convert to Makak's prophetic world-view means to adopt a hermeneutics that can recognize possibilities others cannot imagine.

Makak becomes upset when Tigre and Souris take the opportunity of Lestrade's conversion to taunt him about how he now feels to be the "animal" and "nigger" he earlier accused of them (301). Makak laments like many religious prophets before him, "I have brought a dream to my people and they rejected me." Makak then adds, "Now they must be taught, even tortured, killed. Their skulls will hang from my palaces. I will break up their tribes," harkening up images of a vengeful divine ruler (301). Makak's violent rhetoric comes to fruition when Lestrade kills Tigre, provoking Makak to see it as the actualization of the tribes turning against each other with self hatred. In *Scars of Conquest, Masks of Resistance* (1995), Tejumola Olaniyan describes this moment in the text:

The tribes, led by the converted Lestrade, now the chief ideologue of Afrocentric culturalism, are more of praise-singers than effective monitors of their leader. Once in control of power, their preoccupation seems to be with revenge, and this they pursue with a reckless abandon. (107)

After a ceremonial execution of historical figures for being “indubitably white,” Makak (after ironically being prompted by the previously corrupting Moustique) sees himself as a mere puppet of his power-hungry followers. Furthermore, Makak no longer wishes to symbolize prophetic power to those around him as he despairs that his prophetic dream for black liberation has become fully corrupted. Makak ends the play as he begins it, the reluctant prophet who claims to be only a “shadow” not meant to bother the souls of those around him.

Walcott’s drama shows that it does not matter if Makak wants to take back his prophetic worldview because the converted characters, along with the theatrical audience have already been changed in some way by experiencing Makak’s prophetic cosmology. Robert D. Hamner recognizes the strength of Makak’s prophetic spiritual paradigm when he calls Walcott’s oeuvre “mythopoetic because there are motifs, characters, actions, and symbols in his poetry and drama that provide coherent patterns of belief, explanations of a way of life” (35). Reality and mental states are not separable, even when Makak wishes them to be. Rather, Walcott shows how the prophetic operates like the theatre, collaboratively creating, shifting, and challenging that which we think is “real,” or material. In the final scenes, Makak recognizes the dangerous proliferation of prophetic interpretation, which when taken up by followers with enough fanaticism, can corrupt the original message bestowed by the divine authority.

CONCLUSION – TWILIGHT PROPHETS

Like Makak at the end of *Dream*, Walcott identifies himself in his 1970 essay “What the Twilight Says” as a prophet who is battling with the repercussions of his charismatic power and doomed to sell out his own divine vision as a result of the corrupting possibilities in these new modes of interpretation. In this essay, Walcott imagines himself as a prophet, all while

demeaning his acting as such. The prophetic theme arises when Walcott describes himself and his theatrical collaborators as “new Adams, in a nourishing ignorance which would name plants and people with a child’s belief that the world is his own age” (6). Like Makak, Walcott in “Twilight” muses on what it means to reconcile with one’s own prophetic position in real time, not simply once others have accepted that designation.⁹⁷

In both self-aggrandizing and self-deprecating terms, Walcott explains, “the self-inflicted role of martyr came naturally, the melodramatic belief that one was message-bearer for the millennium, that the inflamed ego was enacting their will” (4). The author’s musings on the prophetic role make sense looking at essays about his work around that time, which describe his students looking up to him as a “prophet.” Even a cursory search through articles on Walcott at the end of the twentieth century show him being regarded as a prophet of Caribbean playwrights, poets, and intellectuals.⁹⁸ Interestingly, Walcott appears to suggest that in fulfilling his prophetic role, he comes to see himself as a “Christ” figure and in doing so manages to lose his own soul, much like Makak at first feels empowered and then implicated in violence he no longer believes in. Walcott calls himself a “self-appointed schizoid saint” full of rage that “eroded and demeaned the soul” (32-33). After describing the linguistic (namely English-born) requirements he made of his actors as a “kind of aggression [which] increased an egotism which can pass for genius,” Walcott says he “was thus proclaimed a prodigy” for insisting on “a formality which had nothing to do with their lives” (32). Here Walcott suggests that with each label of genius, he is further

⁹⁷ In *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*, Paula Burnett identifies that the “artist as prophet” figures largely throughout Walcott’s poetry, including “As John to Patmos,” *Another Life*, “The Arkansas Testament,” and “The Schooner’s Flight.” Walcott primarily pulls from the Judeo-Christian tradition as he analogies the artist – and arguably himself in the process – to St. John the Divine, Moses, and the Apostle Paul.

⁹⁸ It is easy to see how this pattern of regard seems to come to an end in recent years. The decline in overt praise for Walcott likely results from the ways in which his actions amongst female students have garnered him a reputation as predatory, and shed a negative light on his character.

removed from the community he attempts to serve, and that his “mania” and desire to retain artistic power increased above his ability to “help others and treat himself without mercy” (32).

By the end of the “Twilight” essay, Walcott, like his character Makak, wishes to dispel of his authority in the hopes that doing so will redeem his original theatrical mission. And yet Walcott’s earnest, if somewhat narcissistic, tone in “Twilight” reveals the truth apparent in Marriot’s *Bedward* and *Dream on Monkey Mountain*: that once a prophecy has become powerful in the lives of its followers and its detractors, it no longer matters if the original prophet believes in his prophetic gift or not. Rather, prophecy, like an artist’s creative interpretation of the world, takes on a life of its own as it is received, revised, and re-imagined in the minds of those who become its witnesses.

CHAPTER IV

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF POWER: ZOMBIES IN *BROWN GIRL IN THE RING* AND *MYAL*

How to care for the injured body,

the kind of body that can't hold
the content it is living?

- Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Have you heard the term 'zombification' before? The thing's been
going around in my head. You know how some words can stay
with you?

- Erna Brodber, *Myal*

In Erna Brodber's *Myal* (1988) and Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1997), the zombified body signifies spiritual and physical violation. As the "ultimate sign of loss and dispossession," the zombie epitomizes the human suffering and deprivation endured by those exploited in oppressive socio-political systems including slavery, colonialism in the case of *Myal*, and late capitalism in the case of *Brown Girl in the Ring* (Dayan 37). Both Brodber and Hopkinson's novels represent the violence of systemic subjugation through the injured bodies of female characters.⁹⁹ In addition to manifesting cultural trauma, the women's bodies become sites for community empowerment and healing.

This chapter's focus on zombification corresponds and deviates from the overall project's approach to *religious* practices in the Afro-diasporic Americas. In contrast to mediums, prophets, and preachers, zombies are discussed almost exclusively as mythological symbols and folk

⁹⁹ Rebecca Romdhani's recent article on zombifying shame in *Brown Girl in the Ring* cites Erna Brodber's *Myal* as a companion narrative, though she does not explore this connectoin at length.

archetype by contemporary Afro-Caribbean religious scholars and theologians.¹⁰⁰ While zombification is generally considered a mythological construction of the Vodou spirit world, the narrative trajectory of these zombified women -- from individualized spiritual suffering towards wellness in community -- typifies the principles of liberation, fellowship, and healing that characterize Afro-Caribbean religions.¹⁰¹

I first analyze Hopkinson's intensely visceral representations of zombification in her speculative fiction, *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Hopkinson's depictions of zombified flesh prompts readers to notice the corresponding role of human corporeality in political processes, that, like zombification require the subjugation of those who are vulnerable to abuse in a corrupt capitalist dystopian setting. I then explore the sonic aspects of spirit thievery, a form of zombification in Brodber's *Myal*. Brodber's representations of sound demonstrate the concurrently abstract and material experiences of spirit thievery and reclamation. I show how one woman's possession narrative uses sound to illustrate the materiality of thought, while another's use and retention of voice demonstrate how power operates through the embodied performances of abstract ideas. In the remainder of the chapter, I trace how these two novels imagine recovery from dispossession through community-based Myalism, or religious healing.¹⁰² *Myal* and *Brown Girl in the Ring*

¹⁰⁰ Zora Neale Hurston famously claimed to have met a zombified woman in her 1938 ethnography, *Tell My Horse*. Other anthropologists known for their work on zombies include Maya Deren, Melville Herskovitz, and Wade Davis.

¹⁰¹ For more on zombies as myth see Murrell 82, and for more on healing function of African-derived religious practices in the Caribbean, see Stewart 115.

¹⁰² I use the term "Myal" to refer strictly to religious processes of spiritual healing in this chapter, while I use Obeah to refer to the more expansive religious concept of both spirit-stealing and restoration. Obeah is a term used throughout the English-speaking Caribbean to express belief in "the power of spiritually endowed individuals, on behalf of the self or another, to manipulate spiritual forces to procure good or to active evil or to counter evil" (Eastman 404). While scholars such as Stewart, Chevannes, Murrell, and Olmos do not agree on the dichotomy between bad Obeah and good Myal, I use Myal to specify healing in light of the way Brodber

present distinct narratives of Myalism and spiritual liberation, both of which involve bodily disintegration and re-possession.

ECONOMIES OF FLESH IN *BROWN GIRL IN THE RING*

Brown Girl in the Ring's protagonist Ti-Jeanne, a young Afro-Caribbean mother, lives with her folk healer grandmother, Mami Gros-Jeanne amongst impoverished immigrant communities of color in the derelict ghetto of central Toronto, called The Burn.¹⁰³ *Brown Girl in the Ring* further marginalizes this Caribbean Canadian community by placing them in the geographical “hub of a wheel that has been rusted through and through,” with the spokes being Toronto’s wealthy “satellite suburbs” (3). This setting predicts the sublimated and pivotal role that societal oppression plays throughout the novel, for as Ifeoma Nwankwo states, “Racism and classism are the reasons why the novel's setting even exists” (307). While Dayan argues, “the zombi tells the story of colonization,” in the case of *Brown Girl in the Ring*, it also tells the story of colonialism’s racist and classist legacies of capitalistic exploitation. The Burn has been hollowed out due to white flight and economic collapse after the indigenous Temagami win their land rights back in a case against Ontario. Like Brober’s hollowed-out victims of spirit-thievery, The Burn has been emptied as a result of European colonialism’s continual legacies of disenfranchisement. While socio-economically dispossessed, The Burn still bubbles over with Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices.

and Hopkinson deploy the terms in their novels. For more on Obeah see Margarite Fernández Olmos 131.

¹⁰³ Numerous scholars including Gregory Rutledge, Alondra Nelson, Ifeoma Nwankwo, and Monica Coleman focus on Hopkinson’s use of dialect and extra-textual references to construct this Canadian ghetto community with residents of Haitian, Jamaican, Indian, and other origins. For sociological information on Afro-Caribbean immigration in 1960s Canada, see Yon 491.

Mami Gros-Jeanne is a practitioner of the healing spiritual practice Myal, and faithfully honors a distinctly pan-Caribbean pantheon of spirits as she tries to teach to her skeptical granddaughter the benefits of doing the same. Hopkinson's religious and mythical references and events sit alongside plausible yet difficult to comprehend technologies, inviting the reader to imagine the workings of the spirit world as similar to the workings of the scientific world, particularly that of biomedical engineering. Gerald Jonas of the *New York Times* reviewed Hopkinson's science fiction brand of religion, saying,

She treats spirit-calling the way other science fiction writers treat nanotechnology or virtual reality; like the spirits themselves, the spirit-callers follow rules as clear to them...as the equations of motion or thermodynamics are to scientists and engineers.

Jonas identifies the ways in which *Brown Girl in the Ring* presents spiritual and scientific knowledge as powerful instruments that can be used for exploitation or liberation in the material world. What Jonas may not be aware of, is that Hopkinson's treatment of "spirit-calling" is not remarkable for recognizing a set of clear rules, since any attempt to synthesize the intricate cosmologies and liturgies of syncretic religious traditions proves immensely difficult thanks to the complex rituals of practitioners. Rather, Hopkinson's spiritual landscape in *Brown Girl in the Ring* is remarkable because it imagines a world in which *everything* supernatural is made materially real. Gordon Collier describes the novel as a survival narrative, "a racy generic amalgam of dystopia, futuristic technology, supernatural horror and witchcraft, generational romance, mythic quest story, and trickster tale" (444). In the novel there are malevolent spirits associated with Vodou folk mythology (usually de-emphasized by the religion's practitioners), a version of Graft Versus Host Disease in which the graft organ successfully alters the

consciousness of the host, and a Divine Community of spirits and ancestors who battle against evil on earth.

The novel's plot takes off when Tony, Ti-Jeanne's drug-addicted ex-beau and the (unbeknownst to him) father of her newborn baby begs Ti-Jeanne and Gros-Jeanne to help him escape The Burn with the aid of their physical and metaphysical herbal knowledge.¹⁰⁴ Tony is desperate to extricate himself from the posse of violent drug dealers who threaten to kill him unless he murders another human being so that the posse leader, Rudy, can harvest and sell that victim's heart for an organ transplant. Rudy, who we discover is also Ti-Jeanne's grandfather has secured authority over the residents of The Burn along with prolonged physical youth by using his Obeah to zombify and otherwise violate those around him. Rudy is a sorcerer who manipulates the neutral powers of the sacred for his own personal gain, referred to in this novel as a "shadow-catcher" and Obeah sorcerer (121).¹⁰⁵ Usually Rudy creates zombies, which I categorize as "flesh objects," by murdering his victims to force their reanimated flesh to labor on his behalf. In a few special cases, Rudy paralyzes his victims and convinces them to let him control their disembodied souls, also referred to as duppies, creating a particularly dangerous form of zombie, which I call the "disembodied docile body."

Hopkinson's portrayal of zombification in *Brown Girl in the Ring* centers squarely on the meat of human creatures, even when the dispossessed are seemingly disembodied duppies, or souls. In fact, Rudy's violent Obeah is, like the organ economy depicted in the novel, founded in the desire to thwart his own bodily decay, and thus inevitable mortality. Corporeality is a hallmark of Nalo Hopkinson's writing, which Michelle Reid describes as a "challenging

¹⁰⁴ Extensive botanical knowledge is a tenet of Central African influence in diasporic religions. See Stewart 119 and Murrell 255. Usually this knowledge is associated with healing, rather than harm.

¹⁰⁵ For Obeah as "shadow-catching," see Murrell 255.

patchwork rooted in the body, sexuality, and race” (106). Almost every scene in *Brown Girl in the Ring* includes details of bodily functions, from the protagonist Ti-Jeanne’s lactating nipples at the sound of her baby’s cries and Tony’s “buff slashes” that document intravenous drug use, to a Canadian politician’s cardiac arrhythmia that intensifies when she worries over an upcoming election. By crowding the novel with depictions of living, dead, dissected, and reanimated human flesh, Hopkinson ensures that readers keep sight of how certain bodies benefit, and most importantly, how certain bodies suffer from abstract, ideological forms of dispossession.

Monica Coleman claims, “*Brown Girl* dramatises the battle between a mythical and mystical Caribbean culture and the demands of a postindustrial, postcolonial, and here posturban society.” I argue that rather than presenting a battle between the mystical and the postindustrial, Hopkinson uses the mystical and mythological trope of zombification to reveal the corporeal underpinnings of late capitalism. In this way, I am extending Mimi Sheller’s work in *Consuming the Caribbean* (2003) by studying how the symbolic forms of zombies in this novel illuminates “the actual material relations through which bodies in one place unethically touch bodies in another place” (147-48). Though Hopkinson’s novel does not take place within the Caribbean islands, it still reflects on exploitation and “consumption” of Afro-Caribbean persons within diasporic Canada. In the following, I elucidate two examples of exchange through flesh objects—Melba’s zombification and the Canadian Premier’s organ donation campaign – to demonstrate how the novel ties abstract systems of economic and symbolic power to the violated bodies of marginalized persons. After meditating on the materiality of exchange in flesh, I analyze how Hopkinson also depicts the manipulation of the soul/duppy as a process that begins with the corporeal objectification, revealing the connection between spirit and body that *Myal* will extend even further through the trope of sound. In the world of *Brown Girl in the Ring*, I contend, each

of these abusive manifestations of power stems from a desire to overcome the emotional and physical vulnerabilities of all biological life.

Rudy's old secretary, Melba exemplifies the flesh object zombie, a de-souled individual whose empty "living dead" body is used for another's personal gain.¹⁰⁶ Melba demonstrates her zombification through unflinching obedience to her former employer and now owner, Rudy. In several scenes set in Rudy's office, Melba stands "deathly still," in the corner, "looking at nothing," until Rudy instructs her to assist him (usually by cleaning), after which she moves slowly, "eyes irising in and out of focus," and labors at the assigned task until Rudy orders her to stop (5, 28, 130).¹⁰⁷ When Tony sees Melba in Rudy's office, he "shudders," thinking, "whatever hold Rudy had on the woman had to be more than just buff addiction. Her will, her *volition*, seemed to be gone" (28). In her analysis of "zombifying shame" in *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Rebecca Rohmani notes that "all zombies, wherever and whenever they appear across cultures, lack autonomy and the ability to think clearly and feel complex emotions" (73-73). While Rohmani focuses on the psychological powerlessness (zombification) that results from internalizing ideological shame about African heritage, I focus on the physical aspects of these oppressive ideological systems (73).

¹⁰⁶ This "basic" method of zombification aligns with Haitian zombie lore described earlier in this chapter from Hurston's *Tell My Horse* (1938), Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen* (1953), Wade Davis's *Passage into Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (1988), and Joan Dayan's *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (1998).

¹⁰⁷ Melba's lack of visual focus signifies her hollow, dispossessed state. Anthropologist Alfred Métraux says zombies can be recognized by "their vague look, their dull almost glazed eyes, and above all by the nasality of their voice, a trait also characteristic of the Guédé, the spirits of the dead" (250). Whereas in *Myal*, acoustic elements signal the reader to consider the relationship between the abstract spirit and physical body, visual cues perform a similar function in *Brown Girl*, particularly regarding Ti-Jeanne's "gift" of prophetic sight, which connects her to Legbara (59).

In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, abstract trauma, such as shame or economic exploitation, is continually externalized through depictions of visceral injury. For example, Hopkinson evidences Melba's inability to defy Rudy when the shadow-catcher flays her skin so he can prepare to feed her to his trapped duppy hungry for human blood, Mi-Jeanne. Melba even "present[s] her neck to the knife," emphasizing her powerlessness (137). It is because of this grisly procedure that "Melba [holds] her own skin draped over one arm" when she returns to fight Rudy as a ghoul with "determined" stride during the novel's final battle (225). While the afterlife allows Melba to be reunited with her own "determination," she still carries her wounds of objectification, her skin. Just as Stewart notes in African-derived Caribbean theology, for Melba, "the afterlife is a hostel for relational existence and reconnection" to her own capacity for self-direction, but "it does not offer compensation for unmerited earthly suffering" because her trauma is not simply eradicated thanks to the salvation of death (Stewart 239). Melba's detached skin transforms her entire exterior into a scar, and in that vein, a moving signifier of physical and metaphysical violation.

Rudy zombifies Melba in order to "teach [her] a lesson" for "holding back some of she earnings" from him (212). Rudy's reference to "teaching" Melba to not attempt to accrue capital from her wages, or "earnings" demonstrates how this process of spiritual dispossession dramatizes ideologies of exchange value and power. Those like Melba who are doomed to indefinitely perform manual labor for another person represent the extreme manifestation of capitalist oppression, historically rooted in the enslavement inflicted upon kidnapped Africans in the western hemisphere by European colonists. On the other hand, Melba does not read perfectly as a symbol for the commodification of enslaved Africans because Rudy has no intention to use Melba as a commodity- that is to say, he has objectified Melba and is claiming her labor power

as his own, but is not exchanging her on a market. Rather, Melba's zombification as a flesh object personifies a collapse between what Karl Marx calls "labor power" and "use value" ("Wage Labor and Capital" 660).

Melba is a flesh object with use value based on her body's labor power, as well as a flesh object with use value based on her symbolic power. While Melba may not be a commodity in Marxist terms, her objectification does garner Rudy symbolic power¹⁰⁸ because her obvious enslavement strikes fear in the hearts of others who deal with Rudy. Like the body of the enslaved person Saidiya Hartman analyzes in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Melba's reanimated flesh becomes "the captive body," which stands as the "'sign and surrogate' of the master's body" (120). Even if Melba is not a commodity exactly, her presence acts as currency for Rudy. Those who live in or negotiate with those in *The Burn* fear Rudy when they see Melba simply because it is clear that Rudy possesses powers beyond drug-dealing in order to have so mysteriously taken ownership of this woman's body. Just as "black subjection" came to frame "questions of sovereignty, right and power" thanks to slavery in the Americas, Melba's clearly subjugated body, which the text repeatedly describes in non-human blue and grey tones, testifies to Rudy's sovereignty and power among his fellow capitalists (Hartman 115). It is only fitting that Hopkinson's reader first encounters the "haggard, blank-eyed" zombie Melba in the novel's first scene, which features a potential exchange of flesh objects and money (5).

This zombie economy operates concurrently with a physical economy that exchanges flesh objects, namely viable donor organs from pigs and humans. Douglas Baines from the Toronto transplant hospital "Angel of Mercy" meets with Rudy to offer him a monetary award if

¹⁰⁸ Pierre Bourdieu defines "Symbolic power" as the "power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, or confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself" (170).

Rudy can procure a human heart for the ailing Canadian Premier. As Baines and Rudy negotiate a payment for the heart, they hyperbolically demonstrate Marx's description of "labor power" as "this peculiar commodity which has no other repository than human flesh and blood" ("Wage Labor and Capital" 660). In the case of this deal, not only is Rudy's price of labor reckoned in his own work through human flesh and blood, but also the commodity Rudy is producing is in fact human flesh and blood.

By weaving together the zombie and organ economies in the larger narrative plot, *Brown Girl in the Ring* shows how both economies of flesh share common investments in objectifying the bodies of the socio-economically dispossessed for the sake of those with capital. Baines believes that his hospital, Angel of Mercy, will benefit if it performs Uttley's life-saving surgery, so he offers Rudy a sum of money for bringing them a healthy human heart, knowing that the donor will be murdered by the posse. Also in this scene, Baines is intimidated by the symbolic power Rudy flaunts through Melba's obvious subjugation, but continues on with the homicidal deal so that he can gain his own symbolic power from the Canadian government. By not confirming that Melba is a zombie until later in the novel, Hopkinson invites the reader to consider Melba through the non-spiritual lens of Baines, and conflate her total lack of agency with the proletariat laborer's exploitation under capitalism. Because Ti-Jeanne's ex-beau Tony worked in medicine before his buff addiction escalated and he got entangled with the posse, Rudy chooses the young man to collect the needed heart by murdering a viable donor. If Tony does not obey Rudy's commands, the drug lord's henchmen will kill him with impunity. The layers of abuse and manipulation in this moment remind the reader of W.E.B. Du Bois's writings on the burgeoning global market in the nineteenth century: "Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human beasts" (*Black Reconstruction* 15).

Brown Girl in the Ring's capitalist dystopia illustrates how modern markets rely on the continued violation of marginalized human bodies for the biological benefit of humans in power.

In the biological transplant economy, persons attempt to buy flesh objects, which in this case become commodities, in order to procure more embodied “time” for the purchasers. In a play on Marx’s concept of laborers selling their time for wages, here the laborer, namely Tony for the heart transparent is indeed selling his labor time to the capitalist, but also the flesh objects on the market are intended to prolong the purchaser’s time of life. Tony talks about having sold his “soul” to Rudy because he is now required to devote his time laboring for Rudy in morally abhorrent ways just as Rudy admits to selling his soul to the gods in his hopes to procure more time through Obeah. The economy of time in the spiritual scientific realms is inextricably tied to the inevitability of death for all creaturely flesh.

Hopkinson uses an image of corporeal detritus followed by Rudy’s sudden bodily degeneration to show how zombification, like the inequitable organ market relies on the purchasing of embodied time by consuming the bodies of others. When Ti-Jeanne breaks her grandfather’s evil calabash bowl, she frees the imprisoned soul of her mother, Mi-Jeanne (Rudy’s daughter) from eternal enslavement. When the calabash bowl breaks, it first releases the corporeal remnants of Rudy’s subjugated flesh objects: “reeking clumps of dirt; a twist of hair; white knuckle bones; the black mummified body of what looked like a dead cat” and then frees Mi-Jeanne’s tortured soul along with that of Gros-Jeanne’s lover, Dunston (204). When Mi-Jeanne’s duppy is freed, Rudy is no longer nourished by her trapped life force, and so his own bodily mortality catches up with him. Rudy’s vitality is physically nourished by the consumption of others’ objectified bodies.

Similarly, the political rhetoric surrounding the human organ economy attempts to mask the economy's dependence on maintaining socio-economic inequity. Underlining Baines's desire for a human heart for the Canadian Premier is Premier Uttley's calculated decision that in order to swing votes in her favor in the next election, she will take an "ethical" stance against an existing industry of industrial husbandry for porcine organ transplants, insisting on finding a human heart for her urgent transplant. Uttley is up for re-election on a "God's Creatures" campaign, which "says the porcine organ farms are immoral," hoping to appeal to those voters who ascribe to a valuation of all creaturely life (3).¹⁰⁹ However, it appears that the moral indignation over porcine organ farms has grown in tandem with a new disease dubbed "Virus Epsilon" "that had jumped from pigs to humans through the an-antigenic porcine organ farms" (39). Instead of potentially diseased nonhuman organ farms, Uttley and her campaign advisor, or her "spin doctor" and "bookie" Constantine attempt to bring her to power by manipulating Canadian voters into admiring her "moral courage" (40, 239). Constantine tells Uttley,

Make a statement to the press that you're convinced that this is the safe, moral way to go: 'People Helping People,' you're going to call it. Tell them you're so determined that you'll back your words with your life; you've demanded the medical system find you a compatible human heart, and you're imploring the public to sign the voluntary organ donor cards you're going to distribute in the local papers. Tell them you'll refuse the operation unless it's a human heart. Voters'll eat it up (40).

Of course implicit in this appropriately consumptive (having voters "eat" ideology) attempt to appear ethically responsible towards nonhuman creatures is a continuing disregard for the human creaturely life of the economically dispossessed in *The Burn*. Constantine's calculated phrase,

¹⁰⁹ Uttley's campaign invokes Cora Diamond's 1978 alternative to vegetarian ethics, which promoted the concept of nonhuman animals as "fellows in mortality" (474).

“People Helping People,” mocks the “pseudo-humanism” Aimé Césaire identifies throughout bourgeois ideology in his 1955 manifesto, *Discourse on Colonialism* (37). And considering that her voters are likely to be the same citizens who fled urban Toronto and now erect barriers against encroachment by those who would seek a better life outside of the “rusted hub” of The Burn, this insistence on God’s creatures creates a parallel between diseased organs and diseased persons. By locating this crisis in Uttley’s diseased body, Hopkinson makes corporeal the metaphor of the “stricken” and “dying” civilization Aimé Césaire rails against in his 1955 manifesto, *Discourse on Colonialism* (31). Later in the novel, Uttley, whose parliamentary power is an extension of the British government, will prove “morally and spiritually indefensible” like Césaire’s post-war Europe, but in ways that the reader may not expect (32). Conveniently blind to the plight of her black, proletariat population, the organ economy relies on the same hypocrisy of what Michel Foucault terms “biopolitics” that allow Rudy to terrorize his domain with legal impunity. Biopolitics refers to the mechanisms of late capitalist power in which violence is consistently committed against certain disenfranchised bodies through not direct abuse but rather the unquestioned passivity of those who are protected by the state.¹¹⁰ These methods of domination work through control of the masses, and inevitably set up dichotomies between groups of human creatures, protecting one at the expense of the other. Of course in the world of Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*, the politics are narrated through visceral images of biology. While the “God’s Creatures” campaign may appear to promote the valuation of all beings, by operating within an economy that depends on the subjugation of certain populations, it actually excludes those living in The Burn, essentially dispossessing them through neglect. Though

¹¹⁰ See Foucault "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* translated and edited by David Macey (2003).

Constantine assures Uttley they will simply use a pig heart if they cannot find a donor, Uttley is concerned because so few people seem “prepared to signs [sic] parts of themselves over after all, even if they were never going to use them again” (41). In what can be read as a sign of the sheer strength of capitalist ideology, the citizens of Ontario wish to retain their body parts after they hold any use value, insisting on keeping them as biological capital.

After the biological capital that Rudy has hoarded for the purposes of zombification spill out of the calabash bowl along with Mi-Jeanne’s soul, Rudy’s body is dispossessed of the youth he extracted from marginalized others. When Rudy ages, Hopkinson reveals that he is attempting to maintain sovereignty over all flesh objects, even the flesh of his own body. Like the Obeah practitioner in *Myal*, Rudy cannot defy the eventualities of biological degeneration on his own. Hopkinson describes Rudy’s rapid aging in grotesque detail, emphasizing the experience of living putrefaction integral for all embodied creaturely life:

a network of wrinkles was stitching itself over his face. Swollen veins wormed their way over the backs of his hands, while the knuckles bunched like the knobs of ancient roots; he put his arthritic hands to his mouth, spat his teeth in them. His lips sank in on themselves; a ray of fine lines etched themselves around his pursed, trembling mouth; his hair blanched to grey; his shoulders rounded as his spine curled. (204-05)

In this moment, instead of human and nonhuman body parts acting as servants to the powerful, Rudy’s material body appears to mutiny against him; his “veins,” which carry the blood that for the majority of this novel has represented biological vitality, now take on parasitical connotations as they act as foreign worms spreading and burrowing into his once-youthful skin. Throughout this description, Hopkinson writes Rudy’s veins, knuckles, lips, hair, shoulders, and spine into the subject position, repeatedly subjugating Rudy to his component parts. The human subject

Rudy can only move his hands in order to spit and catch defunct teeth. Defanged, Rudy's body, like the persons he has dominated and manipulated for so long in poverty-stricken Toronto turn against him. At encountering Rudy's newly aged body in this scene, the reader is reminded of a curious moment in the novel's prologue, when Baines, the hospital representative seeking a human donor heart closes his and Rudy's extra-legal deal by shaking Rudy's hand "as though he were palpating rotting carrion" (8). This early comparison of Rudy to a decaying corpse is perhaps one of Hopkinson's most unsettling similes throughout the novel, foreshadowing the repugnant display of rotting bodies to come.

In even more gruesome forms of zombification, Rudy dominates his victims by first treating them as flesh objects to be destroyed and then by treating their souls as spiritual objects that can be harnessed and manipulated at his will. With a rapidly aging body, Rudy describes a method of spiritual mastery in which the soul of a murdered victim is trapped in a calabash bowl and forced to do the sorcerer's bidding. Rudy then outmaneuvers his own evil by revealing an even more greater level of spiritual power, the creation of a disembodied docile body. In both forms of zombification, the soul of the victim is enslaved and its metaphysical capacities are used to accomplish feats that are impossible under the constraints of a human body.¹¹¹ Detained by Rudy's henchmen, Barry and Crack Monkey, Ti-Jeanne "glare[s] defiantly" at her ancestral tormentor as he tells her,

¹¹¹ This duppy, or disembodied soul of a dead person acts like the duppies Hurston hears about while attending Nine-Night ceremonies in Jamaica. According to Hurston's rendering of Jamaican folk lore, the human spirit is not necessarily evil-doing by nature, but rather once it is unmoored from the restrictions of the time-limited organic body, this spiritual entity experiences such unlimited power that it cannot help but harm those who are still embodied. Hopkinson's duppies are not nefarious simply as a result of their freedom from the limits of the physical body, but because Rudy has somehow managed to trap and enslave that very freedom.

I come to find out something [Legbara] nah tell me. A duppy from a dead somebody not too smart. Smarter than a zombie, but you still can't give it nothing too complicated to do, seen? But if you split off the duppy from it body while the body still alive! Well, then you have a servant for true. One that could teach you everything it did know in life. (313).

It is this third kind of zombie that Rudy turned his daughter Mi-Jeanne into, and this kind of zombie he intends to create from his granddaughter, Ti-Jeanne. This final “living” zombie form resembles the docile body according to Foucault's concept of "'docility', which joins the analyzable body to the manipulable body" (136). In his 1975 *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault uses the example of soldiers to show how "a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (136). Rudy tells Ti-Jeanne that because her mother, Mi-Jeanne, was a “seer woman” just like her, she gouged out her eyes for him and placed them in the calabash bowl along with her soul. As for the rest of Mi-Jeanne’s corporeal form, it was neglected and left to wander around The Burn as “Crazy Betty,” a seemingly insane and of course blind homeless woman who frightens Ti-Jeanne. By separating the trapped duppy soul and only key component parts of the body (the eyes in the case of Mi-Jeanne), Rudy's method of possession over another epitomizes Foucault's explanation of discipline. Foucault writes,

Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an 'aptitude', a 'capacity', which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverse the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection. (138)

By targeting his daughter and granddaughter for their spiritual gift of "sight" and including the eyeballs in the calabash, Rudy shows that their metaphysical "aptitude" and "capacity" for

prophetic vision is constrained through physical discipline to the body as a means of soul subjection and ultimate obedience. Rudy enormously increases the use value of his zombie by anatomizing the flesh and exploiting the component parts. Rudy's Obeah appears to be informed by the methods of capitalist exploitation he has already perfected with flesh objects. As Foucault explains, "if economic exploitation separates the force and the product of labour, ... disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination" (138).

In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, soul-stealing is accomplished through the violation and exploitation of the human body. Rudy begins the zombification process by psychologically taunting his granddaughter and then injecting a paralyzing zombie poison in her body. Bringing to mind Wade Davis's work on zombie drugs, the zombie poison Rudy utilizes is a mixture of the purified street drug called "buff" throughout the novel with "some other Haiti medicine mix in" (211). Rudy dramatically wields a sharp knife close to his granddaughter's skin while mixing crystalline and liquid drugs, explaining that the buff often slashed by young black men like Ti-Jeanne's lover, Tony comes from "poison toad and some herbs" in Haiti (210). Davis details several complicated procedures for ritually preparing a zombie poison, including one that called for gunpowder and the skin of a white toad (109). By connecting zombification with intravenous drugs that induce "nerve and muscle paralyzant," Hopkinson sets up a blunt social commentary on the spirit-thieving effects of narcotics for poor urban populations of color (211). Rudy tells Ti-Jeanne that "a molasses-thick liquid" he adds to the blue bufo crystals will "lower [her] emotional resistance" as she lies paralyzed by the bufo, and "make [her] more suggestible" for the psychological portion of zombification (210-11). In addition to critiquing narcotic use, the materiality of the poisonous drug cocktail for zombification in *Brown Girl in the Ring* ensures

that any discussion of soul imprisonment also requires consideration of the material body; the soul is then physical and psychological. A queen of a local secret society in Petite Rivière de Nippes in Haiti tells Wade Davis that “there are dozens of powders. They walk in different ways. Some kill slowly, some give pain, others are silent ... but it is the magic that makes you the master” (110). This “magic,” Davis contends throughout his study of zombies is like all ideological and spiritual systems always both physical and psychological, material and abstract. Rudy takes “the knife and slowly [makes] a deep incision in the meat of her thigh muscle,” then “pour[s] some crystals from the phial into the gash on her leg,” using his “thumb to work the mixture deeply into the wound” (211).

The centrality of bodily violation in zombification echoes rape metaphors in zombie lore, also a thematic of *Myal*.¹¹² To gain this dominance over another’s soul requires “balls” in Rudy’s opinion. In his typically masculinist rhetoric, Rudy assumes that the ability to possess others’ bodies and spirits requires adequate courage symbolized by male genitalia, making “balls” an ironically base and corporeal synecdoche for masculine dominance over a disembodied soul. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert connects violent sexual symbolism in her survey of zombie texts with “the invocation of black/white sexuality as the repository of the erotic” and the fetishization of white virginity (46), neither of which are playing out in *Brown Girl’s* notably troubling erotics as a demonstratively aged black man violates his black granddaughter, who is herself a new mother. Rudy’s erotic association with power extends beyond his ownership of female bodies in a scene in which he paralyzes and torments Tony. When Tony’s “eyes seemed to beg,” Rudy recognizes that it is his “power alone to answer that plea,” and as a result “Rudy felt the familiar tightening in his crotch that that sense of power always brought him” (134). In the scene with Ti-Jeanne,

¹¹² For a sustained study of sexual violation and fetishization of white virginity in early-twentieth century zombie narratives, see Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert in *Sacred Possessions* (1997).

Rudy expresses sensual pleasure as he thrusts his fingers into his granddaughter's thigh repeatedly. When Rudy tells Ti-Jeanne that Ti-Jeanne's other father figure, her father-god Legbara told him the secrets to these grotesque, Ti-Jeanne attempts to shout "*Not Legbara!*" but "all that came from her flaccid mouth was a vague, grunting noise" (213). The flaccid, (code impotent) description of Ti-Jeanne's face emphasizes Rudy's incestuous sexual domination over her.

Before the soul can be emptied out of the body and trapped in the calabash, the human commodity must first be treated as meat, and only then as a disembodied docile body. Paralyzed on a table, Ti-Jeanne watches Rudy begin the next stage in her zombification as he heaps gunpowder onto an "old, fire-blackened knife" (213). Rudy explains, "Me know say your body can't speak, but when your spirit agree to serve me, this gunpowder go burst into flames. The body could lie, but when your spirit ready to accept my bond, it go tell me true" (213-14). Rudy places four mounds of gunpowder on the knife, and if all goes according to Rudy's plan, when Ti-Jeanne's spirit consents to be Rudy's disembodied docile body four separate times, making the four mounds explode, she will become his duppy slave forever. Interestingly, Rudy appears to associate "spirit" with will at this moment, confirming Tony's analysis of Melba's lack of her own volition. And yet, this is not an emptying out of Ti-Jeanne's spirit or will, but the bending of that will to do his own bidding, to be like the disciplined soldier of Foucault.

Integral to this particular zombie process is the necessity that the zombified person believe in the Obeah-man's symbolic power, believing in the legitimacy of his words and he who utters them (Bourdieu 170). Rudy begins the process of indoctrination, attempting to use his own rhetorical skills to convince his considerably weakened granddaughter that she *wants* to become his duppy. "Yes," Rudy narrates while the poison spreads through his new victim, "the first stage

of making a zombie. Combine the paralysis and the suggestibility with the right kind of um, *indoctrination*, and the zombie go do anything me tell it” (212). Rudy’s indoctrination relies on the fantasy of absolute control over oneself as a result of ultimate impenetrability by others through emotions or physical harm. In addition to sowing seeds of doubt about Mami Gros-Jeanne in order to bring Ti-Jeanne to his side, Rudy extols the virtues of existing as a disembodied duppy by focusing on the necessary pains of mortal embodiment. Rudy says his daughter Mi-Jeanne begged him to “help she live only in she spirit, for she didn’t want the pains of the body no more” (215). Suggesting that bodily pain is antithetical to the pursuit of power, Rudy coos in his granddaughter’s ear, “You nah see the power I did give Mi-Jeanne? Knife couldn’t cut she, blows couldn’t lick she, love couldn’t leave she, heart couldn’t hurt she. She coulda go wherever she want, nobody to stop she” (215). Feeling guilty that she has killed her own mother’s attempt at infinite life, Ti-Jeanne is swayed by the prospect of “living” without the pain that accompanies existence with others; she imagines how much easier her life would be if she had never fallen for Tony and become pregnant with a demanding baby, or feeling as though she needed to “tear herself in three to satisfy Tony, and Baby and Mami” (215). Gretchen Michlitsch describes Rudy’s offer to Ti-Jeanne: “In his effort to capture and imprison her spirit, Rudy tempts his granddaughter with descriptions of an imagined autonomous independence, with tales of freedom from responsibility and from the heartaches of life” (20). Rudy’s ideology relies on seeing the flesh as weak because it is vulnerable. Rudy’s insistence that to be without a body means to transcend suffering makes great sense considering his own obsessive struggle against inevitable degeneration through aging. As the suddenly decrepit Rudy would well know, to have a mortal human body means to have bodily pains. Yet, implicit in this textual moment is the irony that Rudy intends to take control of his granddaughter’s soul by convincing Ti-Jeanne

to fantasize about having extreme self-power without a body or embodied relationships with others.

And yet it is Ti-Jeanne's recognition of the shared vulnerability in flesh that convinces her to resist Rudy's seductive promises. Even while her grandfather slaps her across the face, Ti-Jeanne weeps for "her mother and for the man who had trapped his own daughter's soul in a container so that he would never have to die" (21). Ti-Jeanne's ability to express sentiment for the mother who abandoned her and the grandfather who plans to trap her soul shows the importance of compassion and love for both *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *Myal*. After Rudy begins "mumbling the words of a ritual in a language she didn't recognize" Ti-Jeanne's spirit begins to perceive her body as a burden, "nothing but an aching weight dragging her back to the pain of her life" (216-17). But before Ti-Jeanne can fully sign herself over to Rudy, the Jab-Jab, a manifestation of her papa-god Legbara, who is himself an aspect of Eshu appears to her and challenges her decision through leading questions and by giving her visions of Melba's and Mi-Jeanne's gory deaths at Rudy's hands. Giselle Liza Anatol explains how after seeing a vision of Melba being flayed, Ti-Jeanne recognizes the similarities her circumstances would share with Melba's if she were to submit her will to Rudy:

Becoming [Rudy's] duppy will mean that she has given herself over to yet another person; she will be in his control, rather than her own. She will be very much like Melba, the woman Rudy turned into a zombie and then literally flayed, who stands in the otherworld holding "her own skin draped over one arm." (32)

The Jab-Jab's horrifying visions of Mi-Jeanne and Melba's past suffering act as divine revelation for Ti-Jeanne, who is converted away from Rudy's doctrine to one of community, and uses what is left of her volition to call on the gods for help.

In Ti-Jeanne's moment of need, she turns to her spiritual community, and the gods and ancestors respond, materially assisting her in the "effort to preserve wellness" and "pursue liberationist transformative action" (Stewart 239). Halfway to Guinea Land already, Ti-Jeanne does not have to shout hard as she rattles off the list of names Mami Gros-Jeanne taught her earlier. She calls on the lord of thunder Shango, warrior and spirit of metal work Ogun, the water goddesses Emanjah, and Oshun, Osain the healer, Shakpana lord of disease, Oya "of the storm," and her own Eshu, Pap Legbara (221-23). Then in another "flash of instinct," Ti-Jeanne invites all those Rudy killed, calling "all you children; every one Rudy kill to feed he duppy bowl – come and let we stop he from making another!" (221). As the Old Ones and the recently deceased descend up on the skyscraper where Rudy torments his zombies, the reader cannot help but experience a sense of empowerment through spiritual community, a power that only grows as Rudy is defeated by the gods he tried to outwit and the humans he tortured for capital. Still, flesh oozes out of this scene, which ends with Rudy's body only "chunks of flesh lying there look[ing] like something that should have been on a butcher's block" (226). With the help of the religious powers from across the African pantheon, Rudy is defeated and left as dismembered flesh objects. In the conclusion of this chapter, I return to this final battle.

SOUNDING OUT SPIRIT THIEVERY IN ERNA BRODBER'S *MYAL*¹¹³

The whole class would follow, their pointer fingers of their right hands sliding under the words and their voices trying to catch up with Miss Ella. "M-a-s-t-e-r, Master."
- Erna Brodber, *Myal*

¹¹³ A version of this analysis has appeared in the *Journal of West Indian Literature* 23.2

Jamaican novelist and sociologist Erna Brodber defines spirit thievery, a form of zombification, as the process in which “somebody takes away your essence... and you are left empty” (Brodber and Castro, Jul 14, 2013). In Brodber’s novel *Myal* (1988) two young women in Grove Town, an early twentieth-century rural Jamaican community, become victims and survivors of spirit thievery. Ella, a light-skinned native of Grove Town is emptied of her spirit by her new USAmerican husband, Selwyn, when he produces a minstrel show that grossly manipulates Ella’s Grove Town memories. Darker-skinned, 15 –year- old Anita has her spirit stolen by Mass Levi, a local Obeah-man who exploits his social and spiritual powers to regain his lost sexual potency. Myalists, or spiritual healers, lead Ella and Anita back to re-possession of their spirits through sonically rich ceremonies. In this article, I argue that Brodber’s representations of sound demonstrate the concurrently abstract and material experiences of spirit thievery and reclamation. I show how Anita’s possession narrative uses sound to illustrate the materiality of thought, while Ella’s use and retention of voice demonstrates how power operates through the embodied performances of abstract ideas.

Like other zombie narratives in the Caribbean, *Myal* invokes Dahomean legends of the living dead to explain historical experiences of enslavement and oppression for Africans and African-descended individuals in the Caribbean.¹¹⁴ The majority of existing scholarship on Brodber’s *Myal* focuses on spirit thievery through a socio-historical lens. For example, Shalini Puri describes spirit possession as a “controlling concept-metaphor for cultural imperialism,” while Neil Ten Kortenaar counters that Brodber “posits a literal spirit possession for which

¹¹⁴ See Herskovitz 243. For more historical information on zombies and legends of white sorcery throughout the Caribbean, see Barrett 190-200 and Warner-Lewis *Central Africa in the Caribbean* 196, and for those specifically about Jamaica see Warner-Lewis “The Ancestral Factor” 74.

cultural imperialism is a metaphor” (Puri 101 and Kortenaar 51).¹¹⁵ While scholars have studied the colonial and spiritual themes of zombification in *Myal*, they have often asked that one theme allegorize the other. I read both colonialism *and* spirituality as metaphorical conceits and literal events in the text. Not only are spiritual events “factual reality” in *Myal*, but the novel itself explores the “real” physicality of abstract concepts.¹¹⁶

Myal complicates the commonly assumed distinction between abstraction and physicality through explorations of sound. In one crucial scene, two key figures of the spiritual community, Willie (also known as Ole African or the pig) and Dan (also known as Reverend Simpson or the dog) explain spirit thievery as a physical and conceptual experience initiated through sound. In this discussion integrating Judeo/Christian narrative with African-derived religions of the Caribbean, Willie and Dan set up a theoretical logic of spirit thievery to explain the historical exigencies of Jamaican disenfranchisement. First Willie asks Dan the rhetorical question, “How come we’ve never won?” then immediately answers, “They stole our sound” (66). It is this inception of spirit thievery through sound that frames my analysis of this oft-discussed dialogue, as well as my later consideration of Anita and Ella’s zombifications. By using the stealing of sound as an analytical guide, I show the extent to which sound acts as a “material” of language in a physical and theoretical sense throughout the novel (Saussure 36). I reveal that when sound

¹¹⁵ Tiffin uses *Myal* to read colonialism and decolonialism in Australia, evidencing the strength of Brodber’s colonial message. Nelson-McDermott suggests postcolonial critics use *Myal*’s plot as a guide for thinking beyond colonial dialectics and towards noncolonial spaces.

¹¹⁶ Forbes says that *Myal* is “the first Anglophone Caribbean novel in which the ancestors as ‘living, active dead’ and the world of the spirit are not historical descriptors or tropes, but factual reality” (7). Khair compares *Myal* to other religious textual works, while Roberts focuses largely on non-textual religious events in the novel as related to Caribbean folk traditions. Rahming uses the novel to posit a methodological paradigm that he calls a “critical theory of spirit,” which considers spirit and colonialism through consciousness.

waves physically materialize abstract concepts communicated through language, such as spirituality and ideology, they also transform the bodies and daily lives of these young women.

Sonic metaphors permeate Willie and Dan's conversation. First, Willie tells Dan that the "conjure men, voodoo men, wizards, and priests, [who] didn't like us... gave them our voice" (66). These conjure men, who were likely of African ancestry considering that they knew African-derived religious practices such as voodoo and hoodoo, gave the colonial oppressors their fellow Afro-Caribbeans' "voices" and "sound," and in the process "sold their own souls" (66). Willie and Dan compare the conjure men, their "brethren" from whom the British "learnt our tune" to Joseph's half-brothers as told in the book of Genesis.¹¹⁷ Just as the brothers sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt, the conjure men sold their African brethren into slavery in Jamaica. Catching on to Willie's lecture, Dan adds that the British "sent in their message using our voice" (66-67). Therefore, conjure men enabled the British rulers to push their own story of white superiority onto the enslaved Africans and later the Grove Town community by performing the spirit-thieving message in the voice of the oppressed.

Unlike the conjure men who gave away sound, Willie says, "men should keep and learn to use their power," indicating that one's sound is that person's power. When Dan quotes the King James version of Second Timothy one, verse seven, "For God has not given us the spirit of fear but of power and love and of sound mind," he paves the way for the text's logic of zombification by aligning "sound" and "mind," and repeating the link Willie already established between sound and power. Interestingly, throughout this conversation about spirit thievery, the

¹¹⁷ Nelson-McDermott notes that the story of Joseph, found in Genesis 37:18-36, also gestures towards Rastafari beliefs that black men are reincarnations of ancient Israelites exiled to the West Indies just as Joseph was exiled to Egypt. This connection is worth noting considering Brodber's membership in the Rastafari Mansion, Twelve Tribes of Israel. See O'Callaghan 73.

¹¹⁷ For more on Brodber's reading of Best see "Re-engineering Blackspace" 72.

term “spirit” only appears in the Bible verse and as a modifier for the word “thieves.” Rather than saying that the conjure men stole the enslaved Africans’ “spirit” or even “essence” as Brodber later defined it during my interview, Willie and Dan refer to “sound,” “voice,” “tune,” and finally “power.” In Willie and Dan’s conversation, sound is revealed to be a sensory medium that communicates ideological messages in addition to a spiritual power that can be stolen, retrieved, or maintained.

My focus on sound deviates from existing scholarship on *Myal*, which largely responds to the novel’s noticeable interest in another medium of ideological communication - books. When *Myal* ends with the enthusiastic call to change the primary school textbooks for the sake of community spirit re-possession, Brodber identifies the British education system as what Louis Althusser would call an ideological state apparatus. This regional apparatus maintains the larger abstract ideology of the state through material means, in this case deriding Afro-Caribbean persons and culture through the material of printed texts (695). Brodber explains that her novel was inspired by Lloyd Best’s notion that “thought is action for us,” with us indicating readers of the academic *New World Quarterly* where Best published his 1967 essay. And so Brodber describes *Myal* as a “lecture” urging “intellectuals to see their purpose and to use their skill and their position to rewrite works offensive to us [Jamaicans]” (122).¹¹⁸ According to Brodber, *Myal* is deeply invested in the print medium, as it is a book designed to promote the writing and rewriting of more books. This political lecture assumes that reconstructing a community’s dominant narratives by producing printed texts like *Myal* can construct a new “social and spiritual life” that benefits that community (122).

¹¹⁸ For more on Brodber’s reading of Best see “Re-engineering Blackspace” 72.

The novel's plot also presents the printed word as a key factor in a community's wellbeing as articulated through the concepts of spirit thievery and spirit reclamation. After all, Willie and Dan's conversation is usually noted for its identification of books as integral to colonial ideology. What is more, Brodber herself uses textual inventions such as non-chronological plot structures, dialogic formatting, and shifting narrative perspectives in her notably scribal fiction to explore the ways in which "the printed word and the ideas it carries" (109) can help commit or resist spirit thievery. Evelyn O'Callaghan remarks that working through Brodber's difficult novels is "an experience that can, if we let it, profoundly change us" (71). I agree with O'Callaghan, and add that Brodber often creates these transformative reading experiences by textually manipulating a reader's imagined experience of sound. For example, Brodber chooses to leave out Willie and Dan's names for ten lines of their key dialogue, and in doing so, both speeds up the pace of their conversation and tangles the two men's voices together in a perplexing exchange of call-and-response. Therefore, Brodber uses the formatting of the printed page to create a sense of collaborative sonic momentum that seems to exceed the capacities of each individual speaker – and I argue – the page itself. Keeping in mind Brodber's use of textual formatting to represent such sonic complexity, I analyze the ways in which *Myal* portrays the ideological power of reading through sound, not scribal text.

Anita's zombification scene interweaves sound and print as it details her process of reading music. In addition to combining reading and aurality/orality, Anita's sight-singing illustrates how abstract ideas become physical sound waves as a result of embodied action. While literary critics often discuss Ella's zombification at the hands of her husband Selwyn, Anita's spirit thievery is rarely explored at length. This discrepancy in scholarly attention may be due to the fact that Ella's more detailed narrative begins and ends the novel, or it may be thanks

to the more overt connections Brodber provides between Ella's story and the book's larger arguments about slavery and colonialism. Unlike Ella, Anita has her spirit stolen not by a representative of the British or US American empires, but by her subtly manipulative Afro-Jamaican neighbor Mass Levi Clarke, who Brodber describes as "a strong man. And spiritually too" (63). After suffering a stroke, Mass Levi uses his spiritual strength for nefarious purposes – to steal Anita's essence and regain his own sexual potency. Mass Levi exploits his Obeah to send a duppy, or a kind of ghost, to harass Anita and slowly empty her of her spirit, thinking, "he could use the young girl's spirit to get him back his own powers" (76).¹¹⁹

Later in the novel, the Kumina queen Agatha Paisley, or Miss Gatha, performs a possession ceremony with her tabernacle members, and successfully saves Anita and leaves Mass Levi deceased on the privy floor.¹²⁰ Therefore Anita's spirit is stolen from her *and* restored to her through Afro-Jamaican religious practices, both of which are historically associated with anti-colonial liberation.¹²¹ Therefore, Anita's storyline is more difficult to read as an allegory of colonialism. June Roberts considers Anita's narrative an "attempt to expose the dirty folk secrets of pedophilia, incest and rape, as well as the practice of obeah" (156). Roberts's reading helps illuminate the trickiness of writing on Mass Levi's character without either glossing over the sexual violation or reifying colonial prejudices toward Afro-Caribbean men and Obeah, but does

¹¹⁹ Mass Levi is not directly identified as a practitioner of obeah, and in fact his form of metaphysical thievery can be aligned with Haitian Vodou. I use the term obeah here because of its Afro-Jamaican connections, his use of a "duppy," and to indicate not that his powers were negative, but that they were focused on using Anita's spirit, rather than body. See Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 155-182 for an overview of scholarship delineating Obeah and Myal.

¹²⁰ Though Miss Gatha is not explicitly termed a Kumina queen, this association is suggested by the female leadership, the nature of African drumming, as well as the novel's location in the southeastern parish of Saint Thomas in Jamaica. See Stewart 130. Urioste-Buschman points out the presence of the female "Mami Wata" deity in Miss Gatha's ceremony.

¹²¹ Adams 166 uses Anita's story to show how anyone with power can practice colonization.

not take into consideration the care with which Brodber details Anita's experiences at the hands of the thieving Mass Levi and the heroic Miss Gatha.¹²²

Mass Levi begins his pursuit of the beautiful and intelligent Anita while she is deeply absorbed in her musical education. Brodber writes, "Anita was studying. The kind that splits the mind from the body and both from the soul and leaves each open to infiltration" (28) Here we see Brodber speak of the immaterial mind's distinction from the material flesh in a manner consistent with Euro-centric philosophical traditions which rely on the idea of a mind/body split attributed to Cartesian dualism. And yet Anita's experience troubles the chasm between abstract consciousness and embodied experience. Puri argues that thanks to the "concept metaphors of spirit thievery ... *Myal* brilliantly overcomes the spirit/matter, mind/body dichotomy, rendering it impossible to separate bodily and mental violence" (102). I agree with Puri and note that by repeatedly invoking African diasporic religions such as Myal/Obeah, Kumina, and Revival Zion, the novel also connects bodily and mental practices of knowing.¹²³ Dianne Stewart notes that in contrast to Eurocentric Christian theology (and I would add European Enlightenment philosophy) "within the context of African-derived religions, theological ideas emerge from concretized practice, ritual, and embodied spirituality" (198). Therefore, knowing itself is a bodily experience – a play on Lloyd's Best's aforementioned idea that "thought is action." The African theological concept of embodied knowledge, I argue also aligns with Althusser's contention that while ideology is understood through imaginary concepts, the "imaginary relation is itself endowed with a material existence" because it is constituted and maintained through the physical action of embodied subjects (695). In Anita's story we see these theological and philosophical ideas play out in the physical practice of reading music.

¹²² For more on the history of obeah and British colonialism, see Paton 1-18.

¹²³ See Murrell 225-285.

Anita's mind, body, and soul are open to Mass Levi's infiltration as she studies printed music by "solfa-ing," a general term for English forms of solmization, or "the use of syllables in association with pitches as a mnemonic device for indicating melodic intervals" (Rainbow and Hughes and Gerson-Kiwi). Because "a solmization system is not a notation," but rather "a method of aural rather than visual recognition," what Brodber calls "solfa-ing" is actually a process of translation from the visual notation to the aural system of solmization (Hughes and Gerson-Kiwi). It should be noted that for Anita, this process of symbolic translation also requires embodied vocalization. In order to read through translation, Anita must use her body and create physical sound waves. The narrator exhaustingly takes the reader through Anita's process of musical interpretation. I quote this passage at length to demonstrate the labor required for interpreting Anita's interpretation.

Anita "had to read the notes – first note on the line is "e" – and she had to remember the sounds. "Do re mi fa so la ti do." So if that was "e", it was really "mi" and she sounded it. Now that next one is the first space so it has to be "f" and if it is "f" coming after "e" then it must be "fa" and she sounded that. Then she went back: "Do re mi fa." So what she really wanted was "mi, fa" and she sounded those two. "Mi fa." The other one was a little bit more difficult. It was all the way to the end: the last note on the line so it had to be "f". Now to get at that sound. "Do re mi fa so la ti do". So that was "do". So the three first notes in the piece were "mi fa do". Now to sing them. And she got it. "Mi fa do." Now the words: "Thee I love." She had got it. Now to press on a little further. Teacher had said it was easy. Other sounds joined hers. She heard a slight "ping" but she continued to the fourth note. (28)

Without even the hint of a musical score, *Myal's* methodical prose submerges the reader in the process of sight-singing. Anita's method makes clear that the musical notes are what Glissant may call "Relational," only legible when considered through "intervals," or in relation to other musical notes. Anita's system of musical interpretation, like Glissant's Relation, is a process of

“knowledge in motion,” a process which does not derive from nor act upon “prime elements that are separable or reducible” (*Poetics* 186, 172). Anita “reads” the written musical score by recognizing visual symbols, then remembering the relationship between abstract sounds in her mind, and finally physically embodying each sound through her voice. Anita’s process of reading music is a process of physically performing relationships between abstract concepts.

Anita’s sight-singing method is made manifest by Brodber’s textual formatting, which asks the reader to “sound out” her printed text in order to better understand. *Myal* walks the reader through this process of interpretation with such detail that it is hard to not join Anita in her sight-singing. If the reader is not familiar with solfa-ing, he or she is likely to get lost in the process of reconciling the written symbols on the page with their assumed tonal relationship to each other. For Anita, these symbols take the form of circles and lines on sheet music; for the reader, the symbols are English letters and words. With the addition of the lyrics “Thee I love,” *Myal* provides yet another layer of symbolic abstraction for Anita to contend with through the material of sound, and it brings Anita’s and the reader’s experiences of interpretation even more closely together. Just as studying solfa-ing “took a lot of concentration” for Anita, studying Anita’s interpretive process requires considerable concentration for Brodber’s reader (29).

The sound of Mass Levi’s duppy throwing rocks against the zinc roof interrupts Anita as she works with the words “Thee I love.”¹²⁴ The duppy’s sonic disturbance signals the beginning of Anita’s spiritual invasion. The pings of the rocks, like the sound of the written notes Anita voices are the result of an abstract concept (in this case spiritual malevolence) made physically manifest – they are thought turned into action. Making the physicality of abstraction even more

¹²⁴ It is not clear whether Levi’s duppy is his own spiritual essence that he has separated from himself, or that of another dead being in his power.

explicit is the fact that a rock ultimately hits Anita on her head, creating a “visible coco,” or raised sore (30). The visible coco on Anita’s head reinforces the impossibility of separating bodily and mental violence in *Myal*.

I see Anita’s reading process as a theoretical work on the part of the novel that allows us to read Ella’s story through these same methods of abstract knowledge rendered bodily in sound. Scholars may be overlooking the sonic connections between the two characters thanks to Ella’s realizations about the spirit-thieving power of books. It is Ella who tells the Christian Methodist Reverend Brassington about the degrading message of the British schoolbooks. She says that this educational system turns young Jamaicans into “duppies, zombies, living deads capable only of receiving orders from someone else and carrying them out” (107). Indeed, Ella’s resistance to the spirit thievery of children’s readers offers a triumphant vision of Brodber’s textual hopes for Jamaican intellectuals. Unsurprisingly, literary critics tend to focus on this plot point, which privileges the medium of their own study and craft.¹²⁵ But even when Ella is protesting the schoolbooks, she emphasizes the role of her voice in the learning process, asking, “must my voice tell that to children who trust me?” (107). Though Brodber describes *Myal* as a lecture promoting books, the prominence of sound in the novel also fits with her intellectual history. Since her early historical and sociological work, Brodber has explored non-scribal forms of cultural knowledge that are communicated through voice and other embodied practices in the Caribbean.¹²⁶ Ella’s story suggests that not only Jamaican cultural wisdom, but also harmful colonial beliefs are “known” through embodied practices. By keeping in mind Anita’s laborious,

¹²⁵ Sound and its counterpart, silence, is also a prominent theme in Brodber’s *Louisiana*, which features a recording machine. For two analyses that focus on sound and particularly music in the novel, see Pollard 33-41 and Meriwether 103-18.

¹²⁶ See “Oral Sources and a Creation of Social History in the Caribbean” 2-11 for one example of Brodber’s expansive interests in oral histories.

physical practices of reading, we can see how the messages imbedded within literary works also become “known” through rituals. More specifically, Ella’s story demonstrates the ways in which ideological subjects perform oppression through embodied rituals, in particular voiced sound.

Brodber begins the chapter on Ella’s childhood with four, uncontextualized stanzas of Rudyard Kipling’s colonialist poem “White Man’s Burden.” The narrator follows the unexplained quotation by reporting, “the words were the words of Kipling but the voice was that of Ella O’Grady aged 13” (5). Kipling’s poem represents the ideological state apparatus, or spirit-thieving enterprise of colonial interpellation through British literature. By repeating the term “words” twice in the act of attributing them to the well-known British author, Brodber points out what the post-colonial scholar Homi Bhabha might refer to as the “semiotic ... disjuncture between the subject of a proposition,” and “the subject of enunciation” in Ella’s cultural performance (35). In other words, Brodber takes note of the supposed separation between abstract words and physical voice. Kipling’s words and Ella’s voice exist in Glissantian “Relation” to each other. Thinking about Ella and the poem in terms of Relation allows the reader to consider how the two are pointedly differentiated from each other during the recitation and at the same time, how both are transformed as a result of the interaction since the work of Relation “always changes all the elements composing it” (172). Brodber makes it clear that Ella is not Kipling’s poem, and yet Ella’s performance of the poem transforms her as well as the written words. For Glissant, “Relation relinks, (relays), relates,” and “domination and resistance, osmosis and withdrawal, the consent to dominating language (*langage*) of dominated languages (*langues*)” can only be understood through a sensorial understanding of Relation (173). Just like with Anita’s musical reading through Relation, the sensorial mechanism of Relation in Ella’s

recitation is sound. In this case, sound is the vehicle through which the abstract concepts of colonial message and colonized subject position become culturally legible.

As if playing on Glissant's use of "osmosis" to describe colonial domination through ideology, Brodber writes about Ella's school experience, detailing that "in a science class, teacher would talk about OSMOSIS, "the process by which a thin substance pulls a thick substance through a thin cell wall" (11). The teacher refused to call on Ella and "once more unrecognized, Ella would stare through the windows and guess what? She would see the thin liquid struggling to pull the thick one and all of this within the membrane of a leaf" (11). Ella identifies the physical "object lesson" of osmosis outside, while inside the classroom she herself experiences the ideological and spiritual osmosis of the colonial education system, along with her lack of legible identity within that space. Brodber uses Ella's recitation of Kipling to illustrate how these seemingly abstract experiences of ideological "osmosis and withdrawal" initiate the physical violence of such ideology. In short, both instances of osmosis are physical.

Myal alludes to the violence of Ella's Kipling recitation when Reverend Simpson compliments the poem's "execution" (5).¹²⁷ When the reverend calls Ella "the little lady executionist," he invokes an odd image in which Ella is part executioner as the oral performer of the colonial poem and part victim of the poem's spirit-thieving message. The educators cast Ella as a mouthpiece for the colonizers, using her voice to tell the imperial message. Kipling's poem is full of those "Big Steamers" later referenced in Willie and Dan's conversation. Helen Tiffin uses appropriately corporeal metaphors as she discusses recitation as a colonial practice, saying,

¹²⁷ The Native Baptist Reverend Musgrave Simpson is also Dan (the dog) who speaks with Willie about spirit-thievery. The novel is not completely clear how this characters' dual (and perhaps multiple considering "the dog") identities relate. See Kortenaar 54 and Rahming 305 for thoughtful discussions on this.

“[t]hrough recitation... the colonized absorbed into their bodies (‘hearts’) the ‘tongue’ of the colonizer” (“Cold Hearts and Foreign Tongues” 913). Ella’s recitation demonstrates Althusser’s theory that ideologies of power may be understood as a “spiritual ideal” through our consciousness, but in fact these imaginary ideologies are only constituted when interpellated subjects like Ella execute them through ritualized practices, such as this colonial performance (696). Althusser’s insistence on ritual as integral to the operation of ideology finds surprising parallels in scholarship on African diasporic religions, which recognize how “spiritual power is internalized and mobilized in human beings” through embodied ceremonies (Paravisini and Olmos 13). Anthropologist Joseph Murphy coins the phrase “diasporan liturgies” to describe these religious practices in the Caribbean wherein the abstract “spirit” is both constituted by and constitutes physical ceremonies. My analysis of sound in Ella’s seemingly mundane colonial performance of spirit thievery thus reveals unexplored connections between philosophies of diasporan liturgy and post-Marxist ideology.

Here, Ella is set up to be one of the “conjure men” who sell the British the Afro-Jamaicans’ sound and in doing so, sell their own souls. In contrast to the legacy of the conjure men, Ella’s recitation is not founded in her dislike for nor lack of faith in the Afro-Jamaican community. Ella is chosen to voice the colonial message thanks to her “sensitivity,” a sensitivity that Brodber links to Ella’s illegible identity in the colonial paradigm. After Ella, part victim and part oppressor, finishes Kipling’s poem with the line describing British colonial subjects as “Half devil and half child,” Reverend Simpson asks himself, “whose burden is this half black half white child?” (6). Reverend Simpson thus confirms the split subjectivity that Ella has already “named” through oral performance. Thanks to her “ginger” hair and “strange” parentage, Ella’s ancestral relation to Grove Town is considered only partial, bringing to mind the partial familial

ties between Joseph and his half-brothers in the Genesis story allegorized by Willie and Dan.

Ella's recitation sonically performs her ideological interpellation. Maydene Brassington reflects that while reciting the poem, Ella appears "totally separated from the platform and from the people around her," emphasizing the girl's growing distance from her community (17). While the recitation performs an already-existing ideological position, the act of voicing that imaginary Relation seems to create a physical manifestation on Ella's body. What is more, Maydene extends that separation to the girl's internal life when she recalls Ella's ethereal stage presence as rooted "in a passion so innocent and strong that it could separate body from soul" (17).¹²⁸ Ella's self-separating passion brings to mind Anita's self-splitting studying, particularly when Maydene adds that in watching Ella recite, she "saw the abstract," or the spiritual relations of ideology (17). After all, the young girl is chosen for the recitation thanks to the abstract "sensitivity" she has gained through her liminal position between communities, a position *Myal* stages yet again in the ideological state apparatus of the school by having the young girl make "the door to the class room her recess spot," since no one in her class will play with her during the break (10). By thinking about Ella's recitation and classroom experiences through the lens of embodied thought, we can see how the ideological manipulation of colonial subjects' consciousness is ritually performed through physical actions. For example, Ella teaches her young students to read the word "Master" by miming her hands and voice in an act of ritual learning. In this way, not only is thought action, but also taking particular actions such as reciting a Kipling poem or parroting an instructor alters a person's mental and spiritual state. Thanks to colonial education, the theft of Ella's spirit begins when she is only a child.

¹²⁸ Maydene associates Ella's demeanor with that displayed by her Afro-Jamaican husband when he was a child.

When Ella travels to live with her new husband, Selwyn Langley in the United States, this theme of metaphysical dispossession through embodied performance reaches a climax. Selwyn takes Ella's childhood stories of growing up in rural Jamaica, and turns them into a derisive "coon show" entitled *Caribbean Days and Nights*. The play violates Ella even further by having her role acted by a blonde white woman and grotesquely parodying those she loves in Jamaica with racist tropes of early twentieth-century black-face drama. With *Caribbean Days and Nights*, Selwyn, like the colonialists on their steam ships, has manipulated Ella into playing the part of Willie and Dan's "conjure man," taking her sound to transmit his own message of racial inferiority. Selwyn's cruel message betrays Ella by mocking her and her home. Ella sees Selwyn as an "architect," who opened up a "passage" in her, from whence "substance had been drained," that substance being her community's sound, their voice and according to Willie and Dan's logic, their spirit and power.¹²⁹ Fixated by her husband's directorial choice to show every Caribbean fruit in full bloom at the same time in his derogatory drama, all Ella's "obsessed soul could register was: 'Everything is a fruit except me.'" (83). Witnessing this ceremony of mocking subjugation, Ella's senses bombard her with the truth of her Relation to the ideologies physically performed before her – her zombification.¹³⁰ Confronted with the fecundity of ideology's material apparatuses on the minstrel stage, Ella finds herself barren in comparison.

Now that Ella has seen the truth of her lifelong ideological and spiritual emptying manifested in oral performances on the musical stage, she attempts to practice bodily resistance against further osmosis and withdrawal. Ella physically resists the sense of having been drained

¹²⁹ Before seeing the show, Ella had wanted her new husband to "show her how to fill the spaces he had created and give her too, a chance to create" (82), suggesting that she sees procreation as an opportunity for agency and authorship.

¹³⁰ Though Ella finally identifies Selwyn as a spirit thief, she has long been performing rituals of spiritual emptying at the hands of the colonial education system. See Adams 161.

of her own sound by Selwyn by first retaining what is left of her voice from him, then from all other people. Finally, she physically retains what is left of her bodily fluids.

She stopped speaking to him the night of her visit to the play. A couple months more and her belly was over-sized. She was carrying the baby Jesus. Then she stopped uttering completely. Stopped doing anything. Even stopped going to the lavatory. (83)

In this unusual act of self-preservation, Ella intuits the corporeal foundations of her metaphysical violation by Selwyn. By retaining her physical fluids while refraining from speaking, Ella acknowledges the embodied physicality of sound, particularly voice and utterance. Furthermore, she aligns both of these physical elements (utterance and excrement) with the abstract spirit and power. Ella's process of resistant retention follows the same logic of Anita's zombification – abstract concepts are known through physical performance, and this process of knowledge acquisition can effect physical and spiritual violence. Ella's hysterical pregnancy is, like the visible coco on Anita's head, the physical, external manifestation of abstract harm on a woman's body. Unlike Anita's raised sore, Ella's pregnancy represents both the physicality of spiritual violence and the physical gestation of spiritual hope.

CONCLUSION

René Depestre argues, “the history of colonization is the process of man's general zombification. It is also the quest for a revitalizing salt capable of restoring to man the use of his imagination and his culture” (20). *Myal* demonstrates this revitalizing salt through community practices of spiritual healing also manifested in sound. Rather than positing the complete recuperation of personal autonomy as the opposite of zombification, *Myal* focuses on communal

practices of sound, spirit, and power. Brodber invokes the concept of spiritual community as a necessary component in any process of physical and metaphysical resistance to abusive power structures. Joseph Murphy explains the critical role of community in “diasporan liturgies,” when he writes,

the reciprocity between community and spirit is expressed in physical work as the community works through word, music, and movement to make the spirit present. The spirit in turn works through the physical work of the congregation, filling human actions with its power. (7)

Abstract spiritual power is accessed through the physical movements of a group of people. The sonic nature of these diasporan liturgies provides an acoustic, spiritual gloss on Hannah Arendt’s formulation of power as “the human ability not just to act but to act in *concert*” (*On Violence* 44, emphasis mine). The collective nature of spiritual re-possession is not a surprise in *Myal* considering the ways in which the novel uses ritual performance to illustrate how subjugated persons must also actively participate in a regime of power.

The groups of living and deceased persons who band together to seek spiritual healing “fight” oppression with what can only be described as spiritual aggression. Because these revolutionary characters have come to understand the material nature of abstract belief, they can wage battle against seemingly imaginary relations within a liminal space between the material and abstract worlds.¹³¹ Brodber’s characters choose sound as their primary vehicle for traveling between the conceptual and the physical in their works of *Myal*.

In each instance of spirit reclamation, sound again permeates the female character’s body in an intense process of “osmosis and withdrawal” this time intended to heal her body and mind/spirit. Each sonic boundary-crossing brings to light the complex Relation of metaphysical

¹³¹ This is an adaptation of Victor Turner’s concept of liminality in ritual.

and physical worlds, as well as that of the young woman's vulnerability to both "domination and resistance" rituals. The opening scene of Brodber's text depicts Myal-man Mass Cyrus preparing to perform a Myal ritual on Ella's hysterical pregnancy, a ritual which is narrated through musical metaphors and which results in a distinctly physical and sonic explosion of spirit from Ella's infection, with a "whole lot of shaking going on! And the noise" (2). This scene emphasizes the sonic valences of spiritual knowledge through bodily Myal healing practices. The practitioner, whose face is described as a musical score, must listen to the "still small voice" in order to eradicate the "stinkiest, dirtiest ball to come out of a body since creation" (3). Puncturing Ella's skin results in such "banging and ringing and splitting and weeping" that the rural landscape "thought it was another Good Friday many many years ago when the Saviour of the world was lynched" (3). Here Brodber alludes to a racialized (e.g. lynched) crucifixion of Christ as a comparatively explosive sonic event after bodily violation. Mass Cyrus is either comparing Ella to Christ, or perhaps he is referring to her "stinkiest, dirtiest ball," that is her hysterical pregnancy that she herself considered Jesus Christ. By invoking the Christian story of the sacrifice of the embodied God, Brodber invites readers to see the puncturing of the young woman's body as a kind of redemptive violence, an intrusion that somehow serves to heal not only Ella, but also the entire Grove Town community. Though redemptive, the sound of Ella's healing is violent, creating such a disturbance in the landscape that it ultimately kills thousands of animals and several hundred humans.

Brodber also describes the physically violent nature of sound in the re-possession ceremony for Anita as sound actually bombards the spirits and bodies of Mass Levi, Anita, and those present in Grove Town.¹³² In the case of Anita, *Myal* shows that all bodies, not just that of

¹³² Brodber published this chapter of *Myal* as the short story "The Spirit Thief."

the zombified woman, are susceptible to the physical osmosis and withdrawal of abstract concepts communicated through sound. The story of Anita's release from Mass Levi's soul-sucking grip begins when "silent Miss Gatha started to talk," inaugurating the noise-filled chapter (70). The Kumina Queen, Miss Gatha performs a re-possession ceremony with singing, drumming, and dancing. The sound Miss Gatha and her congregation make in the "programme of music and recitation" is a physically violent one, a bodily aggressive power (71). Made "captive in their own homes," the people of Grove Town listen through closed windows to the "bum-batti-bum-batti-bum-batti-bum" of the drums (71). The singing grows "a hundred times louder," only to be accompanied by the sounds of groaning and dancing feet, all "tramping on the listener's mind" (71). In this moment, human bodies become audience, musician, and instrument of sound. The physical power of Miss Gatha's ceremonial sound reveals that every body exists in Relation to communal spirituality. It is fitting that "it was with the ears and the head that people [neighboring residents] saw" the spiritual "concert" (71) because Brodber's use of sonic imagery, onomatopoeia and rhythmic syntax encourages her readers to adopt a similar method of observation. Like the scene of Anita's solfa-ing, Miss Gatha's ceremony is written in such a way that readers cannot imagine the scene's plot without following the acoustical movements.

Anita's healing ceremony explicitly presents sound as a physical phenomenon when Miss Gatha's musical performance acts as a weapon against Mass Levi. Through the vehicle of sound, Miss Gatha reverses Mass Levi's sexual domination of Anita by emasculating him, enacting a reactionary spirit-thievery. Miss Gatha's "slippery" sonic movements and aggressive drumbeats force Mass Levi to drop the doll he was using to possess Anita, and terminate his own Obeah

practices as he attempts to physically “push the sound from his ears” (72). In Afro-Caribbean religious theology, it is generally understood that “sound has the power to transmit action” (Olmos and Paravisini 12). Here sound transmits Miss Gatha’s spiritual action as it violates Mass Levi’s body and mind. Just as Mass Levi’s pings against the house cross Anita’s sonic and then bodily boundaries, so does Miss Gatha’s Kumina drum rhythm and song. “On came the groaning and the stomping, like a hundred men stepping on his chest to cut off his breath and to force him into an asthmatic attack” (72). The sound leaves Mass Levi’s body like “a baby in the fetal position... his bottom in the circle of the latrine seat, his privates hanging down like a wet rat” (72). Mass Levi becomes even more impotent than before, with his masculine organs as limp as the magical doll of a woman in his arms.

Like Ella, Anita must endure further physical violation in order to undo the zombification she has already suffered. Brodber turns her attention to Anita after Mass Levi’s death, when the adolescent is finally experiencing relief from Mass Levi’s duppy. But Anita, like Mass Levi, evidences pain from Miss Gatha’s sound as she begins “putting her hands up to her ears, complaining that the noise from the tabernacle was “suffocating” her” (73). It is not only Mass Levi who physically suffers from the aggressive sounds Miss Gatha makes during the ceremony. Anita faints at the suffocating noise and then undergoes the body-shifting possession of Miss Gatha’s ceremony. Touched by nothing but the sound, the young woman moans on the floor as her face transforms into Miss Gatha’s (73). Meanwhile, Miss Gatha herself thrashes on the ground as her face becomes “that of a beautiful fifteen-year-old and back again” to that of a 60-year old woman several times (73). The violence that Miss Gatha and Anita experience as they shift bodies exemplifies celebrated Kumina Queen (leading practitioner) Imogene Kennedy’s

description of Myal as “a somatic experience of aggressive intercourse with a possessing agent.”¹³³

These embodied, ritualized practices that undo zombification require a negation of the individual self – for the zombified and their healers. In the place of such individualism, *Myal* here promotes an ethics of physical and metaphysical interconnectedness and even exchange. Surrounded by her religious community in the tabernacle, these changes in Miss Gatha’s physical form and her clear duress at the experience are met with exclamations of “joy” such as “‘Amen’, ‘Thank the Lord’, ‘Telephone from earth to heaven, telephone’” (73). The telephone is a fitting metaphor for Miss Gatha’s embodied spiritual mediation. The Kumina leader herself becomes a telephone, a physical conduit of sound between the world of the ancestors and spirits and the living.¹³⁴ In the possession trance, Miss Gatha and Anita cross each other’s bodily and abstract boundaries as they are physically and spiritually connected through sound. Together the two women are the collective physicality of spirit and knowledge, occupying the shared space of the embodied voice.

The space of embodied voice allows subjects to safely, if still somewhat painfully, release their sound, and create community in the mutual acts of listening. To illustrate the importance of listening in community revitalization, I return to Willie and Dan’s conversation. When Willie begins to teach Dan about colonial zombification, he laments that when “they stole our sound ... We got no support, man. No one could hear us” (66). Before the Grove Town community can change the mechanisms of power that split them from themselves, they must hear each other’s sound first. Anita and Ella’s ceremonies of spirit reclamation suggest that this

¹³³ See Stewart 155.

¹³⁴ Described as the “water mother herself,” Miss Gatha also represents the Kalunga line, that river in Kongo cosmologies (the geographic area where Kumina originated) between the realms.

listening will likely be as upsetting as it is liberating. The “clear clean sound” of listening and telling the half that has never been told prefigures Willie and Dan’s plans to revise books and finally turn around ships. Brodber’s *Myal*, like Willie and Dan’s telepathic conversation operates in the realm of imagined sound, textually making heard what has for so long been ignored. Brodber’s “lecture” challenges readers to “listen” to these imaginary relations, to also become telephones between thought and action.

When readers take the time to pay attention to sound in Brodber’s story, they, like Anita and Ella, inhabit a dangerous space between the abstract and material. This space of spiritual vulnerability echoes what Glissant calls the “oral exposé,” where the individual is and is not community and where the physical and spiritual interact. Glissant explains the oral exposé,

When the oral is confronted with the written, accumulated hurts suddenly find expression; the individual finds a way out of the confined circle. He makes contact, beyond every lived humiliation, a collective meaning, a universal poetics, in which each voice is important, in which each lived moment *finds an explanation*. (*Caribbean Discourse* 4)

For Brodber, there are many layers of collective meaning that can be accessed in that embodied space between sound and text, from the spiritual communities that allow her characters to transcend the “lived humiliation[s]” of ritual oppression to the collectivity of active readers her texts hope to inspire. The oral exposé asks us to see how thought is indeed already action. Reading the sounds of *Myal*, then, has very real ideological, spiritual, and material implications for all of us.

In Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, collective meaning is acquired through "serving the spirits," the Myalism enacted by Mami Gros-Jeanne and later her granddaughter. Legbara in the form of the Jab-Jab tells Ti-Jeanne

Yes, it have plenty names for what Gros-Jeanne was. Myalist, bush doctor, iyalorisha, curandera, four-eye, even obeah woman for them who don't understand. But you what woulda call it, if you had ask she ... Gros-Jeanne woulda tell you that all she doing is serving the spirits. (219)

Legbara says in fact, Gros-Jeanne would have said "that anybody who try to live good, who try to help people who need it, who try to have respect for life, and age, and those who go before, them all doing the same thing: serving the spirits" (219). To serve the spirits, then, means individually living in accordance with the universal collective, respecting the mortality of biological flesh as well as the immortality of the soul by acknowledging the ancestors, "those who go before."¹³⁵

This expansive concept of enacting a belief in collective belonging brings to mind the spiritual underpinnings of the God's Creatures campaign, which appeal to materiality-oriented post-human philosophies like Anat Pick's *Creaturely Poetics* (2011). Pick's concept takes inspiration from Cora Diamond's concept of nonhuman animals as "fellows in mortality" and locates that fellowship in the physical flesh, arguing that, "materiality of life turns us all into creatures sharing in a common embodiment and mortality" (Interview). When the doctor sees the heart Tony gets for Rudy, the heart of Ti-Jeanne's grandmother, Gros-Jeanne, he comments that "a healthy human ticker looks Not so different from pig hearts," emphasizing the

¹³⁵ Romdhani connects the concept of service to the tenet of Ashe as explained to her by Vodou priest Ross Heaven (75).

commonality of human and nonhuman flesh (169). Pick then extends this focus on the physical, taking “material existence not as some precondition of moral value, but as synonymous with it: finite, mortal, vulnerable existence is tantamount to a sense of the sacredness of life—any life” (Interview). For this creaturely ethics, all embodied life is sacred because it will eventually die, falling in accordance with Legbara’s mention of respecting all life and respecting age, integral to the eventual death of all life. And as if in accordance to this philosophy, Mami Gros-Jeanne, the Myal healer refuses to eat meat unless the animal is near-death and has ostensibly asked her to be spared suffering (65). Gros-Jeanne also attempts to serve the spirits by teaching Ti-Jeanne about the African gods after Osain, her papa-god tells her “is time and past time for she to play she part” in ending Rudy’s shadow-catching evil (98). So to serve the spirits means to physically work to preserve life with human and nonhuman creatures in the physical and spiritual worlds.

As a Myalist, Gros-Jeanne may be demonstrating creaturely ethics, but she is also guided by ethics derived from West African religious philosophy, which equate sacredness to the shared divinity of all beings, which is in turn connected to the unending dynamism of the universe.

Priest and theological scholar John Mbiti writes,

African peoples are aware of a mystical power in the universe. This power is ultimately from God, but in practice it is inherent in, or comes from or through physical objects and spiritual beings. That means that the universe is not static or "dead": it is a dynamic, "living," and powerful universe. (202-203)

Both of these concepts eschew an anthropocentric approach to contemplating life because they place human and nonhuman life on the same level of value. The African religious viewpoint is an animistic way of thinking about sanctity of all life, and the other is materialistic; they are two sides of the same theoretical coin.

Unlike creaturely ethics, which equate sanctity with mortality, the spirituality represented in these two novels equate sanctity with the intimate relationships between the living and the dead. Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, along with Brodber's *Myal* present a world in which ancestors and the recently deceased can be accessed by the living, drawing upon the Central and West African concepts of death as only a passage into an alternative state of being. Scholar of theology and ethnography E. Bolaji Idowu explains this concept in terms of the Yoruban religion, "Death is not the end of man, those who departed from this earth in consequence of the phenomenon called death have only gone to live in another "world," the "after-life";... there is a spiritual link between the deceased and those who are still on earth." Idowu adds, "this conception is linked to a belief in the immortality of the soul" and the dead are considered divine, even to be worshipped" (186-87). Afro-Caribbean religious practices such as Vodou and Myal integrated these African-derived concepts of the afterlife with the Christian belief in the continuous life of the soul through resurrection. In Hopkinson's narrative, these religious philosophies are made material and supernatural.

Hopkinson uses the concept of reincarnation to sabotage the corporeal dominance that Uttley and Rudy enjoy in their abusive economies of flesh. In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, the god of the cemetery Legbara and the god of healing Osain undermine Rudy and Uttley's machinations for earthly power by transferring their childrens' souls, namely those of Gros-Jeanne's lover after Rudy, Dunston and Gros-Jeanne herself into other human forms. When Ti-Jeanne shoots the calabash bowl, Hopkinson describe how, "*as the duppy bowl cracked, another soul than Mi-Jeanne's flew free of it*" (206). Rudy also chained and tortured Dunston's soul in "*the microcosmic hell that was the world of the duppy bowl*" until this moment of freedom that Hopkinson describes as "*a world exploding, a heart breaking twice*" (207). Now Dunston flies to

join the “*bodily housing*” Legbara prepared for him for this exactly moment (207). Dunston’s soul is then reincarnated in the waiting corporeal house of Ti-Jeanne’s own child, referred to as Baby. As Legbara’s son then, it appears that unlike Mi-Jeanne, who fully dies at her release, Dunston can be mortally alive again “no longer Gros-Jeanne’s doomed second husband. Nothing but a baby now” (207). Predicting the conclusion of *Brown Girl in the Ring*, the transplant doctor transferring Gros-Jeanne’s heart into Uttley’s body describes Gros-Jeanne as “healthy as a horse” despite her age, punning on the grandmother’s role as a spiritual horse, ridden by her papa god Osain earlier in the novel. When Uttley wakes up from the surgery, she too becomes ridden by Gros-Jeanne, who is in turn ridden by Osain, as she fundamentally alters her approach to politics in *The Burn*. In this scene, it is the materiality of Gros-Jeanne’s heart that brings her soul and her worldview into Premier Uttley. In contrast to her previous position that *The Burn* should either continue to be exploited for cheap labor and seedy tourism or be “revitalized” through a capitalist overhaul with incoming “big business,” she now, after being invaded by Gros-Jeanne’s soul promotes a community-oriented approach. Uttey tells her advisor Constantine that they will encourage small business growth within the currently marginalized communities in *The Burn*.

Zombification, while taking different forms, still ultimately represents a loss of self in both Brodber’s *Myal* and Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*. This loss of self is constituted through embodied, ritualized practices of ideology. At the same time, the embodied, ritualized practices that undo zombification in both texts also require a negation of the individual self, promoting instead an ethics of physical and metaphysical interconnectedness.

CHAPTER V

“YOU PREACHED TODAY!”:

ZORA NEALE HURSTON AND TONI MORRISON’S SERMONIC PERFORMANCES

That’s what the black church means. Our beating heart. The place
where our dignity as a people is inviolate.
- President Barack Obama, Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend
Clementa Pinckney, June 26th, 2015

The truth is, that the religious service is a conscious art expression.
The artist is consciously creating – carefully choosing every
syllable and every breath.
- Zora Neale Hurston, “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” 81

The figure of the black folk preacher looms large throughout the African American literary tradition. This is no surprise considering the pivotal cultural, political, and religious roles that the Protestant Christian preacher has performed throughout Afro-diasporic history in the US.¹³⁶ According to W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the Negro preacher began as the African priest, who on the slave plantation took on additional cultural and social responsibilities. While the white master, who had “far greater and more despotic powers,” replaced the powerful figure of the African chief on the slave plantation, the role of the Priest or Medicine-man remained and came to carry even more significance for the enslaved communities. Du Bois writes that this Preacher/Medicine-man

appeared on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of the wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the

¹³⁶ For a general history of religion among African Americans, and particularly the development of African American Protestantism, see Albert J. Raboteau’s *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (2001).

longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people. Thus, as bard, physician, judge, and priest, within the narrow limits allowed by the slave system, rose the Negro preacher, and under him the first Afro-American institution, the Negro church. (119)

Du Bois offers this figure a litany of occupational labels: interpreter, comforter, avenger, one who expresses feelings of oppressed people, bard, physician, judge, and finally priest. In addition to healing the sick and divining the supernatural, this enslaved Negro preacher took on the task of orally performing the messages of sacred texts (texts written and passed down through memory) as well as orally performing contemporary sociopolitical messages to his oppressed congregation.

Du Bois, though often considered the first, is far from the only scholar of African American Christian religion to emphasize the expressive, bard-like aspects of the Protestant black preacher amidst a longer list of pastoral and prophetic roles. For example, the editors of *Black Church Studies* (2007) calls preachers “interpreters, heralds, conveyors of truth, witnesses, translators, artists and performers” (208) and Lawrence Mamiya and Eric Lincoln go so far as to say, “the Black Church was the first theater in the black community,” suggesting that the preacher was the first leading actor (6). In the modern and contemporary US, the communicative responsibilities of black preachers are best demonstrated in their homiletics, or performance of preaching. Black preaching styles have been so integral to the development of the African American Christian church that preacher and scholar Henry H. Mitchell’s canonical *Black Preaching* (1970) argues for a theological reading of the Black Church based on popular homiletic performances (124). Generally construed, preaching is the religious art of interpreting

biblical text and presenting that interpretation to a congregation through practices including but not limited to storytelling, rhetorical argument, and poetics.¹³⁷

The preached sermon demonstrates through content and form, the guiding ethics, poetic aesthetics, and performative paradigms of the preacher and the preacher's congregation. Scholars of homiletics in Black Church Studies usually emphasize the "performative" style of sermonizing in the African American Protestant church, and (to a somewhat less extent) the preaching event's relationship to a wider community of worship. For decades, scholars of African American preaching have employed the term performative to highlight the dramatic, or even theatrical stylizations of homiletics, and to indicate that when preachers properly *say* their sermons, they are expected to *do* something for the worshipping community.¹³⁸ Dolan Hubbard writes that as a result of societal oppression and marginalization,

African Americans attempted to redefine themselves and their history through speech acts. Grounded in the church and based to a large extent on improvisation, these speech acts, keyed to the preacher's speech act, provided the aesthetic underpinnings for black oral expression. (4)

The African American preaching event is defined by its performative nature; it is an artistic drama that also, at its best, creates effective change.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ See *Black Church Studies* 203-19.

¹³⁸ The latter phrase is meant to play on J.L. Austin's sentence regarding performatives: "To *say* something is to *do* something" in his 1962 volume *How to Do Things with Words*.

¹³⁹ The performative, or effective preaching event is often considered to be one that engenders an experience of catharsis for worshipers. Hortense Spillers describes the sermon as a poetic "instrument of collective catharsis, binding once again the isolated members of the community" ("Fabrics of History" 4). Similarly, Henry Mitchell refers to a "healing catharsis" that can result from a successful preaching event (111), and Lincoln and Mamiya explain, "the charisma of church leaders was demonstrated both in appeal of their personalities and especially in their

In this chapter, I explore how two canonical black women authors, Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison portray this dramatic and effective art of preaching with particular consideration to the collective community of worship. More specifically, I analyze a sermon entitled “The Wounds of Jesus” that Hurston textually presents in three separate publications from 1931-34, followed by Toni Morrison’s textual and audiobook presentations of a sermon in the novel *Beloved* (1987 and 2007). For these two authors, preaching becomes a component of a larger ritual structure legitimated through the encoded actions performed by the congregants in chorus with the preacher. I use Hurston and Morrison’s literary sermons to explore the ways in which the sermons’ textual presentations and theatrical and audiobook performances reveal theories of preaching that ultimately de-center the preacher’s performative powers by emphasizing the bodies present in the congregation.

LITURGICAL PREACHING IN HURSTON’S SERMONIC TEXTS

I analyze Hurston’s editorial practices to argue that she posits preaching in the Sanctified Church as a liturgical performance. By calling Hurston’s theory of preaching liturgical, I mean to emphasize that in her works, spiritual authority is not centralized in the preacher, but rather is enacted through embodied, ritual acts performed by the entire congregation. Therefore, I use the term liturgical to signify that Hurston presents a wider distribution of religious authority during the preaching event. Furthermore, I demonstrate how Hurston’s literary maneuvers enact the key elements of collaboration, embodiment, and continuation that I identify in her liturgical theory of

ability to preach and elicit a strong cathartic response” (14). Additionally, what Spillers, Lincoln, and Mamiya calls “catharsis,” anthropologist Victor Turner would likely consider “spontaneous communitas” (132).

preaching. In the chapter's conclusion, I put the term liturgical in conversation with a theatrical reference Hurston invokes to show that while Hurston's theory of preaching de-centralizes power, it still assumes the presence of established hierarchies through encoded traditions.

Hurston heard the Reverend C.C. Lovelace deliver the sermon "The Wounds of Jesus" on May 3rd, 1929 in Eau Gallie, Florida.¹⁴⁰ Lovelace's sermon is undoubtedly one of Hurston's favorite works of religious material. In Hurston's oeuvre, versions of "The Wounds of Jesus" appear in the following textual formats: a dramatic monologue in the one-act play "The Sermon in the Valley" performed by Cleveland's Gilpin players in 1931, 1934, and 1949 (published in 2008 in *Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays*), an ethnographic transcription entitled "The Sermon" in Nancy Cunard's 1934 *Negro: An Anthology* (reprinted in Toni Cade Bambara's 1981 *The Sanctified Church*), and the climactic final sermon of protagonist John Pearson in Hurston's 1934 novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Hurston formats the sermon to fit in three genres – ethnography, theater, and narrative. The sheer number of this sermon's iterations indicates that Hurston was particularly interested in the ways that Lovelace's original text could take on new artistic force through revisions and contextualizations.¹⁴¹

Hurston's numerous re-presentations of Lovelace's sermon demonstrate her willingness to artistically re-imagine ethnographic material through editorial practices. In a letter dated April

¹⁴⁰ No historical information has been found on Reverend C.C. Lovelace, but he may be, like the fictional preachers Hurston creates, an itinerant evangelical preacher, which would mean that he likely delivered this sermon several times in different church congregations. It would be enlightening to know whether or not Hurston managed to hear Lovelace perform this sermon several times, considering how that would appropriately preface her decision to perform it several times as well.

¹⁴¹ No original textual or audio version of Lovelace's sermon is known to exist. Eric Sundquist notes that at this time, African American sermons were being included on "race records" ("The Drum with the Man Skin" 59).

30th of 1929, Zora Neale Hurston wrote to her then-friend and collaborator Langston Hughes about this openness to artistic revision:

Oh, I love my religious material. Some of it is priceless. Know what I am attempting? To set an entire Bapt. service word for word and note for note. The prayers are to be done in blank verse for that's what they are, prose poetry. I have four dandy ones. I don't like my sermon as well, but I shall prop it up on every leaning side. I shall cut the dull spots in the service to the minimum and play up the art. (*A Life in Letters* 140)

In the letter, Hurston makes clear that while she strives to "set" a Baptist church service "word for word," she intends to do so with a focus on the *artistry* of her "religious material," rather than on the ethnographic fidelity of capturing each exact word and note. Hurston's enthusiasm for condensing and reformatting the ethnographic material for artistic purposes, which would be "anathema" to many contemporary anthropologists, reveals her unapologetic enthusiasm for creative aspects of the editorial process (Hemenway 126). Considering that Hurston heard Lovelace's sermon in Eau Gallie less than a week after writing to Hughes from that same location about her desire to "set an entire Bapt. Service," along with her dissatisfaction with the current sermon on record, we may assume that the ethnographer listened to "The Wounds of Jesus" with the direct intention of transforming the oral event into a work of textual art for wider publication. Hurston presents "The Wounds of Jesus" in nearly identical formats in Cunard's anthology and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, suggesting that she found her creative transcription to be a particularly strong piece of material that could perform new artistic functions according to its context. Though the text of the sermon is nearly identical, she re-contextualizes the sermon in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, giving the text new meaning in relation to the novel's plot. While several critics including Hurston's biographer Robert Hemenway have considered the Lovelace sermon

a clumsy attempt at integrating ethnographic work into literature, I agree with Eric Sundquist, who calls Hurston's textual representation of Lovelace's sermon in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* a "virtuoso performance of fictive creation" (25). "The Wounds of Jesus" so successfully performed artistic functions in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, that one *New York Times* reviewer infamously declared that Lovelace's sermon in the novel was "too good, too brilliantly splashed with poetic imagery to be the product of any Negro preacher."¹⁴²

In the case of the play "The Sermon in the Valley," Hurston not only saw herself as an artistic reviser of Lovelace's sermon thanks to her editorial form of authorship, but also invited others, particularly Rowena Jelliffe to collaborate on the artistic representation of the sermon as well. According to the editors of Hurston's collected plays, Jane Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell, the playscript "The Sermon in the Valley" "contains significant additions and revisions made by Rowena Jelliffe," who along with her husband Russel Jelliffe (both white) founded the Karamu settlement house in Cleveland, which hosted the multi-racial acting group, The Gilpin Players.¹⁴³ While we cannot be sure of the extent to which Jelliffe helped to format the sermon as a one-act, I consider her a co-author of the one-act just as Hurston becomes a co-author of Lovelace's "The Wounds of Jesus" each time she re-presents it.¹⁴⁴ Hurston's interest in collaboration did not end

¹⁴² In a letter to James Weldon Johnson from May 8, 1934, Hurston writes, "It just seems that he is unwilling to believe that a Negro preacher could have so much poetry in him. When you and I (who seem to be the only ones even among Negroes who recognize the barbaric poetry in their sermons) know that there are hundreds of preachers who are equaling that sermon weekly. He does not know that merely being a good man is not enough to hold a Negro preacher in an important charge. He must also be an artist. He must be both a poet and an actor of a very high order, and then he must have the voice and figure. He does not realize or is unwilling to admit that the light that shone from *God's Trombone* [sic] was handed to you, as was the sermon to me in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*." (*A Life in Letters* 302).

¹⁴³ I have emailed Jane Lee Cole and David Mitchell for more information about Hurston's possible work with Rowena Jelliffe on the playscript of Lovelace's sermon.

¹⁴⁴ Unlike Hurston with Lovelace's sermon in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, it appears that Jelliffe never recontextualized Hurston's play without giving her "co-author" credit.

with her theatrical works. In the April 30th letter to Hughes, as well as another of the same year, Hurston either thanks Hughes for helping her to edit her ethnographic material, or asks if he would be interested in editing material together.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, Hurston is well known for weaving choice songs, phrases, and anecdotes from ethnographic research into her fiction and theater.

I connect Hurston's editorial proclivity towards ongoing collaborative creation with Lovelace's sermon to her description of the sermon in what she calls the "Sanctified Church." When Hurston discusses the Sanctified Church, she refers to the Holiness-Pentecostal movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly the Saints of God in Christ and the Church of God in Christ (Thomas 35).¹⁴⁶ The sermon in these churches, Hurston explains in an essay unpublished during her lifetime,

is not the set thing that is in the other protestant churches. It is loose and formless and is in reality merely a framework upon which to hang more songs. Every opportunity to introduce a new rhythm is eagerly seized upon. The whole movement of the Sanctified Church is a rebirth of song-making! It has brought in a new era of spiritual-making. ("The Sanctified Church" 104)

In this essay, Hurston still presents the sermon as a work of poetic artistry, but specifies that the rhetorical artistry of the sermon acts in service of rhythm, song, and spiritual-making. In other

¹⁴⁵ Perhaps one of Hurston's most documented theatrical collaborations was the play *Mule Bone*, which she developed in 1930 with Langston Hughes also for Rowena Jelliffe at the Karamu House. Misunderstandings regarding the publication of *Mule Bone* ultimately led to the disintegration of Hurston and Hughes's friendship. The preface to the Harper Perennial publication of this play (1991, 2008) synthesizes the existing knowledge about the falling out, including excerpts from Hemenway's biography of Hurston, Hughes's autobiography *The Big Sea* (1968), and Arnold Rampersad's biography *The Life of Langston Hughes* (1986).

¹⁴⁶ For more on the Church of God in Christ, see Anthea Butler's examination of women's religious and social lives in the African American Pentecostal denomination, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (2007).

words, the sermon here is an impetus to collaborative creation between preacher and congregation. The sermon as an instrument of spiritual-making in the Sanctified Church summons the participatory art of thematic variation. In “Spiritual and Neo-Spirituals,” Hurston writes, “The real spirituals are not really just songs. They are unceasing variations around a theme” (79). The Sanctified sermon, then, is a liturgical event manifested through collective, artistic improvisation around a prescribed ritual format.¹⁴⁷

Hurston describes the Sanctified Church as a “revitalizing element in Negro music and religion,” which was “putting back into Negro religion those elements which were brought over from Africa and grafted onto Christianity,” such as chanting, “bearing up” the preacher’s sermon, and “shouting,” which Hurston saw as a continuation of the “African ‘Possession’ by the gods” (104-05). Hurston’s assertion of African survivals in the Sanctified Church demonstrate her academic alignment with the scholarship of anthropologist Melville Herskovitz in the infamous Herskovitz-Frazier debate regarding the retention of African survivals in the cultural practices of the Afro-diasporic Americas. Hurston’s identification of African elements in the Sanctified Church may help shed light on why this religious context occupied so much of her research and art. The Sanctified Church is an optimal setting for Hurston to explore her scholarly commitments, reflect on her own history of growing up as an itinerant Baptist preacher’s daughter, and use her authorial skills to showcase the “life of color of [her] people” in a way that leaves “no loop-holes for the scientific crowd to rend and tear [them]” (from 1929 letter to Hughes in *Letters* 139).

¹⁴⁷ Rhythm is not only a crucial aspect of the Sanctified Church, but also extend to homiletic practices across a range of African American Christian institutions. Dolan Hubbard identifies how African American literature invokes preaching practices through “the use of rhythmical language, role playing, repetition, pauses and stammers” (34).

In both “The Sermon in the Valley” and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Hurston sets the Lovelace sermon in religious contexts that fit her description of the Sanctified Church. Hurston and Jelliffe’s play, “The Sermon in the Valley” depicts itinerant preacher Brother Ezra as he delivers a version of the Lovelace sermon to a group of field workers. The drama features hallmarks of the Sanctified church service, namely chanting, bearing up, and singing performed by the eighteen to twenty people who portray Brother Ezra’s “flock.” Sometimes these performances of the Sanctified liturgy appear to erupt spontaneously from the congregants, and at other times the field workers are led by a young woman from the flock named Caroline. *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* tells the story of John Buddy Pearson, who becomes a successful but philandering Baptist Pastor, only to lose everything after his beleaguered wife, Lucy dies, leaving him in a tangled web of existential grief.¹⁴⁸ Loosely based on Hurston’s own parents, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* delves deeply into the complex world of early twentieth-century African American Pentecostal communities.

Lovelace’s sermon “The Wounds of Jesus” begins with a reading of Zachariah 13:6, which prophecies the Messiah being wounded in the house of his friends. The premise of the text is Christ’s tragic sacrifice, making it an archetypal point of departure for a cathartic performance. The sermon is rife with further biblical references, including the books of Isaiah, Peter, and John.¹⁴⁹ “The Wounds of Jesus” brings together a Messianic telling of the earth’s origination with the New Testament story of Jesus calming the sea in Galilee, ultimately insisting that the

¹⁴⁸ I particularly appreciate Eric Sundquist’s description of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* as “a palimpsest of autobiographical and cultural rumination that not only fuses her family history to fieldwork and theory but, in fact, self-consciously extends the attack on the boundary between ethnology and narrative that she had begun in *Mules and Men* (1935), which was written before but published after *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*” (51).

¹⁴⁹ The preacher then references the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, as well as the apostle Peter, specifically Peter 1:19-20 to argue that Jesus was fated to be sacrificed for humanity’s sins before the beginning of the world.

congregation must get off “de damnation train” and seek redemption in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Just as “[t]he sermon is the *text* within the *experience* of the preaching event in the faith community,” (BCS 209) the message of Lovelace’s sermon becomes the text that Hurston manipulates over and gain through formatting to produce an experience of preaching in her literary communities.

Hurston represents the Sanctified sermon as a collaborative event founded in a prescribed ritual framework by demonstrating the congregation’s liturgical task of “bearing up” the preacher. In the playscript “The Sermon in the Valley,” Hurston and Jelliffe show the staged congregation, designated by the title “the flock” continually “bearing up” the preacher, Brother Ezra. The flock interject Brother Ezra’s sermonic monologue with spoken responses in the “tones of fervent prayer,” seemingly spontaneous “singing” in chorus, along with “protesting moans and cries,” and “chants.” In “The Sanctified Church,” Hurston explains, “bearing him up” such as that which we see in the play “is not done just any old way. The chant that breaks out from time to time must grow out of what has been said and done” (104).¹⁵⁰ In other words, bearing up is a collaborative liturgical process. It is liturgical because the congregants cannot simply respond to the preacher in any way they feel, but must take the preacher’s cues in accordance with the encoded set of actions and utterances passed down through memory. In “The Sermon in the Valley,” the flock responds to Brother Ezra in ways that augment his tone and demonstrate that the congregants are following the sermon’s message. When Ezra declares

¹⁵⁰ Hurston also writes extensively on bearing up in “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals,” explaining, “Chants and hums are not used indiscriminately as it would appear to a casual listener. They have a definite place and time. They are used to “bear up” the speaker. As Mama Jane of Second Zion Baptist Church, New Orleans, explained to me: “What point they come out on, you bear ‘em up” (82).

that “Jesus groaned upon the cross / And said: “It is finished,” the flock chants back “And He never said a mumblin’ word” (199). In this instance, the congregation’s chant punctuates the end of the crucifixion story, and indicates that Jesus’s statements are to be prioritized and treated with spiritual authority in the liturgical event.

It is no surprise that Hurston used the Lovelace sermon for a theatrical play that she collaboratively wrote with Rowena Jelliffe and the Gilpin players, considering the way that Hurston describes bearing up as an example of theatrical creation. In “The Sanctified Church,” she writes, “go into the church and see the priest before the altar chanting his barbaric thunder-poem before the altar with the audience behaving something like a Greek chorus in that they “pick him up” on every telling point and emphasize it. That is called “bearing him up” (103-04). In this play, we actually get to see her stage the religious audience as a theatrical chorus.

When Brother Ezra in “The Sermon in the Valley” quotes Jesus as saying, “My heart is exceedingly sorrowful unto death, / For this night one of you shall betray me,” the flock responds with “(*Protesting moans and cries*) No, Lord. No—no---,” bringing attention to the tragedy of the betrayal (196). The flock’s utterances of protest at the revelation of betrayal instruct the audience, just as the Greek chorus did in Athenian tragedies, to find catharsis through Jesus’s sacrificial demise. Because the flock of “The Sermon in the Valley” is composed of a group of “some eighteen to twenty people” acting in a drama, it functions as a Greek chorus for two audiences – the audience depicted on the stage and the audience watching the theatrical work.

“The Sermon in the Valley’s” theatrical flock also bear up Brother Ezra by “responding” with repetition to rhetorical questions in the sermon, emphasizing the role of dialogue in the Sanctified liturgy as well as in the content of the preaching text. Brother Ezra tells the story of

man's creation, saying that first God gathered "water out of the might deep," "a handful o' dirt," and a "thimbleful o' breath," then "ready to make man," asked "Who shall I make him after? Who?" (195). The flock then "*Repeats the chant*" intoning, "Who shall I make him after?! Who shall I make him after?" (195). The congregants' chant demonstrates that while they are not, nor is anyone else for that matter, meant to answer God's question, the deity's decision regarding man's creation must be developed in the process of a conversation, just as the Sanctified liturgy is developed through participatory call and response. Brother Ezra follows the "bearing up" chant with a story that "*Rapid[ly] rise[s] in tempo*" about the ways in which the elements, namely the sun, moon, and stars (all gendered feminine) beg to have man made in their image. God responds to each element with an emphatic "No," finally declaring "I'll make man in my own image and I'll put him in the garden" (195). The flock recognizes God's decision here as a positive resolution to the original question with the response "Hallelujah, hallelujah, Lord have mercy" (195). The "conversation" God has with the elements about making man is only one of the many moments wherein the sermon's message appears through a process of rhetorical dialogue. When God first says that he will make man, "the elders upon the altar cried out that "Ah, he will sin (*Responses from the flock*)" to which Jesus interjects "Make man, Oh, make man / And if he sin, I will redeem him (*Responses from the flock*)" (194). In this celestial conversation born up by congregational utterances, Jesus appears to volunteer for his own crucifixion in order to resolve God and the elders' anxieties about creating man (194). By having Jesus sign up for his own sacrificial role, "The Wounds of Jesus" suggests that Jesus actively wants for the sermon's audience to achieve cathartic relief at the expense of his life.

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston does not insert comments about how the congregation responds to "The Wounds of Jesus" during the text of the sermon, but rather suggests the

importance of liturgical collaboration while narrating the scene's beginning and end. Hurston cues the reader to the fact that a Sanctified service is about to begin by having the preacher lead the congregation in singing the Sanctified spiritual derived from the Gospel of John, "Beloved, Beloved, now we are the sons of God," which the author formats in verse to indicate that it should be read as a poetic song. On the very next page, Hurston also formats the majority of "The Wounds of Jesus" in poetic verse. By placing the versified song a few paragraphs before Hurston versifies the sermon, she encourages readers to make connections between the musical chorus and the role of the same congregational chorus in the performance of preaching. Highlighting the importance of the congregational chorus for the legitimacy of the preacher's liturgical power, Hurston has her protagonist John reflect, "The audience sang with him. They always sang with him well because group singers follow the leader" (174). By having John reflect on the necessary collaboration of his "audience" before opening up the sermonic event, Hurston invites readers to consider the ways in which the congregational audience must also collaboratively create the Sanctified liturgy he is about to perform, and how that participation maintains John's tenuous position as their leader. At the close of the climactic sermon, Hurston also uses the participatory bearing up as an indication of the Sanctified liturgy, saying, "There had been a mighty response to the sermon all thru its length... [and] the 'bearing up' had been almost continuous" (181). The fact that the preacher was continually born up tells the reader that he indeed managed to "preach" rather than merely "lecture," successfully inspiring the collaborative participation of his congregation, and for the time being, preserving John's authority.

Key to Hurston's understanding of the Sanctified sermon is the element of live embodiment that constitutes the sermon's liturgical manifestation. The preaching event must

occur within an embodied performance because a liturgy can only be said to have successfully occurred so much as all the appropriate people who are present in it have spoken and acted in accordance to tradition. Roy A. Rappaport explains, “ritual not only communicates something but is taken by those performing it to be “doing something” as well,” suggesting that ritual, like performative speech, is both expression and action (Rappaport qtd in Schechner 53). The collective liturgical performance of Sanctified preaching is based on a framework of tradition that enables the cumulative expression of religious feeling that Hurston calls “spiritual-making.”

In the case of “The Sermon in the Valley,” Hurston and Jelliffe highlight the importance of recognizing the live embodiment of the Sanctified service by merit of the works’ performative genre, or simply by staging the service with the live bodies of actors. The issue of effectively communicating the embodied performance of the sermon comes to the fore, then, in the textual version of “The Wounds of Jesus,” namely in the anthology and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. In these works not written to be performed on a stage, Hurston uses textual mechanisms, namely versification of the sermon, dialect, and indications of breathing to creatively transform Lovelace’s sermon so that readers imaginatively experience the aural preaching event as a live performance through the visual, printed medium of written prose and poetry.

In every iteration of “The Wounds of Jesus,” Hurston writes the introduction of the sermon’s themes and key biblical references in prose, then structures the bulk of the sermonic text as prose poetry, just like the prayers she mentions in her letter to Langston Hughes. In the play “The Sermon in the Valley,” the sermon’s versification instructs the actor playing Brother Ezra in how to deliver the preaching event in a poetic manner via line breaks. It is important to note that even when Hurston describes the poetic artistry of a religious sermon, she often does so with a concentration on the embodied performance of that artistry as evidenced in the preacher’s

oral delivery. Hurston asserts in “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals,” “The truth is, that the religious service is a conscious art expression. The artist is consciously creating – carefully choosing every syllable and every breath” (81). Hurston formulates her religious material as poetry in order to demonstrate how the material becomes poetry in the liturgical performance, through the act of it being spoken. Like her references to Greek theater, Hurston’s decision to write the sermon in verse also allows her to demonstrate the artistry of African American culture to an audience that may strive to demean these religious traditions.

In the case of the anthology and the novel, the poetic format instructs the reader in how to consume the sermon as a poetic text, engendering the experience of embodied sound. Cheryl Wall uses Richard Bauman’s definition of performance as “the enactment of the poetic function, the essence of spoken artistry” (3) when she writes in 1989 that Hurston anticipated “the work of current-day anthropologists by several decades” when she “both theorized about and put into practice the concept of performance” in her 1930s ethnography (664). I agree with Wall and extend her argument to Hurston’s textual representations of Lovelace’s sermon. By presenting the sermon in verse, Hurston emphasizes the spoken artistry of the religious event, and encourages readers to proceed more slowly with the reading process, pausing with each line break, and in doing so mentally mimicking the performative choice of “every syllable and every breath” just as the actor for Brother Ezra would be expected to do. For the novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, the versification of “The Wounds of Jesus” also sets the sermon apart from the rest of the text. With the exception of the Lovelace sermon, a few songs (including “Beloved, Beloved”) and chants, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is primarily written in dialogue-heavy paragraphs with a past-tense, third-person narrator focused on the actions and thoughts of the protagonist, John Pearson. Thus Hurston intensifies the performative nature of the preaching event in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*

by noticeably switching from her typical novelistic formal structure to that of poetic verse, aligning the sermon with the spiritual-making evidenced earlier, and, thanks to well-placed line breaks, emphasizing the sermon's sonically-inspiring partial rhymes such as, "I am the teeth of time" and "took de hooks of His power" (175, 179). By styling the sermon as spoken poetry, Hurston orients the reader's attention to the rhyme and rhythm of her language, which in turn, bring to light the illusions of silence and sound that play out in readers' minds as they are "delivering" the sermon to themselves.

Hurston's religious scene combines the interpretive force of versification with one of her most well-known stylistic maneuvers, the textual representation of dialect. Hurston asserts that a "lack of dialect in the religious expression – particularly in the prayers – will seem irregular" to any Sanctified church-goer, and in the case of sermons, "dialect breaks through only when the speaker has reached the emotional pitch where he loses all self-consciousness," meaning that dialect is a necessary component to the recognizable Sanctified liturgy, which is consciously performed to promote the emotional escalation required for a collective experience of spiritual-making (81). Hurston writes in a glossary entry for *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, "In his cooler passages the colored preacher attempts to achieve what to him is grammatical correctness, but as he warms up he goes natural," (206) which she evidences in the text of her sermon during a climactic moment when Jesus declares his own betrayal. First Hurston sets up a juxtaposition for the "natural" dialectical grammar by having the preacher almost directly quote the ornate verbiage of the King James Bible in a reference to Matthew 26:38:

His eyes flowin' wid tears, ha! He said

“My soul is exceedingly sorrowful unto death, ha!¹⁵¹
For this night, ha!
One of you shall betray me, ha!

The preacher’s stylized use of seventeenth-century English then shifts into a stylized speech pattern that uses similar antiquated terms, but situates them within a grammatical structure that Hurston identifies with the Southern USAfrican American dialect. The preacher intones,

It were not a Roman officer, ha!
It were not a centurion
But one of you
Who I have chosen my bosom friend
That sops in the dish with me shall betray me. (*JGV* 177)

The preacher’s linguistic stylization here, I contend, represents the Sanctified sermon as a linguistic work of spiritual-making. Hurston insists, “the jagged harmony is what makes” the spiritual, adding that “the harmony of the true spiritual is not regular. The dissonances are important and not to be ironed out by the trained musician” (80). “The Wounds of Jesus” performs this “jagged harmony” by emphasizing the compelling linguistic dissonance created when two seemingly competing registers of spoken English are placed in a chorus.¹⁵²

Hurston also writes “The Wounds of Jesus” using phonetic spellings to indicate specific pronunciations for certain words such as “yo” for “your” and “heben” for “heaven” (177). Like

¹⁵¹ Matthew 26:38 in the KJV reads, “Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me.”

¹⁵² The preacher’s linguistic complexity here brings to mind James Weldon Johnson’s contention that African American folk preachers “were all saturated with the sublime phraseology of the Hebrew prophets and steeped in the idioms of King James English, so when they preached and warmed to their work, they spoke another language, a language far removed from traditional Negro dialect” (qtd in Sudnquist 49).

versification, phonetic representations of dialect force the reader to intentionally imagine the construction of linguistic sound and in turn mimic the performance of orality while consuming visual media. Eric Sundquist writes on Hurston's use of dialect to create an aural reading experience in the sermon appearing in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*,

Hurston's orthography, her variations in person and tense, and her lack of grammatical markers or punctuating line stops -- that is, her unmistakable but also flexible appeal to dialect -- support the vividly inventive metaphors of her scene. Here and elsewhere, her use of enjambment, repetition, assonance, and a metrical scheme based on breathing rather than syllabic count drive the verse into a form that is "readable" only to the degree that is "heard." (49)

I agree with Sundquist's interpretation of dialect and versification in Hurston's material, and build upon his reading to argue that Hurston's creation of aurality in the literary text serves to present the religious scene as an embodied liturgical performance. Dialect, again like versification, functions as a means of communicating the embodied performance of the liturgical event more emphatically in Cunard's anthology and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* than it does in the play "The Sermon in the Valley." In fact, the sermon as written in Hurston and Jelliffe's playscript contains far fewer instances of dialect than do the other two versions. For example, when the anthologized and novelized text use "de" to indicate the phonetic sound of "the," the drama simply reads, "the." Similarly, the script does not use the dialectical terms "monasters" and "oarus" that appear in the other two versions, opting instead for the "standard" English spellings of monsters and oars.¹⁵³ While these changes may be editorial decisions by Rowena Jelliffe or

¹⁵³ It should be noted that in the anthology and novel versions, Hurston follows up both "monasters" and "oarus" with the standard versions in parentheses, indicating that she treats her novel as an opportunity for ethnographic, linguistic information.

the Gilpin players, they still demonstrate how dialect especially serves to evoke a sense of embodied performance in the versions of the sermon not written for live performance.

Hurston, one of the first ethnographers to record, transcribe, and then describe the stories, songs, and sermons of the early 20th-century African American South, extensively considers how dialect highlights the body's role in mediating between visual and aural media throughout her early ethnographic work. In 1935 Hurston assisted Alan Lomax in recording sermons and songs in Florida, but up to this point her fieldwork was accomplished through note-taking and memorization (Sundquist 59). In the case of "The Wounds of Jesus" Hurston "transformed her acoustic impressions of African American preaching in written form" several times after hearing the original religious performance only once (Valkeari 35).¹⁵⁴ In Hurston's 1935 ethnography *Mules and Men*, a local resident tells about a story contending with the aural and oral limitations of written texts. In the story, a young woman returns to her father's home after years of schooling, and now fully equipped with alphabetic literacy, attempts to write a letter on his behalf. The father dictates the letter to his daughter, "Now tell him some mo'. 'Our mule is dead but Ah got another mule and when Ah say (clucking sound of tongue and teeth) he moved from de word'" (62). Of course the daughter tells her father, "Ah can't spell (clucking sound)," to which the father laments

You mean to tell me you been off to school seven years and can't spell (clucking sound)? Why Ah could spell dat myself and Ah ain't been to school a day in mah life. Well jes' say (clucking sound) he'll know what yo' mean and go on wid de letter. (63)

¹⁵⁴ In this discussion of Hurston's sermons, Valkeari cites the Lovelace sermon as it appears in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* along with a traveling preacher's sermon in the 1935 ethnography *Mules and Men* (35).

Though not directly related to preaching, this tale beautifully illustrates how one can write out an auditory performance that is defined through the body. The father appears to see literary dictation as an onomatopoeic enterprise, like an anthropologist's tape recorder, which phonetically documents all sonic variations. We do not know how the daughter notes (clucking sound) in her father's letter, but her difficulties therein demonstrate the incomplete abilities of the written text along with the possibilities of formal manipulations, such as Hurston's notation of "(clucking sound of tongue and teeth)" that describes sound through bodily action.

The text of "The Wounds of Jesus" also aligns the creation of sound with bodily movement, like when Jesus is said to create music with the sounds of his footsteps on earth. The preacher exclaims and then most likely sings,

I can hear Him [Jesus] when He walks about he golden streets
I can hear 'em ring under His footsteps
Sol me-e-e, Sol do
Sol me-e-e, Sol do (*JGV* 178)

Jesus also uses his body to control the powerful sounds of the natural world when he wakes up in the ship with his disciples during a tremendous storm on the sea of Galilee. As the "storm was in its pitch," Jesus stood in the boat

And placed His foot upon the neck of the storm
And spoke to the howlin' winds
And de sea fell at His feet like a marble floor
And de thunders went back in their vault
Then He set down on de rim of de ship
And took de hooks of His power
And lifted de billows in His lap
And rocked de winds to sleep on His arm
And said, "Peace, be still."
And de Bible says there was calm. (*JGV* 179)

In this scene we see Jesus use the performative power of his utterances to control the seas, thunder, and wind. This formulation of the performative harkens to Austin's theories of effective speech because it appears to actualize the events that it announces. If Jesus's words are powerful enough to calm the environment, it is not clear why he must also use his body to perform his dominating power by putting his foot on the storm's neck and then bodily perform the power of his nurturance by holding the billows like a child on his lap and rocking the wind to sleep in his arms. Perhaps Jesus in this scene is like the embodied preacher, whose words appear to be so powerful as to performatively bring about bodily responses in his congregation, but who in reality must always showcase his body's powerful labor and vulnerability in the liturgical event.

In the case of "The Wounds of Jesus" as it is formatted in Nancy Cunard's anthology and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston describes sound through bodily action in onomatopoeic signals of breath, or "ha"s.¹⁵⁵ Hurston explains the crucial role of the breathing "ha" in "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals," writing,

The well-known "ha!" of the Negro preacher is a breathing device. It is the tail end of the expulsion just before inhalation. Instead of permitting the breath to drain out, when the wind gets too low for words, the remnant is expelled violently. Examine: (inhalation) "And oh"; (full breath) "my Father and my wonder-working God"; (explosive exhalation) "ha!" (82)

In the anthologized sermon and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston brings the embodied liturgical act of preaching to life by emphasizing the preacher's live performance of breath through markers of "ha," while, like dialect, these textual cues appear far less frequently in the play version "The

¹⁵⁵ In *Mules and Men*, Hurston's glossary entry on the preacher's breath is almost identical to that in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* save one line that reads, "The "hah" is a breathing device, done rhythmically to punctuate the lines" (307).

Sermon in the Valley.” For example, the scene I cited earlier during which God considers making man looks quite different in the anthology and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* than in the play.

Rowena and Jelliffe’s script reads,

When God said, “Let us make man.”
The elders upon the altar cried out,
“If yo’ make man ... if yo’ make man ... Ah, he will sin.”
(*Responses from the flock*)
Then yo’ friend Jesus said, “Father, dear father, Oh, Father, (194)

As already noted, the play version presents this scene with an emphasis on its conversation, placing each line of dialogue on a new poetic line, and bearing up the importance of man’s fated sin with responses from the staged congregation. *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* presents this same scene with fewer grammatical markers and line breaks defined by indications of breathing,

When God said, ha!
Let us make man
And the elders upon the altar cried, ha!
If you make man, ha!
He will sin
God my master, ha!
Father!! Ha-aa! (175)

The breath markers are of particular importance for Hurston’s textual renderings of the sermonic event, suggesting that they are meant to communicate the embodied performance that is not as evidence in literature as in theatrical plays. Hurston explains, “Negro singing and formal speech are breathy. The audible breathing is part of the performance and various devices are resorted to to adorn the breath taking. Even the lack of breath is embellished with syllables” (81). The lengths to which Hurston goes to demonstrate the preacher’s breathing in her textual revisions of

the sermon reveal that the preaching event must be actualized through the clearly ritual movements of the preacher in addition to the congregation.

When Hurston uses indications of breath to emphasize the importance of the preacher's breathing body for the actualized liturgy, she inherently manages to de-center the sermonic words in the religious event. In the glossary of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston specifies the way signs of breathing indicate the preacher's performative embodiment, saying, "The "ha" in the sermon marks a breath. The congregation likes to hear the preacher breathing or "straining" (206). Hurston demonstrates the importance of a preacher's "straining" voice when her novel's protagonist, John Pearson, so impresses a church congregation with his "good strainin' voice" after a public prayer that a church Deacon believes "dat boy is called tuh preach" (89).¹⁵⁶ Like the figure of Jesus in the sermon, John's rhetorical skills appear so powerful as to be performative, effectively transforming his audience members. Hurston narrates, "One night at the altar-call he cried out his barbaric poetry to his "Wonder-workin" God so effectively that three converts came thru religion under the sound of his voice" (89). Hurston complicates this supposedly performative moment with the preceding line, "He rolled his African drum up to the altar, and called his Congo Gods by Christian names" (89). Hurston's reference to drums and Congo Gods is yet another nod to her scholarly belief in African survivals. In addition, it reminds the reader that John's sermonic performance is a Sanctified one, "putting back into Negro religion those elements which are brought over from Africa and grafted onto Christianity" (105). Furthermore, John's metaphorical use of African drums aligns his preaching with the collaborative and performative liturgical practice of spiritual-making, specifically the "drum-like

¹⁵⁶ Hurston also writes in "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals," "It is said of a popular preacher, "He's got a good straining voice"" (82). Furthermore, she references a preacher who fails to convert his congregation despite his reputation as a man with a good straining voice in *Mules and Men*.

rhythm of all Negro spirituals,” which Hurston uses as proof that “the Negro has not been Christianized as extensively as it is generally believed” in her essay “The Sanctified Church” (103). The reference to African survivals and rhythmic drums also gestures towards the phenomenon of shouting, which Hurston defines as “an emotional explosion, responsive to rhythm” that derives from African possession rituals (“Shouting” 91). Later in the novel, Hurston indicates that John Pearson is a Sanctified preacher when his third wife Sally, hears John preach and comments, “Man, you preached!” ... “only thing Ah heached so many folks wuz shoutin’ Ah couldn’t half hear whut you wuz sayin’” (189). Like spirituals, shouting highlights the collaborative, embodied nature of the liturgical event. Hurston explains,

Shouting is a community thing. It thrives in concert. It is the first shout that is difficult for the preacher to arouse. After that one they are likely to sweep like fire over the church. This is easily understood, for the rhythm is increasing with each shouter who communicated his fervor to someone else. (91)

By connecting John’s preaching abilities to spirituals and shouting, Hurston does not fully permit the reader to imagine that John effectively converts church members with only his words. Rather, John Pearson’s words become powerful when they are accompanied by his encoded bodily actions and collectively experienced in the bodies of his congregants.

As Hurston ascribes the power of the religious event to the embodied liturgical performance, rather than merely the words of a sermon, she argues that effective preaching depends largely on the ritually recognizable actions and utterances of the congregation that may only be inspired by the capacities of the preacher. The plot of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and the Sanctified practice of “shouting” exemplify this reality, that the preacher cannot be a spiritual leader without a congregation to bear him up. The plot of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* follows John

Pearson as he is lifted into social and spiritual prominence as a result of his effective preaching abilities, then details his ultimate demise when the congregation of Second Zion Baptist church refuses to follow a preacher who has abused his wife and participated in extra-marital affairs. When John performs “The Wounds of Jesus,” he does so in order to try and convince his dissenting congregation that they should not replace him with a new preacher, Reverend Cozy. Even though John’s effective performance of “The Wounds of Jesus” outshines his competitor’s ineffective “lecture,” he cannot bear to continue leading congregants who have turned their backs on him. Ultimately, John fails to find a new flock and is killed by a train that echoes the “damnation train” described in Lovelace’s sermon. In short, John learns that in the Sanctified church, you cannot have a preacher without a congregation.

Another aspect I have identified in Hurston’s theory of Sanctified liturgy is that of the preaching event’s continuation into futurity under the directions of those who are not the preacher, offering further variations on the theme. “The Sermon in the Valley” does not end when Brother Ezra ceases to speak, but rather continues as Caroline, the only congregant with a name leads the flock in simultaneous singing. In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, a congregant Anderson, follows up John Pearson’s “Wounds of Jesus” sermon by leading the church in chanting. In the case of the novel, the preacher is not even present as the liturgical event continues. Hurston’s reiterative editorial process then, seems a fitting legacy for “The Wounds of Jesus.”

Every future liturgical event framed by the sermon is “a new creation” manifested in collaborative, embodied performance (“Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” 80). In the case of Lovelace’s sermon and its many iterations, Hurston and her collaborators riff on the themes of collectivity and embodiment through the metonymic *wounds* of Jesus, Biblical signifiers of both divine and human corporeality. The wounds of Jesus, just like the sermon of the same name,

signify stories of suffering and betrayal, all while enabling the manifestation of collective spiritual transcendence for the entire Christian community.

WHEN A PERFORMANCE IS NOT A PERFORMANCE: MORRISON'S READING OF BABY SUGGS

Perhaps one of the most regularly cited literary examples of transcendent, community-focused preaching is that exhibited by the character Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison's 1987 neo-slave narrative, *Beloved*. Baby Suggs is an elderly black woman who begins preaching a message of grace through self-love and spiritual community to free black persons in and outside of churches in Cincinnati Ohio. An "unchurched preacher ... who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it," (*Beloved* 92), Baby Suggs chooses to preach as Linda Kurmholz says, "the guidance of a free heart and imagination" after she achieves social liberation when her son, Halle, pays for her manumission. Baby Suggs, like John Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, is never ordained by an ecclesiastical institution, but still guest-preaches to a variety of black Protestant Christian denominations, "AME's and Baptists, Holiness and Sanctifieds, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed" when not conducting her own ceremonies in the Clearing (92).

I analyze Morrison's textual representations of Baby Suggs's performative preaching praxis, then close-read Morrison's 2007 recording of *Beloved* in order to ask how the concept of performative preaching is challenged by the fact that Morrison refuses to "perform" on her supposedly "transformative" audiobook. I argue that Morrison's reading style, though clearly inspired by black preaching contours, purposefully breaks these expectations in order to require that listeners remain actively invested in the interpretation process, engaging the embodied

imagination, and thus participating in the ethics of communally constituted preaching praxis that her character Baby Suggs enacts.

According to Baby Suggs, what distinguishes her from a “real” black Christian preacher is her lack of literacy, and resulting separation from the written Bible. Baby Suggs is “uncalled, unrobed, [and] unannointed” (92), meaning that she would not be considered a professional preacher. The family friend Stamp Paid recalls “her authority in the pulpit, her dance in the Clearing, her powerful Call (she didn’t deliver sermons or preach – insisting she was too ignorant for that – she *called* and the hearing heard)” (185). While Morrison talks about Baby Suggs’s “preaching,” Baby Suggs herself refers to her speaking in church pulpits and the Clearing as “calling” because according to her, she does not have the knowledge to preach. Later in the novel, Denver clarifies that the reason her grandmother considers herself too “ignorant” to be a preacher is because she cannot read. In Denver’s first-person chapter largely devoted to forms of reading and listening, she remembers that Baby Suggs “said she always wishes she could read the Bible like real preachers” and “so it was good for [Denver] to learn how” (218). In Baby Suggs’s opinion, what separates her from “real preachers” is her lack of alphabetic literacy, specifically her inability to read the Bible. Indeed, Baby Suggs’s sermon, unlike “The Wounds of Jesus,” never cites verses from the bible nor mentions biblical characters such as God, Jesus, or the disciples. The assumption that the ability to read establishes personal legitimacy also inspires Denver (along with her knowledge that her father was literate because of the same reasoning)¹⁵⁷ to attend college.

By distinguishing herself from “real” preachers through her ignorance of alphabetic literacy, Baby Suggs also distinguishes herself from the “formal” masculine tradition of black

¹⁵⁷ See Madhu Dubey’s “The Politics of Genre in *Beloved*.” (1999).

preaching demonstrated by the male preachers in Hurston's *Mules and Men* and stemming from the "interpretive" duties of the preacher articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois. As Roxanne Reed writes, "the Bible is linked inextricably to a masculinist practice of theology and preaching" (60). Du Bois's Negro preacher derives from the priest-preacher during slavery, who acted as "interpreter of the Unknown," through primarily oral practices, came to do these interpretive tasks by reading and then orally interpreting the Bible to his congregation, thus gaining the leadership position by claiming knowledge of the correct textual interpretations and thus being able to "define" terms for the congregation.¹⁵⁸ Morrison illustrates the power of being the "definer" when white Schoolteacher beats the enslaved African Sixo "to show him that definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined" (199).

Like Hurston's textual sermon, *Beloved* is well known for pushing the boundaries between media. Morrison herself states that she intended to create the novel with a "non-book quality," saying, "I wanted the sound to be something I felt was spoken and more oral and less print" (Morrison and Bonetti 1983). A well known example of Morrison's stylistic maneuvers designed to elicit this aural experience of prose appears in the very first, short line of her novel, "124 was spiteful." The author chooses to use a numerical number because it requires the reader to "sound out" the word, reminding us of Erna Brodber's sonic sol-fa-ing in *Myal*. Morrison provides more detail on her use of "124" in a recent interview about her audiobooks, saying, "*Beloved* opens with a certain rhythms --- "124 was spiteful" BOOM dah-du-du-du-du-dah [laughs] – that's the way I hear it" (Rudley). Cheryl Hall argues, "as critics, we must come to

¹⁵⁸ In Hurston's *Mules and Men*, a group of gathered locals distinguish the traveling preacher (accompanied by two women) from a bootlegger by seeing the visual cue of the "dog-eared Bible," and the key to his sermonizing is his presumed ability to offer the "correct" interpretation of the term "behold" for the audience. It is this ability to create the definitions of the terms bestowed upon the literate preacher that grants him so much social power.

[Morrison's] work with a new set of assumptions" grounded in narratological "forms arising from the oral tradition, in which song and story intertwine and are often inseparable" (90). Similarly, Hannes Bergthaller says that Morrison creates "simulated orality," and that studying *Beloved* as an oral story, "assumes that the novel itself can function in the same way as the scenes of antiphony and oral instruction which the novel describes - that orality can be successfully simulated, as it were, in a written text" (Bergthaller 129).¹⁵⁹ Hall and Bergthaller are calling for what I term a performative textual hermeneutics.

Morrison's novel is distinctly performative and textual. I agree with Tuire Valkeakari that "because several episodes of *Beloved* so emphatically present Baby Suggs as an orator, critics tend to pit her ministry against the written word," and in turn, her appreciation for the written word is an "overlooked aspect of her legacy" (166). For Valkeakari,

Baby Suggs ... embodies the paradox that informs the relationship between the spoken and written words in African American culture, and her legacy points to the possibility of a creative coexistence and dialogue between these two media of expression. (166)

Historically, the relationship between formal literate preaching and informal oral preaching are not distinct either. For example, Karen Baker-Fletcher employs term *theographia* to explain how materials constituting formal religious literature are often composed of informal sources such as written and oral expression of African American women.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Höttges, Bärbel claims that Morrison "employs an extended form of orality which openly and simultaneously combines written and oral elements," a practice he states qualifies *Beloved* as a syncretic, specifically African American text (15).

¹⁶⁰ See *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper* (1994)

Thanks to her messages of black subjectivity and liberation, literary critics often position Baby Suggs and her ministry in opposition to those Christian traditions that called for obedience and subordination, particularly those practiced by pro-slavery white ministers using the Hamitic myth as biblical justification for the institution of slavery.¹⁶¹ But Baby Suggs also can be distinguished from the tradition of black preaching on liberation that, like her, opposed message of black subordination, thanks to the things Baby Suggs does not say about spiritual or material liberation: “She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure” (93). By not preaching on the black community’s eventual liberation from oppression, Morrison deviates from the frequent theme of Biblical Exodus from slavery preached by black ministers in the nineteenth century.¹⁶² Instead, Baby Suggs articulates grace not as something to be achieved upon salvation through Christ, God, or the emancipation of slavery in the United States like many black preachers proclaimed. Morrison tells the reader, “She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (93). For Baby Suggs, grace exists only as a phenomenon in the imagination of the believer, making spiritual transcendence an experience of personal creation.

The idea of personal imagination here must be complicated; however; because Baby Suggs’s ministry is intertwined with West African theologies, which generally negate the European Enlightenment concept of individualistic autonomy in personal subjectivity, as well as

¹⁶¹ See George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (2008); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World that Slaves Made* (1976); and A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process – The Colonial Period* (1980).

¹⁶² Dolan Hubbard explains, “Black people came to view white oppression as Egyptian slavery” (3). This hermeneutical practice is also a tenet of Afro-Christian religions in the Caribbean including Revival Zion discussed in chapter 2, and Rastafari.

the Cartesian mind-body split often integrated into contemporary, Western religious thought. Though grace exists in a person's imagination for Baby Suggs, the "person" is always interconnected and interdependent with community, or *muntu*, incorporating their living and dead fellows.¹⁶³ Therefore grace can only be imagined for the person so much as it is always already imagined in community with others. Valerie Smith puts Morrison's emphasis on subjectivity through community in non-theological terms when she writes that Morrison's "characters achieve autonomy and a sense of identity only to the extent that they can understand and name themselves in relation to a social unit" (123). In addition, the imagination itself is not strictly a mental construct in accordance with West African cosmologies, which largely assume "the interconnectedness and interdependence of the conditions of the body and the soul/spirit/mind" (Valkeakari 61).

Dolan Hubbard writes, "the preacher is the transformational agent who walks the critical tightrope between the sacred and secular; his speech act (sermon) is the agent for historical location." Somewhat surprisingly, Hubbard then uses Morrison's Womanist¹⁶⁴ *Beloved* as his example for *his* speech act sermon that allows for the transmission of knowledge across generations of black persons (14). While Baby Suggs does facilitate the recognition of embodied knowledge for those in the Clearing, she is not allowed the secular socio-political status of black preachers. Rather, the community ultimately turns its back on Baby Suggs when she appears too generous, flaunting her emotional bounty, then abandon her after Sethe kills her own daughter.

¹⁶³ I employ the term "muntu" here as it appears in African American Christian scholarship, and appreciate the ways in which it connects this dissertation back to where it began – with Manuel Zapata Olivella's *Changó, the Biggest Badass*.

¹⁶⁴ See Alice Walker *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1984) for a canonical reading of Baby Suggs' sermon as Womanist.

In addition, I argue that Baby Suggs's emphasis on personal imagination and embodied knowledge prohibits her from acting as the mediator between God and the congregation.

Another distinguishing factor between Baby Suggs and the masculine Christian preachers portrayed by Morrison is the way her own body factors into the preaching process. Even though *Beloved* is designed as an aural text, Morrison does not focus on Baby Suggs's use of her "straining voice" like Hurston does for the male preachers, but rather describes Baby Suggs's guest-preaching as "let[ting] her heart beat in their presence" (92). The narrator here equates Baby's preaching with the beating of a heart, echoing Hurston's comparison with the traveling and guest preachers' performances and their breathing "hah." Baby Suggs and the male preachers similarly actualize the preaching practice by showcasing their own embodiment, and more specifically by demonstrating that embodiment through rhythm. That is, through the shifting rhythms of the strained breath in the sermon performance and through the steady rhythm of Baby Suggs's beating heart in *Beloved*.

While Baby Suggs resembles the male preachers of Hurston in showcasing embodied rhythm, her use of the "beating heart" starkly contrasts the straining breath. When Baby Suggs "let[s] her heart beat in their presence," she is not aiming to prove her body's performative labor to the congregation, but rather just seeks to exist.¹⁶⁵ It should also be noted that a person cannot control his or her heartbeat to the degree that he or she can control the breath. Rather, the heartbeat is only indirectly under our control. Morrison cues the reader to understand Baby Suggs's rhythmic preaching symbolizes love, as well as the battered living body, much like the wounds Lovelace's sermon discusses in Jesus's sacrificed body.

¹⁶⁵ The importance of quiet, rhythmic beating permeates *Beloved*, often as a precursor to moments of sound, such as when *Beloved* begins singing the song only Sethe's children could know.

The beating heart symbolizes Baby Suggs's preaching practice and her foundational impetus to preach at all, an impetus grounded in past pain and present choice. Baby Suggs's preaching began through a dedication of what was left of her body after slavery, her heart. Baby Suggs "decided that, because slave life had 'busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,' she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart -- which she put to work at once" (92). Not only is the heart a metonym for the element of love here, but it represents those physically battered body parts that still survive, such as Sethe's scarred back resulting from Schoolteacher's beating and her mom's mutilated mouth resulting from the use of the iron "bit." Corporeally and metaphorically wrecked as a result of forced labor, Baby Suggs chooses to put her remaining heart to work now, and so the old woman's preaching represents the free choice to perform spiritual labor for her black community. When Stamp Paid pleads with Baby Suggs not to quit Calling, he exclaims, "you can't quit the Word. It's given to you to speak. You can't quit the Word, I don't care what hall happen to you" (186). Here Stamp Paid misunderstands Baby Suggs's relationship to preaching, thinking that her calling to spiritual leadership forces her to sermonize regularly. But the reader knows that Baby Suggs understands her preaching as a use of her heart, and that she only recognized her capacity to have a heart after being made free through Halle's manumission. Preaching symbolizes choice for Baby Suggs more than anything. In the paradigm Hurston offers, a preacher can only be considered a spiritual authority so long as his embodied performance effectively inspires the collaborative liturgical event in the bodies of his congregants. In contrast, Suggs' style of preaching, based on the offering of her own heartbeat rather than on the bodies of others, leave her free to leave preaching without losing her sense of self. What is more, Stamp Paid aligns Baby Suggs's preaching with the "Word" – a term he uses no less than five times in this one dialogue – when

she conceptualizes her preaching as non-alphabetic. Finally, Baby Suggs's preaching practice can never be separated from "what happen to [her]" because she chooses to preach as a reckoning with her past, with the things that have happened to her and her community.

Community is key in Baby Suggs's ceremony in the Clearing. First like Jesus, Baby Suggs calls the children to her, shouting, "let the children come!"¹⁶⁶ After Baby Suggs instructs the to children laugh for their parents' ears, she calls the "grown men," instructing them to dance for the eyes of the wives and children, and finally calls the "women," and instructs the women to cry "for the living and the dead. Just cry." This format of the sermon inverts the usual structure, which uses rhetorical fervor to prompt the congregants to manifest emotion. But here Baby Suggs begins with these displays of emotion, harkening even more closely to Western African practices, wherein the affective spiritual experience occurs not as much through one person's moving rhetoric but through the embodied practice of all those present together. In *Dancing Wisdom* (2005), Yvonne Daniel explains that in religion, culture, and performance of the African diaspora, spirit functions as embodied knowledge, which accesses meaning on deeply metaphysical, cognitive, and somatic planes. Thus Baby Suggs' preaching praxis also relies on the collaborative liturgical event, by instructing those present to access spirit, or the imagined grace through their embodied knowledge.

Toni Morrison narrates the 2007 audiobook of *Beloved* as she does all of her recorded novels in English. As audiobook blogger Matthew Rubery notes, "hearing Toni Morrison read aloud is a very different experience from that of reading her to oneself," and as a result of her

¹⁶⁶ Carolyn A. Mitchell, who writes a particularly Christian-focused reading of Morrison's text, also compares Baby Suggs to Christ, and says that Baby Suggs preaching praxis inspires those present to experience "the wildness of the divine," Vincent Harding's "definitive explanation of liberation spirituality."

unique oral style, audience reception for her recorded editions is far more mixed than that for her printed, literary works. While “some find her speech mesmerizing, even haunting ... others struggle with her unique cadences and refusal to perform” (Rubery). Indeed, a cursory look at review titles of *Beloved* on the audiobook subsidiary of Amazon, Audible.com reveals polarizing perspectives. Select review titles include those discouraging purchase such as, “Amazing Book-Bad Audio Book,” “Morrison is a terrible reader,” and “Great novel, poor performance” to those in apparent devotion of Morrison’s style such as “Magnificent – Toni Morrison’s voice will haunt me” and “Perfect!,” which claims that “there’s nothing like hearing the beautiful Music of Toni Morrison’s voice reading her own work.”

Morrison tells Matthew Rubery in a 2013 interview that she decided to record her own audiobooks beginning with *Tar Baby* in 1983¹⁶⁷ after listening to recordings by “first-rate actresses” Lynne Thigpen and Alfre Woodard and deciding, “the rhythm was wrong.” Morrison goes on, “she didn’t put the emphasis where I had heard it in my head. So I thought, well, then I’ll read it the way I think it ought to sound” (2013). Morrison since agreed to record all of her own books in the style she uses before audiences, with – as she puts it – “the right emphasis, accent, and so on.” It should come as no surprise that an author who wrote her novel to “sound” “more oral and less print” also thinks at length about exactly how her novels should “sound” through non-imagined speech.

Morrison is not the only one thinking critically about the ways in which her voice affects the readers’ experience of interpreting her novel. At the heart of almost every Audible review is a question about how Morrison’s oral performance influences the reader’s experience of interpretation for her works. One review entitled “You may not like this book” warns the

¹⁶⁷ Rubery notes long before it was common practice to have authors narrate recordings.

consumer that "this novel requires active participation of the reader" and some may find it "too arduous." This reviewer may not realize that Morrison "want[s] the reader to participate in" the story and purposefully constructs her prose accordingly, but he or she clearly picks up on the method she encourages (Rubery). Morrison explains her desire to have the reader participate in the reading process in terms of the author-listener/reader relationship, saying, "I want the reader to help me with the book. I want the relationship to be that intimate." Morrison, then, uses her textual and oral performance as a means of incorporating her readers and listeners into the liturgy of her texts.

What is particularly interesting for my analysis is that the majority of reviewers, even those with opposing evaluations of Morrison's voice overwhelmingly argued that they felt "transformed" or "changed" after listening to the entire narrative. The reviewers' proclamations of transformation inspire an analysis of Morrison's audiobook as a performative oral experience like the sermon discussed throughout this chapter. In Morrison's *Beloved* we see the reflective practice of what Hortense Spillers identifies in her analyses of nineteenth-century African USAmerican sermons – "a paradigmatic instance of reading as process, encounter, and potential transformation" ("Moving on Down the Line: Variations on the African American Sermon" 253). But in the audiobook, we have the same concept turned around on itself – a visual text, written to evoke the aural imagination, then made aural through by the author reading the visual text in such a way that somehow creates "transformation" through the supposed *lack* of performance. Of course even Morrison's lack of performance is not as much an absence of presentational style as it is a performance different from what some listeners expect. Namely, Morrison does not offer the paradigmatic "straining voice" associated with black preaching and speech in general. Rather, Morrison indeed reads in a limited register of pitch with distinctive

“lyrical” patterns that reviewers call monotone, and breaks up her syntax by pausing at unconventional moments. Rather than monotone, Morrison’s reading voice may be best compared to the religious practice of the intoned sermon thanks to its proximity to non-melodic musical structures.

The reader is taken back in time to one of Baby Suggs’s sermonic performances when her daughter-in-law, granddaughter, and the mysterious young woman who turns out to be Sethe’s resurrected daughter, Beloved, all stand on the outskirts of the Clearing where Baby Suggs once held informal ceremonies. Like the “The Wounds of Jesus” as presented in Cundard’s anthology and the novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Baby Suggs’s written sermon supports a reading method focused on auralty. The audiobook version of the sermon supports a listening method that manages to set Baby Suggs’s sermon apart from the rest of the text, and yet still maintains Morrison’s typically non-theatrical reading voice. Morrison tells Rubery that “dramatizing character voices” is “a little too theatrical and staged for [her] because [she doesn’t] want to limit the reader’s view or imagination about the characters” (Morrison and Rubery). Morrison’s stylistic choices here demarcate Baby Suggs’ sermon as a special event within the larger narrative.¹⁶⁸ Though it may not be the term Morrison herself would choose, she indeed performs this particular paragraph with distinct contours of intonation, rhythm, pronunciation, and tempo. Some of these stylistic choices such as the triplet figure prompt connections to culturally recognizable patterns in black preaching, while others appear to minimize the genre expectations for oral sermons.

¹⁶⁸ African American voice actress Ruby Dee has recorded audio versions of Hurston’s *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for which she adopts a stylized accent that compliments the dialect Hurston uses in her text. Ruby Dee has also recorded a version of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

Morrison uses the movement into present tense to create the sensation of listening to a live sermonic performance in her prose, while the audio version of her novel augments this linguistic cue with a pause in the audio track. Baby Suggs's sermonic monologue is framed by an introductory phrase signaling the reader to enter into the continuous present of the sermonic scene: "Here," she said, "in this here place" (88). The cultural cues of ministry (song, prayer), though altered, combined with the repetition of "here" initiating the monologue sets the reader up as an audience member of a live performance of religion occurring in a clear setting, the place of the Clearing. Furthermore, a new audio "chapter" of *Beloved* begins just before Baby Suggs' first "here" of her sermon, creating a sonic demarcation between the narrative of the chapter and the event of the present-tense sermon. The shift to a new audio "chapter" on the recording means that the track pauses in the digital format for approximately seven seconds. Considering that all of Baby Suggs' sermon spans only two minutes and forty-two seconds out of the twelve-hour and six-minute long narrative, the pause makes up almost four percent of the length of the total sermon. In addition, depending on the space between tracks in the compact disc version, the listener hears silence for even longer as the electronic device transitions.

Morrison sets off the sermon with a subtle paragraph break,¹⁶⁹ thus relying on the movement into the present tense, quotation marks signaling the beginning of Baby Suggs's monologue, and her repetition of "here" to signal that the paragraph-long sermon is distinct from its surrounding text. Morrison's textual formatting, though it brings about similar aural reading results as those Hurston invokes, contrasts "The Wounds of Jesus" in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* by not moving into verse, but rather into one long passage of prose, a monologue written in a single paragraph. Because the monologue is not written in verse, and so not encouraging frequent

¹⁶⁹ Of course one of the well-known aspects of print *Beloved* is its confusing nature thanks to rapid shifts in narrator / chronological time, etc over the course of just a paragraph break.

pauses through poetic line breaks, Baby Suggs's sermon reads at a quicker pace than "The Wounds of Jesus." In contrast to the text's subtle indicators, the audiobook's relatively lengthy pause not only provides a chapter, rather than paragraph break, but also ends up mirroring a kind of "moment of silence" often invoked before religious prayers and/or sermons. In other words, the pause enacts the distinction between sermon as "*text* within the *experience* of the preaching event in the faith community" (*Black Church Studies* 212). Thus, the audio's pause, though likely an accident of timing and digital manufacturing requirements, still signals listeners to hear the prose of Baby Suggs' sermon as a distinct religious monologue, and encourages them to adopt a congregational position in the preaching event.

In analyzing Morrison's "reading" of Baby Suggs' oral preaching as interpellated audience member, we are invited to consider how the author's reading style inflects the message of Baby Suggs' sermon.

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it."

Throughout her recorded reading of the sermon, Morrison's speech adopts distinctive contours, or "patterns of successive levels of pitch," though not always the same distinct contours of pitch critics have connected to oral preaching styles. (*OED Online*). The first noticeable pronunciation Morrison offers is that of the first "flesh," which she pronounces by accenting and elongating the "fl" and "sh," sounding like a Shakespearean actor trained to articulate each consonant clearly. What is more, the term flesh, which has no distinction between singular and plural, inspires the listener to imagine the congregation as a kind of contiguous body of *muntu*, a human body

represented through the metaphorical body of the semi-impromptu church and manifested in the physical bodies of the worshipers.

Morrison pauses and emphasizes the graveliness of her voice as she says, "Love it. Love it hard," elongating the first "o" in "Love it" and lowering her pitch emphatically as she elongates the "a" in "Love it hard." Morrison then contrasts her declination of pitch in "Love it hard," with the following sentences detailing how "they" do not love your flesh. Here she uses a contour of phrases that go up in pitch, creating a sense of continuation and interrogation, as if the list of violence is a series of questions that could go on ad infinitum. Morrison uses this ascending pattern of pitch throughout the sermon, repeatedly creating a sense of uncertainty (interrogatives in English feature the ascending contour) and circularity. When Morrison looked for literary inspirations in creating a more "oral" scribal novel in *Beloved*, she explains,

the closest I came, I think, to finding it was in some books written by Africans, novels that were loose ... the kind that people could call unstructured because they were circular, and because they sounded like somebody was telling you a story. (Morrison qtd in Hall 89)

The oral pattern of pitch ascension throughout the sermon in a way manages to orally create the experiences of circularity and looseness Morrison admired in African scribal stories.

And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands!

In the audiobook, Morrison's tempo slows considerably as she says "And O my people they do not love your hands," encouraging the listener to pause and reflect on the severity of how white outsiders do not love their hands. Morrison then switches to a rapid staccato as she rattles off the

words of bodily abuse towards the hands - "tie, bind, chop off and leave empty," after which she returns to a slower pace, finally extending the final vowel for the command "Love your hands!" This pattern of speaking quickly about violence and slowly about self-love allots more time to any words or phrases devoted to loving the body, meaning that Morrison has Baby Suggs thematically focus on white racist violence while performatively minimizing the very same subject. It is as if Morrison's reading sonically manifests what she hopes her literature will also do – devote less attention and airtime to white characters and messages all while confronting black experiences of racial violence.

Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!* And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. *You* got to love it.

Here we see Morrison meet several of the stylistic expectations for black preaching. Roxanne Reed argues that in the text version of this passage, which she calls a selection from "one of Baby Suggs's preacherly performances,... the phrasing suggests a rhythmic pattern typically found in black preaching... namely the triplet figure" (61). Jon Michael Spenser identifies the triplet figure as a common phrasing in preaching by black men. According to Reed, the triplet is created through "emphasis on the initial word in each of the short phrases, [which] suggests an accented beat followed by unaccented beat or beats" (61). Indeed, Morrison does accent the words beginning words of those phrases, raise, touch, pat, and stroke. What Reed could not know in her textual analysis is that in the audio version, Morrison increases her volume and pitch steadily throughout these short commands, then quickly drops back to a matter-of-fact tone,

again creating a sense of harshness, and yet also giving less attention to violence when she adds, "cause they don't love that either."

This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver – love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.

When Morrison itemizes the "flesh that needs to be loved," she again performs the triplet pattern, accenting each of the first words, all of which happen to be parts of the body: "*Feet* that need to rest and to dance; *backs* that need support; *shoulders* that need arms, *strong arms* I'm telling you" (emphasis mine). By tonally emphasizing each element of the body needing compassion, Morrison gives each of those body parts the positive attention for which her sermon argues. Morrison uses the literary text to make real her loving focus on the body.

CONCLUSION

Both Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston's depictions of preaching diffuse spiritual power by locating sacred experience in the collective participation of individual bodies in worship. At the same time, both authors do not negate the inherent inequities of power that may exist within or outside of the religious ceremony. By close reading Hurston's ethnographic, theatrical, and novelistic writings on religion, particularly that of preaching in the Sanctified Church, I have contended that Hurston uses editorial practices to portray the Sanctified preaching

event as a performative, liturgical event constituted through embodied collaboration. While I have focused on the distribution of power that such a liturgical theory proffers, that is not to suggest that Hurston establishes a homiletics devoid of the trappings of institutionalized power. A religious liturgy is a prescribed order of acts and utterances, which worshipers follow. Hurston points out the encoded nature of the Baptist and Pentecostal church service, saying, “[b]eneath the seeming informality of religious worship there is a set formality” (“Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” 83). Because liturgy manifests religious authority through the performance of encoded actions and utterances, the “set formality” of the service also belies a set system of power that circulates in the preaching event. Anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport writes that to perform a liturgical order means to conform to the sequence of acts and utterances encoded by another person, therefore “authority and directive is intrinsic to liturgical order” (*Ecology, Meaning and Religion* 192-93). The intrinsic order of the Sanctified sermon is exemplified in Hurston’s description of the congregation as a Greek Chorus. In theater, “the concept of a chorus always contains a fundamental tension between the need for the chorus to act as a unified entity and for the individuals in the chorus to preserve an identity and dramatic function of their own” (Pickering 86). In this way, Hurston’s choral depiction of liturgical power insists on the very tensions of subjectivity in community that Morrison so beautifully narrates.

In Morrison’s *Beloved*, the sacred ceremony refuses to ignore, or like *Changó, the Biggest Badass, Bedward* and *Dream on Monkey Mountain* predict a triumphant messianic end to the centuries of subjugation against African-descended individuals in the Americas. Rather, Baby Suggs preaches individual and communal love for the subjugated body in the midst of systemic suffering. As Nancy Jesser succinctly puts it, “Baby Suggs sings a litany of loving all the pieces that make up the body” (332). I

disagree with Jesser's contention that in her sermon, Baby Suggs promises "transcendent change ... clear and boundless freedom to love and dance in the world" through the "power of the imagination" (333). Jesser's argument ignores the Africanist elements of Baby Suggs's ministry and the subsequent concept of mind-body-spirit interconnectedness. What is more, Jesser's argument mistakenly contends that the performativity of Baby Suggs's preaching can only be realized so long as she creates lasting effects on their bodies, suggesting that she must prove to have some kind of control over their bodies. Rather, I see Suggs's sermon as already admitting that no amount of dance or self-love can force white persons to respect and love black persons' bodies, that her ceremony is not a performative act of domination or protection for the congregants. Rather, Suggs promises that the only "transcendent change" available to her congregants is that inherently transitory experience of self and communal love, the love focused on the "beat and beating heart," that they practice together in the Clearing through embodied practice. The intense embodiment of Baby Suggs's sermon goes against the strict idea of mental transcendence. The sermon urges listeners to love their physical bodies, not escape into a disembodied realm of the imagination. As Kwame Gyekye writes (referring to the Akan of Ghana), "the condition of the soul depends upon the condition of the body" (65). Similarly, "African scholar Babatunde Lawal maintains that it is through the body that this spirit or life force manifests itself, acting as a threshold between the secular and the sacred, enabling the human being to interact directly with the superhuman" (*Black Performance Theory* 41). Rather than the disembodied concept of spiritual transcendence, we can see Baby Suggs preaching

immanence, wherein the divine is manifested in the material world. After all, the material body is loved and thus worshipped as divine through the Clearing ceremony.

Baby Suggs does appear defeated by the reality that no matter what, white people can enter into a black person's yard and destroy the sense of personhood that self and communal love has established after Sethe's infanticide of Beloved. Still, I argue that Baby Suggs's decision to retire from preaching and instead "get in [her] bed and lay down [and] fix on something harmless in this world" (188) does not disagree with her sermon's message at all. Instead, she agrees that "the heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn't count. They [white people] came in her yard anyway and she could not approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice" (188). As much as the tone of this tragic reality may contradict with Baby Suggs's uplifting sermon, the conclusion is the same – the only point to the spiritual ceremony is to love yourself because no matter what, the oppressor will never do it for you. The act of love is the reason to enact love.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

i found god in myself

& i loved her/I loved her fiercely

-Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow Is Enuf*

Ntozake Shange's "choreopoem" *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1976) articulates a now-familiar journey from spiritual grief and suffering to self-connection, divine recognition, and "fierce" love. The "lady in red," who first utters the lines quoted above is soon "born up" like Hurston's preachers by her fellow women on the stage. Shange's stage directions read,

(All the ladies repeat to themselves softly the lines 'i found god in myself & i loved her.' It soon becomes a song of joy, started by the lady in blue. The ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks the ladies enter into a close tight circle.) (274)

In this moment, Shange dramatizes the shared intimacies that emerge from personal encounters with the divine. The lady in red's revelation of personal divinity becomes communal through the interpretive process of enunciation and reception. In each of the literary works included in this dissertation, spiritual power is encountered through embodied acts of performance and interpretation like that Shange stages between the lady in red, the chorus of actresses, and the audience. The "lady in red's" discovery of a feminine god within herself brings us back around to the Josefina Báez quote that commenced this dissertation. For Báez, "Goddess within is a poet with action," a "performer" who employs "poetic license" (np). This particular interpretation of

the sacred unites the elements present through sacred acts of reading: language, performance, and embodied action.

In Báez's "Secular prayer," the poet/artist/author plays the parts of medium, prophet, spiritual victim, spiritual healer, and performative preacher. For example, she exclaims,

I am the chosen one.
I am the chosen, to polish a letter of the
longest ever and ever sentence.
A humongous line with a defined period at the
end of its own beginning.
The mother of all syntaxes starts there.
There, where it really all started.

Here Báez uses the rhetoric of prophecy and mediumship, calling herself the "chosen one" in order to say that she has been designated by a higher authority to work in the mediating realm of language. Suggesting that she is one of many participants in the collective performance of liturgical syntax, Báez will contribute by polishing "a letter" from an interminable sentence. She defines this "longest ever and ever sentence" through paradox typical of her work and the spiritual cosmologies throughout this dissertation. Báez says that it is both terminal, marked off by a period. However, the grammatical sign of finitude appears back at the sentence's own beginning, creating a sense of infinite continuation that echoes the African-derived religious temporalities that abound in *Bedward*, *Myal*, *Louisiana*, *Changó*, and *Beloved*. She continues to describe this cosmology of an originating syntax in increasingly democratic terms, saying, "Everyone alive and living in this world holds a /letter, not the intial of their name printed and /signed in vital records." In each of these textual iterations of self, Báez invites the audience

members (including readers) to consider their own participatory roles in “The gift. The present. Full of past and future.”

The Sacred Act of Reading studies the relational dance between authors, words, mediums, and readers that Báez and Shange evoke with ceremonial reverence. This dissertation is, above all else, a love letter to reading literature. An especially scholarly love letter, *The Sacred Act of Reading* invokes the academic names, vocabularies, and epistemologies, which have become my intellectual home during graduate school, but which can only go so far in articulating the value of reading these authors and works. In fact, this academic study of “spirituality, performance, and power in Afro-diasporic literature” seeks to demonstrate the limitations of its own genre’s Euro-centric epistemologies. By becoming “all ears” to the spiritual ways of knowing reality presented in these texts, I hope to have emulated the hermeneutics of engaged surrender personified by *Louisiana’s* divinely humbled academic, Ella Townsend. These works have moved and humbled me.

When literature moves us, it uses language to communicate that which exceeds its own linguistic form. I believe that the sacred resides in that movement, revealing itself through the relational dance of interpretation. When reading becomes a sacred act, what was once solitary is divinely shared, even if only for a moment, even if that moment leaves the reader with a familiar ache of loneliness and grief. Every one of the texts in this project stimulates interpretive pain and pleasure, as it moves the reader with a spark of truth - the truth of beauty, of cruelty, of suffering and healing. Underpinning each of these truths is the recognition of the sacred that dwells within the movement between the reader’s relationship with the self and wider world. We are all prophets, mediums, preachers, and healers. Or as Josefina Báez professes, “I am the chosen one. / And so are you.”

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