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Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways

Travels in
Deep Southern Time,
Circum-Caribbean Space,
Afro-creole Authority

KEITH CARTWRIGHT

Intro

2013

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Reborn Again

Orphan Initiations, Motherless Lands

Ya mus dohn wonda wen A tell ya say, "Ya mus be bon gin."

—John 3:7, *New Testament in Gullah, Sea Island Creole*,
American Bible Society, 2005

I say that this water is what will defeat your deliriums. I say that this water will extinguish the nuclear fuse you train on the world. I say that this water is the voice of humanity's future . . .

—René Depestre, *A Rainbow for the Christian West: Vaudou mystery-poem*

"Voodoo," as Hollywood and the humanities have combined to present it, almost always seems to come from another time, another space, and from something other than accredited authority. The pin-pricked doll. The zombie. Frenetic drums in the distance.¹ The National Geographic Society's 2009 *Fast Facts Book*, for instance, opens a prefatory section on religion titled "What Is Magical Thinking?" with a striking photograph bearing the caption, "EN-TRANCED BY THEIR BELIEFS, Haitian women engage in ritual bathing during a pilgrimage." Readers learn that Haitian religious practice "blends magical elements of voodoo with Christian traditions."² On one side of the blend we have uppercase "Christian traditions"; on the other lie "magical elements" of "voodoo." A few pages later a man is depicted making morning ablutions in the Ganges River—not as an illustration of magical thinking but of ritual in a venerated world religion. This sets the stage for a timeline of important dates in the progress of global religion, moving from cave paintings in France to the lives of Buddha, Christ, and Mohammad, to an endpoint in Martin Luther's establishment of Protestantism. These facts about the world, coming from no less an authority than the National Geographic Society, renewed my own appreciation for that old voodoo economist, Ronald Reagan, and his famous slip of the tongue at the 1988 Republican National Convention: "Facts are stupid things." Reagan got this absolutely right. Imagine, for example, if National Geographic's *Fast Facts Book* had used a photograph of a Kansas girl rising exuberantly from a baptismal font as an illustration of magical thinking. Only a group of others (blended/hybrid others) would do for a *Fast Facts* illustration of magical thinking: distant streamside voodoo rather than one

of the American heartland's chlorinated baptismal pools. But we are all entranced by belief or ideological consensus in the face of ecological, economic, and spiritual crises sweeping the planet. And most of us know we could use a good cleansing in a river held sacred.

As we face a generalized crisis in the legitimacy of the humanities today, we should recognize that there may be good reason for such a crisis. In this study, I turn to deep southern/Caribbean rites and writings that challenge reader-responders to enter perceived cultural backwaters with a *hippi-kat* (open-eyed) reconsideration of dismissed perspectives and uncredited gnosis.³ We can start to get our feet wet in high-simultaneous swamplings of orientation issued by two of the Deep South's most famous novels: William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Writing from the midst of Jim Crow apartheid and in the immediate aftermath of a nineteen-year military occupation of Haiti, both Faulkner and Hurston called readers into initiatory reroutings of knowledge peculiarly registerable in (post)plantation spaces but hardly limited to them. In Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha or Hurston's Okeechobee muck, such baptismal reaffiliations bring characters and readers into ideologically excluded congregations of witness and agency that prove to be not just compatible with modernity but generative of many of its profoundest counter-cultural forms.

"You would have to be born there," Faulkner's Mississippi-born-and-raised Harvard freshman, Quentin Compson, tells his Canadian roommate Shreve at a moment in *Absalom, Absalom!* when *there* may as likely be immersion in vortices from a suppressed past (where mothers may become fish) as any single plot of Yoknapatawpha soil.⁴ Both the Canadian co-narrator and the co-creating reader of *Absalom, Absalom!* may well get born there in unsettlingly entrancing performances. Hardly national space, not even altogether southern or spatial, this sublime *there* of requisite nativity is a kind of intertidal zone of time/space fluidity: something submerged or abject that we, like Faulkner's Quentin and Shreve, would have to "live and breathe in like air."⁵ *There*—in Quentin's (and increasingly Shreve's) backwater routes of narration via harbors of creolization in Haiti, Martinique, and Louisiana—memory of a broken and reconstructing Deep South finds novel performance authority in a Harvard dorm. Little of this, however, would have been in their curriculum.

Quentin, who has been obsessed not just with his sister's underthings but with his home space's submerged black authority ("Niggers say a drowned man's shadow was watching for him in the water all the time"), finds that there is no moving north of his region's Gulf-bound currents so often named in the language of the dispossessed—Tallahatchie, Bogue Chitto, Suwanee, Mississippi.⁶ Faulkner's readers, along with the Canadian roommate, come

to the narratives that precede Quentin's suicidal plunge into the Charles River via a flood-surge of language, pushing us *there* into an initiatory gnosis from below—from what Vodou practitioners call *En-ba-dlo* (beneath the waters), where the spirits reside.⁷

"You got tuh go there tuh *know* there," indeed, as Zora Neale Hurston's Florida-set and Haiti-written *Their Eyes Were Watching God* testifies.⁸ Her novel also immerses its primary avatar, Janie, in vernacular performance from low spaces, in storm-encounter with "monstropolous" beasts of drowning and dispossession. Hurston's readers have often resisted going there with Janie and Tea Cake Woods and their Bahamian friends into Okeechobee's muck. This fluid space of abjection is what is "radically excluded," according to Julia Kristeva, something that threatens meaning, "disturbs identity," and "does not respect borders."⁹ To have to be born *there* (again) is to face an orphaning journey of self-erasure and subsequent reaffiliations of person, kinship, and relation to otherness. In response, therefore, to these Haitian-inscribed hailings of Mississippi and the Florida muck, and coming out of my own circum-Atlantic experience, *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways* undertakes a set of travels or pilgrimages through Gulf and Gulf Stream waters . . . into new (but simultaneously old, long-tested) modes of consciousness.

Currents coursing through American, African American, and Southern Studies have had Americanists looking away from the nation's city on a hill, turning gazes southward—and thankfully southward still, over the waters—to reconsider an aqueous set of relations with the postplantation Caribbean, the other Americas, the Atlantic rim, and the planet at large. As a key review by Jon Smith and an essay by Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Margarite Fernández Olmos have noted, the conceptual channel markers for these trans-cultural journeys were set out by longtime navigators of the Caribbean.¹⁰ What has emerged—in works as vital to my project as Wilson Harris's *The Womb of Space* (1983), Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Antonio Benítez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island* (1996), Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997), Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents* (2006), Valérie Loichot's *Orphan Narratives* (2007), and Monique Allewaert's "Swamp Sublime" (2008)—is an expansion of scale beyond the space of national sovereignty and beyond the periodicities of history, literary or otherwise.¹¹

Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways focuses on modes of Afro-creole agency shaping the Caribbean's and Deep South's long experience of a heterogeneous and unsettling modernity.¹² *Although I do not ground my study in other* radically excluded southern perspectives—such as those of the Choctaw or Carib—my attentiveness to the counterclockwise movement of Afro-creole hermeneutic circles has often brought me to rely on the memory guarded by various Muskogee-speaking nations (Creek, Seminole, Choctaw, and Chicka-

saw) to render this book's perspective. The Deep South's inhabitants share an ongoing relation to what Cherokee writer Jace Weaver has called the "psychic homicide" of Native removal, removals that expanded national investment in the normative violence of the white-supremacist plantation economy.¹³ *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways* points to one potent set of Afro-creole recognitions and treatments—to spirited countermeasures of time and space, polyrhythmic disembeddings of clock time and chronology, antiphonal loops and tangles of kinship, thickening what Wai Chee Dimock presents as "deep time" or the *longue durée*.¹⁴ Native to a peculiarly homicidal and broken time-space, the children of African slaves in much of the circum-Caribbean grew up speaking a new language of their own invention, practicing new rites of their elders' and their own reassembly, facing new challenges to their humanity. Their African parents named these new people *criollos* (creoles), natives to a truly New World in which they served as culture brokers, guides, translators, go-betweens, pharmacists, and scapegoated others. Blacks in the New World were among the first orphan initiates and self-conscious subjects of a globalizing modernity.

To be born there—inescapably native to a broken time-space—is to retain awareness of the violent and shadow-haunted side of the sacred (registered in the range of meaning in the Latin *sacer*, from "beneficent" to "accursed"), a knowledge repressed in the triumphant sacrality of a Western Christianity intent on transcendence.¹⁵ My title's focus on the "sacral" seeks to remind us of the sacrificial elements of the sacred, to avoid approaching the sacred through an accustomed propriety. Such a reminder is necessary because the sacred in Atlantic creole societies has been maintained in travels not only through violence and death but also through shit. Elders of Afro-Cuban *Regla de Ocha* (*Santería*), for instance, account for the arrival of the tradition's divination nuts and sacred stones in tales of these fundaments being swallowed by initiates in Africa prior to boarding the slave ships. The sacred *fundamentos* had to pass in shit in the stench of the ships if they were to foster godchildren's belief in a new world.¹⁶ Indeed, transatlantic slavery and its afterlives subverted the enslaved to what Orlando Patterson termed "natal alienation" and "social death."¹⁷ But as Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* has shown, a resilient "counterculture of modernity" emerged out of the most abject chattel slavery, fostering a resocializing "rapport with death" and a calling-responsive "ethics of antiphony" in grooves that recreated Africa's bush-groves of autonomous authority.¹⁸ In the Americas, Africans and creoles tapped worn pathways of performance to reestablish the kind of sacred grove that the Nigerian divination priest Kolawole Ositola described to Margaret Thompson Drewal: "We are reborn ourselves," Ositola asserted of rites he led in his urban *igbodu* or sacred bush.¹⁹

Whoever would be responsible to the call of the black Atlantic's sacral

grooves must come to move and read ever-more flexibly, to pass low, under what Guyanese writer Wilson Harris configures as a "limbo gateway" into cross-cultural community. Harris's conceptualization of the limbo gateway (1970) has drawn attention recently for being a re-creative countermeasure and "a new kind of space . . . not simply an unbroken schedule of miles in a logbook" but an apocalypse-traversing threshold of survival.²⁰ In the limbo dance, "born, it is said, on the slave ships," Harris finds his chronotope, or time-space figure, of creolization: the spread-eagled test of flexibility by which "the slaves contorted themselves into human spiders."²¹

For Harris, limbo (like Haitian Vodou) activates phantom limbs and pains of Africa and Middle Passage but also fosters a "new corpus of sensibility," "an inter-tribal or cross-cultural community of families."²² Harris's limbo gateway is nothing less than enslaved peoples' miraculous reassertion of a symbolic and social order from within a plantation system that denied them agency. Carnival limbo, Harris insists, "seeks to re-play a dismemberment of tribes (note again the high stilted legs of some of the performers and the spider-anancy masks of others running close to the ground) and to invoke a curious psychic re-assembly of the parts of the dead god or gods . . . issued from a state of cramp to articulate a new growth" (159). What he terms "the limbo imagination of the folk" (160), reading a "gateway complex between cultures" (165), evinces a powerful "creative phenomenon" that remains denigrated in its sacral and carnivalesque forms (159). In response to enduring psychological censorship, Harris points the Caribbean artist-academic lower, in a "gamble of the soul" to embrace "a risk which identifies . . . with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples" (166).

Harris's trope of the limbo gateway marks a secret history of Atlantic time and space. This history is secret because plantation censorship forced its countercultural opacity, but "secret" also because Afro-Atlantic cultures have vetted deep knowledge and authority only upon the responsibly initiated. The closest Yoruba equivalent for "religion," the word *awo* (secret or ritual knowledge), signals experience in what is regarded as the "journey" or travels of spectacle performance.²³ In their often opaque rapport with initiatory rebirthings, deaths, and transition, Afro-Atlantic rites utilize chronotopes of time-space travel. Eileen Julien's memoir, *Travels with Mae*, illustrates something of this, for example, in its work of remembering both her mother's and black New Orleans's whole culture of tenaciously restored behaviors. She reveals how even an act as ordinary as the preparation and consumption of gumbo may serve as a limbo gateway: "a kind of communion," "a rite that puts me in touch with myself," "a spiritual experience which makes me understand in some unutterable way the continuity in my life with the lives of women now far away from me, our common history, our uncommon love."²⁴ Such gumbo hermeneutics require "not only . . . special ingre-

dients but also the right setting, a special feeling. Folks who have eaten it all their lives—or who act like they have” in a communion of learned behaviors and practiced relations.²⁵ Here, gumbo rites define a community apart from others, but one open to whoever may act with a socially and spiritually limber enough response.

Since “things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around” in a gumbo, as Huck Finn affirms, we find our usual (naïve) subjects, genealogies, individualist notions of self and nation thickened and swapped around in any gumbo/limbo narrative.²⁶ Just as gumbo starts with a roux base, we commence with the linguistic-performative modalities of the creole basilect, in a relation of linguistic polarity with the metropolitan-leaning (Euro-standard) acrolect. The historically low-prestige variety of speech (or cultural grammar) within a stratified continuum in each of the contact languages known as Atlantic Creoles, the *basilect* provides a sociolinguistic *base* for a bottom-to-top *lection* (variant reading) of circum-Atlantic experience. As Valérie Loichot helps us see, texts from plantation spaces require a “calling-responsive” co-writing from readers if we are to slip beneath the bar of print culture’s ideal citizen-subject standards to move, spiderlike and more limberly, along the lowest common ground and thereby “foster” texts otherwise orphaned from their extended family networks.²⁷ Basilectal forms of agency navigate a “swamp sublime” within which—as Monique Allewaert’s reading of William Bartram’s *Travels* points out—we not only *can* but probably *must* engage certain plantation texts as swappings of metropolitan subjectivity, rendering new possibilities for inhabitation of terrain where the juices swap around.²⁸

Seen from white-supremacist machineries of power, the integral religiosity of the Afro-creole majority was rendered “a hybrid, crude, and undefinable medley of truth and falsehood,” as the *Southern Christian Advocate* complained of the “pseudo religion” of black South Carolinians in 1846.²⁹ In *The Creoles of Louisiana* (1884), George W. Cable similarly dismissed the splendor of Mardi Gras, ridiculing its “makebelieve art, frivolous taste, and short-sighted outlay.”³⁰ And George H. W. Bush chose a most reliable adjective in 1980 for disparaging Ronald Reagan’s “trickle-down” tax-cut plan as “voodoo economics.” Creole peoples face the constant assertion that they speak no real language, have no real religion, no claim to authority except in movement to the higher ground of acrolectal (Euro-standard) forms. So responding to Afro-Baptist, Vodou, Santería, and jook housings of subalternized agency, I will examine texts and performances from two remaining groves of creole language in the coastal South (the Sea Islands and Louisiana) and from two longtime frontiers of creolizing contact (Florida and an extended Gulf South) to chart deep southern ties to Caribbean rites, writing, and needs to make right. From these moorings, my study embarks upon two currents of Afro-creole agency: (1) reassertions by the enslaved of indepen-

dent sacred societies; and (2) flexible “limbo” performances in which authors have gone low under the bar of sacred folk forms in texts that lend wider circulation and transformed authority to Atlantic countercultures of modernity. This book thereby addresses what Ifeoma Nwankwo terms “cosmopolitanism from below,” and would have us acknowledge such cosmopolitanism not only in its acrolectal movement (toward the metropolitan standard) but also in its basilectal vitality, in what many consider the most backwater cultural forms.³¹

Gulf-Konesans and Authority—Some Conceptual Markers for the Journey

“To dare transition,” Wole Soyinka insists, “is the ultimate test of the human spirit.”³² In his classic essay “The Fourth Stage” (1973), Soyinka drew on Yoruba repertoires of Ogun, the *orisha* (deity) of metallurgy’s creative/destructive cycles, to describe how Ogun’s musically backed rites have nurtured a transitional rapport with the dead, the unborn, and wild agencies of the bush. For Soyinka, passage through any given “abyss of a-spirituality and cosmic rejection” draws most potently from a “ritual summons, response, and expression [that] is the strange alien sound to which we give the name of music.”³³ Soyinka’s notions on the role of ritual muse and music in supporting travels of “spiritual re-assemblage” through a “transitional gulf” can help us appreciate African initiatory preparedness to face even the extreme a-spirituality of Middle Passage and chattel slavery.³⁴ Soyinka’s focus has been on Africa itself; however, his ideas about the metallurgic *orisha* Ogun and his mythic forays into abjection and the sublime apply even more aptly to those of Ogun’s devotees who were hauled across the Atlantic to Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad, and Louisiana: “Only one who has himself undergone the experience of disintegration, whose spirit has been tested and whose psychic resources laid under stress by the forces most inimical to individual assertion, only he [*sic*] can understand and be the force of fusion between the two contradictions [destruction and creation].”³⁵

From American shores of the Atlantic, Édouard Glissant’s *Poétique de la relation* (1990, translated as *Poetics of Relation* in 1997) charts a relational rapport with the sublime steeled by this most trying “*chaotic journey*.”³⁶ Glissant reconfigures Soyinka’s abyssal “fourth stage” of ritual transition as a traumatic passage through “*le gouffre-matrice*” (the gulf-matrix), the physical crossing that—in the Middle Passage for Glissant—marks a new people in recirculated networks of relation.³⁷ Glissant does not gloss over the ineffable terrors wrought by slavery’s crimes against humanity: “the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out” from within a “*Généralice*” pregnant with the dead, living, and unborn.³⁸ If the first stage of passage aboard Glissant’s “Open Boat” enacts disorganizations

of the self, a second stage acknowledges the Atlantic as a single grave with its “thousand channels” delineated by “scarcely corroded balls and chains” (3, 6). This gulf’s gravesite and dread extend into island spaces of arrival since “the most petrifying face of the abyss [*la face la plus médasante du gouffre*] lies ahead” in an impossible futurity—the “panic of the new land, the question of having reached “edges of a nonworld that no ancestor will haunt?” (6–7). From this third Medusa-like gulf avatar (“*avatar du gouffre*”), the ocean reflects petrifying loss; however, the mournings of so many initiates of a thousand African groves catalyze a fourth re-creative stage of relation in a plantation space of nigh-exterminated first inhabitants, unsettled Europeans, indentured Asians, and enslaved Africans. Thus, Glissant positions the creole Caribbean as carrier of an initiate gnosis: “Not just a specific knowledge, appetite, suffering, and delight of one particular people, not only that, but knowledge of the Whole [*la connaissance du Tout*], greater from having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation [*le savoir de la Relation*] within the Whole” (8). “*Connaissance*” (familiar rapport or know-how), born of forced “*fréquentation*” of the gulf, becomes a below-sea-level plantation “*savoir*” (knowledge) of Relation.³⁹

Afro-creole sacred societies have long tended to such knowledge. According to Karen McCarthy Brown, the production and transmission of *konesans* “is one of the goals of Vodou initiation ceremonies.”⁴⁰ Drawing on her study and experiences of Haitian Vodou, Brown explains, “Konesans is the ability to read people . . . diagnose and name their suffering,” and “to heal” them. The experiential power of *konesans* is born of the initiation room’s sacred space, a kind of “alchemical oven in which suffering is transformed into knowledge, into experientially rooted priestly power.”⁴¹ In response to the traumas of chattel slavery, black Atlantic ritual reassemblies of agency proved crucial to sustaining alternative sets of relation and consciousness. A performative, musically infused “slave sublime” provided the base for what Paul Gilroy calls a black Atlantic “politics of transfiguration” demanding far more than fulfillment of extant legal and scriptural codes. The politics of transfiguration cannot be reduced to print. Hailing its subjects differently, it must get “played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about, because words,” Gilroy insists, “will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to the truth.”⁴²

Glissant’s “Open Boat,” Gilroy’s “slave sublime,” and Harris’s “limbo gateway” share a nondisclosable secret of sea-change. This is not quite the Kantian sublime: the overwhelming encounter with nature, followed by the authoritative self’s “reconquered mastery” in a willful turning away that produces an almost orgasmic rush—a “discharge all the more powerful”—for having followed a momentary, little death.⁴³ Enlightenment aesthetics posits a necessarily detached separation between the subject and object of sublime

experience. It is this detachment that produces the masterful taxonomies of Enlightenment reason.⁴⁴ Glissant, Gilroy, and Harris, on the other hand, present a black Atlantic sublime that remains porous to otherness, remains corporeal, composite, and calling-responsive.

Although Sanford Budick has insisted that a “cultural sublime” undergirds Western traditions of agency and has long served as an initiatory test of authorship, Europe’s transatlantic colonial projects brought new challenges and resources into play. From this perspective, a (trans)cultural sublime might gain importance, for as Budick explains, one of the effects of experiencing engulfment by an overwhelming force is to open up the possibility of alternative response, beyond the accredited repertory.⁴⁵ In fact, “the author,” as we have come to know him, was re-created out of Europeans’ transatlantic “bush” travels. Donald Pease writes that the cultural sanction of medieval *auctores* “remained more or less unquestioned until late in the fifteenth century, with the discovery of a New World whose inhabitants, language, customs and laws, geography, and plant and animal life did not correspond to referents in the *auctores*’ books.”⁴⁶ Losing something of the self in New World encounters, the explorer’s survival authorized him as someone whose reportage carried an experience-based authority and even new language (from *hurricane* to *racoon* and *barbeque*). From Cabeza de Vaca’s *La Relación* (1542) to Bartram’s *Travels* (1791), we find an authority born of stepping outside the accredited boundaries and of appropriating and becoming captivated by the authority, gods, lands, and bodies of others. Much of the Renaissance found initiation in a transatlantic sublime’s reciprocal enculturations. This transformation seems best named, however, not by Western metaphysics but by a new word, *criollo* (creole), its earliest documentation appearing in Joseph Acosta’s *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590).⁴⁷

The word “creole” marks a countercultural black authority born of traumas of dislocation unaccrued in Western thinking. Inca Garcilaso de la Vega’s early history, *La Florida* (1605), presented *criollo* as a term invented by Africans to acknowledge gulfs of orientation between enslaved African parents (often of differing African nations) and their children born in the Americas.⁴⁸ “Creole” thus appears as an articulation of identity subject to the conditions of what Mary Louise Pratt has called “the contact zone”: “the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”⁴⁹ The contact zone is creole space: our space of ongoing social and environmental climate changes.

Afro-Atlantic articulations of New World formations keep gaining currency. Two *PMLA* articles from a 2002 issue spoke, for example, of an “increasing hybridization or creolization of cultures” and of “increasingly creolized conditions of metropolitan life.”⁵⁰ We are all now having to be born

there, in trying spaces that call for imaginative and intellectual risk. Caribbean and postplantation writers, native to the contact zone's historic core, may prove diagnostic in their responses to the challenges of a long-globalizing economy. With Édouard Glissant we may seek to reconstitute an "aesthetics of the earth," a relational "passion for the land where one lives . . . an action we must endlessly risk."⁵¹ Similarly, Wilson Harris turns us along a "limbo gateway" to take up "a risk which identifies . . . with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples."⁵² Glissant's "cross-cultural poetics" and Harris's "cross-cultural imagination" emerge from postplantation spaces where risk is a native land.

Part of the risk of authorship born of the contact-zone writing that Pratt terms "autoethnography" lies both in the censorship of its basilectal grounding and in the self-fashioning of a literacy insidiously bound up with colonial representations.⁵³ Modernity and cosmopolitanism have been terms defined by the colonizer. And at the very sweep of time when black god-signs and authors appeared renaissance in places like Paris, Harlem, Havana, Port-au-Prince, Rio de Janeiro, and Lagos, both God and the Author were famously declared dead, leaving the professional metropolitan scribe to adjudicate the play of textuality. For instance, in Roland Barthes's classic essay, "The Death of the Author," Barthes's *écriture* and *jouissance* happen as discharge in a paradoxical zone of contact—the sublime time-space of Western author-ity's loss become gain: "This disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins" out of "the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin."⁵⁴ In his metropolitan take on aspects of creolization, Barthes adds that "the sense of this phenomenon, however, has varied; in ethnographic societies [*les sociétés ethnographiques*] the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose 'performance'—the mastery of the narrative code—may possibly be admired but never his 'genius' [*le 'génie'*]."⁵⁵ As Montaigne had done centuries before, Barthes turns to "*les sociétés ethnographiques*" for a certain kind of freedom. But in "The Death of the Author"—along with an openness to being born *there* in self-sacrificial possessions—comes a moment of colonial possession in relation to "ethnographic societies" that exist only in metropolitan writing: those subjects whom ethnographers write, whom "we" know only in textual fabrications. These *sociétés ethnographiques* whose scripted roles provide a make-believe model for losing our own subject (ivity) in performance may—we are told—admire mastery of the code but never a performer's "genius" (*le "génie"*). Barthes, however, got this partly wrong due to inattention to meanings secreted in relation to the word *génie*: its Latin "guardian spirit" imported into Arabic as *djinn* (*genie*) and admired across much of Africa in the form of bush-spirits of the sublime. These djinn, orishas, *lwa*, are the very forces served in ritual performance. It is indeed the ge-

nium that is admired even as the possessed person (the "mount" or "horse" of the spirit) may be granted a certain authority for her initiate training in giving momentary disconnect to herself to become mount of a genius. Clearly some peoples' genes (and cultural "horses") have been so discredited as to appear to exist only in ethnographic textual productions. A need for both authorship and guardian genius remains. Nevertheless, Barthes does make a compelling case for the Author, God, and autonomous first-person "I" of the Western tradition being in need of a killing.

"The Death of the [Western] Author" may in the end mark too partial a path. The West African "shaman" and author Malidoma Somé points out that the Western world's ancestors (really its authors) need healing, and asks, "Why is it that the modern world can't deal with its ancestors and endure its past?"⁵⁶ Endurance of ancestors put into relation seems the unremitting job of folk like Faulkner's Dilsey, the ex-slave subject (and "mammy") made to stand between the abject and the families she serves. She endures modernity's ancestors and helps initiate the modern text. Faulkner could not be, could not *have been*, without Dilsey.⁵⁷ If any of her biological children become authors, we are not told. After all, their public pursuit of authority could well have led to their murder. Maybe Parisians, like Londoners or Bostonians, can afford to kill their authors. Authors do make excellent scapegoats and may be charged with carrying our cultural baggage—the trash or shame we refuse to touch—into a past to which we are no longer responsible. But does death or the author get performed the same way in Parisian circles (or even at the University of Iowa or Mississippi) as in Port-au-Prince or New Orleans or in Zora Neale Hurston's Eatonville? Who are the ancestors and authors of our peculiar modernity? How do we come to serve and endure them, ourselves, each other? A single repeating Afro-Atlantic initiation tale offers pointers and clues.

Kumba's Calabash—Egg-Fetching Travels

On a recent CD titled *Give and Take*, Senegalese music star Youssou N'Dour invokes a tradition of travel as initiatory, educational agency, singing: "Ku dul tukki doo xam fu deck neexe / Booy tukki yaw" (Who doesn't travel can't know where sweetness is / Boy, go travel).⁵⁸ A fundament of West African societies has been the "travel" of bush initiation. The traveler undergoes a series of tests, learning to give and take in the wilderness through a journey into foreign terrain. Youssou N'Dour's song to Senegal's contemporary global travelers, along with Malidoma Somé's Dagara elders' advice ("Go and let yourself be swallowed . . . be swallowed into the wilderness"), could well inform a tipping of libations to Ralph Ellison and his *Invisible Man*'s grandfather's directive ("Let em swoller you till they vomit").⁵⁹ Indeed, a strategic

agency may well arise from allowing oneself to be consumed by the other, by otherness itself—to fetch the secrets of the foreign and put them into play.

Throughout the black Atlantic we find the initiatory wilderness journey preparing the undone/remade seeker for new modes of kinship, knowledge, and power. In one very widespread Afro-Atlantic tale of an orphan's initiation, her bush-travel is enabled by what Bahamians would call her "brought-psy" or the guiding presence of the dead mother, a presence that enables the orphan's receptivity to fostered reaffiliations.⁶⁰ My prior book, *Reading Africa into American Literature*, presented a Louisiana version of such a tale in its entirety, noting the tale's reproduction of Senegambian models.⁶¹ But we should no longer be content with genealogies of African brought-psy in America. If the tales helped sustain ritual kinships and economies of reciprocity across Atlantic gulfs, then they may teach something about navigating an abyssal modernity. While the tale appears in various places throughout the Americas, let us look to the Senegalese (Wolof) prototype paraphrased below:

The Wolof orphan tale features two girls named Kumba: "Orphan Kumba" and "Kumba-with-a-mother." The father remains alive, but it is a surviving co-wife who is charged with parenting the orphan and her own daughter. The co-wife/foster mother uses orphan Kumba as a virtual slave until the girl comes of age, and then sends Kumba on a journey she is not meant to survive. The orphan must cross the wilderness to wash a dirty calabash in the Sea of Ndayaan (the Atlantic). On her journey through the wilderness the orphan meets a jujube tree that is chopping itself down, and then a skillet doing its own cooking on a fire. In both cases she greets the spectacle with openness and is rewarded—with jujubes (a natural anxiety medicine) and a handful of the skillet's cooked food. Kumba finally encounters a crone in her path: a woman with only one leg, one arm, one eye, one ear, and one finger. Keeping her composure in this encounter, and following the crone's instructions to cook a single bone and pound and boil a single grain of millet, orphan Kumba enjoys a plentiful meal of meat and couscous. Given a pair of needles to defend herself against the bush crone's "children" (wild animals, including Bouki the Hyena), the orphan uses the smallest needle to prick the "children" just enough to move them back into the bush so that she may sleep. Come morning the crone gives Kumba three eggs with instructions for breaking them in the forest on her way home. Orphan Kumba follows the instructions precisely, and bursts the eggs, an act that allows her to arrive back in town with the wealth that crowns her new status, including drummers, armed guards, slaves, gold, and cattle that emerge out of the burst eggs on the orphan's path back home. The stepmother then responds to the orphan's transformation by sending her own blood-daughter Kumba into the bush. This Kumba's journey turns deadly because the girl cannot "give and take" in the spirit realm, can't abandon preconceptions of normalcy, ridicules

all she sees, tortures the crone's animal children mercilessly, does not follow directions, and is devoured by the beasts that emerge from the eggs she receives. Of the failed traveler, the tale says simply that vultures fed on her entrails and cried out, high over the girls' home: "Here is the heart of the little girl who set out for the wilderness by the Sea of Ndayaan."⁶²

The orphan—seen by her stepmother as a competitor with the stepmother's own children for goods, marriage, and inheritances—fulfills what is meant to be an infanticidal task: the washing of a dirty calabash spoon in the Atlantic. Here we must recall the dangers of the coast during the Atlantic slave trade. Orphan Kumba, however, totes her dead mother's brought-psy with her: a fear-overcoming ritual respect that helps the orphan navigate potentially murderous wilderness and maintain composure in her encounter with the disfigured crone/djinn/orisha known throughout the black Atlantic as the herbalist of initiatory transformation.⁶³

Although Senegal is not my study's focal point, nor are the Atlantic's African or European shores, African initiatory grounding aids our examination of Afro-creole reassemblies of agency in American plantation societies. In the Islamicized world of modern Senegal, Wolof people have abandoned the kind of bush schooling that Kumba's tale describes. Nevertheless, Kumba's initiation tale has flourished as a narrative of restored behavior in this oldest black Atlantic contact zone. Kumba is not only a common Wolof female name but one that bears quintessentially ethnic or local "country marks."⁶⁴ For instance, of the four Senegalese "communes" of early French colonial assimilation (St. Louis, Gorée Island, Dakar, and Rufisque), three remain guarded by Atlantic or river-mouth siren-genies named Kumba: Maam Kumba Bang of the old French capital and slave depot of St. Louis, Maam Kumba Kasrel of the slave depot of Gorée Island, and Maam Kumba Lambay of Rufisque.⁶⁵ Kumba appears to be both the orphan traveler and the initiate djinn/genius of a Wolof sublime. Her contact-zone locations may be Muslim or Christian or secular but are always aflow with another, sedimented agency.

So what do we make of the task of washing a dirty calabash in the Atlantic? At the risk of conflating West African traditions, which, after all, converged on the Atlantic's American shorelines, we can turn to Yoruba calabash washings. Yoruba ifa priest Kolawole Ositola regularly initiates boys whose lives have yet to find their ritual container, but he also discusses the practice of initiating men who have found their lives "shattered and scattered like a broken calabash."⁶⁶ Margaret Thompson Drewal explains that as fruit and container, the calabash is a womb-symbol of women's birthing power, and since life's secret is held by women, it is calabash and earthenware containers that guard ritual fundaments from the uninitiated gaze.⁶⁷ It is generally women too—or men who have become women in initiation (Yoruba posses-

sion priests are “brides” of the spirits) who serve as vessels becoming momentary mount or “horse of the god” (*esin orisa*).⁶⁸ The story of Kumba washing her dirty (menses-stained) calabash in the Atlantic serves not simply to pressure girls into conformity with models of female submission as Christiane Owusu-Sarpong remarks of a similar Ghanaian orphan initiation tale.⁶⁹ Far more than this, these tales chart a path into all initiation, modeling open-eyed responses to the wildest realities in preparation for marriage to the spirit. We are all invited to become Kumba. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “all becomings begin with and pass through becoming-woman. It is the key to all the other becomings.”⁷⁰

How account for the wounded bush-genie and her imposed tasks? In Nigeria and in the Yoruba diaspora of the Americas, the one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged forest spirit is Osain, guardian of the herbal medicines indispensable to initiations. The tale cultivates respect for the mentor’s guidance through disfiguring frequentation of the sublime. Just as Yoruba possession priests, male and female, are made ritual “brides” or *iyawo* of the orisha (whether the orisha are male or female), Kumba’s tale insists that initiation calls for a becoming-woman in preparation for marriage to the spirit. Something of this comes across in a Wolof tale of two bush-schooled brothers as the orphan boy accepts each of Kumba’s tasks from the one-legged/armed/eyed “queen of the djinn,” including the dry bone to be boiled and the single grain to be pounded and cooked for the initiation meal.⁷¹ In these tales we often face the dark side of the sacred “genie”—her transfiguration as the devouring vulture who picks the bones and eats the hearts of failed initiates. What we come to intuit is that the two Kumbas are one, that the dark side of this experience belongs to them both, and that the only way the orphan emerges transfigured is through acceptance of her own death and rebirth in an evisceration of the raw ego in sacred bush.

It can hardly be surprising to see Kumba’s allegory of bush encounter repeatedly narrated in a New World plantation system on the other side of an abyssal Atlantic (from the Bahamas to St. Kitts, South Carolina, Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Dominica, Guadeloupe, Haiti, Louisiana, and Florida): a world in which humanity is orphaned, kinship is in need of rerouting, and internal authority—even the language to speak it—is a dangerous invention.⁷² In meeting her stunningly disfigured spiritual parent in the bush, the orphan accepts one promise demanded of her according to Senegambian and Louisiana creole variants: “You must promise me not to laugh at anything which you will see.”⁷³ No matter the marvels she encounters, the seeker greets the unfamiliar with open-eyed respect. No presumptive questions. No slack-jawed wonderment. No spilling of secrets. Orphan Kumba offers a model of flexibility as a stranger in the sacred’s strange land. Her shadow sister’s egg-

botching inability to give and take in foreign/otherly space is perhaps an even more urgent cautionary model.

Swallowed by wilderness, Orphan Kumba manages to assemble what Deleuze and Guattari call the Body without Organs (BwO): “The BwO is the egg,” and “[t]he egg is the BwO . . . you always carry it with you.”⁷⁴ As Deleuze and Guattari ascertain from readings of Dogon ethnography: “If it [the BwO/egg] is tied to childhood, it is not in the sense that the adult regresses to the child and the child to the Mother, but in the sense that the child, like the Dogon twin who takes a piece of the placenta with him, tears from the organic form of the Mother an intense and destratified matter that on the contrary constitutes his or her perpetual break with the past, his or her present experience, experimentation.”⁷⁵ Kumba’s tale indeed fosters a certain radical openness (not without discernment): a knowing not to impose domestic assumptions of normalcy on the contact encounter. This radical openness lies at the heart of creole genius. It is Kumba’s dead mother’s broughtupsy—the egg or piece of placental motherland Kumba carries with her—that keeps opening her to life-affirming potentiality in the face of abjection, periodic bleeding, and loss.

Swallowed by Zion—Kumba’s Crossings

So what do we gain by washing our calabashes in the sea of Ndayaan? In journeys along shores too often seen as nigh-absolute boundaries, we may begin to recognize that the Africans whose social personalities were eviscerated and swallowed by colonial plantation systems did not enter the belly of that beast unprepared to consume New World materials themselves. Kumba’s egg-fetching undoing and redoing in initiatory wilderness steeled her for passage through unspeakable trauma and encouraged her to foster others’ social and psychic reincorporation. Most often renamed by whoever held title to her, Kumba still reemerged on other Atlantic shorelines, bringing her narrative of initiation with her. In North America, Kumba’s Wolof and Mande sisters, children, and cousins arrived regularly in the plantation ports of Charleston and Savannah around which the anglo-creole language of Gullah or Geechee became a majority language. Surprisingly little, however, remains of her initiatory tale there. One of Joel Chandler Harris’s Georgia tales introduces us to an “old Affky ooman, ‘e call ‘im name Coomba,” who finds her desires stoked by “one snake-nes’ fill wit’ aig.”⁷⁶ After Coomba breakfasts on the snake’s eggs, she faces the snake’s reciprocating threat: “You is bin ‘stroy me chillum. Tek keer you’ own; tek keer you’ own.”⁷⁷ Coomba must then guard her own daughter by relying on a call-and-response secret password song. With the child opening the door only in response to Mother Coomba’s song,