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"BURNING WITH A FLAME IN AMERICA"

African American Women in African-Derived Traditions

Tracey E. Hucks

While collecting ethnographic data in New Orleans in the 1930s, anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, who was researching southern, African American religion and folklore, asked Mrs. Rachel Silas where she could find a good "hoodoo doctor." Mrs. Silas immediately eschewed any knowledge of, connection to, or belief in the African-derived practice of hoodoo. As Hurston tried to reassure her of the potency and efficacy of hoodoo and the healing and helpful effects of its work, Mrs. Silas gradually relaxed her cautious disposition. Like Hurston, Mrs. Silas was familiar with the unbelievable accounts of hoodoo, remarking, "Oh it kin be done, honey, no effs and ands 'bout de thing. There's things that kin be done."[1] A nearby African American woman, Mrs. Viney White, quickly chimed in and explained the ways in which she employed hoodoo as a means of protection, informing Hurston of the "Big John de Conqueror" root she carried with her and the sprinkles of mustard seed she spread across her door each night. Mrs. Silas, initially guarded, now felt it safe to disclose to Hurston that she, too, "got something buried at dat gate" for protection. Mrs. Silas and Mrs. Viney then inquired why Hurston was seeking the service of a hoodoo practitioner. Upon hearing her response, Mrs. Viney informed Hurston that "me and Rachel both knows somebody that could teach you," assuring Hurston that this person was a hoodoo doctor who "don't do nothin' but good."[2]

After her extensive fieldwork, Hurston concluded that the African-based tradition of hoodoo, or voodoo, was "burning with a flame in America."[3] Although hoodoo functioned in the United States as what Hurston called a "suppressed religion," Hurston's ethnographic investigations bore witness to three

[1] Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 196.
[2] Ibid., 197.
[3] Ibid., 193.

findings: first, that there were thousands of "secret adherents" to African-based traditions in North America; second, that these African-based traditions had experienced a historical process of localization and innovation; and third, that African-based traditions continued to persist alongside Christianity. In what follows, I argue, and Hurston's ethnographic works support, that African Americans historically have engaged in the negotiation of multiple religious worlds for accessing spiritual power and for obtaining alternative modes of healing and recovery. What might seemingly appear conflicting and contradictory phenomena in the practice of more than one spiritual tradition is readily reconciled in moments of African American empowerment and healing. This has been especially true for African American women.

Throughout their history in the United States, African American women have sustained open and fluid boundaries regarding religion and have been active agents in shaping their own religious meaning. Thus, scholarly studies that attempt to circumscribe and to assign rigid religious identities to African American women often eclipse the ways in which black religious communities have historically fashioned religious orthodoxy and praxis reflecting their immediate needs. I contend that black women's religious identities include complex dimensions of the supernatural world that often allow for multiple religious traditions to coexist within their lives. At times, this religious coexistence is lived out individually in daily ritual practice. At other times, it is carefully and systematically circumscribed in written texts for collective edification, as in the works of Iyanla Vanzant and Luisah Teish. My nascent categories for defining this identity are *religious coexistence* and *dual* or *multiple religious allegiance.* In exploring specific ways in which many black women have historically practiced, and continue to practice, both African-derived traditions and, in particular, Christianity, I am convinced of the need for more expansive approaches. Such approaches include multidisciplinary methods—most notably, ethnographic investigations—that can unveil the myriad ways that black women have generated religious meaning.

African-Derived Traditions in Antebellum America

Christianity and African-derived religious practices have functioned historically in an important dialogical relationship. Within the religious world of enslaved Africans, specifically in the American South, African-derived traditions such as hoodoo, voodoo, and conjure complemented black Christian orientations. In order to meet their spiritual needs, members of the enslaved population sought to access the powers that both Christianity and African-inspired traditions offered. According to religious historian Albert Raboteau, "[C]onjure could, without contradiction, exist side by side with Christianity in the same individual and in the same community because, for the slaves, conjure

answered purposes which Christianity did not and Christianity answered purposes which conjure did not."[4] Over time, African-derived practices, such as conjure, became important spiritual resources for informing African American "extrachurch orientations" and traditions. Conjure and hoodoo helped to broaden black religion to include orientations of African origin that had existed concurrently within black communities. Broadening the category of black religion, Charles Long states that "the [Christian] church was not the only context for the meaning of religion. . . . The Christian faith provided a language for the meaning of religion, but not all the religious meanings of the black communities were encompassed by the Christian forms of religion."[5] Long contends that traditions such as Islam, black nationalist philosophies, and African-derived practices, in addition to Christianity, must be considered important influences in shaping black religious identity. Thus, in analyzing African American religious history, methodological approaches that dichotomize the "church" or black denominationalism and the "extrachurch" orientations, in which African orientations, folklore, and culture are privileged, inevitably yield conceptual and interpretative limitations.

For African Americans in the United States, African-derived traditions were defined less as a set of codified doctrines and rituals. Instead, such traditions relied heavily on the ability of practitioners to mediate supernatural worlds; to perform divinatory rites; to prescribe herbal remedies; and to create protective charms. Echoing this sentiment, Mechal Sobel states that

> the chief evidence that African world views came into America and that they coalesced into a more or less singular cosmos is the fact that Voodoo actively permeated all of slave life. . . . The world of spirits and the practices surrounding their supplication and control remained an overarching reality throughout the slave era. . . . No slave area was without spirit-workers, and virtually no slave was without contact with spirits.[6]

Conjure, hoodoo, and voodoo functioned as religious systems that informed the complex ways in which African Americans explicated supernatural phenomena, accessed dynamic entities of power, and dispensed spiritual prescriptions.

[4] Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 288.

[5] Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 7; see also idem, "Perspectives for a Study of African-American Religion in the United States," in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, ed. Timothy Fulop and Albert Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), 24.

[6] Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 41.

African-Derived Traditions from Emancipation to the 1930s

As independent black Christian churches began to assert their public visibility and authority in the Emancipation era, access to African-derived practices was relegated to secrecy and seclusion. Pressures of accommodation and white Christian conformity weighed heavily on post-Emancipation black churches in the United States.[7] An increased awareness of socioeconomic class greatly contributed to the displacement of African-derived practices from black ecclesial consciousness. Black denominational foci on "respectability" and assimilation created deep chasms between emerging middle-class churchgoers and black masses. As documented by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham:

> By conforming to the Baptist doctrine taught in the schools of higher learning, educated ministers and women teachers and missionaries adhered to the same beliefs of most white Baptists and rejected conjuring, belief in ghosts, voodoo, and practices of "superstition" that carried over from slave religion.[8]

Nevertheless, black Christianity and African-derived practices continued to coexist within African American religiosity in the postbellum period. However, the overall concealment of African-derived traditions from black public religious expression in no way minimized its predominance within African American communities throughout the United States. Its practice was simply consigned to the margins, forcing researchers like Hurston to conclude, "Nobody knows for sure how many thousands in America are warmed by the fire of hoodoo, because the worship is bound in secrecy. It is not the accepted theology of the Nation and so believers conceal their faith. Brother from sister, husband from wife. Nobody can say where it begins or ends."[9] Hurston's careful documentation of African-derived practices in the United States and in the Caribbean helped categorize African-derived practices as "legitimate, sophisticated religion," reflecting what she called "the old, old mysticism of the world in African terms."[10] For Hurston, African-derived practices in the New World were ultimately religions of "creation" and "life."

Hurston's own religious world did not remain untouched by African-derived traditions. The daughter of a Baptist minister from Eatonville, Florida,

[7] Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 145.

[8] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 44.

[9] Hurston, *Mules and Men,* 195.

[10] Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 249.

Hurston expanded her religious world, without contradiction, to include formal initiations into voodoo. In total, Hurston was initiated into voodoo six times. In describing the details and theological underpinnings that surround the tradition of voodoo, Hurston recounted her initial visit to Luke Turner, the nephew of famed voodoo priestess Marie Laveau. Hurston recalled that Turner unassumingly remarked to her, "The Spirit say you come back tomorrow." In compliance with the request of the "Spirit," Hurston found herself undergoing one of several formal initiations into voodoo. Reflecting on her initiation ceremony, Hurston writes:

> The next day he began to prepare me for my initiation ceremony, for rest assured that no one may approach the Altar without the crown, and none may wear the crown of power without preparation. It must be earned. And what is this crown of power? Nothing definite in material. Turner crowned me with a consecrated snake skin. I have been crowned in other places with flowers, with ornamental paper, with cloth, with sycamore bark, with egg-shells. It is the meaning, not the material that counts. . . . This preparation period is akin to that of all mystics. Clean living, even to clean thoughts. A sort of going to the wilderness in the spirit.[11]

Hurston's initiation narrative concluded with her encounter with the "Great One," the amorphous African Spirit in voodoo.

> With the help of other members of the college of hoodoo doctors called together to initiate me, the snake skins I had brought were made into garments for me to wear. One was coiled into a high headpiece—the crown. These garments were placed on the small altar in the corner. The throne of the snake. The Great One was called upon to enter the garments and dwell there. . . . Three days my body must lie silent and fasting while my spirit went wherever spirits must go to that seek answers never given to men as men. I could have no food, but a pitcher of water was placed on a small table at the head of the couch, that my spirit might not waste time in search of water which should be spent in search of the Power-Giver. . . . For sixty-nine hours I lay there. I had five psychic experiences and awoke at last with no feeling of hunger, only one of exaltation.[12]

The direct impact of these successive voodoo initiations on Hurston's black Christian background never reached the pages of her text. Hurston's biographer, Robert Hemenway, describes her at this time as having "become for the moment the spiritual descendent of Marie Laveau, and one did not talk in

[11] Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 207–8.
[12] Ibid., 208.

books about the nature of that transformation."[13] Paradoxically, evidence of Hurston's creative use of her knowledge of voodoo appeared in the proceedings of her 1939 divorce trial. The proceedings reveal the permeability of voodoo and its ability to be invoked as an avenue for spiritual control. According to the court records:

> The Defendant was also put in fear of his life due to the professed "Black Magic" or "Voodooism" claimed by the Plaintiff to have been acquired by her while living in Haiti and that she had the power both in spirits and in the use of certain preparations to place individuals under certain spells and that if the Defendant would not perform her wishes she possessed the power to "FIX HIM."[14]

Hurston's early writings, and the details of her own religious journey, provide concrete evidence that African-derived traditions were integral components of African American women's religious lives in the early decades of the twentieth century and existed in close proximity to Christianity.

African-Derived Religions and Christianity: A Reconciliation of Traditions

With the recent rise of African-based religious practices among African American women in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, the question of multiple religious discourses remains as relevant today as in the time of Hurston. In conducting field research on the practice of Yoruba traditional religion in North America in the 1990s, I found that several African American women had chosen to organize their religious lives formally around both African-derived traditions and Christianity. One example was an African American woman I will call Adejoke. Adejoke's narrative provides important insight into the complex world of dual religious allegiance as it relates to African American women's participation in African-derived religions and Christianity.

Adejoke has been formally initiated as a priestess in the African-derived tradition of Yoruba. As a Yoruba practitioner, Adejoke is connected to a growing religious tradition that for several decades has attracted numerous African American devotees. Yoruba traditional religion finds its historical roots along the west coast of Africa and, for several centuries, has inspired many religious derivations throughout South America and the Caribbean such as Lucumi (Santería), Cándomble, and Vodou. Although the exact origins of Yoruba practice in North America are ambiguous, its twenty-first-century appeal to thou-

[13] Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 122.
[14] Ibid., 274.

sands of African Americans in search of a spiritual reconnection to Africa is undeniable. As a result, I suggest that many African American women have entered the tradition for four major reasons: (1) They turn to African-derived traditions in search of a direct link to their African ancestry and heritage. (2) Many seek a compatible spiritual counterpart to their nationalist and/or Afrocentric philosophies. (3) Many African American women desire a religious alternative to Christianity or Islam. (4) African-derived traditions such as Yoruba offer a means of exploring new possibilities of black womanhood as such exploration relates to the reverence of female deities.

African American women who encounter the Yoruba tradition in North America often attest to profound affirmation of their blackness and femaleness. Many African American women have found this affirmation lacking in other religious traditions in which masculine iconography of the sacred is privileged. Within African-derived traditions, such as Yoruba, sacred representations are embodied and incarnated in both male and female forms. The sacred female entity in the Yoruba tradition manifests itself in *orisha* (divinities) such as Oshun, the goddess of the river; Yemoja, the goddess of the sea; and Oya, the goddess of the wind. Within the lives of many African American women, like Adejoke, these deities function practically as sources of maternal energy and theologically as female manifestations of divine power and authority.[15]

While a practicing Yoruba priestess, Adejoke is also an ordained Christian minister who professes a direct descendancy to Nannie Helen Burroughs, the well-known activist, feminist, and founder, in 1900, of the National Baptist Women's Convention. Burroughs, a native of Virginia, worked tirelessly on behalf of the Women's Convention. According to historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, during Burroughs's first year as corresponding secretary "she labored 365 days, traveled 22,125 miles, delivered 215 speeches, organized a dozen societies, wrote 9,235 letters, and received 4,820."[16]

One of Burroughs's most significant contributions to the early black Baptist movement and to black education as a whole was her affiliation with the National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C. In 1909, as its first president, Burroughs diligently implemented the school's philosophy of racial uplift and self-help through industrial training. Maintaining this philosophy, Burroughs understood the concept of *work* as twofold. For Burroughs and for the members of the Women's Convention, work corresponded to compensated labor and the ability to sustain one's self autonomously and responsi-

[15] Sabrina Sojourner, "From the House of Yemanja: The Goddess Heritage of Black Women," in *My Soul Is a Witness: African-American Women's Spirituality*, ed. Gloria Wade-Gayles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 272–78; Diedre Badejo, *Osun Seegesi: The Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power, and Femininity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996), xiii–xvii.

[16] Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 158.

bly. "Work," for black women, also included "race work" or exercising one's additional "responsibility to the collective cause of African Americans."[17] Although this essay does not allow for a comprehensive treatment of Nannie Helen Burroughs and her contributions to black religious and secular communities, it is fair to say, as Higginbotham points out, that her role was so significant to early black denominational history that "no scholar of the black church can overlook or disregard her presence and influence. [Burroughs] stands among the finest representations of the black Christian tradition."[18]

Connected to this tradition, Adejoke describes her family as "traditional Baptists" and as "old-line church founders in Orange County and Madison, Virginia." Adejoke lives out her Christian fulfillment in a prominent Northern Baptist church. She considers the Baptist Church an important part of her ancestral legacy and is active in many of its programs relating to women and children. She is presently completing a doctoral degree in education and is the founder and director of an after-school educational and tutorial program for black children. In many ways, Adejoke sees herself following in the footsteps of her maternal ancestor, Burroughs.

> She had a great faith. She built her school on a hill and she called that school, "Zion's Holy Hill." She believed that she could have this school in a time where black folks were not doing well economically, and she had very little in terms of financial resources, but she had a big vision and a faith in God. They [would] invite members of the family back for Founders Day and I would go over and serve as the person to introduce speakers from around the country. . . . In the old days, it was a school that served an international clientele from Africa, the Caribbean islands, etc., and had a boarding part to it. . . . I believe I have inherited some of her visionary spirit and great faith that all things are possible through the power of God.[19]

It is important to note that, like countless African American women in the past, Adejoke sees no real conflict between the coexistence of traditions within her religious world. When asked about her devotion to both Yoruba and Christianity, Adejoke responded, "I don't seem to see a problem with it. It seems to fit well into my life. I am in the church seeking a closer relationship with Olodumare, and I am seeking a closer relationship with God Almighty. I use the terms interchangeably because they both mean the same to me. My reason for being is to get closer to God." The two traditions for Adejoke exist in a harmo-

[17] Ibid., 211.

[18] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Religion, Politics, and Gender," in *This Far by Faith: Readings in African American Women's Religious Biography,* ed. Judith Weisenfeld and Richard Newman (New York: Routledge, 1996), 154.

[19] Interview with author, April 1998. Subsequent quotations are from this interview.

nious, complementary relationship. She never feels as though she will need to choose one tradition over the other. In fact, Adejoke feels balanced in the sense that, on several occasions, divination consultations in the Yoruba tradition have both affirmed and encouraged her participation in Christianity. This confirmed for Adejoke the sense that there is, indeed, work for her to do in both traditions.

Throughout the interview, I invited Adejoke to reflect on how embracing Yoruba religion, which she calls "Ifa," has affected her philosophical interpretations of traditional Christian teachings. Three organizing themes that emerged within our conversation were (1) the understanding of animal sacrifice used in most African-derived traditions, (2) the role of Jesus Christ and the theological underpinnings of Christology, and (3) the function of sacred texts as sources of authority.

Coming from a strong Christian background and later embracing an African Yoruba consciousness seemingly did not alter Adejoke's view on animal sacrifice. She was not necessarily repelled by the ritual blood sacrifice of animals in the Yoruba tradition and felt that there was a theological "common ground" in the two traditions. According to Adejoke, "If we trace back into the history of Christianity, there is always the breaking of the bread—the communion service that we go through that represents the breaking of the body of Christ and the drinking of his blood. In Ifa, those similarities are the same in that it is a blood sacrifice. We are taught that the largest Christian sacrifice that was ever paid was the life of Jesus—his body and his blood."

Admittedly, however, Yoruba religion has heavily influenced Adejoke's notion of Christology.

> [Jesus] was a prophet. . . . He was one of the prophets that was lifted up by the Christian church, but there are others. Even Jesus himself says that he has come to show us how to do these things and that we too can do what he has done, and more. It was like he expected us to attain his level and to go beyond him. . . . I guess I am still seeking [this level] through the power of God, through the power of the *orisha* [spirits], lifting me up. It is the rising of the spirit reaching for the greatest goal, and the Christian church wants you to do the same.

Adejoke's Christology also includes a unique explication of Jesus' status as the "Son of God," an interpretation again influenced by her participation in the Yoruba tradition. For Adejoke, "All humans are sons and daughters of God, or *omo-Olodumare* [the Yoruba God], children of Olodumare." For her, the "Son of God" is not a designation or status reserved exclusively for Jesus Christ, but for all humanity.

Ultimately, Adejoke's narrative provides a brief glimpse into the fluid boundaries that constitute African American women's religiosity. It reflects the

historical ability of African American women to embody symbiosis and reciprocity within their religious identities. In the end, involvement in both traditions allows Adejoke access into a broader base of spiritual power. By accessing dual spiritual entities and engaging multiple religious worlds, Adejoke experiences a greater sense of assurance and fulfillment. As she confesses:

> Sometimes Christianity makes you feel alone, but with [Ifa], I have a broader depth of understanding. . . . My ancestors are now more vibrant to me. I know that their energy is pulling for me to make it, those old souls, old Africans. Our foreparents and great-grandmothers relied upon that energy a lot.

Adejoke's commitment to the black Christian church as an ordained minister grows out of the church being what she calls "the church of my ancestors" in America. Her simultaneous commitment to African-derived religions in her capacity as a Yoruba priestess grows out of her deeper ancestral connections to Africa. Adejoke sees her dual religious commitments as an opportunity to access a collective community of spirits from two traditions that have gained influence in African American religious life. For Adejoke, "All things are truly possible through the power of Olodumare—God Almighty, the *orisha,* and the emissaries working in my life. I don't have to fight battles alone."

Finally, Adejoke draws interesting comparisons between the written, biblical teachings of Christianity and the sacred body of oral teachings in Yoruba religion. She contends that her spiritual life in both traditions is consistently reinforced by the oral and textual corpuses of each faith.

> I believe in the Holy Scriptures because even Ifa has [oral] Holy Scriptures. . . . Studying the Bible you know there is something called the concordance and that helps you to have an even greater understanding of the word that is written in the Scriptures. So, too, the power of the Ifa tradition helps you to open up an even greater world of the Bible.

> Ifa has something which is called the Odu. . . . these are the Holy Scriptures of Ifa. . . . The Odu are the scriptural verses of Ifa and each Odu has its scripture in that they tell you how to become elevated, how to live your life, how to respond in a way that is in more alignment with Olodumare, with the power of God working through you for the betterment of not only yourself, but the uplifting of society. . . . The Odu is becoming more accessible to people now. There are books that if you want to read it on your own, you can, but it is better to study with a spiritual teacher or guide, high priest, or *babalawo.*

African American women, like Adejoke, bear witness to an interesting phenomenon surrounding the growing textualization of religious knowledge within African-derived religions in the United States. According to Adejoke, a textual movement involving the codification of the oral teachings of Ifa is well

underway. This raises critical questions regarding the ways in which African-derived religions have been directly influenced and subsequently forced to respond to the dominant textual and scriptural identities of Western Christian traditions. Ultimately, Adejoke's narrative compels us to contemplate these questions further while, at the same time, it affirms the ways in which African American women have accommodated exchange and cross-fertilization in their religious worlds.

African-Derived Religions and Textual Traditions: African American Women and the Works of Iyanla Vanzant and Luisah Teish

Nowhere has the dissemination and discourse on African-derived religions been so profoundly affected and transformed for African American women than in the texts of Iyanla Vanzant and Luisah Teish. Since the late 1980s, the works of the two African American Yoruba priestesses have ushered in a new era and genre in black women's religious readership in North America. Although both women draw their primary spiritual sustenance from the African tradition of Yoruba, their works have attracted a large audience of black women from multiple religious faiths. By focusing on overarching themes of healing, ritual, and self-empowerment, the writings of Iyanla Vanzant and Luisah Teish have fostered a vast cross-religious appeal among African American women.

In addition to their books, both Vanzant and Teish have become noted public figures. As such, they have amassed a wide following among African American women who find resonance with their messages of spiritual healing and rejuvenation, their emphases on female-centered images of divine energy, and their transreligious and noncreedal mode of engagement. The influential nature of Vanzant's and Teish's texts rests in their use of transcendent religious language, their appeals to a universal Divine Spirit, their emphasis on ritual activity and personal spirituality, and their use of literary space as a forum for healing and transformation.

In recent years, the influence of the Yoruba priesthood in the United States has spread beyond local religious communities into national arenas. African American Yoruba priestesses such as Iyanla Vanzant and Luisah Teish have begun to utilize public lectures, ritual workshops, and texts as effective forums for addressing African American women across religious boundaries. Through these mediums, both women attempt to facilitate meaningful ways for African American women to negotiate issues of identity, health and well-being, and empowerment.

Iyanla Vanzant has emerged as one of the most widely read authors among African American women. Vanzant's books remaining on the bestseller list for African American women include *One Day My Soul Just Opened Up: 40 Days*

and 40 Nights toward Spiritual Strength and Personal Growth; In the Meantime: Finding Yourself and the Love You Want; Faith in the Valley: Lessons for Women on the Journey to Peace; The Value in the Valley: A Black Woman's Guide through Life's Dilemmas; Acts of Faith: Daily Meditations for People of Color; and *Yesterday, I Cried: Celebrating the Lessons of Living and Loving.* The multiple experiences that Vanzant describes derive from her roles as a Yoruba priestess, ordained minister in the Christian New Thought movement, empowerment specialist, and spiritual-life counselor. Her texts mirror the multiple religious traditions she seeks to negotiate and draw strength from in her daily life. Vanzant has been national spokesperson for Literacy Volunteers of America, a radio talk-show host, attorney, author of a line of black greeting cards, and has made numerous appearances on the *Oprah Winfrey Show.* She is currently the host of her own talk show on ABC. However, the experiences that resound most with African American women are those of grief, molestation and sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, public assistance, physical battery, poverty, attempted suicides, and hospitalization for mental illness. Using texts as a communal telling of her personal pain, Vanzant attempts to foster a collective healing for her audience and herself.

> I have learned that the telling helps me continue healing. I have found, though, that as I tell my story, there are places and pieces that other people can tap into so that they may somehow find the courage to revisit their own experiences, bring forth the tears, and grow into their greatness. . . . I know there are far too many people suffering alone from experiences that are common to us all. . . . It is the story of the common things that we experience that we have not learned to express. . . . My prayer is that my story will help throw away their crutches of dysfunction and addiction so that we can all stand together in a new time, in a new place, with a new understanding that enables us to celebrate the fact that we are still alive.[20]

Vanzant's medium of autobiographical texts as a forum for self- and shared recovery challenges the broader implications and boundaries of religion with respect to textuality and healing. She states that "it was in the writing process that I learned there are many paths that lead to one road. I realized that God didn't care if I was a Yoruba or a Christian. . . . God wanted me to love myself. God wanted me to honor myself."[21]

Vanzant's self-identified religious journeys and affiliations are varied.

[20] Iyanla Vanzant, *Yesterday, I Cried: Celebrating the Lessons of Living and Loving* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 26–27.

[21] Ibid., 277.

Some argue that Vanzant embraces a "religious pluralism"[22] that neither detracts from nor diminishes the effectiveness of her writings in any way. Her early religious insight comes from having been raised by her paternal grandmother, an indigenous American of Cherokee and Blackfoot background whose primary devotion was to the Church of God in Christ. Vanzant recounts in her early childhood history an exposure to herbalism, "healing" baths, spiritual "work," dreams, voices, and gifts of prayer. In her early adult life, Vanzant frequented spiritualists and spiritual mediums, where she "learned a great deal about spirits and the people who talked to them."[23] For Vanzant, visiting spiritualists, erecting home altars, and reading New Age texts were part of a larger quest to "know God" that eventually led her to become initiated into the Yoruba priesthood in North America. Reflecting on the meaning of her priesthood in the Yoruba tradition, Vanzant writes:

> To be a Yoruba priest . . . meant learning how to be whole, mind, body, and spirit, and how to minister to the whole person. You must know how life and the universe of life function. You must understand that life is more than what we can see; life is tangible and intangible, with visible and invisible spheres of energy. It is the priest's job to help people maintain their balance on all levels of life.[24]

Vanzant's texts deal honestly with the complex layers of pain and suffering that envelop black women's lives and that result in emotional and spiritual imbalance. To combat this imbalance, Vanzant offers contemplative and meditative techniques that she herself has accessed through religious channels such as Yoruba, Christianity, and New Age philosophical teachings. By engaging African American women in prayer and meditation and by appealing to a common "Spirit" and "Mother of Creation," Vanzant is able to replace rigid demarcations of religion with broader, more embracing appeals to a universal spirituality.

Two texts that demonstrate Vanzant's meditative approach to healing and transcendent approach to the sacred are *Acts of Faith: Daily Meditations for People of Color* and *The Value in the Valley: A Black Woman's Guide through Life's Dilemmas.* In *The Value in the Valley,* Vanzant targets African American women who are "imprisoned by fear, hate, anger, shame, oppressive domination and outdated stereotypical roles and expectations."[25] Throughout the

[22] Gina Henderson and Brenda L. Webber, "Niki Jewell Loves Iyanla Vanzant," *Emerge* 11 (April 30, 2000): 34.

[23] Vanzant, *Yesterday, I Cried,* 191.

[24] Ibid., 199.

[25] Iyanla Vanzant, *The Value in the Valley: A Black Woman's Guide through Life's Dilemmas* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 5.

book, she attempts to sketch a landscape of the dark spiritual experiences or "valleys" that plague African American women. For Vanzant, many of these valleys arise from concrete situations of oppression and incarnate themselves in African Americans through lack of self-love, understanding, confidence, and courage. Valleys, however, also serve as sources for personal transformation. According to Vanzant, "The valleys help to bring the true purpose and meaning of life back into focus. . . . Valleys force us to examine what we are doing, why we are doing it, and to decide whether we choose to . . . pursue the evolution of the spirit."[26] The work involved in achieving healing is mediated by a reliance on intuitive knowledge, prayer, personal growth, and spiritual development. Because Vanzant believes that "there are ten valleys which Black women commonly fall into based on their orientation to life and their everyday human experiences,"[27] each chapter of *Value in the Valley* is structured to facilitate a morphology of transformation and healing. Each chapter begins with the definition of a specific valley; the universal law that governs that valley; the lesson to be learned from the valley; the practical character traits that it teaches; and the ultimate spiritual virtue from which healing and recovery emerge.

In *Acts of Faith*, this morphology is organized into daily ritual affirmations. Vanzant dedicates the book to "the descendants of the Africans who long to know themselves."[28] In helping those of African descent to "know themselves," Vanzant compiled an array of affirmations that reflect the diversity and complexity of African American religiosity. Sources for her spiritual affirmations include Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Yoruba traditional religion, African American literature and music, and African proverbial lore. Structurally, *Acts of Faith* is similar to the daily Unity Church meditation booklet, *The Daily Word*, the church in which Vanzant is also an ordained minister. About negotiating both Yoruba and Unity identities, she writes, "I learned to combine the universal principles I was learning through Unity with the cultural principles I had learned in Yoruba."[29] Founded in 1889 by Mary and Charles Filmore in Kansas City, Missouri, the Unity School of Christianity emphasizes the mission of Jesus Christ and the power of healing through affirmations, positive thought, meditation, and prayer. Vanzant asserts that, along with other texts, it was reading Charles Filmore's *Atom-Smashing Power of the Mind* that helped her see herself "as a divine and creative being whose every thought is manifested as a

[26] Ibid., 28–29.

[27] Ibid., 30.

[28] Iyanla Vanzant, *Acts of Faith: Daily Meditations for People of Color* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

[29] Vanzant, *Yesterday, I Cried*, 247.

tangible physical experience."[30] In 1924, Unity began publishing a monthly meditative periodical, *The Daily Word,* featuring a daily spiritual message for reflection that is circulated globally and translated into nine languages.

Similar to Unity's *Daily Word,* Vanzant's *Acts of Faith* provides a date for each affirmation, an explanatory statement and lesson, and a short proverbial affirmation for continued contemplation. On a personal note, Vanzant discloses that "writing *Acts of Faith* helped me to develop an intimate and personal relationship with God. It was in that process that I met God for the first time. I met the God of understanding. The God I could feel in my heart."[31] Both *Acts of Faith* and *The Value in the Valley* attempt to impart larger spiritual principles and themes that collapse the religious particularities of her largely black and female audience. In both texts, Vanzant utilizes a theological language that transcends the concrete parameters of any single religious tradition. Her theological vocabulary includes words such as *Spirit, Divine, Father/Mother God, Creator, divine purpose, divine power, divine energy, intuition, revelation, spiritual path, universal law, spiritual principle, spiritual philosophy, transformation,* and *ancestral memory.* This use of language allows her to engage African American female readers within fluid spiritual boundaries. Vanzant contends that her writing is "about integration and about not having lines of division but of having lines where you can coexist cohesively."[32] Her texts ultimately convey to African American women that acquiring religious meaning and self-empowerment far exceeds the need to maintain static and inflexible religious orthodoxies.

Utilizing similar strategies, Yoruba priestess Luisah Teish also seeks to maintain religious fluidity and multidimensionality in her works on ritual. For example, Teish offers African American women an approach to religious ritual based on their collective historical and "trans-cultural" past.

> Centuries ago the trans-Atlantic slave trade brought millions of Black people from their motherland, Africa, to the so-called New World. They were dispersed throughout the Western Hemisphere, with large concentrations in Brazil, the Caribbean Islands, and the North American colonies. In those places, Native American folk knowledge . . . and enforced Christian theology were added to their own beliefs and practices. . . . the Africans managed to acclimate themselves to the land, people, and culture around them. And in the process they created rit-

[30] Iyanla Vanzant, *One Day My Soul Just Opened Up: Forty Days and Forty Nights toward Spiritual Strength and Personal Growth* (New York: Fireside, 1998), 58.

[31] Vanzant, *Yesterday, I Cried,* 277.

[32] Henderson and Webber, "Niki Jewell," 34.

> uals and celebrations that are both old and new. . . . Tradition was based on the needs of the time and on the perceived needs of the future.[33]

Teish's personal narrative reflects various dimensions of this "trans-cultural" past. Teish was born in New Orleans, known for its historic religious connections to voodoo as documented by Hurston several decades before. In fact, the house of Teish's grandmother was built on the site where Mam'zelle Marie Laveau had assumed her residence more than a century before. From the 1830s to the 1880s, Marie Laveau and her daughter of the same name were voodoo priestesses widely known throughout New Orleans as spiritual diviners, initiators, and ceremonial leaders.[34] For Teish, this regional connection to Laveau linked her symbolically to the tradition of voodoo. In fact, her reflections on voodoo helped her contextualize her early childhood experiences of prophetic dreams and visitations of spirits within a concrete tradition. *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* chronicles Luisah Teish's experiences within this southern religious world of spiritualists, proverbs, folktales, ancestors and "old souls," dream interpretations, and herbal folk remedies. She traces her own faith journey from the folk wisdom of New Orleans to the Sanctified Church in Mississippi to various African-centered faiths and eventually to the Yoruba tradition. Like Vanzant, Teish couples her religious texts with narrative accounts of personal tragedies, periods of disorientation, and suicide attempts. For both women, personal pain is counterbalanced with spiritual power.

In *Jambalaya* and in her later book, *Carnival of the Spirit: Seasonal Celebrations and Rites of Passage,* Teish provides African American women with concrete instruction on ritual: charm-making ingredients; guidelines for constructing spiritual altars; and ritual practices for honoring the seasons and the universe in daily life. Through rituals, particularly those rooted within African-derived religions, Teish believes that African American women can reconnect with the spiritual knowledge of their ancestors. According to Teish, "Black women will find information which helps us to better understand ourselves and our elders. We will be freed of the acid we feel when somebody calls our tradition, superstition. We will know why our grandmothers claim to know nothing of African spiritual traditions but can recount its potions and charms."[35] Ultimately, for Teish, the creation and performance of rituals promote healing in the lives of African American women. Throughout her books, she addresses an array of spiritual and physical concerns that her inspired rituals seek to heal.

[33] Luisah Teish, *Carnival of the Spirit: Seasonal Celebrations and Rites of Passage* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), xii–xiii.

[34] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 79.

[35] Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), xiii.

According to Teish, the rituals put forth in her texts are influenced and directed through spirit guides, ancestral forces, and, in *Carnival of the Spirit,* female Yoruba deities. The diversity of rituals outlined in her books include the spiritual cleansing of one's home; the construction of ancestral altars; rituals for depression, wealth, peace, and courage; rituals to combat evil spirits and to remove "hexes"; and, finally, rituals for health problems.

Teish's books provide African American women concrete ways of directly accessing spiritual power through ritual. The sources of this spiritual power include God and Spirit, ancestors, natural entities, and personal intuition. The mediums for accessing these powers include prayer, spiritual baths, altars, dreams, petition writing, and possession. While not advocating any single religious tradition and, instead, affirming multiple traditions, Teish hopes that active engagement and participation in ritual practice will empower African American women to utilize their own agency to shape and reformulate the world around them. In turn, similar to Vanzant, African American women become agents of their own healing and transformation.

Conclusion

Constructing fixed boundaries around the religious lives of African American women precludes a thorough analysis of the multiple dimensions of the sacred that have historically informed, and continue to inform, the religious lives of women. This approach does not allow for the fluidity or complex interchange that often defines the religious worlds of African American women. Therefore, as African American women continue to access dual and even multiple religious reservoirs to create comprehensive religious meaning, the field of black religious studies will need to expand its interpretations, language, categories, and analytical frameworks in order to accommodate this development's full significance.

Throughout their history in North America, many African American women developed spiritual relationships with more than one religious tradition as a way of meeting their most primary needs. As the works of Zora Neale Hurston reveal, these relationships were often forged within layers of necessity as well as of concealment. For African American women like Adejoke, who openly practice dual traditions, concealment and ambiguity are readily assuaged and reconciled as complementary, rather than competing, orientations. Finally, the success of the literary genre created by Yoruba priestesses Iyanla Vanzant and Luisah Teish rests largely in their ability to function as broader spiritual resources while, at the same time, allowing African American women to maintain the integrity of their individual faith traditions. Both women draw from numerous spiritual traditions while at the same time transcending any fixed source of spiritual power. Through their books, they introduce African

American women to forms of mediation between these women and the supernatural world; such mediation neither undermines nor alienates the women from their primary religious convictions. As a result, African American women create coherent religious realities that privilege their temporal needs and expand their spiritual possibilities.