

**“Dancing for the Deity:”**

Remapping the Black Female Body through  
Spiritual Movement in Brazil and the United States

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“The concrete act of dancing affords the immediacy of both the learned and intuitive realms of knowledge, and empowers humans as well as transforms and identifies them with and as spiritual entities” – Yvonne Daniel<sup>1</sup>

Dance and human movement are at once the most physical and tangible of forms, and the most ephemeral and unquantifiable. For this very reason, especially in their improvised, possession, or spiritually based manifestations, they bridge the gap between the conditions of the concrete world and the invisible, transcendent divine. The dancer’s body is the meeting place, expressing in the most physical form the inexpressible pulses of another world. It is a terrain upon which both “learned” and “intuitive” realms combine in the act of motion, and through which the dancers – along with their bodies – have the potential to “transform” and “identify” themselves. Not only then can a body be both literally grounded and free flowing simultaneously, but also culturally, socially, and psychologically it can be identified and transformed, stabilized, and mobilized.

This duality is especially pertinent to the study of slavery in the Americas, more specifically in the northeast of Brazil and the southeast of the United States. Slavery existed in Brazil between 1550 and its abolition in 1888, and in the U.S. from the mid-1600’s until its final eradication in 1865. There have been few groups of people with more heavily “marked” and visible bodies than African slaves. The visibility of racial identification became not only a reason, but also a justification for the enslavement and mistreatment of Africans in the Americas. If the search, then, is

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<sup>1</sup> Yvonne Daniel, “Embodied Knowledge in African American Dance Performance,” in *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas*, ed. Sheila S. Walker (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001): 356.

for an embodiment of the most centralized meeting place for these complex realms – the grounded and the liberated, the concrete and the spiritual, the corporeal and the embedded abuse of Afro-Brazilian and African-American slaves – there is no more relevant terrain to map than the presence of black women’s bodies. Not only marked by race, but also by womanhood, the particular implications of being female in a society in which all black bodies were owned property and contested domains make black femininity during and after slavery a devastatingly physical terrain for the investigation of identity and presence.

In the introduction to her book, *Something in the Way She Moves*, Wendy Buonaventura sums up the stigma that has plagued female bodies in motion across cultures and throughout history: “Women have long been assumed to reveal their true nature through their bodies, and aside from giving birth this is most in evidence when they dance.”<sup>2</sup> The body itself is assumed to be the location of the essence, the “true nature,” of a woman, Buonaventura suggests. And dance, or expression through that body, seems to inhabit the same terrain of physicalized truth-telling as does birth, the giving of life. Indeed, as Buonaventura also points out, dance has historically been associated with sex, and often there is a back-and-forth exchange of sexualizing perceived between the body (especially a female one) and the actual motions of the dance: the body, by being female, sexualizes the dance; the dance, by being movement, sexualizes the body.

This is all immensely magnified by the added visual, social and political element of race. Perhaps the most condensed example of this model occurred in the

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<sup>2</sup> Wendy Buonaventura, *Something in the Way She Moves: Dancing Women from Salome to Madonna* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003): 9.

early 1810's, during which a female "specimen" from South Africa was brought to England and France to be ogled in circuses and museums as a "quasi-human artifact" and a "representation...a thing, a concept, a relic of a species that supposedly was the link between European 'races' and higher mammals,"<sup>3</sup> under the name, "Hottentot Venus." The name is not only oxymoronic in its connotations, but, more importantly, entirely drawn from a particular perception of this woman's body as being at once disgustingly sexualized by its difference from white European "norms," and desired, evidenced by the power of this difference to hold the white (particularly, male) gaze in both "scientific" museum settings and circuses designed to showcase "freaks." This "Venus," also known as Sara Baartman, had multiple exhibitors and "masters" through her short five years in Europe before her death in 1815. Of special relevance to the discussion here is the fact that "Baartman did not dance, nor utilize any part of her anatomy sensually or kinetically (and certainly not erotically)." To the contrary, "she was a static, unmoving image."<sup>4</sup> Already labeled away into a perceived significance, her body did not even need the element of movement (any form of which would surely have only strengthened the imprint of the paradigm on white, European thinking) in order to be immediately sexualized and objectified. She was allowed no other identity beyond that which was signified by her bodily presence.

This model, in which female African bodies are not only displaced and demarcated by a projected sexuality and enslavement, but in which that projected

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<sup>3</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): 150.

<sup>4</sup> Gottschild, 152-53.

identity is taken for the essence and truth of their existence, can be extended into a larger model reenacted repeatedly in the African slave histories of Brazil and the United States, especially Bahia and the American South. Buonaventura, discusses one reason for the specific controversy over the dancing female body in religion.

In many cultures, the worship of a single male god replaced religions in which both male and female deities were once honoured for their powers. Under male-centred monotheism women were taken out of the creative picture. They no longer played a part in shaping our world, nor was there a place for them in religious ceremony. Ever since then, man has been the measure of all things.<sup>5</sup>

This transition from “both male and female deities” to a solitary, male god-figure epitomizes the numerous changes that African slaves endured in their transplantation to Brazil and the United States. Slaves in both countries were brought over from a variety of tribes and traditions, often not even able to communicate with each other in the same language, and so this particular transition did not quite follow Buonaventura’s model of a culture changing over time. Rather, it was many cultures obliged to change because of distance and difference: the distance from one continent to the next, as well as the difference between and among traditions from Africa and those of the Christian societies they were suddenly immersed in. Buonaventura writes of a lost “part in shaping our world” for women under this male-focused Christian structure, as well as a lost role within religious ceremony and ritual themselves. Under these theologies, women are often erased from the “creative picture” in terms of their active roles. Even within Catholic theology, where female saints and the Virgin Mary are venerated as objects of devotion and prayer, this “creative picture” is headed by a distinctly male God and

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<sup>5</sup> Buonaventura, 14.

implemented on earth through the male figure of Jesus. Despite their power, female Christian icons still exist within a patriarchal structure of belief. They do not participate on the same level as men in the “creative picture,” a phrase ironically akin to the “static, unmoving image” describing the “Hottentot Venus.” A subtext seems to exist in which the fearfully sexualized bodies of women in motion exist in a precariously similar relationship to versions of women demanding stillness and visual presence only – in which women’s bodies are frozen in a kind of “static,” non-“creative” role.

How, then, did *black* women negotiate this transition to a New World religion and culture that pushed them even further out of the “creative picture” in which they existed as slaves, placing them either on a marginalizing pedestal or into an image so motionless that only its most external parts remained visible? In 1851 in Akron, Ohio, men, including male clergy, who had come expressly to a women’s rights conference to antagonize the women present, met with great success until Sojourner Truth, a former slave, gave her celebrated speech, “Ain’t I a Woman,” using the very same theology to justify feminism that the clergymen had used to disrupt the proceedings.<sup>6</sup> The physical presence of Sojourner Truth was neither unproductive nor sexual: “Raising herself to her full height of six feet, flexing a muscled arm, and bellowing with a voice one observer likened to the apocalyptic thunders,” Truth spoke of how Christ came from “God and a woman.” “Man had nothing to do with Him,” she said. “If the first woman God ever made was strong

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<sup>6</sup> Toinette M. Eugene, “Lifting As We Climb: Womanist Theorizing about Religion and the Family,” in *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*, ed. Larry G. Murphy, (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 438.

enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again.”<sup>7</sup> The story of Eve’s corruption was turned, in her words, into a positive example of womankind’s potential. And her fiercely embodied presence – often described in comparison to the uncertain hesitations of the otherwise white, female speakers previously attempting to defend themselves against the clerical attack – carved out an undeniably visible and physical space within the discourse of the convention. Her ability to turn the very words of Christian doctrine into an alternative (and affirmative) vision, without actually changing the source text (the Bible) or the basic template, is an example that by then had already repeated itself on a much larger scale in slave cultures throughout the Americas. Some answers, then, to these questions about black women and their literal and figurative place in New World religious contexts may be found in a closer examination of black Christianity as it has developed out of slavery within both countries.

To speak of Afro-Brazilian or African American Christian religiosity, as a general title for many complex and interlinked groups and traditions existing in both ex-slave nations, is to imply that there is something identifiably African about such church practices and theologies. Throughout historical, sociological, and literary accounts of this African element, music, dance and religious ritual are cited again and again as the most prevalent elements of African cultures brought to the Americas by slaves. Buonaventura points to “trance dancing” as a widespread

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<sup>7</sup> Eugene, 438.

African tradition that is especially evocative of this conjunction of the body and religious practice.

Simple movements are repeated, to an unwavering rhythm, in nonstop motion which may go on for many hours. Anyone who submits to the repetitive movement and driving rhythm may, after a while, go into a true state of trance, which induces a sense of ecstasy and transcendence...like other vigorous, sweaty activities...you feel fully, nerve-tinglingly alive and leaves you with a sense of profound well-being.<sup>8</sup>

The word “submit” itself seems to fit rather comfortably within a basic Christian theology of submission “unto the Lord,” and here it is the movement and rhythm that bring on that “ecstasy” and “transcendence” associated with divinity in almost any culture. Interestingly, Buonaventura opens her chapter entitled “And God Created Devil-Woman” not only with a description of African trance dancing but, also, with a not so subtle reference to slavery itself; the “other vigorous, sweaty activities” summon up another word that has been linked in two particular ways with slavery and black Christianity in the Americas, and which bears special meaning for female bodies: “labor,” both in terms of physical and manual labor, and the labor of giving birth to another human being.

The damaging role of physical labor in slavery need not be elaborated here, and the pregnancies of black enslaved women had more than one consequence in these slave-based societies. First, the connotations and symbolism of mixed-race children (entirely different in Brazil and the United States) were often cause for even greater pain than childbirth itself. Often representing a living product of the rape and sexual slavery endured by many black women at the hands of their white

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<sup>8</sup> Buonaventura, 17.



male masters, in both countries mixed-race women, especially, were considered highly valuable property and often subjected to even greater sexual degradation than their mothers had experienced. Second, because of the basic premise that slaves were chattel, not people, family ties, especially in the U.S., were negated by law, and the buying, selling, and moving of slaves from place to place imposed a physical, geographical separation on members of nuclear and extended families alike. And so the two historically painful and degrading meanings of “labor,” within the context of American slavery, become intertwined with the feeling of being “fully, nerve-tinglingly alive” and the “sense of profound well-being” brought on by the equally physical and laborious movements of trance dancing. In fact becoming more “alive” through dancing of this transcendent kind is an idea that appears throughout the literature on black religious experience. And the “well-being” described, while seemingly opposed to the often literal violations of the black female body during slavery, probably arises from a related sense of physicality. The only healing, then, for these wounds and these violently imposed meanings of the body seems to come from a revision similar to that of Sojourner Truth in 1851. A reversal of damages and misperceptions seems to be possible, Buonaventura’s description suggests, but only by revising the damaged terrain itself.

In a revision of this kind, in which the body and its motion is the text or image to be revised, even the most trusted language of description, reference, and explanation holds the potential to cause further damage. The very questions posed in an exploration of this sort should not just center on where and when dance forms came into existence; should not simply attempt to create, as anthropologist Michel

Agier points out in a sociological study of race relations in Brazil, a simple genealogy of traditions and origins. As Agier asks, "In order for a community to exist...is it enough to give it a name?"<sup>9</sup> As we can see from the frustrating and even mortal limitations imposed on the body and being of the "Hottentot Venus," by simply giving her a name, there is no simple answer to this, no path to trace from one culture to the next, and, likewise, no easy explanation of social movements or racial hierarchies. In her article, "Dance, Authenticity and Cultural Memory: The Politics of Embodiment," dance anthropologist Theresa Jill Buckland poses a similar question, specifically in terms of a form as culturally crucial, yet analytically elusive, as dance; rather than what, where, or who, the question ought to be, "*whose* body in performance?" so that issues of gender, social status, kinship, ethnicity and power can be addressed, as well as more reflexive concerns related to bodily experience."<sup>10</sup> Buckland refers to dance as providing a "cultural memory as embodied practice," something tied not only to various social, political, racial, or national constituents, but also to the bodies themselves and the cultural and ethnic knowledge, or evolving "memory," that comes with them. Traditions from parts of Africa, traditions of Euro-American slaveholding cultures, and the meshing, shifting, and inventing that arose out of the particularities of being displaced and enslaved, are all recalled by the body and exist within its dance.

Bodies in motion cannot be pinned down, grounded in history as they may be, and it is often the language used to describe them that remains after the fact. The

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<sup>9</sup> Michel Agier, "Racism, Culture and Black Identity in Brazil," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 14, no. 3 (1995): 255.

<sup>10</sup> Theresa Jill Buckland, "Dance, Authenticity and Cultural Memory: The Politics of Embodiment," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 33 (2001): 1.

words used in the discourse on the social, political, and racial framework of countries like Brazil and the U.S. are revealing, forming a bridge between wider social examinations of race and religion, and the particular remnants of slavery on identities and bodies. “Identity,” which dance “transforms and identifies,” as Yvonne Daniel writes, is the term around which much of the discourse circles, and the significance of the word is just as powerful on a wider social level as it is to the terrain of the individual body in motion. As Gerard Béhague, a scholar of Latin American ethnomusicology, notes in an article specifically attempting to connect black music research in South America and the United States, “Boundaries and borders are clearly related to the question of identity and must be rethought with special attention to the various factors that contributed to forge an old or contemporary identity.”<sup>11</sup> These “boundaries and borders” are echoed and repeated throughout the literature of black race relations and black dance dealing with both countries; like “identity,” words like “mobilization,” “active,” “location,” “roots,” “space,” and “movements” slide easily between socio-racial or political conversations, and dialogues on dance and cultural tradition. Blacks in both countries have “claimed” their identities, found their “roots,” and created “spaces” for themselves in society, on dance terms as much as socio-political and cultural ones. These “boundaries and borders” of classification (both between people because of race, culture, and class, *and* within the academic study of those people) are the landscape within which the dancing body carves out its “space” of culture

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<sup>11</sup> Gerard Behague, “Bridging South America and the United States in Black Music Research,” *Black Music Research Journal* 22, no. 1 (2002): 1.

and identity, finds its roots, locates itself and rewrites its own version of boundaries and borders, mobility and motion.

The enslavement of Africans in the Americas has a particular lexicon of its own, constantly shuffling interactions between African and Western European Christian cultures – both Anglo-American Protestant and Portuguese Catholic – into different, complex relationships to explain the development of American black cultures. Throughout the documentary film, *New Worlds, New Forms*, which focuses on the various black dance forms that have arisen since in Brazil and the U.S., the language used by the narrator and those interviewed describes these relationships in a myriad of ways: blacks were “stripped” of their culture and forced to recreate it anew; blacks were “bringing in” elements to their new lands; slaves “confiscated” dominant culture to make it their own; cultural exchange was limited to “encounters” and “coexistence;” white religion was used to “hide” continued practice of African traditions; black and white traditions completely combined and intermixed; blacks appropriated from whites, or whites appropriated from blacks.<sup>12</sup> All of these terms and views, among others, have been debated over time and continue to pass in and out of the discourse. The only real certainty is that in both Brazil and the U.S. today exist many new identities and traditions that strongly lay claim to African roots, but would not exist as they do without their American slave history and the interchange with white European colonial culture that this entailed. As anthropologist and African studies scholar Sheila S. Walker points out, dance is

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<sup>12</sup> *New Worlds, New Forms*. Produced and directed by Orlando Bagwell. 58 min. Chicago: Home Vision, 1993. Videorecording.

the only thing that can be brought along when a people are entirely uprooted and dislocated, because it always finds its location in the body.<sup>13</sup>

Béhague offers deeper insight into these varying views on religious and cultural interactions, which not only led to traditions specifically American and black, but also point us to possible interpretations of actual social and racial relationships. Quoting French sociologist Roger Bastide, Béhague identifies a black folklore – including dance, music, rituals, stories, etc. – consisting of traditions generated “spontaneously or artificially” in the Americas, African folklore, and “white folklore,” the latter referring to traditions appropriated from whites by blacks or taken by whites from blacks in an attempt by both groups to “raise” black culture to a “civilized” level. For Bastide this emergent black folklore is partly due to “a process of creolization, which is a spontaneous movement, internal to Afro-American culture, through adaptation to the surrounding environment and assimilation of European elements.”<sup>14</sup> Uprooted and re-placed in the New World, slave or slave-descendant populations adapt and assimilate to the new or dominant surroundings in a process of “creolization.”

This “internal movement” pointed out by Bastide and Béhague can be viewed as a socio-cultural relocating of identity within a new society and a new place within it (that of the slave), *and* in the more metaphorical sense of people and bodies attempting to relocate and identify a space for themselves in a new place and in new relations to other people and bodies. In *The African Religions of Brazil*, one of the most extensive early studies of Afro-Brazilian religions, Roger Bastide writes,

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<sup>13</sup> *New Worlds, New Forms.*

<sup>14</sup> Bastide, quoted in Béhague, 5.

Afro-Brazilian religions...had to seek out, in the social structures imposed upon them, “niches” where they could establish themselves and develop....This meant finding as yet unrecognized links, new gateways, that would allow mystical values to survive by incarnating themselves in the social fabric and at the same time make it possible for the social domain to be penetrated by values quite different from – and sometimes even contradictory to – the values of European origin that had hitherto sustained society either as models or norms.<sup>15</sup>

Again the new structures are “imposed” and “niches” created in which new cultural development could take place. Bastide speaks specifically of bridging the gaps between past and present cultures, geographies, and religious identities, but also of a corporeal “incarnating” – a process that involves, for Bastide, both a taking in and an altering of Portuguese colonial culture by African slaves in Brazil. Black slaves in both Brazil and the U.S. were navigating not only a new social and psychological realm, but also a new physical location and way of interacting (viewing and being viewed, speaking or being spoken to, acting or being acted on) with their white, Euro-American masters.

Whatever the terms used, however, whatever language is assigned, it is undeniable that cultural traditions, especially regarding religion and ritual, changed with their transfer to the Americas. As Bahian historian João José Reis writes, “when I speak of identity and ethnic concentration, I am speaking of African ethnicity as *recreated* in the New World, not African ethnicity as *transferred* to the New World.”<sup>16</sup> Whether seen as altering or altered, combined or consumed, in both Brazil and the United States, a re-centering, rewriting, re-identifying of the place and space

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<sup>15</sup> Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil*, trans. Helen Sebba, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978): 58.

<sup>16</sup> João José Reis, “*Quilombos and Rebellions in Brazil*,” in *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas*, ed. Sheila S. Walker, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001): 309.

of black bodies and the cultures they brought with them was necessary, not only to be able to function in a new society and country, but also for survival's sake.

Since it is the bodies and the dances of slaves to be traced here, the first stage to be mapped is the Middle Passage: even before the Americas were reached and the rhythm of slave labor instilled into their bodies and lives, Africans were already being verbally described and physically inscribed into white, European, colonial definitions based on their bodies and dancing. Dance and music, as Sheila S. Walker points out, were the main traditions carried over the ocean, as they were embedded within the body and remained there even when those bodies were marked, abused, and violently limited. In *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*, Lynne Fauley Emery quotes an account by a retired slave-trade ship captain written in the mid-1800s who recalls having watched African women dance while ashore on the Gold Coast during the Middle Passage:

...a whirling circle of half-stripped girls danced to the monotonous beat of a tom-tom. Presently, the formal ring was broken, and each female stepping out singly, danced according to her individual fancy. Some were wild, some were soft, some were tame, and some were fiery...I have no distinct recollection of their characteristic movements.<sup>17</sup>

The language in this description is particularly fascinating. The girls are “half-stripped,” imbued automatically with a sexual connotation even before the dancing is described. There is a “formal ring” broken by individual improvisational dances, a form that can be seen both in the candomblé ceremonies of Brazil and in the Christian plantation gatherings in the United States as black slave populations grew over the generations.

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<sup>17</sup> Theodore Canot, quoted in Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*, (Heightstown, NJ, 1988): 2.

In these solos, the women dance according to “individual fancy,” and the spectator seems astonished at the variety of qualities that emerge before his eyes: individual and improvisational dancing, especially in spiritual situations as an expression of a divine presence, appears and reappears in Afro-Brazilian and African-American religious situations, and movement style is here clearly connected to individual identity and expression. The adjectives themselves (“wild,” “soft,” “tame,” “fiery”) fit easily into the images of dancing black female bodies we have already seen: they are almost animals, either “wild” or “tame,” and sexualized as either “soft” or “fiery.” Either way, the particularities of their dance have disappeared from memory; we have only the adjectives of this white, male slave-trader and the illusory essence of individuals that he cannot separate from this language of categorical enslavement to describe their actual physicality. Another trader calls dancing observed in Nigeria full of “lascivious gestures.”<sup>18</sup> There is no way to know the real cultural context of what any of them saw, as slave-traders accounts were hardly known for their awareness of African tribal affiliations or cultural rituals. But a common language already exists in many of the accounts from this early period.

Once on slave ships often crowded to twice their capacity with hundreds of Africans from many different nations and areas of the western coast, dance and movement gained a significance not only determined by the inhumanity of the physical conditions. First of all, to emphasize the particularities of female experience, “the shackling of men while the women roamed free at the mercy of the

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<sup>18</sup> John Barbot, quoted in Emery, 3.



sailors”<sup>19</sup> was not uncommon on ships, and it was normal to force slaves to dance to “keep them in good health,” a routine practice often called “dancing” the slaves.<sup>20</sup> If they were not dancing hard or nimbly enough, one account by a surgeon on a slave ship relates, “they are flogged,” and in another, “the parts...on which their shackles are fastened, are often excoriated by the violent exercise they are thus forced to take.”<sup>21</sup> Dancing then, in the most basic use of the term, took on a new coercive definition, as yet another way in which black slave bodies were – literally – shaped and moved, based on the perception (and use) of them as “quasi-human,” valued only for their labor potential. The language used in some of these accounts to describe the movement of the “danced” slaves itself connects this new definition of dance even more strongly to the kinds of language we have already observed. Slaves “twisted and writhed their bodies into a multitude of disgusting and indecent attitudes” in one account, and one observer is “disgusted” by what he sees. One thing can be inferred from all of these descriptions: the line between “indecent” and sexual, and “indecent” and disgusting was a fine one.

Upon arrival in the United States, the black female body became even more pointedly linked with the two definitions of “labor” already discussed. In the U.S., “Blacks were chattel, White men could impregnate a Black woman with impunity, and she alone could give birth to a slave. Blacks constituted a permanent labor force and metaphor that were perpetuated through the Black woman’s womb.”<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the slaveholding Americas, the labor of work and the labor of giving

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<sup>19</sup> Emery, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Emery, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Emery, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Eugene, 436.

birth became synonymous with each other within the violently limited and devalued significance of black women's bodies. Particular to the U.S., however, was the "one drop rule," under which the children of black women impregnated by white men, and potentially all of their descendants, were considered slaves by virtue of having black blood, even if only "one drop." Long after slavery's abolition, the "one drop rule" continued to define blackness based entirely on lineage and blood.

In terms of religion, Protestant Christianity in the United States may have been based on the idea of liberation – from the Pope, from Rome, from the ostentatious distraction of Catholic ritual. But what was liberation to Anglo-American Protestant culture drew further limitations and boundaries for African slaves, considered neither citizens nor human beings worthy of the rights that Protestants had come to the U.S. to claim in the first place. Disdainful of ostentatious forms of worship, puritans viewed as sinful and often prohibited the drumming and dancing of slaves. For this reason, there was little room for the maintenance of African ceremonial practices and little room for a developing identity. Beyond the severity of Protestantism toward outward displays of religion, as Sheila S. Walker points out, white masters in the United States feared the power and communication – the way the drums "charged the air" – that music and dancing represented, and so drums were taken away and dancing prohibited. In fact, as Gayraud S. Wilmore notes, certain elements of Christianity, like water baptisms, ritual worship, and the existence of a central deity, were not totally new to many African slaves. Thus, "they adopted new ideas and rituals that were similar to the old ones they knew," thereby strengthening rather than discarding African forms, "although it is more accurate to

say they were gradually transformed.”<sup>23</sup> The limitations ultimately led to the development of new forms of religious and cultural expression, especially the “ring shout,” in which participants – kept from dancing conspicuously – shuffled in a circular pattern and used sticks and hand claps – rather than drums – to keep the rhythm. In reality, drumming, like dance, did not exist outside the human body: in the case of North American slaves, the body became both drummer and drum.<sup>24</sup> Slaves learned to use their bodies in ways other than traditional forms of dance, clapping, stamping feet, slapping body parts to create rhythm, movement, and sound, and thus an altered but unified space of free expression. Walker sees dance and music as being a “sacred territory,” and a way of knowing who you are without having to speak the words,<sup>25</sup> so that the body itself was redefined through these new forms of movement.

In fact, whites even hesitated to fully introduce their black slaves to Christianity at all, as “a baptized slave might get the foolish idea that freedom in Christ (Gal. 5:1) had to include freedom from bondage.”<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, in Protestant theology a rhetoric of freedom could be found, making room for an expanded sense of self and identity for blacks within the master/slave relationship of bondage and ownership. As religious historian Charles H. Long writes, “God has been more often a transformer of their consciousness, the basis for a resource that enabled them to maintain the human image without completely acquiescing to the norms of the majority population. He provided a norm of self-criticism that was not derivative

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<sup>23</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, “What Is African American Christianity?” in *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*, ed. Larry G. Murphy, (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 30.

<sup>24</sup> *New Worlds, New Forms*.

<sup>25</sup> *New Worlds, New Forms*.

<sup>26</sup> Wilmore, 29.

from those who enslaved them.”<sup>27</sup> As regards this transformation, Timothy J. Nelson, in a 2005 study of an African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina, discerns a tendency common to a majority of African American church theologies to take “words and ideas and make them alive and immediate.”<sup>28</sup> The words “alive” and “immediate” are echoed in Nelson’s discussion of this AME theology, which regards salvation as “a complete and total transformation of the individual from one who was spiritually dead and cut off from God to one who is alive and truly a child of God.”<sup>29</sup> Drawn from the story of Christ’s resurrection from the Bible, this view that true faith has to do with coming “alive,” is tied to the idea of forming a connection, a relationship to God. As scholars of African American religiosity C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya write, “Freedom has always meant the absence of any restraint that might compromise one’s responsibility to God.”<sup>30</sup> Freedom itself, with all of its corporeal implications for African slaves, becomes revised through Christianity and affirms the significance of the individual.

The moment of that divine connection is the transformation from being “cut off” to being “alive” and connected as a “child of God,” an experience both individual and personal in order for the worshipper to be saved. One woman of this Charleston congregation describes her salvation experience as beginning with a similar repetitive “calling,” until she heard a voice and began to converse with the Lord,

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<sup>27</sup> Charles H. Long, “Perspectives for a Study of African American Religion,” in *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*, ed. Larry G. Murphy, (New York, NY: New York UP, 2000):15.

<sup>28</sup> Timothy J. Nelson, *Every Time I Feel the Spirit: Religious Experience and Ritual in an African American Church*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 40.

<sup>29</sup> Nelson, 75.

<sup>30</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, “The Religious Dimension: The Black Sacred Cosmos,” in *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*, ed. Larry G. Murphy, (New York, NY: New York UP, 2000): 34.

replying first, “Save me Lord, save me,” and then, “Fill me.”<sup>31</sup> Salvation for this woman, epitomized by the call to “save me Lord, save me,” became equated with the physicalized notion of being “filled.” This was followed by the Lord’s response: “First you have to deny yourself and then you have to humble yourself.” There is no doubt as to the personalization and immediacy of her experience. Not only is it based on the premise of a direct conversation with the Lord, but in the repeated emphasis on the self it also points to the actions the woman must take in her own life to affirm her identity and individuality. Indeed, the conversation with the Lord was immediately followed by a physical experience: “The deeper it got, my cheeks started trembling, [it went from] my ankles to my legs to my knees to my thighs, all the way up [my body].”<sup>32</sup> As the woman relates to the author, such a “supernatural experience with the Lord” is necessary to know that “the Lord been working,” and from her own experience, she “knew that the Lord was *real*, knew he was real, knew he was *real!*”<sup>33</sup> This repeated conviction of what is “real” implies that there is something innately intangible about God that must be expressed through the concreteness of embodiment to be truly believed.

Corporeality is the most personal and individual form of spiritual involvement, since there is nothing more believable than one’s own bodily experience, but it raises a larger question in terms of what Theresa Jill Buckland called, “cultural memory as embodied practice.” How does this particular form of embodied spiritual salvation relate to an equally embodied experience such as

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<sup>31</sup> Nelson, 65.

<sup>32</sup> Nelson, 65.

<sup>33</sup> Nelson, 65.

slavery? Reverend Wright, pastor of the church studied by Nelson, once preached, “I am pro-slavery myself...For Jesus said, ‘Come and work for me for I have a yoke of slavery, but my yoke is easy. I have a bondage, but my burden, my bondage, is light.’”<sup>34</sup> Slavery, initially a reference to white enslavement of blacks, becomes redefined through Christian rhetoric: the word itself comes to designate a master/slave relationship between Jesus and his followers. By extension, within this reinterpretation, the meaning of words like “bondage,” “burden,” and “yoke” are altered, as well as the ideas of freedom, labor, ownership, and servitude.

In fact, as “slavery” takes on new meaning, the laboring bodies are reconceived and reoriented toward a different master and a different framework of self-definition. The language of pregnancy – again, reminiscent of labor, and with a particular salience for black female bodies – appears in Reverend Wright’s preaching as well. “When a woman is pregnant with child, and carryin’ that child, she knows that there is life in her belly, because she can feel that child movin’ ...And when Jesus is on the inside of your life, I declare you’ll feel that life keepin’ you awake all night long...have you got him on the inside?”<sup>35</sup> Nelson points out that the consequences of this life “on the inside,” like pregnancy, are a change in the actions and choices a person makes. There is something about this internalization of spirituality that is at once life-giving, embodied, and enacted. The body seems to have a myriad of meanings in Christian and African American Christian rhetoric: Reverend Wright at once denounces the “carnally minded,” and the sinful things a

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<sup>34</sup> Nelson, 69.

<sup>35</sup> Nelson, 76.

person's "flesh wants to do,"<sup>36</sup> as being just as "dead" as churches in which "the only movement you see is when the undertakers roll the casket down the aisle, and you hear some crying and weeping...but other than that [nobody moves]."<sup>37</sup> Likewise, to "get up and say you're a child of God," Reverend Wright declares, does not make it true. Outward behaviors are not sufficient within this rhetoric: it is a combination of the internal mind, correct actions, *and* embodied experience, then, that makes for an authentic spirituality within this theology.

With all of this we return to a recurring point in the entire web of discourses raised here: identity through embodiment. It is the self that is altered by the religious experience. Nelson notes that religious worship and religious ritual are identified by both the "intent" behind them and the "identity" taken on by those present.<sup>38</sup> If read as declarations of intent, the calling out that often begins the testimonial is comparable to the first criterion, and in fact, many personal accounts regard salvation as beginning with a personal decision to "give oneself to the Lord," choosing to call and to offer oneself for that deeper level of conviction and connection that salvation brings.<sup>39</sup> Nelson also points out that "such overt actions as standing, clapping, and running demonstrate emotional involvement and spiritual commitment...bodily movement is equated with the spiritual life and vitality of the congregation."<sup>40</sup> Bodily involvement in revelation and salvation moments is a testament to the life inside the body: not only does it make the person come alive in a spiritual sense, but it attests to the simple power of the worshipper to express that

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<sup>36</sup> Nelson, 89.

<sup>37</sup> Nelson, 150.

<sup>38</sup> Nelson, 62.

<sup>39</sup> Nelson, 78.

<sup>40</sup> Nelson, 150.

aliveness, that inner thing that is both Holy Spirit and the spirit of the individual. It is a wordless proof that the body is not simply a body laboring or in labor for some human master, but a body and spirit together laboring for a divine Master: the rhetoric and the lives it defines are altered, all without leaving the basic Christian hierarchy. That structure is expanded through the words of a black theology, leaving free those “unconfined spaces” for a danced and embodied worship, which, at its climax, honors as much their own existence as it does their God.

In Brazil a much different historical course was taken: Catholicism was the European Christian colonial import, rather than evangelical Protestantism. Moreover, the patterns of slavery themselves were different, especially in Northeast Brazil. First and foremost, there were simply more slaves imported, living, and working in far more highly concentrated groups than in the American South. Both slaveholding societies relied primarily on plantation labor, but in Brazil plantations tended to be much larger, with a minimum of sixty to eighty slaves. By the nineteenth century it was not uncommon for a single slaveholder to own one thousand slaves, whereas in the U.S. many plantations had only a fraction of that number.<sup>41</sup> Thus, “the African ethnic entities could regroup and re-establish a more restricted solidarity within the black caste and around their religious leaders” more easily in Brazil than in the U.S. Still, “whites were interested only in their Negroes’ capacity for work.”<sup>42</sup> In both countries, the dominant ideology viewed slaves as little more than bodies to labor, tied to their masters as chattel property, valued only for

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<sup>41</sup> Bastide, 48.

<sup>42</sup> Bastide, 48.



their physical capabilities. Moreover, by law and social convention, masters had the power *actually* to limit slave bodies – and identities.

In the U.S. this pattern was quite clearly reflected in the limitations and controversy over the religious practice of slaves, even when that entailed full devotion to Christianity and the Bible, however different the means of expressing that devotion may have seemed to the white majority. But in Brazil the case was different: Bastide writes that religious solidarity was better upheld, not only because traditions could be practiced or communally reworked more easily in the larger, less well-controlled plantations of the Northeast, but also because masters saw that if allowed “to amuse themselves ‘after the fashion of their nation,’ on Sunday evenings or on holidays ‘sanctified by the Holy Mother Church,’” slaves “worked better than if they were required to labor continuously, day in and day out, without a break.”<sup>43</sup> Although economically motivated, the Brazilian approach made it easier to continue lines of family heritage, tribal association, and religious traditions, however altered they were in the New World.

In fact, in Brazil’s slave society Catholicism served as a major facilitator for maintenance of African traditions and solidarity between slaves, a fact that strongly differentiated the Christian influence on Afro-Brazilian religion from the case in the U.S. As noted, there is a conflict between the sexualized, dancing body and the male-centered monotheism of Christianity: a struggle that takes place visibly on the bodies of black women and has the power both to remove an individual from the “creative picture” of religious practice and freeze her as a “static, unmoving image.”

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<sup>43</sup> Bastide, 49.

In an article trying to bridge “Afro-American Religious Syncretism in Brazil and the United States,” Evandro M. Camara points out that Protestantism has an “other-worldly orientation,” is ethically and internally based, and therefore has an intense, conflicting tension toward all things *in* the world, especially the body; Catholicism, on the other hand, is certainly “other-worldly,” but, like African religions brought to the Americas by slaves, it contains a strong element of “this-worldly orientation.”<sup>44</sup> This, Camara argues, left a great deal more space within Catholic Brazil for African-based traditions to survive in myriad, morphed forms, and to retain relatively distinct “nation” affiliations and strains of practice.

The “this-worldly”/“other-worldly” duality is useful in considering topics of embodiment and physicality, especially in terms of sexuality. As Camara points out,

The relationship of *all* religion to sexuality remains ‘extraordinarily intimate.’ This-worldly religions show remarkable affinity with, and incorporation of, the sexual element...the ‘orgiastic ecstasy’ does not emerge as an end in itself, but as the outcome of the sexualization (through dance, etc.) of the worship ritual, as a particular element in the process of sanctification. Such a quality of religious eroticism was strongly evident in the Luso-Brazilian Catholicism of the colonial and imperial eras. In contrast, ascetic, evangelical Protestantism has kept a hostile stance towards sexuality, proscribing ‘any eroticism that tends to deify the human creature.’<sup>45</sup>

Of particular note here is the final phrase, and the words, “deify the human creature.” Protestantism feared a visible, physical interaction between the divine and the human, and the body was the main culprit of this violation. Bastide describes one example of the so-called “erotic” dances devoted to “selection of a sexual partner and the symbolic confirmation of that choice” performed by slaves

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<sup>44</sup> Evandro M. Camara, “Afro-American Religious Syncretism in Brazil and the United States: A Weberian Perspective,” *Sociological Analysis* 48, no. 4 (1988): 301.

<sup>45</sup> Camara, 301.

throughout Brazil, and the role Catholicism played in their practice: “before the modest Catholic alter erected against the wall of the *senzala*, in the flickering light of candles, the blacks could perform their religious tribal dances with impunity. The whites believed them to be dancing to the glory of the Blessed Virgin or the saints, but the Virgin and the saints were no more than masks.”<sup>46</sup> Rather than maintaining African rituals and ideas in an abstract form, both in terms of Christianity and physical embodiment, as was necessary for slaves in the U.S., Brazilian slaves encountered a Catholic church that was less constraining of their actual practices, as long as the “masks” of Catholic tradition covered African ones. And so, “in transforming the African cults, the church, without meaning to, often helped them to survive.”<sup>47</sup> This relationship between white Christianity and its interactions with black slave religious practice almost seems to have been made *possible* by the limited view held by white Brazilians of black slave bodies: if their *actions* appeared to be sufficiently in line with Catholic traditions, it did not matter that other beliefs and ways of thinking about divinity continued to be upheld. In fact, as far as slaveholders were concerned, dance – whatever its religious significance – was seen as “a means of sexual stimulation that encouraged procreation, and hence as a cheap way for renewing their herd of human cattle without capital outlay.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, dance meant sexuality. But sexuality also meant pregnancy and “labor,” in both senses of the word: the reproduction of the “human cattle” needed for economic sustenance, and the resulting new generations of laboring slaves. Again, this dance/sexuality

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<sup>46</sup> Bastide, 49.

<sup>47</sup> Bastide, 54.

<sup>48</sup> Bastide, 49.

paradigm is tied quite physically back into the possibilities of the body and black womanhood, and the outcome is, again, damaging and degrading.

As a country with an enormous ratio of blacks to whites from the outset of slavery, and with the dominating Euro-Christian religion being far more “this-wordly,” Brazil’s response to racial difference and discrimination was as limiting as that of the U.S., but in quite a different manner. In 1871, a law was passed that gave free status to the children of enslaved women, called *ventre libre*, a decision that seems positive and liberating, except for the meaning of the rule itself: “free womb.”<sup>49</sup> Black women’s bodies, their wombs in particular, were the location of possible liberation for the next generation, but in being named so, they also fall directly back into the codification of enslavement. It was the womb that was free, not the woman herself. The female body was seen as harboring possibility for blacks in another way, as well: rather than the “one drop rule” of the U.S., Brazilian academics and administrators saw the miscegenation between black slaves and white owners as a process of “whitening” that would “improve” the majority black population. As historian Carl Degler writes, Brazil as a society has made “a place for the mulatto,” so that “certain other responses to the presence of black men in a white-dominated society” are not as simple as a black/white binary based on blood ties, as in the U.S.<sup>50</sup> What marking the womb as potentially free and giving a place for the mulatto children of slaves within an otherwise prejudiced society do is not so much liberate as shift out of view the “place” and “presence” of blacks.

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<sup>49</sup> Barbara Browning, *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995): 3.

<sup>50</sup> Carl Degler, quoted in Browning, 21.

While the image of a symbolically Brazilian, mulatto society may have been defended as inclusive and racially tolerant, it left no space for blacks to be legitimized themselves, beyond their role in the “whitening” process. As dance ethnographer Barbara Browning writes in her study of Brazilian dance cultures, including candomblé, “race has effectively been erased as a term for postabolition society.”<sup>51</sup> Since slavery, the history of Brazil has written race almost completely out of the picture as an issue, as if the country’s willingness to liberate slaves and promote intermixing as a means to a society of superior, emblematically Brazilian mulattos, was also a way of “erasing” the existing racial hierarchy. Browning writes that, “erasure is precisely the word here, because it is the metaphor behind the ideology of color which has led to these accounts full of holes” in the first place.<sup>52</sup> The “holes” in many of the historical accounts of postabolition racial intolerance stem from what Brazilian sociologist and politician Florestan Fernandes calls, “the prejudice of having no prejudice;”<sup>53</sup> through this paradigm of attempting to portray itself as prejudice-free, open, and not racially structured, Brazilian society erases the visual presence and place of blacks, and participates in the very discrimination from which it ideologically dissociates.

Parallel to women being removed from the “creative picture” of patriarchal religion, blacks in Brazil were made invisible within the picture of the country’s racial make-up; even the physicality of danced and embodied religiosity was viewed by white slaveholders only in terms of sexual and economic value. Nonetheless, it

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<sup>51</sup> Browning, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Browning, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Florestan Fernandes out of Browning, 7.

was that very physicality that has paved the way for black culture and identity to reenter the picture. Throughout the testimonies of interviewees in the film documentary, *Bahia: Africa in the Americas*, a key theme is reiterated: because Afro-Brazilians have maintained such a strong link to African traditions like Yoruban candomblé, there is a consciousness of the need to preserve religious ritual, a sense of the preciousness and richness of these traditions. With the movement to redefine Afro-Brazilian, especially Afro-Bahian, identity came a redefinition of Brazil's annual, trademark tradition, Carnaval, which came to Brazil from Portugal as a Catholic festivity, adopted from a pre-Christian, "pagan" European festival. Carnaval rose to prominence as a new stage for the enactment (both socio-political and physical) of a newly empowered, politically and socially conscious, black identity: with the express purpose of making unified, public expressions of black identity and African heritage in Carnaval, drum and samba dance groups have formed based on location, African nation, and family ties. The movement sought its African roots *within* the already existing Brazilian culture, attempting to bring to the fore preexisting and continually evolving forms of African heritage and blackness: fusions, alterations, and "pure" manifestations together.

Pelhourinho, the colonial center of Salvador, which is the capital of the state of Bahia – provides a clear metaphor: the word itself refers to the pole-like structure used for whipping black slaves, and the space, now the historical heart of the city, is known for its famous plazas, preserved colonial architecture and winding cobblestone streets. Having been the place to which slaves were originally brought for punishment and public humiliation, as well as the most desirable neighborhood

for slave owners, it is now the most definitive center of Afro-Brazilian pride, the revival and rewriting of Carnaval and candomblé, and an icon of Afro-Brazilian art and religion: “spreading the culture of freedom which blacks are creating in Bahia,” as president of the major Salvadorian samba group Olodum, João Jorge Santos Rodrigues says.<sup>54</sup> Realizing the significance and value of candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian traditions like the samba and Carnaval has been a trend throughout Brazil in recent decades, with candomblé as the basis and reference for African identity, upon which Afro-Brazilians have built the demand for more cultural and social “space” in Brazilian society.<sup>55</sup> Unlike the U.S., that space and recognition, though often negated and erased from the picture by society, could be shaped and reinstated through religiosity, and Afro-Brazilian identities revised through the embodied, danced traditions of the candomblé.

Not only did the commodifying, sexualizing attitude of slaveholders and whites toward black slaves and their religious practice leave a great deal of room for African traditions to survive, but even the Catholicism required of most slaves, like the “masks” of saints for African deities, left a space for an embodied spirituality to continue to evolve, even as it was obscured from view. “When Africans in Brazil first assimilated the orixás to Catholic saints,” Browning writes, “and Olorun to the Christian God – it was out of necessity and fear of retribution. But over the centuries, the approximation has solidified. Candomblé worshipers find Saint Barbara and *lansã* to be two terms for the same principle.”<sup>56</sup> Catholic elements not only cloaked

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<sup>54</sup> *New Worlds, New Forms*.

<sup>55</sup> *Bahia, Africa in the Americas*. Produced, written and translated by Geovanni Bremer. Berkeley, CA: University of California, Extension Media Center, 1988. Videorecording.

<sup>56</sup> Browning, 43.

African ones, but over time they also became meshed and equalized with them, even though the practice of candomblé was prohibited in Brazil until the 1970's. The very limitations of this invisibility gave a space, however liminal, for African traditions to continue to be practiced and developed, such as this example of the candomblé described by Browning: "the circle of dancers moves counterclockwise until one or more receive a divine spirit. At this moment, the entity, held no longer to be a mere dancer but an incorporation of divine energy, moves to the center of the circle,"<sup>57</sup> so that the worshipper is no longer a dancing body itself, but transcends the potentially degrading, laboring corporeal experience through this receiving of the divine.

The dancer is no longer regarded as such in the moment of divine connection, and the very space of the circle alters its possibilities and meanings; as Browning writes, "spirituality is expressed through sophisticated rhythmic structures and divinity makes itself present in the bodies of dancers."<sup>58</sup> The steps of the dance are spirituality itself, and in the moment of divine presence, the dancers' bodies become divine versions of themselves. Sheila S. Walker describes this moment more specifically in an interview: "Initially the human being is destabilized because this larger force is coming into his or her body...the person, after having danced in a rhythmic manner, suddenly loses balance, starts to lurch: loses control, essentially, because this is the transition from being the human and divinized, and *dancing* for the deity."<sup>59</sup> There is a switch at some point during the organized, rhythmic, circular dance, in which the dancer becomes "destabilized," "loses control," and moves, quite

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<sup>57</sup> Browning, 26.

<sup>58</sup> Browning, 23.

<sup>59</sup> *New Worlds, New Forms*.



literally, to embody this interaction between human and earthly body, and the divine realm. And yet the body does not disappear in this equation, as the dance itself is the crucial form of communication: like the physical experience of AME worshippers required to “know” the reality and truth of the divine, the deity joins the human beings present in the circle *through* the dance, and the dancer’s body gains a new significance.

Similar to African American embodied spiritual experience, this loss of control in the moment of encounter and being filled by the deity has deeper implications for identity and the body itself. As Professor Vivaldo Da Costa Lima, of the Federal University of Bahia says, “this is how the power is established: making a union between the divinity and the person that exerts the power. This is why the force of this power is unquestionable.”<sup>60</sup> The “union,” like the encounter with God in the African American woman’s experience, is the catalyst for the empowerment of the worshipper. Da Costa Lima puts a particular emphasis on “the person that exerts the power,” as if the power lies already in the dance and body of the individual, but becomes “unquestionable” and “established” when the divinity makes its presence known within that physical territory. In Yoruban theology, the bodies of human beings, Browning relates, are “carved out, like wooden dolls, in the womb by the orisa Obatala...We are not the shapers of divinity. We are rather created as works of art.”<sup>61</sup> Human beings, and Afro-Brazilian practitioners of the candomblé, are placed within a larger theological system, shaped by divinity as “works of art,” through the ritual practices.

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<sup>60</sup> *Bahia, Africa in the Americas.*

<sup>61</sup> Browning, 44.

The significance of the female womb and its productive labors themselves are altered, as control of the power to “shape” human beings no longer lies in the hands of slaveholders, social stigma, nor the laws entrenched in “the prejudice of having no prejudice.” As Browning goes on to relate,

Individual creativity is not admired as a characteristic of the worshipper. But the community may take pleasure in the excellence of the body as a vessel for an orixá. Physical strength and beauty may be appreciated by the community, as they will be appreciated by the orixá...often an old or feeble body contains so much axé that its motion in the dance far exceeds what should be physically possible. When the observers of a ceremony see this kind of transformation, they recognize the body as divinely gorgeous.<sup>62</sup>

Axé, by Browning’s own definition, is “Yoruba for pure potentiality, divine energy, or...the power-to-make-things-happen.”<sup>63</sup> It is the potential within the bodies of the dancers for divinity to present itself. It is not each person’s creative powers, physical agility, or attractiveness that matter: in that moment of “transformation,” the picture can be altered and the body itself recognized as “divinely gorgeous.” As a young female candomblé initiate says in a film interview, “When I begin, my saint takes hold of me so that I dance. When I’m about to receive Axé, I feel a strong beating in my heart.”<sup>64</sup> In that moment, the very beating of the heart is strengthened. Outside the limitations of pure economic or sexual significance, the body and identity of the individual finds a far wider space that not only affirms its living existence on divine terms, but also recognizes the individual body as a part of a larger community and spiritual realm. Identity finds a space for expansion and recognition, and yet the

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<sup>62</sup> Browning, 45.

<sup>63</sup> Browning 28.

<sup>64</sup> *New Worlds, New Forms*.

Afro-Brazilian body – so violently limited and erased – remains wholly and more “divinely gorgeous” a part of that identity.

It is not just thought, nor just action, then, but a combination of the two summed up in the word “experience” that is crucial to possession or spirit-catching. The experience is the meeting place of the internal or mental aspect of the ritual worship, as well as the meeting place for the individual person and God or gods. And from that meeting place – which is as much a physical “place” as it is an intangible emotion – is born a newer version of self, defined within an alternative, religious perspective, and beginning in the moment in which word and deed, human being and spirit become, literally in the definition of the word “experience,” aspects of one phenomenon. As the human self yields to divinity, as body gives over to abstract theology, it finds space to widen and reformulate itself as “not derivative from those who enslaved them.” As religious anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner writes, “the reshaping of consciousness or experience that takes place in ritual is by definition a reorganization of the relationship between the subject and...reality which...emerges from a certain experience of self.”<sup>65</sup> The experience of religious ritual is the crucial point at which “reshaping” of self into a new, creative, and mobile identity can occur – more specifically, it is the “reorganization” of the master-slave relationship through the deity-worshipper relationship that occurs in this crucial moment of experience that allows for that new self-definition.

In *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild quotes Jaan Whitehead on language: “It expresses our view of ourselves,

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<sup>65</sup> Sherry B. Ortner, quoted in Stephen D. Glazier, “Embedded Truths: Creativity and Context in Spiritual Baptist Music,” *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana*, 18, no. 1 (1997): 46.

but it also constitutes that view. We can only talk about ourselves in the language we have available. If that language is rich, it illuminates us. But if it is narrow or restricted, it represses and conceals us. If we do not have language that describes what we believe ourselves to be or what we want to be, we risk being defined in someone else's terms."<sup>66</sup> Charles H. Long's 1971 article, "Perspectives for a Study of African American Religion," has already been quoted here, along with other writings from black perspectives. Yet, though much has changed in recent decades regarding race in both Brazil and the United States, black women still find themselves and their presence within academic discourse to be limited. Following a pattern of assuming that "when black men spoke genuinely for the community that black women's voice was being heard therein,"<sup>67</sup> an assumption common to many studies of slavery and religion in the United States, Long rhetorically leaves women out of the equation. "By being a slave and a black man, one was isolated from any self-determined legitimacy in the society of which one was a part and was recognized by one's physiological characteristics...a complexity of experience revolving around the relationship between one's physical being and one's origins."<sup>68</sup> Long points to many of the themes of the body, self-determination, and physical presence that continue to reappear throughout the discourse, but women – some of the most clearly effected by these issues – are excluded in a pattern familiar from Buonaventura's observations on patriarchal religion.

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<sup>66</sup> Whitehead from Gottschild, 19.

<sup>67</sup> Larry G. Murphy, *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*, ed. Larry G. Murphy, (New York, NY: New York UP, 2000): 434.

<sup>68</sup> Long, 11.

But as we have seen, whether through a version of African-based belief and ritual masked in Catholicism, as in Brazil, or a reformulation of Protestant theology into a new, black form, as in the U.S., the body in religious motion is the site upon which this type of exclusion can be altered. Through these moments of embodied interrelation between worshipper and deity, selves and identities are revised. The body becomes a terrain not only to be marked and defined by its abuse, labor, or exclusion, but rather *unmarked* and *undefined*. Nor is this just a *redefinition*, like Sojourner Truth's revision of the conventional, patriarchal reading of the Bible: through the physical connection with divinity and the abstract realm of theology, a space is opened up beyond the usual definitions of black female identity as being limited to its perceived, manipulated body, either frozen before the eyes or caught in endless, laborious, sexualized motion. In this new, extended space, these women become more real, existing and human. They not only redefine their identities through the dance and their bodies, but they also redefine the dance and their bodies themselves.

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