

**The (In)Visibility of a Frenzied Reality:
W. E. B. Du Bois as Conjure Man in *The Souls of Black Folk***

*“It is thus clear that the study of Negro religion is not only a vital part of the history of the Negro in America, but no uninteresting part of American history. The Negro church of to-day is the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character.”*¹

The role of religion in the institution of slavery is as relevant to the existence of black people in the North American continental context as the sociopolitical and cultural practice of slavery itself. Appearing as two seemingly incongruous institutions, the resonance of religion with slavery is rather uncanny. Though many of the religious difficulties encountered by slaves were veiled in an ideology which suggested that the plight of the slave and slaveholder was ordained by God, there remained a subtle discounting of the economic bottom line of trafficking bodies and the cultural privileging of whiteness. And yet, decades after the Emancipation Proclamation, the prophetic voice of W. E. B. Du Bois invokes these words:

A sort of suppressed terror hung in the air and seemed to seize us,—a pythian madness, a demonic possession, that lent terrible reality to song and word. The black and massive form of the preacher swayed and quivered as the words crowded to his lips and flew at us in singular eloquence. The people moaned and fluttered, . . . , while round about came wail and groan and outcry, and a scene of human passion such as I had never conceived before.²

In these few lines, Du Bois catalyzes a legacy of discourse that ushers in an examination of black spiritual traditions within the Diaspora, and more specifically in the United States. Du Bois’ recounting of this black church milieu in his chapter “Of the Faith of the Fathers” exposes an invisible people’s visible reality. And yet, there is something to be said with regard to the

¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 157.

² Du Bois, 155.

spectral veil that cloaked the humanity of these slaves and shrouded it in second-class citizenship and displaced inferiority. Somehow, in spite of the institutional scourge inherent to a system of brutality like slavery, the freedom to be all that God created these newly enfolded African Americans to humanly be was often only fully actualized in communion with and in response to the God who created them.³ Hence, when we encounter Du Bois' categorization of a worship experience in a southern country church, as well as the work of Albert Raboteau regarding slave religion, we may readily ascertain that the black church had and has a triune existence: within, without and above the American veil.⁴

“The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a “boss,” an intriguer, and idealist—all these he is, . . .”⁵

The first characteristic that Du Bois posits as central to the religion of slaves is the role and personality of the preacher. The proclamative act, or kerygma, is essential to the foundation of the black church tradition fostered in America following the transatlantic slave trade. This is due in part to African religious and cultural traditions that utilized a similar kind of office in tribal/village customs and rituals. Raboteau writes, “The various cults usually have priests and devotees who are active in their service to the gods. It is the role of the priest to offer worship and proper ritual sacrifice to the gods and to preside at periodic festivals honoring gods and ancestors. In addition, priests often serve as skilled diviners and herbalists”.⁶ This kind of characterization is most often affiliated with the African understanding of a griot, a village elder who engaged in the kind of sociocultural and religious experiences alluded to by Raboteau. This

³ “Out of the presence of whites, the slaves were free to express openly their desire for freedom in this life as well as the next”. See Albert J. Raboteau, Canaan Land (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 43.

⁴ “. . . I have sketched in swift outline the two worlds within and without the Veil, . . . Leaving, then, the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses,—the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls. . . . And, finally, need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?” See Du Bois, 1-2.

⁵ *Ibid*, 155.

⁶ Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 10.

kind of prescient reality seemingly fosters the American configuration of the preacher. In like manner, the preacher, usually a man,⁷ became an organic lifeline to his fellow slaves. He was capable of providing a way out in the midst of the bleak; this could range from aiding in slave illiteracy or being true to the gospel, in spite of fellow white clergy's misconstrual of it:

The desire for "real preachin'," that is, sermons free of proslavery propaganda, pushed the slaves to hold their own religious gatherings. . . . , "The white clergymen don't preach the whole Gospel there." . . . Slave preachers led the meetings of the "invisible institution" and exercised a good deal of influence among the slaves in general. Although most were illiterate, their verbal artistry earned the slave preachers the respect of blacks and sometimes whites as well. The slave preacher had to be careful not to mention freedom or equality for black people in this life, but only in Heaven—at least in the presence of whites. Preachers and their followers developed ingeniously indirect and veiled references to fool any whites who might be listening. . . . Hindered from learning to read and write by law or by custom, slaves learned the Bible by hearing it preached.⁸

We view how necessary and vital the preacher was to the ethos of the black church during the visible institution of slavery. And yet, even in the liberative quality of such an office, slave preachers were also toying with, teetering on the edge of, their own survival. Raboteau gives extensive examples of slave narratives, inclusive of those of Sarah Ford, Henry Clay Bruce, and Rev. R. S. Sorrick, in which the mere utterance of an antislavery sentiment led to *field work*, censure or even imprisonment.⁹ Nonetheless, these slave preachers proceeded in debunking this institution. Raboteau balances the stories of punishment with those of pursuit and prevail; narratives like those of Peter Randolph, London, and Sam Johnson prove how these unique

⁷ "As in regular churches, slave women were not preachers in the 'invisible institution,' but they were exercised religious authority nonetheless. Some served their communities as experts in the healing arts, combining the use of herbal medicine with prayer and religious ritual to assist the sick, the dying and women experiencing childbirth. Others acted as 'spiritual mothers,' . . . , including the ability to explain people's dreams and to advise them on the state of their souls". See Albert J. Raboteau, Canaan Land (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47. Though they were not bestowed the formal title of "preacher", or something in that vein, women carried out many of the African priestly rituals, outlined by Raboteau in Slave Religion, in this American context. Furthermore, they did engage in proclamative acts, even if it was giving "young slave children (and sometimes white children also) . . . their first instruction in Christian prayers, songs, and stories" (Raboteau, 47).

⁸ Albert J. Raboteau, Canaan Land (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 43; 46-47.

⁹ Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 232-233.

personalities, as stated by Du Bois, “learned on the sly the rudiments of reading”.¹⁰ The slave preacher stands on the frontline in the ongoing battle for freedom during slavery. And though Raboteau is careful to make clear that “[f]or some the call to preach might have been a call to status and privilege, but for the majority it was the command of God to spread the Gospel”¹¹, a characterization which may not be wholly dissimilar to the (post)modern black church context and office of the preacher, we recognize how the essence of black church preaching holds a direct camaraderie with black liberation during the visible institution of slavery.

‘The Music of Negro religion is that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which, despite caricature and defilement, still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil.’¹²

Though he dedicates a mere paragraph in the chapter “Of the Faith of the Fathers” to explicating what he believes to be the second characteristic of slave religion—the Music—Du Bois shows the importance of this musical *institution* to the black existence in America by completing The Souls of Black Folk with the chapter “The Sorrow Songs”. He further states, “And so before each thought I have written in this book I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men. Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and mine”.¹³ Du Bois appears to be both stranger and kin to these songs of sorrow, these musical legacies which are wholly and simultaneously black/African **and** American. In my estimation, this characteristic of the Negro/slave religion is the fulcrum of the black religious tradition in that the two other traditions of preaching and frenzy not only utilize music as a basic function in their presentations, but also would be

¹⁰ Raboteau, 234.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 237.

¹² Du Bois, 155-156.

¹³ Du Bois, 204.

incomplete without music as their complement. With or without instrumentation, this music is a necessity for and of black religious worship from slavery to (post)modern day contexts.

Raboteau states, “There were several kinds of spirituals—shouts, anthems and jubilees—serving different occasions and reflecting different moods. . . . , and although the music and melodies were strongly influenced by the sacred and secular songs of white Americans, the style in which the slaves sang the spirituals was African”.¹⁴ In Canaan Land, he adds:

Spirituals were not only sung, but they engaged the whole body in hand-clapping, foot-stamping, head shaking excitement. And they were danced in the counterclockwise, circular shuffle known as the ‘ring shout.’ . . . While slaves were forbidden to use drums because of slave codes in the United States, their clapping and chanting duplicated the rhythmic drive of drums that was so crucial in African worship. Similarly, the singing style of the slaves was strongly influenced by patterns of African song: call and response, multiple rhythms, syncopation (stressing the off or weak beat of a rhythm), slides from one note to another, repetition, hand-clapping, and body movement.¹⁵

The incorporation of music in worship was essential for not only oral and aural ecstasy, but that of the ethereal as well. These enslaved bodies, crippled from having to endure the *sturm und drang*¹⁶ of slavery, beckoned to a higher power for the liberation of their beings. When given the freedom to literally and figuratively exercise that God-given embodiment, they did so. For slaves, music became the medium for mediating the Almighty; the worship experience became reactive through the utility of music. In turn, the music entreated that slaves give of their whole selves within the confines of a visible space--the church--even if such a bodily offering lasted

¹⁴ Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 73-74.

¹⁵ Albert J. Raboteau, Canaan Land (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47-48, 52-53.

¹⁶ “So dawned the time of *Sturm und Drang*: the storm and stress today rocks our little boat on the mad waters of the world-sea; there is within and without the sound of conflict, the burning of body and rending of soul; inspiration strives with doubt, and faith with vain questionings. The bright ideals of the past,—physical freedom, political power, the training of brains and the training of hands,—all these in turn have waxed and waned, until even the last grows dim and overcast. . . .,—the dreams of a credulous race-childhood, or the fond imaginings of the other world which does not know and does not want to know our power”. See Du Bois, 10-11.

ephemerally in an invisible institution.¹⁷ Slaves fully endeavored to make a metaphysical request for emancipation a physical actualization.

“Finally the Frenzy or ‘Shouting,’ when the Spirit of the Lord passed by, and, seizing the devotee, made him mad with supernatural joy, was the last essential of the Negro religion and the one more devoutly believed in than all the rest.”¹⁸

Frenzy. Shouting. Ecstatic behavior. All of these terms have been used to qualify what Du Bois considers the third characteristic of the “Negro religious life as developed up to the time of Emancipation”.¹⁹ Not unlike music, the frenzied aspect of the slave religion and worship experience was an amalgamation of African and American sensibilities:

Drawing upon the worship traditions of Africa, as well as those of revivalistic Christianity, the slaves created services that resembled the spirit-empowered ceremonies of their African ancestors. Both traditions assumed that authentic worship required an observable experience of the divine presence. . . . Ritual, in this perspective, was supposed to bring the divine power tangibly into this world, so that people might be transformed, healed, and made whole. . . . In this ecstatic form of African-American worship, the divine was embodied in the faithful. . . . By encouraging them to believe the biblical doctrine that everyone was created in the image of God, worship helped Christian slaves to fight off slavery’s terrible power to depersonalize its victims.²⁰

Raboteau suggests that often, when the Du Boisian characteristics of preaching and music commingle, the byproduct is the frenzy; it appears to be born from a rather syncretistic cultural parentage. Furthermore, though Raboteau relates the American frenzy tradition to that of Africa, there are subtle differences. He posits:

Ecstatic behavior, in the form of spirit possession, is, as we have seen, central to the liturgy of West African peoples and their descendants in many parts of the New World. . . . The possessed takes on the personality of the god, dancing his steps, speaking his words, bearing his emblems, acting out his character in facial expression and bodily gesture. . . . , African spirit possession differs significantly from the shouting experience found in the revivalist tradition of American evangelism. . . .

¹⁷ “Historians have called the slaves’ religion an ‘invisible institution’ because much of it was a secret, invisible to the eyes of their masters”. See fn. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 156.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 156.

²⁰ Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 45.

The African gods with their myriad characteristics, personalities, and myths do not “mount” their enthusiasts amid the dances, songs, and drum rhythms of worship in the United States. Instead it is the Holy Spirit who fills the converted sinner with a happiness and power that drives him to shout, sing, and sometimes dance.²¹

In spite of the proverbial new world water the slaves are imbibing, the true essence of Africanity they are seeking to mimic is not wholeheartedly materializing. This is perhaps one of the earliest examples of an American *bricolage*²² of a distinctly African cultural/religious Zeitgeist. As Kelten Cobb asserts, at this moment of historic significance, cultures violently jam and in an attempt to maintain a culturally poetic enjambment, something is seemingly lost in the transmission of customs and rituals due to the slave trade; the lifeline to Africa is irrevocably severed. These naturalized Americans appear to have sought a kind of re-memory of Africa and the religions of their ancestors. This re-memory is steeped in an earthly comprehension of the divine holding tabernacle with them in their humanity. The oft-occurring possession of these Africans-turned-Americans’ souls signals a deep reverence and communion with a higher being which stands in stark contrast to “shouting”—the imperceptible versus the perceptible, the invisible versus the visible. The duality of this reality only furthers the level of retention these slaves were intent on recapturing as “pilgrims in this barren land”.²³ And even in the direst of situations, wandering through a wilderness of ambiguity, these slaves still make a conscious decision to cry out to their gods, both new and old, in search for an answer to their plight. This is why the act of shouting becomes central to black religious worship experiences. As an outward

²¹ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 59, 63-64.

²² “Style is a ritualized form of consumption, a reception of manufactured goods that empties them of their intended symbolism and invests them with different and often subversive meanings. This is done through *bricolage*, the creative, ad hoc improvisation that assembles richly encoded symbols systems out of poached materials, symbol systems that baffle outsiders, sustain the solidarity of insiders, and serve as highly effective ‘sites of resistance’. At the extreme, this becomes what Eco called ‘semiotic guerilla warfare,’ expressing itself in various forms of monkeywrenching and culture jamming”. See Kelten Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 69.

²³ William Williams, *Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*.

embodiment of praise, it was discursive in that it created a space for the rational and spiritual expression of the inward tumult and twisted grace that was afforded slaves in this visible institution.

The Preacher, the Music and the Frenzy—Moments of Conjuring?

In conclusion, the question left to ask is how do Du Bois' three characteristics of Negro religion—the Preacher, the Music and the Frenzy—exist within, without and above the American veil? To begin, it is quite ironic that in almost, if not all, of the texts associated with comprehending “Negro religion”, there is always a section regarding conjuring and magic. In both Slave Religion and Canaan Land respectively, Raboteau refers to conjurers as “the preacher’s chief rival for authority of a supernatural kind”²⁴ and as people who “were themselves religious and regarded their skill as a gift from God”.²⁵ Even in “Of the Faith of the Fathers”, Du Bois states:

Endowed with a rich tropical imagination and a keen, delicate appreciation of Nature, the transplanted African lived in a world animate with gods and devils, elves and witches; . . . Weird midnight orgies and mystic conjurations were invoked, . . . , and that vein of vague superstition which characterizes the unlettered Negro even to-day was deepened and strengthened.²⁶

All of the conjuring narratives are juxtaposed with the *spiritual* narratives. When doing a further examination, we also acknowledge that much of the language used to ratiocinate conjuring is also used when discussing slave religion. Du Bois speaks of the historical legacy leading up to the role of the preacher and suggests that “He early appeared on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, . . . , within the narrow limits allowed by the slave system,

²⁴ Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 237-238.

²⁵ Albert J. Raboteau, Canaan Land (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 52.

²⁶ Du Bois, 161.

rose the Negro preacher, and under him the first Afro-American institution, the Negro church”²⁷; and Raboteau speaks about how congregations “developed ingeniously indirect and *veiled* references to fool any whites who might be listening” through the music of the spirituals like “Steal Away” (fn. 8). What does this mean? Well, perhaps it is that even though the “invisible institution” of slave religion existed within the visible institution of slavery, the products of that invisible reality were veiled, even in their presentation. Therefore, these religious occurrences essentially become moments of conjuring insofar as what was invisible was actually subversive from its earliest inception to its ritualized practice, i.e., the kerygmatic became enigmatic because *illiterate* slaves were learning how to *read* from hearing; the melodic became cacophonous because “Steal Away”, among other spirituals with similar ends, had just as much to do with that night’s escape as it did with an eschatological hope; and shouting became a location for sheltering in that though African religious traditions may have been “lost” through the act of American transplantation, perhaps wise slaves subverted spirit possession and made it shouting such that an American context could not co-opt from the Africans more of that which was wholly African. Furthermore, a voice from without seems to adequately characterize the veiled occurrences of within:

The colonized, therefore, in his obsession, shuns his deep desires by inflicting on himself odd rites that monopolize him at every moment. They dance: that keeps them occupied; it relaxes their painfully contracted muscles, and what’s more, the dance secretly mimes, often unbeknownst to them, the No they dare not voice, the murders they dare not commit. In some regions they use the last resort: possession. What was once quite simply a religious act, an exchange between the believer and the sacred, has been turned into a weapon against despair and humiliation: the *zars*, the *loas*, the Saints of Santeria possess them, take control of their violence and squander it in trances ending in exhaustion. At the same time their idols protect them: in other words the colonized protect themselves from colonial alienation by going one step better with religious alienation, . . . , tired of being insulted day in and day out, the hallucinating individual suddenly gets it into his head to hear an angel’s

²⁷ Du Bois, 160.

voice complimenting him; this doesn't stop the jeering, but at least it gives him a break. It is a means of defense and the end of their story: the personality dislocates and the patient is a case for dementia.²⁸

Jean-Paul Sartre's categorical (re)imagining of the colonized religious moment is an act of historic reclamation that is perhaps as provocative as Du Bois' ruminations on his chance encounter with a little southern church. The dance, the possession, the divine conversation—all of these symptoms of dementia voice a fundamental reality of the otherworldly existence intoned by slaves: as per Yolanda Pierce, though their minds may forget, these slaves' bodies remember the story of their servitude. In essence, during instances of re-memory, the body conveys that which the mind suspends. This is precisely what Du Bois contends: the linguistic within (the preaching), the musical without (the music) and the spectral above (the frenzy) conflate to totalize the conjured moment amidst gazes of perceived comprehension. In the end, that which is revealed masquerades as that which is hidden.

And yet Du Bois, as a South-bound northerner, shows us that as a happenstance churchgoer, he is an *etic* participant, because he is not familiar with this religious scene, and simultaneously an *emic* participant because these are his people, kindred souls still wrestling with the *sturm und drang* of this life (cf. fn. 13). Nonetheless, utilizing his authorial liberty to recount this phenomenon, Du Bois places a cosmic microscope on this church to show that there is something more going on than just preaching, music and frenzy: within these four walls, people are being inculcated with the idea that they could be black and divine.²⁹ Indeed, within, without and above this American veil, slaves and slave religion may have been, in some form or another, free and freeing people long before any document did.

²⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface", *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), liii. See fn. 21.

²⁹ Joan Morgan, "They Call Me Ms. Hill" [online magazine] (New York: 2006); available from *Essence.com* at <<http://www.essence.com/2006/01/16/they-call-me-ms-hill/>>; accessed 18 Oct 2010.

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