Chapter 1

Maps of Meaning

Black Bodies and African Spirituality as African Diaspora Trope

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One might think of the African Diaspora as drawn in, on, and through history, and in the process producing life maps.[1] These life maps that constitute the African Diaspora are drawn to various scales—from the personal to the communal, from the national to the transnational. Each, in its own way, speaks to the nature and meaning of human existence within the context of simple and complex interactions and exchanges.

One might also note the manner in which African American religious studies has entailed a particular attention to these life maps and what they say about the religio-theological concerns and commitments of peoples of African descent. While, within African American religious studies, one is more likely to find attention to these mappings as they relate to large-scale developments and communal-based trackings of change, it is important to recognize the connections between personal mappings and collective mappings. In this sense, scholarship related to the nature and meaning of African American life involves a type

of layering—of producing greater detail, a richer cartography, through overlapping presentations.

It strikes me that Peter Paris's *The Spirituality of African Peoples* provides an example of this layering process, entailing both the personal and the communal. Paris, in his intellectual and personal geography, represents the reach of the Diaspora. Born in Canada, educated in the United States, and intellectually and emotionally drawn to the Caribbean and Africa, Paris's work marks an effort to recognize the overlapping nature of moral vision and ethical conduct. That is to say, Paris sees through academic concern and personal experience the shared cartography of contact and conquest that marks our world; and, as an ethicist, he seeks to develop a moral vocabulary and grammar for discussing and addressing the messy nature of human life. From his perspective—with which I would agree—discussion of the African Diaspora involves multidirectionality; it involves highlighting both the transnational nature of contact between Africans and Europeans as well as the impact of this contact and conquest on particular communities and individuals.

In what follows, I give attention to the theoretical significance of Paris's notion of "African spirituality" which undergirds his more recent work by arguing that his concept of spirituality serves as a useful trope by which to explore the linkages over time between various African peoples. Unlike other ways in which the African Diaspora is presented as a mode of analysis, Paris's offering foregrounds religion as a primary expression of world making by African peoples. However, I begin with a few questions concerning the shape and content—the particularities—of Paris's notion of religion as a common framework lodged within the larger conceptual arrangement of African spirituality. That is, I would like to say a few words concerning the manner in which Paris "reads" the religious.

Religion and African Peoples

For Paris, the religious message highlighted by the movement and positioning of peoples of Africa is clear and straightforward, and without significant variation from a general cosmic theme: people of African descent have been and continue to be defined by commitment to the

idea of supernatural realities (e.g., god[s]). In his words, "One of the most important marks of continuity between Africans on the continent and those in the diaspora is their common belief in a transcendent divine power primordially related to them as the creature and preserver of all that is."[2] Whether defined in theistic, polytheistic, or henotheistic terms, for Paris Africans and African Americans are anything but atheistic in outlook. Why Paris might make this claim—the numerical dominance of divinity-based religious systems—is somewhat apparent; but does this logic really stem from the lived experience and commitments found within the African Diaspora?

"There are no atheists among them," he boldly proclaims.[3] (And, it is safe to believe, based on the blending of past and present in his writing, that Paris means by this a declarative statement covering all recorded time.) Really? How does one support such a claim? In light of Paris's assumption, what does one make for example of the posture of African leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah or Cheikh Anta Diop, who, some scholars argue, is humanistic in orientation? More to the point, what does one make of the humanist, agnostic, and atheistic sensibilities represented in certain examples of popular culture—such as some blues and folktales—found within the African Diaspora?[4] Is it reasonable to exclude from consideration nontheistic, agnostic, and atheistic orientations? And if so, based on what established and transparent criteria?

Paris is rightly concerned with presenting a phenomenology of religion as resistance against modalities of "structural racism"[5] experienced by African peoples; yet, is it reasonable to frame such resistance only within the context of divinity-based systems? Such a theory of unified religious outlook does not involve the "historical retrieval and reinterpretation" Paris deems vital to the promotion of personhood within a context of proper "social development." Rather, it might be said to entail a form of religious imperialism whereby the real thickness and variety of African/African American religiosity is truncated. His sense of the religiosity of African peoples is based on the use of a particular hermeneutic that one might call the hermeneutic of the problem of evil. That is to say, implicit in Paris's recounting of the dread of structural racism is an assumption that severely oppressed peoples are only able to avoid total destruction, avoid nihilism, through the presence of more powerful forces working on

their behalf. His is a narrow, theologically based formulation of the logic of struggle. In short, it suggests selective historical and cultural memory whereby the religious landscape of the African Diaspora is presented in a way that does not challenge Paris's perceptions.

In *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, Paris refers to Toni Morrison, but without noting her rather balanced depiction of historical-cultural memory. From Morrison's perspective, memory is rather fragile—premised on what we seek to retain and what we surrender (either by force or by choice).[6] Hence, what is known about the frames of life meaning(s) developed and embraced within the African Diaspora cannot be stated with lingering certainty. Therefore, Paris's hard-and-fast claims concerning the limited scope of religious (or "secular") commitments should be interrogated and challenged in that he assumes clarity without respect to what, if Morrison is taken seriously, cannot be known with certainty. That is to say, the manner in which divinity-based religious traditions dominate the landscape of African American communities does not suggest the nonexistence of alternative approaches that question, if not reject, divinity-based systems.

I would suggest the mechanisms of oppression resulted in a variety of creative and imaginative responses from people of African descent—some of which were divinity based and others that rejected such allegiances and instead sought life meaning(s) through a clear focus on the mundane. I would not argue for one approach over against another but, rather, that African peoples employed both theistic and nontheistic orientation as a way to make sense of the world. To suggest otherwise, I believe, involves a type of exclusionism—a cartography of life meaning that privileges certain formulations and in this way ignores the overlapping, conflicting, and "messy" religious arrangements that dot the landscape of the African Diaspora.

This is the source of dissonance within *The Spirituality of African Peoples*: Paris seeks a broad and flexible theory of life meaning(s), but limits this possibility through a grammar of religiosity that is rather fixed, and one that takes as paradigmatic a god(s)-centered framework.[7] In this sense, his posture might be read as a type of religious exceptionalist stance—a privileging of a divinity-based orientation to the exclusion of other possibilities.

There are common features of experience for peoples of African descent as they battle structural racism, and some of these linkages involve the "religious and moral ethos,"[8] as Paris puts it, associated with Africa. But that is not to say their quest for meaning (vis-à-vis religion) can be so easily defined as a unified commitment to cosmic forces.

Fortunately, this is not the primary selling point of Paris's project. In other words, the project's fundamental value is not found in his description of religion but in the larger and more abstract notion of African spirituality. And, I believe his notion of African spirituality as he defines it does not require acceptance of his description of religion.

African Diaspora and African Spirituality as Trope

I must note my critique of Paris's phenomenological presentation of religion is not meant to reject the significance of divinity-based orientations. His effort to retrieve the significance of religion within the African Diaspora is to be appreciated. My aim, therefore, is to put those orientations into a context of religious pluralism that recognizes strong difference. The focus of this short essay is not simply a refutation of Paris's rejection of the possibility of an African atheism (or humanism for that matter).

It seems to me "African spirituality" does not function well as a general concept of religiosity due to narrowness of definition. Yet, there is a manner in which it might function as a trope or conceptual arrangement for framing what has been called the African Diaspora. Mindful of this, I am interested in the manner through which his framing of the African Diaspora as African spirituality might provide a corrective to theorizations of the African Diaspora that tend to minimize the religious markings of that shared cartography of African peoples.

For instance, while Paul Gilroy has mapped this Diaspora by offering the "black Atlantic" as a vital "unit of analysis," he has failed to give sufficient attention to the place of Africa in the matrix and he tends to see the significance of cultural production such as African American music devoid of necessary connection to the religious and theological intent of certain musical forms.[9] On the first point, Gilroy focuses on the manner in which a cultural grid marks the American hemisphere (and Europe by extension). In his words,

> Artistic expression, expanded beyond recognition from the grudging gifts offered by the masters as a token substitute for freedom from bondage, therefore becomes the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation. Poises and poetics begin to coexist in novel forms—autobiographical writing, special and uniquely creative ways of manipulating spoken language, and, above all, the music. All three have overflowed from the containers that the modern nation/state provides for them.[10]

What Michelle Wallace notes in support of attention to the visual arts can be extended: Much study of African American (or one might argue diasporic) development privileges music and dwarfs the importance of other cultural markers of meaning and identity.[11] Paris's turn to spirituality as trope does not restrict materials for examination and in that way is free to interrogate a fuller range of sources for their meaning-making importance.

While Gilroy's analysis is vital, it fails to consider Africa as anything more than a place of departure—the starting point for this cultural matrix but not a vital component of its continuing cultural impact. Michael Gomez alludes to this oversight when arguing for an alternate take on the shape and content of the African Diaspora. "Envisioning of an African Diaspora vitally and inextricably linked to the histories, cultures, and communities of Africa," he writes, "is at least as valid as the notion of a black Atlantic that effectively excludes the continent (save as source of a primordial and unrecoverable inception)."[12]

Concerning the second point, I am not arguing that religion within the African Diaspora has received no attention by scholars, in that there are numerous volumes discussing the emergence and development of religious traditions throughout the African Diaspora. Yet, these works tend to consider religion important cultural material (read historically) but not the "stuff" out of which a theory of the African Diaspora develops.[13] Rather, I am suggesting theorizing of the African Diaspora tends to give little consideration to the manner in which religion might inform conceptualization, the abstract framing of what we mean by African Diaspora. That is to say, it is rare for religion to be understood as not simply the "content" but also as the "form" of the Diaspora.[14] In this sense, Paris offers a useful heuristic framework.

Paris's notion of spirituality as theory and cartographic framing of the African Diaspora plays on Du Bois's language of "soul" in that it speaks to a general connectedness, self-consciousness—worldview—that connects the individual to a larger reality defined in terms of sociocultural postures, grammars, and symbols. In Paris's words, "Metaphorically, the spirituality of a people is synonymous with the soul of a people: the integrating center of their power and meaning."[15] Put differently, the "soul" in this sense is the "force" that shapes and moves human history. And spirituality codes a general and shared matrix of experience and life meaning(s) in that "the 'spirituality' of a peoples," as Paris remarks, "refers to the animating and integrative power that constitutes the principal frame of meaning for individual and collective experience." Spirituality here conceived entails recognition of the synergy between nature, human history, and the general "push" of life.[16]

The benefit of Paris's framing of transnational developments as spirituality—although his depiction of religion within the Diaspora does not successfully maintain this tension—involves his continuous movement between various points of contact. Paris does not simply appeal to the United States and cultural developments within that context as representative of developments elsewhere. Instead, he maintains a complexity and "thickness," the overlapping spheres that make up diasporic experience(s) and avoids the critique offered by Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley:

> Diaspora has always been employed (invoked) in such a way as to hide the differences and discontinuities. The very concept of diaspora has been extracted from peoples' lived experiences and then molded into metaphors for alienation, outsiderness, home, and various binary relationships such as alien/native. The metaphor has come to represent those experiences and, in so doing, erases the complexities and contradictions as it seeks to fit all within the metaphor. Indeed, the experiences of those located in the United States, for example, have often come to stand for those not in the US or used as the standard of comparison.[17]

What Paris captures through this theorizing of intrinsic connection is the ebb and flow of cultural formulations, the flexible and porous

nature of national boundaries as the yearning for life of peoples push against the logic of distinction that marks modern racism. Or, one might frame this in terms of the similarity between Paris's trope of spirituality as diasporic matrix and Donald Carter's framing of the Diaspora as a matter "of drifting endless on the betwixt and between of the world's boundaries. . . . Diaspora is a way of being 'other' among the established, of keeping live the drama of the voyage of 'otherness' in worlds that seek sameness and homogeneity."[18]

Whether conscious of this or not, Paris provides a response to Carter's sense that much talk of the African Diaspora has privileged displacement, disconnection, and dissonance as the guiding logic. While the spread of African peoples and cultures across various hemispheres has something to do with physical and metaphorical separation, there are ways in which the Diaspora also connotes continuity, connection, and a web of meaning(s). And Paris's trope of spirituality captures some of this.[19] "Spirituality" as trope, although not explicitly wrestling with the possibilities of numerous diasporas, does show flexibility and reach often missing from discussion of the links between African diasporic communities.

Black Bodies and the Mapping of the African Diaspora

The conceptualization Paris offers is all the more useful when one gives attention to the production and meaning of black bodies.[20] That is to say, the transnational and hemispheric cartography as spirituality is given more graphic relief when explicitly viewed through the black body as metaphor and material.

I noted at the start of the essay the manner in which Paris's autobiographical map sheds some light on the importance of the body as diaspora marker; yet, beyond the personal, much of the body's importance must be inferred from the pages of *The Spirituality of African Peoples*. The grammar of embodiment peppers the text, offering by way of gentle description the frequently used reference to the body of material, or the body of evidence. Yet, what if the body is held in frame, continuously marked as the conduit for spirituality, hence as the primary trail of the African Diaspora?

Something akin to the above is suggested very early in Paris's book when he notes that the underlying values that shape the progressive activities (related to identity formation, for example) of people of African descent have a power and that the "energizing and unifying power of those values was and is embodied in the thought and practice of African peoples everywhere."[21] Perhaps is it more than a metaphorical embodiment at work here.

We might consider this embodiment in a different sense: the force of these values is represented in, through, and by the bodies of African peoples—bodies that are both metaphorically constructed and biomedical realities occupying time and space. What I suggest here is an extension, an experiment, by which we maintain the metaphorical and somewhat veiled attention to the body in Paris's work but broaden it to a joint concern with the body as material and the impact of this complex body on notions of the African Diaspora as a cartography of spirituality.

Paris avoids the dominance of the written text, marking the framing of meaning and identity in both text-based materials and nonwritten text-based developments. This provides an opening: one might then suggest that the body became the primary conveyer for (body as material) identity and meaning. The ethos, or framework of life over against injustice, is (re)presented by bodies—in the way in which bodies make possible production of music, creation of written materials, the communication of relationships, and so on.[22]

The body is a complex and multidimensional mapping; it is read and deciphered, and it tells the stories of interconnected worlds. In this way, Paris's scholarship serves to echo the story told by his own body as symbol and as material. He, in both word and body, suggests a certain epistemological geography of life that encourages hemispheric thinking as an approach to African American religion: his body bridges several numerous spaces—Canada, the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. Hints of this position come across when he claims much of African American religious studies involved and continues to entail "various African American religious ethicists, along with church historians and others" focusing "their scholarly attention on various dimensions of the African American historical experience in search of the basic elements for characterizing the perspective(s) of African Americans."[23] Perhaps

this link is closer than we had initially realized, and perhaps it is represented both materially and metaphorically in the bio-autobiographical framing Paris offers. That is to say, the linkage or the commonality is found in all who live in the world through and in a black body.

The Body and the Religion(s) of African Peoples

The above consideration is worth serious attention, if, for instance, Linda Arthur's assertion holds any merit beyond her rubric of "dress" as "expression of identity."[24] In Arthur's words, "we wear our identities on our bodies and our bodies are used by religions to visually communicate world views."[25] If this holds, as it should, Paris's African spirituality as trope surfaces and informs through, by, and in the body. By extension religion, if we broaden Paris's framing beyond a unified supernatural orientation, is related to and expressed not in spite of but, rather, through and because of the body (as both material and metaphor for the social system). That is to say, nothing Paris says (or should say) about religion is possible without the (re)presentation of the body in time and space. And my more layered sense of religion is likewise tied to the body. Thus, our two separate notions of religion share an implied assumption within the African Diaspora: "virtues" are indeed embodied.

Perhaps this is why, for example, Christian conversion involves a reframing of the body: "I looked at my hands and they looked new; I looked at my feet and they did too." These lines and others like them suggest something important about the body within the African Diaspora, or within African spirituality as Paris describes it: religion can offer a refashioning of bodies by changing their relationship to themselves, others, and society at large. Physical bodies are defined in new ways, ways that promote ideally their health and well-being. And bodies as symbols of the social system are recast in ways that challenge the legitimacy of the status quo.

If religion involves a "binding together," it might be the case, then, that religion serves to bind together the various modes of the body and in the process tries to create a cohesive and unified whole—a healthy identity tying the individual to collectives or communities. Religion, one might infer from Paris's work, serves as guide—helping us to know (and

develop) in new and more productive ways our bodies by pointing out what is most important to us—a deep(er) sense of life meaning.

Finally, the liberation and "freedom" that Paris wants to highlight as the project of African peoples involves the forcing of black bodies into the world through ways that interrogate, challenge, and change the nature and content of knowledge, the nature and function of relationships, and the promise of self-understanding and community identities. African/African American religion(s), then, might be said to promote disobedient bodies, somewhat unruly in that they buck against the status quo.

This is to suggest the *common notion of life* is firmly lodged in the logic and meaning of our bodies—both as metaphor and material. It is through and by means of these bodies that the shared religious cartography of existence Paris seeks to highlight is framed and shaped. In this sense, the body (as metaphor and material) links the various points of contact that constitute the African Diaspora; it informs and challenges the matrix of life meaning that has marked a history of contact and conquest. The black body, then, becomes plastic. That is to say, it stretches across various nation-states and hemispheres and reaches through time. It becomes the primary vehicle for tracing African spirituality (as a connecting membrane for the African Diaspora) in that the "expressivity of the body is thus the condition for social communication."[26] For Paris this framing of the body helps explain the manner in which, during long periods of injustice, modalities of community and shared concern are communicated and enacted.