

***Afro-Christian, Afro-Blue: Land Based Autonomy and the Making of  
Blues Identities at the Turn of the 20th Century***

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper argues that contemporary projects to decolonize African American religion particularly in its Christian form can be enhanced by an increased understanding of how current and past images of the land have impacted religious and racial identity. The emergence of the cultural production known as the Delta Blues as a locus for investigation clarifies these transformations and reveals anti-authoritarian counter-statements that suggest a creative Black autonomy at the dynamic intersection of deep ecology and social ecology. That is, how we imagine space determines whether our faith is based on a fellowship with the natural world, or guardians of the natural world, or as conquerors and consumers of the natural world. This in turn reproduces hierarchy and domination, consciously and unintended in community relations among Black Americans. Via critical engagement with the emergence of the cultural production of Blues music, history of religions scholarship, insights from decolonial theory, critical environmental history, and critical geography I read the Blues identity as a starting point for a constructive response to Victor Anderson's call for( the end of ontological blackness in religious and theological thought.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Oh cryin' won't help you, prayin' won't do no good  
When the levee breaks, mama, you got to lose  
-Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe, "When the Levee Breaks"

"I must be serving the Devil, I can't be serving Jesus Christ.  
Cuz, I asked him to save me and look like he trying to take my life."  
-Funny Paper Smith, "Fool's Blues"

If you can live in the full knowledge that you are going to die, that you are not going to live forever, that if you live with the reality of death, you can live. If you can't do it, if you spend your entire life in flight from death you are also in flight from life.

-James Baldwin, "Uses of the Blues"<sup>1</sup>

With these three epigraphs in mind, I want to make a case for a spatial reading of the blues. Towards this end, I argue three points; 1. Land should be understood as a substantive component in how we understand black identities, 2. Certain Christian binaries, particularly the Spirit/Flesh binary, does violence to blues identities that point toward deep relationships with the land, 3. The Blues as a cultural production points toward a landed cosmology that has corrective implications

for how we image life theologically. In short, each of these points express a type of Blues— *A Blues for the Land, Spirit/Flesh Blues and the Blues of Blues People.*

### *A Blues for the Land*

At the heart of the black American Struggle for life has always been the question of the land. Land, at the most basic level, situates all human relationships with flora and fauna. My focus on Afro-Christian and Afro-Blue identities is situated by the idea that life, at its most basic level, suggests relationship to the earth. However, what we are dealing with in the emergence of Blues Identities is a forced situation. The forced situation or context, as theologian Gerald Boodoo has argued, is the imposed relationship between colonial settlers and the natives of all the spaces touched by European expansion.<sup>2</sup> The lands known as the Mississippi Delta Region, which is not technically a delta, are those lands that border the eastern side of the Mississippi River in the northwestern portion of the state of Mississippi. By the time of enslavement, the Delta landscape had been forced into what environmental historian Mikko Saikku refers to as European eco-history.<sup>3</sup> By eco-history Saikku connotes the measurable environmental impact of human presence on a given ecosystem. Saikku's environmental history covers three long time periods in the eco-history of the Delta Region, the pre-human period, the Mississippian Period and the post-Mississippian or Euro-American Period. What is significant about Saikku's research is the way in which he situates human history within the pre-human ecology of the Delta Region rather than within the Euro-American representations of the Delta Region. Euro-American representations originally saw the Delta Region as a natural wilderness. In counter distinction from the wilderness outlook, Saikku reminds that what the Settler colonialists of the 18th Century saw as wilderness was the result of 5,000 years of Mississippian history.<sup>4</sup> The enduring effects of a Mississippian cosmology presented no history in the eyes of Europe. Everything was wild and a threat to the Divine mandate of Dominion over the earth. Afro-Christian and Blues identities emerge from those peoples whose bodies and lives were the very means by which the Mississippian Life World and the flora and fauna of the Delta were dominated by an emerging European global market system.

Much ink has been spilled articulating the black Christian religious experience that emerges from the underside of European eco-history. However, the emergence of the blues cosmology has received less attention. Theological works that touch on the blues cosmology include, but are not limited to, James Cone's, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*,<sup>5</sup> John Michael Spencer's, *Blues and Evil*<sup>6</sup> and Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant*<sup>7</sup>. Each have approached the blues as an undervalued source for theological reflection. However, these thinkers have primarily used an inter-racial optic to investigate the blues. As such, the blues is represented as a black perspective on the experience of anti-black racism. With the exception of Douglas, who makes an appeal for a black ecclesial appropriation of the blues understanding of embodiment, most theological treatment of the blues sees it as the emergence of a black secularity that remains in deep tension with the Afro-Christian religious experience.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, this section has looked to situate Afro-Christian and Afro-Blues identities within the historical transition from the Mississippian cosmovision where the land is a sacred subject to the Eurocentric cosmovision in which the land was represented as resource commodity. My effort to resituate Afro-Christian and Afro-Blues identities in relationship to the land moves towards a spatial approach to black life and life at large. My aim is to decenter the methods of theological critique that begin with the problem of anti-black racism and its implications for religious experience. By bracketing the deep problem of anti-black racism I do not mean to suggest that we are in a post-racial moment, but *rather*, my aim is to delink from the incessant need to adapt to the European eco-history that is the nerve center of anti-black racism. As Sylvia Wynter argues, modernity is built on a representation of humanity that proceeds in a scarcity mode, that is, a mode that assumes that the world, on its own, cannot support human life.<sup>9</sup> Anti-Black racism and its role in the division of labor is a function of this idea of humanity which suggests that an evolved human is one that lives in a progressivist fight against the scarcity of the earth. The Blues identity resists this mode in its appeal to autonomous land based subsistence, and as such provides an

option, albeit a repressed one, for delinking from European eco-history.

***Spirit/Flesh Blues***

The black struggle for equality in the Modern/Colonial world has precipitated major reductions to the expansive cosmologies that situated enslaved Africans and black Americans in time and space. From the trans-Atlantic perspective, the violence to African cosmologies is usually associated with the Middle Passage which precipitated a break in the time/space imagination of the enslaved. The Reconstruction and its failure to produce sustainable land based options for black life, represents a continuation of this break that has substantial implications for how the land is imaged in relation to Afro-Christian and Afro-Blues peoples. The environmental dimension of the Promised Land hope that inspired, slave insurrections, black union troops and black Radical reconstruction was seen as insurgent to European eco-history. Fearful of the loss of their control over the land, Euro-Americans launched a violent counter-insurgency against black American visions for life. This counter-insurgency was aided by certain strands of the post-Reconstruction Afro-Christian imagination which in its response to the failed project of “landed independence,” reified elements of European eco-history.

Amidst the violence of Euro-American eco-history, the blues cosmivision emerges alongside two strands of Afro-Christian religious imagination: the Holiness movement and Black Protestantism. Zora Neale Hurston articulated that the Holiness or spiritual churches emerged as a type of protest against the “highbrow tendencies”<sup>10</sup> of black Protestant Churches. Extending Hurston’s insights, religious historian John Giggie’s method of history reveals that Baptist and Methodist Church congregations, during the decades after Reconstruction, began to fuse consumerism within a new style of religious identity.<sup>11</sup> Clothing, drapes, and the upkeep of Christian homes were presented as marks of sanctity and a circumspect Christian identity. Church sanctuaries adorned with carpet, chandeliers, and other fixtures were seen as physical signs of God’s self-revelation in history. In addition, the black Protestant congregations also became spaces in which the religious imagination was infused with the struggle for political equality that provided an increased access to consumer participation in the market economy. On the other hand, the Holiness movement held to the memory of Slave Religion and a spirituality which privileged a more direct experience of God’s self-revelation in the body and in nature. Leaders and members of the Holiness and Spiritual churches critiqued black Baptist and Methodist denominations for their repression of black spiritual traditions, their embrace of consumerism, and their capitulation to nation-state politics. With Giggie’s work on consumerism and the above comments on European eco-history in mind, the tensions between the Holiness movement and black Protestantism can be read as disagreement over how to theologically interpret the repression of Radical Reconstruction and the hope in landed independence. As the Holiness movement and black Protestantism took center stage in the aftermath of the Reconstruction, both engaged in a fight for the construction of true religion at a time when European eco-history moved towards industrialization and the expansion of consumer markets<sup>12</sup>. Constrained within contexts where land-based subsistence was central, the rise of consumerism presented a new option for life that was appealing to many black Americans. The eventual collusion of black American religious identities with the growing consumer market identity precipitated an increasingly hierarchical and repressive relationship between the Afro-Christian consumer cosmologies and the more land-based cosmologies that have sustained black life. The blues cosmivision and the cultural production of blues music is a repository of this repression and has lasting insights for current discourses on identity and identity formation.

Much of the repression chronicled in the blues is a response to an Afro-Christian adoption of the Euro-American Christian cosmology of Spirit and Flesh. As Sylvia Wynter has argued, the European Christian missions brought modernity’s “Man” into being by “overrepresenting” the Spirit/Flesh as a universal representation of humanity.<sup>13</sup> Wynter’s Spirit/Flesh refers to a discursive production of human “be-ing” that draws on the Pauline Christian axiom “walking after the Spirit and not after the flesh.” *Flesh*, signifies that which suffers from original sin and the fall

of humanity, which is mythologized in the disobedience of Adam and Eve. *Spirit*, signifies a form of human being characterized by communion with God and creation. This communion is symbolized in the peace of the Garden of Eden and in the promise of a Heavenly Afterlife.

As such, the Spirit/Flesh was employed by European missionaries to articulate their difference from the supposed anti-humanity of Native American, African, and Amerindian ethnicities.<sup>14</sup> Wynter's Spirit/Flesh, as an ideology of human difference, fits into what Walter Mignolo<sup>15</sup> and Vine Deloria<sup>16</sup> articulate as the domination of land based spiritualities by the time/space of Christian Religion and its secular analogue. Subalterns of the modern project were subjugated not only because they did not reflect the virtues of the Spirit, but also because they did not prescribe to a chronological understanding of time. Time amongst many of the world's indigenous peoples is about an enduring relationship with the material and immaterial world, rather than a chronology of events that move toward an expected end.

With Wynter, Deloria and Mignolo in mind, we can see that the forced location of African Americans between two cosmovisions, the Native American and the European, required them to make choices about how they would construct views of the world that would generate options for survival within a forced situation. Underneath the pressures of legitimating their religious outlooks, Afro-Christians, albeit in different ways, adopted the Colonial Christian logics that constructed and represented the Americas and Africa as zones of false religion, non-being, and inhumanity. The emergence of Afro-Christian orthodoxy as it colluded with consumerism, and eventually urbanization, operationalized this colonial logic or coloniality. This coloniality of identity operates within intra-racial discourses on true religion, respectability and body politics. The blues, in its appeal to land-based autonomy, speaks back to this coloniality in ways that have been underappreciated. This underappreciation is resultant of an over-dependency on the binary of Spirit/Flesh and its use as a marker of geographically situated human differences. It is through this logic that the cultural production of the Blues was demonized and seen as an impediment to social progress, moral development, and equal participation in the market economy. Amid these entanglements blues peoples sang back:

They say we are the Lord's children  
I don't say that ain't true  
But if we all the same like each other  
Ooo-well'well, why do they treat me like they do?<sup>17</sup>

### ***Blues People Blues***

Critical geographer, Clyde Woods, provides some insights into the blues option for living. In his work, *Development Arrested*, Clyde Woods articulates the blues as a cultural repository of black autonomy.<sup>18</sup> In his rigorous treatment of blues people's and their geographical vision for the Delta Region, Woods highlights how the Delta Blues peoples saw the land as the primary option for a sustainable and meaningful life. To this point, he references the activities of the Colored Farmers Alliance, the Inter-racial efforts of Southern Populism, the post-War activity of the Black Union Troops and the autonomous township of Mound Bayou Mississippi, among other events, as indicators of a plan of development which worked to destabilize the Plantation as the primary vision for life in the Delta Region.<sup>19</sup> To be clear, the problem in the Delta Region during the post-Reconstruction period, was the Planters and their imposed economy of capital extraction. Capital extraction hinged upon three major geographical ventures, the building of a dependable levee system along the Yazoo and Mississippi Rivers, the clearing of the Delta Hardwood forest, and the conversion of the forest floor and wetlands into an agricultural landscape, all of this was made possible via the control of a predominately black labor force.<sup>20</sup> The Delta blues peoples, in Wood's view perform geographical resistance, that is, they re-envisioned the space of the Delta and how their bodies were to be organized within it.<sup>21</sup> Albert Murray has argued that the blues offers a counterstatement to the negative view of flesh promoted in his interpretation of Black worship. His words on this point are worth quoting at length:

The church is not concerned with the affirmation of life as such, which in its view is only a matter of feeble flesh...Unlike the revelers of the Saturday Night Dance Function the worshipers attending the Sunday morning Service are very concerned with guilt and seeking forgiveness for their trespasses what each expresses is not affirmation of life, as such, but rather his [sic] determination not to yield to the enticements of the fleshpots of Baal.<sup>22</sup>

While some might not agree with Murray's characterization of black ecclesial worship, I argue that Murray recognizes how the Spirit/Flesh binary is employed geographically to characterize certain spaces and how bodies operate in those spaces. The geography under which Juke Joints became the spaces of the Devil, enforces the very same idea of difference that colonialists used to repress the spiritualities of the Americas, the Caribbean, and Africa.

### **Conclusion**

Contrary to the Afro-Christian caricature of the blues as hedonism, the blues at its best, points us towards an *Edenism*. The blues Eden is the Juke Joint, the space where sonic, lyrical and bodily activity reflects the sanctity of life. In this blue *Edenism*, there is a spirit of struggle that defies the Spirit/Flesh binary and its use in demonizing and racializing alternative land-based spiritualities. As Victor Anderson and others have noted, ontological constructions of racial identity risk reifying the very constructs within which African diaspora peoples and indigenous peoples at large, were colonized, enslaved, and racialized.<sup>23</sup> Amid current uprisings where many of us have adopted the battle cry of Black Lives Matter, the blues reminds us that we must continuously commit ourselves to affirming what we mean by life and living. As we make use of inventive counter-identities in our scuffles against European eco-history, and its pernicious repressions, we must be careful not to slip into hegemonic overrepresentations. The threat of this slip, is exacerbated by the tendency in the post-Civil Rights Era to sacrifice radical life ways at the altar of representative democracy. I fear, and I do not think that I am alone, that identity formation outside of direct visions for human engagement with the land result in shallow forms of living that exacerbate the suffering of all those workers of the world who labor with the soil in vain. Their labor is in vain because it does not produce life. Rather, their labor is the very means by which life is extracted for a living that goes on elsewhere. As we continue to sing our identity blues we must not only be on guard against, "the blackness that whiteness creates,"<sup>24</sup> but the land that Man develops. It is on this guard that we might find the courage to sing the blues as a spiritual otherwise:

Must Jesus Sing the blues alone and all the world go free?

Spirit/Flesh, I'm not your wretch, I'll sing my blues and be.

### **NOTES**

1 James Baldwin and Randall Kenan, "The Cross of Redemption : Uncollected Writings," (2010): 80.

2 Gerald Boodoo, "Transgressive Theology or Transgressing Theology?," *Voices* XXXVI, no. 1 (2013).

3 Mikko Saikku, *This Delta, This Land : An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

4 *Ibid.*, 249-52. Here Saikku sets out his theoretical basis for the pre-Mississippian, Mississippian and post-Mississippian time periods. Table 5 entitled, "General Patterns of Human Induced Environmental Change in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, 3000 B.C. to the Present," illustrates ecological revolutions, that is, time periods of substantial and irreversible environmental change. Saikku uses the table to highlight the substantial difference in human induced environmental change between the Mississippian and post-Mississippian periods. For more on eco-historical periodization see: Yrjö Haila and Richard Levins, *Humanity and Nature : Ecology, Science and Society* (London ; Concord, Mass.: Pluto Press, 1992). For more on ecological revolution see: Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions : Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

5 James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues : An Interpretation* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980).

6 Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993).

7 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church : A Blues Slant*, 1st ed., *Black Religion/Womanist*

Thought/Social Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

8 For more on Kelly Brown Douglas' approach to the blues and embodiment see: *ibid.*, 8.

9 Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation--an Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 321.

10 Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley, CA: Turtle Island, 1981), 103.

11 John Michael Giggie, *After Redemption : Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875-1915* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15.

12 *Ibid.*, 24.

13 Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation--an Argument," 269.

14 *Ibid.*, 278.

15 Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs : Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 21.

16 Vine Deloria, *God Is Red : A Native View of Religion*, 3rd ed. (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Pub., 2003), 63-65.

17 These lyrics are taken from the blues song "The Good Lawd's Children" recorded on Decca Records by Peetie Wheatstraw (William Bunch) in 1941. For the lyrics to the entire song see: Paul Garon, *The Devil's Son-in-Law: The Story of Peetie Wheatstraw and His Songs*, Blues Paperback (London,: Studio Vista, 1971), 101.

18 Clyde Adrian Woods, *Development Arrested : The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, The Haymarket Series (London ; New York: Verso, 1998), 29.

19 *Ibid.*, 81-87.

20 *Ibid.* 43-87.

21 *Ibid.*, 25-27.

22 Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 38.

23 Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness : An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995). See also: William D. Hart, *Afro-Eccentricity : Beyond the Standard Narrative of Black Religion*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

24 Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness : An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, 13.

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## APPENDIX

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## **REFERENCES**