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Note to Readers of Seminar: The musings I have provided below reflect shifting lines of inquiry associated with my unfolding project rather than a publishable essay. In particular, I envision that my project on the black sacred has implications for how traditional theological ideas such as God or the Trinity are thought and imagined, although I do not directly or substantively explore these implications in this piece. My talk will draw from these notes.

Introduction

Black religious scholar Charles Long contends that the plurality of African-American religious experiences has yet to be captured in traditional theological modes. In large part, this problem is bound up with privileging theoria as the starting point in describing and legitimating doctrine and “proper” religious experience in Christian theology. This epistemological orientation however misses the ways in which black religious experience has been lived in and through the flesh of black people. As Long asserts, African-American religious experience is rooted in “the absurd meaning of their [black] bodies.”¹ For Long, religion involves the body through a full array of structures, expressions, experiences, behaviors and modes of thought. For African Americans, it was through their flesh and the meanings of their flesh that the oppressed came to be controlled in the context of modernity. African American religion then entailed an enfleshment as they attempted to move from their second creation as objects of Western history back to their first creation as subjects, as fully human. What I infer from Long is that in order to speak about black religious experience, it involves a focus on how black bodies have experienced cultural contact and conflict with the West and the ways in which the West has signified upon their bodies in order to legitimate particular meanings associated with black life (such as black bodies as primitive, non-rational, criminal, and so forth). However, black bodies and black life were always signifying upon the signifiers. Moreover, black people’s assertion of their humanity was always lived in and through their flesh first. As a result, African-American theologies have turned to concrete lived experience, both material and reflective, as a way to get underneath the plural modes of religious experience and their meanings. Turning to enfleshment within African-American religion has sought to create pressure on the study of Christian theology in fruitful ways that do not over-determine the interpretation of black religious life solely through using systematized accounts of Christian theology.

Taking my cue from Long, I want to think about the “more” of black religious experience, experiences that have yet to be rationalized or systematized in Christian theology in the West. In particular, I want to proffer a way of thinking about
Spirit/black flesh through a somatic-centered Afro-Pentecostalism. A somatic-centered Afro-Pentecostalism departure point is about the celebration of enfleshment, how the Spirit moves in and through marginalized flesh such as black flesh in envisaging beloved communities marked by radical alterity and belonging. I am not interested in theorizing the Spirit in relation to speculative trinitarianism or Christology, which for me, involves theorizing Spirit in relation to belief. My conversation moves in and beyond thinking Spirit on the spectrum of “belief vs. unbelief.” Instead, I turn to the complex narrative of the Azusa Street Revival and the problems this revival creates in terms of Western theological epistemologies of God, Salvation, the Eschaton, and more. Azusa nods in the direction of how black enfleshment of the Spirit produces alternate patterns of intimacy, eros, and belonging that expand, contract, and even implode dominant doctrinal categories, beliefs and modes of sociality in the West.

A somatic-centered Afro-Pentecostalism is a methodology and a sensibility, a way of reading with, against, and beyond orthodoxy, a way to demonstrate how the category of belief itself delimits a faith that is enacted and enfleshed between and among different bodies, opening up to alternate theological orientations grounded in somatic possibilities for love, justice, and radical embrace. Historically, the category of belief in the project of Western theology has often led to violence and violation, stipulating what has been understood as properly Christian identity and agency in contrast to what is not. Theology has been about whiteness and whiteness is a way to think the world, a violent encounter, and an acceptance of violence and violation as a way of life, as quotidian and axiomatic. To use J. Kameron Carter’s words, theology has functioned as cultural property of the West. Theology as cultural property of the West attempts to force subaltern black religious experiences into a systematic coherence and conceptual clarity, which imprisons and violates the diverse, cacophonous nature of such religious experiences and meanings. Azusa cuts against this Western theological propensity of domesticating, violating, and “violencing” black religious experiences.

Troubling Orthodoxy: Azusa

Started in 1906 by an illiterate, itinerate black clergyman, William Seymour, along with black washerwomen and black janitors in Los Angeles, California, the Azusa Street revival was an intergenerational, interreligious, interracial, and global movement. Women and men preached to each other, prayed together, and laid hands on one another. Children danced, shouted, and prophesied with audacious conviction and agency. Chinese, Mexican, German, Irish, and African Americans testified and worshiped together, often greeting each other by declaring, “I am saved, sanctified, and prejudiced removed.” Lasting for three years, this revival’s enfleshment of an expanded sociality can be contrasted to the dominant ecclesial and juridical institutions of the day that upheld racial apartheid and white superiority. This revival drew
thousands of people from around the world, as people sought to be initiated into an experience of the Spirit that was simultaneously social and political in character.

I will argue that a somatic-centered Afro-Pentecostalism a la Azusa provides an alternate way of reading black flesh and Spirit, a de-colonial reading that brackets doctrinal and creedal formulations as first-order movements in reflecting on the meanings of Spirit/black flesh. But first, what do I mean by Pentecostalism, a term rife with contestation and diverse meanings? For much of Pentecostal scholarship in the West (i.e. Amos Yong and Cheryl Sanders), Pentecostalism is understood as a valence of Protestant Christianity, operating within the horizon of Christian theology. Pentecostalism in theological literature has simply been seen as a focus on pneumatology, holding the indwelling of the Trinitarian Spirit at the center of its understanding of Christian piety and transformation.\(^4\) But should we read early Afro-Pentecostals at Azusa Street certainly use Christian materials but is all that is happening here an inflection and emphasis on an aspect within the system of Christian theology, being pneumatology and glossalalia? I want to answer these questions with a loud “no.” These are the questions my talk will address.

The After-life of Azusa: The Specter of Black Flesh/Spirit

Afro-Pentecostalism a la Azusa allows me to think black flesh/Spirit together. And the after-life of Azusa continues to persist in spectral form by haunting and unsettling Christian theology and its categorical distinctions in the present, distinctions which necessarily involve projects of violence and violation upon subaltern religious experiences. After offering a distinction between flesh and body as well as the problematic genealogies of “flesh” associated with Christian thought, I will discuss how Azusa and its ecstasies/erotics of black flesh haunt Christian theology in spectral form, insisting that black religious experiences be freed up from both theological and secularist epistemologies and structures, thus able to forge new theological knowledge and practices oriented toward alterity.

The Future of the Black Sacred: Language of Poiesis & Somatic Imaginaries

Finally, I will turn to a discussion on the future of the black sacred. The black sacred entails envisioning futures through the language of poiesis. In Poetics of Relation, Edouard Glissant does not describe poetics as simply about a style of writing but also modes knowing, being, and acting in the world. For black religious experiences, poetics is an approach and process which acknowledges the discontinuities and opacity that black sacred experiences often bring due to the ways in which marginalized histories have been disrupted and shattered. Black flesh/Spirit then must be grasped poetically as a relation, an endless becoming. This relation, as being-in-the-world, is manifold,
dynamic, indeterminate, not fully known, given to opacity, known through utterances but not fully utterable. But this indeterminacy is not a weakness, as systematized accounts of theology often presume. Instead, we can imagine this indeterminacy through a poetics. Following Glissant, poetics is a practice of engaging the world, in engaging what is not fully known, what is opaque, silent, and indeterminate in order to risk being transformed by such unsayability and unknowability.\(^5\) This practice engages what is not fully known even as this unknowability whispers and utters the contours of an alternate world. Poiesis is about such creative making in the world and in thought, to use Mayra Rivera’s words. We can never fully grasp Spirit/black flesh but we can imagine it through a poetics.

This language of poiesis makes way for somatic imaginaries. As discussed, the ways in which Spirit moves in and through black flesh and by extension all flesh at Azusa births forth somatic possibilities toward transformation. These somatic possibilities cannot be fully captured in pre-given Western systematized accounts (in the language of theory), as these systematized accounts are modes of cognition that attempt to repress the uncouth, wild, and unruly excesses of of experience and imagination. Spirit/black flesh contains an excess, a plentitude of meanings, which cannot be domesticated into systematic and categorical coherence. This excess which grounds somatic imaginaries enunciates an expanded sociality, an alternate way of being together grounded in radical alterity, marked by loving, living and desiring each other.

The future of the black sacred is about a togetherness that is imagined through somatic imaginaries which centralize Spirit/black flesh. At Azusa, participants believed that one needed to be in the world as an agent of radical alterity, which is about a somatic openness to others while establishing one’s own claim to move through the world differently. As Ashon Crawley intimates, alterity is about how one thinks and enfleshes the relation of difference. Systematized accounts of theology and their categories obtain and think difference by way of its exclusion, as difference is interpreted as an aberration of what is “pure,” normative, or virtuous. In contrast, radical alterity disrupts and ruptures this way of “thinking difference.”\(^6\) Difference is not something to be excluded or excised from pure thought or practice. Instead, the relation of difference is thought and embodied diasporically. As Glissant intimates, diasporic epistemologies have always acknowledged multiplicity in unity, a plentitude of meanings that can exist together, enlarging and dilating our view of ourselves, others and the world. This way of thinking and valuing difference is a spirited fleshly practice that enacts love, life and possibilities as a critique to a violent, violating world that seeks to expunge difference and consequently contract a sense of togetherness and expanded sociality.

We must turn to the language of poiesis to imagine this excess, this plentitude of meanings and modes of togetherness associated with the black sacred such as Azusa. Through such poetic imaginings, we might “conjure other worlds, other bodies.”\(^7\) When
I speak of other bodies, I use Rivera’s understanding of “glorious bodies” as “bodies we cannot see, relationships not yet perceived, ways of life few can dream.” If “bodies” are discursive creations, then bodies can be discursively remade and re-articulated in new ways, according to new relationships. Glorious bodies are new ways of naming and valuing flesh, relationships and social ways of being together that perhaps can only be imagined and spoken about through a poetics.

2 Theology as cultural property of the West is a term that J. Kameron Carter employs in his book, Race: A Theological Account (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Carter foregrounds the multiple legacies implicated in the production of a racialized world and places Christianity at the center of this Western colonial, cultural production.
4 Classical studies in Pentecostalism describe Pentecostalism as a 20th century denomination grounded in a doctrinal distinction surrounding the Spirit, holiness, sanctification, and glossallalia. For example, Vinson Synan, The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century describes Pentecostalism’s origins pre-Azusa and primarily interprets Pentecostalism in relation to doctrinal distinctions and dogma.
7 Mayra Rivera, Poetics of the Flesh (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 115
8 Ibid.