Notes on Spiritual (in)Coherence*
By Taylor Renee Aldridge

Some of my most lucid memories are enmeshed in my time growing up in a Baptist church in Detroit — a city with no shortage of Black spiritual institutions. My family and I weren’t devout church attendees, but Sunday mornings often involved waking up early, sliding into tight, itchy stockings and a dress that I didn’t want to wear, and gathering myself to be ushered into mahogany pews at the Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church. I would later find out this was the same church where the renowned Reverend Frederick G. Sampson would serve as a mentor to the honest, sometimes inflammatory, and now infamous Jeremiah Wright.

One Sunday in the late ’90s, my family and I were seated in the Tabernacle pews located on the right side of the pulpit. I recall the smell of mildew that pervaded the old building, along with a pungent scent of women’s perfume. I tapped my shoes on the scarred black linoleum floor while the reverend preached fiercely. Something stirred within me; it was one of the first moments that I felt a visceral response of joy and revelry, inspired by rapid music, the gospel chorus, the “amens” that jumped out from all areas of the congregation, and the intrepid cadence of the preacher who dominated the extemporization of it all. That day, at the age of seven or eight, I pulled myself up out of the pew by a conviction that did not feel as if it were entirely my own. I carried myself to the altar to voice that I had been saved, and sought baptism. The lights landed bracingly on my face, the air felt different — warm, thick, encouraging. Soon after, and to the delight of the entire congregation, my father — a former Catholic altar boy, who was then a self-proclaimed agnostic — followed, joining me in our public admission of Christ. The church would later remark it was some divine happenstance.

Tabernacle would be the first time I committed myself to a public renunciation. A public claiming of a spirit and faith. It would be the first time I’d see a person sanctified, or possessed by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, I would experience a litany of rituals: rituals that remind us we exist, rituals that remind us to continue doing so. The corporeal movements remain indelible: liturgical dancers dressed in white, gesturally representing scripture and gospel. Women in large, brimmed hats and shiny skirt suits who capitulated with force, collapsing their necks, heads, and backs. People falling out as if all around them didn’t matter. Other women who ran to provide tissue and fans for the fallen. A preacher conceding to an omnipresent spirit while consoling possessed bodies from the podium. The bodily admission manifested an unrelenting curiosity in me: How could you commit to a fall without knowing if someone would catch you? What are they feeling in that moment of collapse? Where do they go? What comes to them?

In recent years, I’ve come to realize that these acts, associated with certain denominations of Black Protestantism, such as Pentecostal and Apostolic faiths, were inadvertent lessons in vulnerability. I’ve become enamored with this state, in which we are exposed, open to some unforeseeable spirit. The scholar Ashon T. Crawley beautifully describes the aesthetics of “Blackpentecostalism” as “operat[ing …] through irreducible openness, never adhering to containment, to producing specific performative behaviors during specific, predetermined moments of church services.” Yet, I was a closeted queer person growing up in a space that
fundamentally functions through patriarchal and heteronormative orders; being open about these specific curiosities and impulses was (and is) considered blasphemous. I would eventually drift away from this sacred space, finding refuge in other forms of communion. I now appreciate how religion enables collectivity, study, even imaginative movements toward freedom in spaces beyond church. I see the parallels between explicitly Christian sites of sanctuary and explicitly queer spaces of refuge; each providing opportunities for spiritual and somatic surrender.

While visiting the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles earlier this year — the largest LGBT archive in the world — I read an article connecting Pentecostal, sexual, and spiritual enlightenments through personal testimony. “BLACKBERRI: Searching for My Gay Spiritual Roots,” is in the June 1990 issue of BLK magazine, which happens to feature feminist icon Barbara Smith on the cover. Blackberri — a self-proclaimed member of the radical faerie tradition, a queer identity that locates spirituality in secularism — articulates links between his first spiritual experience in a Pentecostal church, his sexuality, and his initiation into the Yoruba Religion. Blackberri writes, “That summer night I lay on the floor of a small Pentecostal Church: trembling, shaking, and speaking in a language I had never spoken before.” He would have another religious experience in 1984, as a Yoruba initiate. “At my first Bimbe [celebration for God or Goddess], the spirit moved amongst the people. Listening to the drums, the singing, the dancing and seeing spirit possession took me back to my Pentecostal experience…” This testimony marks distinct bodily gestures connecting Westernized Christian beliefs practiced by Black folks with African traditions suppressed through colonization and chattel slavery after the Middle Passage. Blackberri represents an African spiritual diaspora, buttressed by queerness.

This spiritual diaspora is embedded in the New Waves! Dance and Performance Institute in Port of Spain, Trinidad. I’d come to the institute in 2018 intending to observe — a collaborator of mine, a choreographer, was there participating in the daily movement workshops — but my plans to be a passive gawker were immediately thwarted: I was told that observation without participation was not permitted, and deeply “colonial.” The New Waves! founder, Makeda Thomas, has been facilitating the institute for several years; the space — exclusively dedicated to African and Caribbean futurisms, ancestral spirituality, embodied practices, and most importantly, Black liberation — required collective fellowship in corporeal movement.

I found myself in dance class, working through this unanticipated shift as an untrained dancer. The first workshop I participated in was led by Haitian movement artist Jean-Sébastien Duvilaire. It began with chanting, song, and call-and-response praise in Kreyòl. I recalled Tabernacle Baptist, and the nature of Black spiritual worship; as energy is exchanged, mutual expression enables spirit conjuring.

Duvilaire taught us about the break, a corporeal state which originates from the heart or the head. The break at the head produces a jerking of the neck so that the head falls back, eyes rolling with it, face looking to the sky. This break causes an equilibrium shift, while the break of the heart allows the center of the body to collapse, creating a trembling through the body — both enabling an opening, an exposure. The front of the neck, the chest, and the pelvis are projected and pronounced, as the back bends (as it breaks), creating a rupture. We know if we are doing it correctly, Duvilaire tells us, if we feel somewhat out of control. It is a physical act of submission allowing for bodily dispossession; an opening up to let spirits in. I think about those church
ladies in the aisle of Tabernacle breaking their backs, letting the spirit in, relinquishing control. I consider the queer, African, and Pentecostal spiritual trajectory of the performer Blackberri, and how Black people become liberated through somatic dispossessio in various places of worship and reverence.

The Pentecostal tradition, which so heavily evidences the residue of African traditions — (dis)possession, chanting, shouting, and collective expression — is sustained through the public admission of belief and vulnerability. What differentiates Pentecostalism from other forms of Protestantism is the distinct custom of communication; as scholar George Eaton Simpson has written, belief is enabled through “verbal agreement,” through a “correspondence in sentiments” — a personal communication with God that allows for the transition from theory to embodiment.

In Alice Walker’s novel The Color Purple, the narrator and protagonist, Celie, takes up this practice of correspondence through sentiment. As she does so, her perception of God changes from a central white male figure to an omnipresent force, a shift that runs parallel to and ultimately informs her severance from the Black nuclear family, encouraging her to leave her abusive husband, Mr. ___. Celie’s evolution occurs through her relationship with the fierce Shug Avery — a sexually liberated queer entertainer, and Celie’s eventual lover. Shug asks Celie, “Tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did.” She goes on to declare, “Any God I ever felt in church, I brought with me.”

Celie, Shug, and their God become queer. To invoke Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s definition, “queer in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in the ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist…” Shug has empowered herself to determine when and how she will encounter the Spirit: by choice, not by happenstance. Through Shug’s eyes, God is errant, and in all places — sacred and secular.

During my visit to Trinidad, I was encouraged to participate in what is referred to as a dotish tour; a twelve-hour tour of Trinidad’s Indigenous land and history which begins around 9 p.m. and extends well into the late morning. The term dotish is a colloquial Trinidadian term that (as I would find out through first-hand experience) translates as a state of being dumb or forgetful. In other words, the all-nighter tour elicits a state of incoherence and fogginess for the attendee. I attended on the eve of Emancipation Day, which called for a very special tour through an Orisha shrine and breakfast with representatives of descendants of the island’s Indigenous people.

I took a cab to the departure destination, where food and coffee were offered to begin the night. About an hour later, about two dozen of us crawled into two vans and journeyed to the bush of Arima, stopping twice due to car issues. I had known no one longer than a day or two, at most, and a few hours, at the least. Perhaps I should’ve been afraid, but I was the calmest I had probably ever been in my life. We arrived first at an Orisha shrine at someone’s home. There was a tent, lit with inviting scents and drum rhythms. A woman carried a small man over to the side of the enclosure; he had been possessed and was tired after the spirit mounted then left his body. Throughout the night, priests and priestesses reminded us that it was the eve of
Emancipation Day, that we should shout, clap, dance to honor those who endured the Middle Passage and chattel slavery for centuries on the island.

A short, older Black man with a lengthy rope dangling from his waist tossed rum across an altar installed in the middle of the tent, inviting women to dance with him. Whether because the site was new for me and the dynamics of engagement deeply heteronormative, or because practicing worship movement had been so buried in my past, I felt the need to retreat to the perimeter of the space to thwart the invitation as much as I could. I watched as almost every woman I came with obliged his outstretched hand. He eventually made his way to me. And I refused to commit to what felt like an extreme exposure. I recalled Duvalaire’s lesson in focusing on the heart and head to allow for the break. Yet, I was paralyzed, too cerebral, and my heart continued to cower in my chest.

I remembered my time in Tabernacle church, fascinated by my willingness to surrender to the feeling of spiritual worship at such a young age. Marveling at the dancers and those carrying the orisha, I remembered those women who allowed themselves to be touched by the Holy spirit. Yet, here I decided not to concede. And I couldn’t quite figure out why I was so reluctant to expose myself in that shrine. What happens when we can’t break? How can I return my body to that adolescent spiritual memory in order to open up to a mode of bodily and spiritual surrender — to yield control?

In the days that followed, I sought to take up the practice of bodily surrender in the dance workshops provided. I promised myself I’d carry those cues beyond the island, commit to openness and exposure. On one of the final days, I submerged myself in the Atlantic Ocean in the presence of friends, promising to maintain a practice of vulnerability, as I did that day at Tabernacle church as a child.

This journeying back to that adolescent body, a body open to collectivity and omnipresent subjection, has become a ritual of daily desiring. It looks like a goddess pose, like crying in public when I need a release. It looks like exposing myself during fellowship with friends; dancing until I feel safe, free, and held enough to be irreducibly open. It looks like perpetual body scans to make sure my heart and head are available for exposure — allowing for the break, allowing for whatever needs to be let in.

The concept of exposure perhaps seems antithetical to this moment (and even fatal), but this practice has grown even more significant as opportunities for touch and proximity become distant memories. In those fleeting moments of my practice — where I work to abandon thought, and I lead with my body into the unknown — it feels like a brief edging toward a specific kind of freedom that has been there all along. Not a sovereignty that is perpetually evading capture, but rather a release that is always assured, always mine.
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