

Where is the Theology?

Brenda Dixon Gottschild

Where is the Theology? was commissioned by Jaamil Olawale Kosoko to accompany his piece *Séancers*, presented at Black Box teater as part of the Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival program 2018. This essay is re-published by Black Box teater with the permission of the author.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild is an award-winning author, Professor Emerita of Dance studies at Temple University, and a freelance writer, consultant, performer and lecturer. Among her many honors for leadership and scholarship, she was awarded a 2017 Pew Fellowship in the Arts. Her books include *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* (awarded the 2001 Congress on Research in Dance Award for Outstanding Scholarly Dance Publication), and *The Black Dancing Body – A Geography from Coon to Cool* (awarded the 2004 de la Torre Bueno prize for scholarly excellence in dance publication).

Circling. In Africanist¹ spirit tradition, the circle is the architecture that predicates existence and encompasses our being/nonbeing. Birth, earthly life, physical death, and afterlife are concentric, overlapping, contiguous spheres of ongoing endeavor. Overlap is key here: literally and metaphorically, practically and conceptually, the circle is non-linear, represents multidimensional space, and bridges dimensions, divides, and borders of human understanding.

Crossing. Crossings. Crosses. Crossroads—the cosmic X—is a potent signifier in Black theologies. So much happens where roads of all kinds, physical and metaphysical, intersect. Legend has it that musical genius Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads in Mississippi. In global Yoruba practice this meeting place is potent enough to have a designated guardian. Eshu, in Nigeria; Exú, in Brazil (Candomblé); Echú, in Cuba (Santería); Legba, in Haiti (Vodun)—all are names for the deity of the crossroads. The cross is not linear. It intersects netherworld and earthground, shares horizontality and verticality, past, present and future. It exudes magic: The X can be a hex. Go to the crossroads to barter and parley with the paranormal and/or converse clairvoyantly.

An X spans the floor of the performance space for *Séancers*. Poised at this crossroad, near

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1 African and Diasporic African, including African-American.

the beginning of the work, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko slowly completes a full circle around a pond of white tulle. It's a powerful, fleeting moment, but one that I remember. Who is he—a Yoruba priest?² Seeker of the coolest partner on the dance floor? Under-the-radar/over-the-top voguer? Alter ego performance artist? All of the above? Yes—a resounding “Yes”—and more. Let us call him a “latter day saint” personifying Africanist theologies in his passionate pursuit of truth through a Black lens, in a Black space.

Like Kosoko's previous works, including *Black Male Revisited* (hereafter referred to as *BMR*) and *#negrophobia*, his concern in this movement-music-visual theater discourse is our endangered Black identity which must be nurtured and nourished with a mojo strong enough to fend off the constant threat of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”³

Audre Lorde. Ruby Sales. African-American women representing African-American cultures. Two approaches—one perspective. The poet-activist and the theologian-activist, both working in the tradition and spirit of making a place for a Black space that, on the American continent, has been appropriated, stolen, raped, bartered, bought and sold, desired and demeaned—but we are still here. As Junot Díaz said, “I’m a child of blackness. Blackness was not meant to survive, and we have survived. And we have thrived. And we’ve given this world more genius than we have ever received.”⁴ Díaz speaks of “radical hope as our

best weapon.”⁵ This is the territory that *Séancers* traverses. Kosoko is also holding words from *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*: “Nothing can come between a man and his ego except a woman, black, with history on her side...”⁶ May I live to see the day! I delight in the majesty of those words, the nobility of the sentiment, and I long for the time when this radical hope actually comes true.

Séancers—a collective, cultural memoir; an Afrofuturist magical mystery tour in which Lorde's and Sales' work are front and center. The first words spoken are from Lorde's poem, “Power”: “I have not been able to touch the destruction within me.” With the help of these two womanist, sisters, mothers, lovers—priestesses, if you will—Kosoko tilts the balance away from the destruction embodied in his birth mother, who appeared in his two

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- 2 In Haitian Vodun, when two priests (houngans) or priestesses (mambos) meet at the beginning of a ceremony, they circle each other in mutual acknowledgment and respect.
- 3 This phrase attributed to bell hooks. See George Yancy, opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/10/bell-hooks-buddhism-the-beats-and-loving-blackness
- 4 Krista Tippet on Being with Junot Díaz, Sept. 14, 2017, onbeing.org/programs/junot-diaz-radical-hope-is-our-best-weapon-sep2017
- 5 www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/under-president-trump-radical-hope-is-our-best-weapon
- 6 Jaamil Kosoko performance program, Philadelphia Performance Garage, July 27, 2017, quoting from *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*.

previous pieces, toward a vision that offers life after whiteness—life beyond the “free, white, and 21” recording that pierces the action (a brilliant sound design by composer Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste).

Kosoko’s performance spaces are rife with the props he uses to represent his worldview, a perspective revealed to us through his repurposing of odd throwaway items. Blowup figures, wigs, fabric, antiquated children’s toys take on haunting connotations as he deploys them in exploring “... the fatal axis where Blackness and queerness collide. Fatal because the coupling of these two identities often times equates to premature Black death.”⁷ A toy horse head becomes a stereotype of Black male hypersexuality. It appeared prominently in *BMR* and *#negrophobia* and is one of the lesser props making an appearance, but not alluded to, in *Séancers*. It’s as though this and other threads of Kosoko’s past are always with him; but the forces that drove *#negrophobia* and *BMR*—the “stoned... suicidal mama,”⁸ the murder of his brother, the words of James Baldwin—are transmogrified through the spirit power of Lorde’s poem of outrage and Sales’ homily of love. Channeled through the “unapologetically Black”⁹ bodies of Kosoko and Baptiste, Lorde’s and Sales’ combined energies equate, respectively, as the Yoruba deities Oya (goddess of the wind, powerful sorceress) and Yemoja (the divine mother).

Séancers is “unapologetically Black”—to borrow critic Wesley Morris’ marvelous phrase.¹⁰ We are ushered into a Black space that is séanced,

parametered, and nuanced by Lorde’s and Sales’ words and Kosoko’s body. Being unapologetically Black and alternative, is part of the Black millennial culture of empowerment—from Black Lives Matter to BlackGirlMagic to innumerable social media hashtags and Facebook pages (like “binders full of women and non-binary people of color in academia”; “binder full of people of color in the art world”; “Black women who meditate,” and more). Black. Being Black during the Obama years, when the deep-rooted disease of white supremacy spread its viral poison in response to a Black president. Black. Being Black in the “unapologetic” era of a new white supremacist regime in the White House, giving Kosoko’s work—and Lorde’s and Sales’ words—a renewed urgency, entitlement and agency. Black. Being Black “. . . in a country that for so long has refused to see our full selves, we can see one another. Why should anybody have to apologize for that?”¹¹ We won’t. Not any more!

7 Calvin Warren, “Onticide” quote by Jaamil Kosoko, email to Brenda Dixon Gottschild, July 26, 2017.

8 From “mama: a litany,” in Jaamil Kosoko, *Notes on an Urban Kill-Floor, Poems for Detroit*, POVISMO/PRESS, 2011, pp. 22–23. Kosoko recites this poem in *#negrophobia*.

9 See notes, below.

10 Wesley Morris, New York Times “T” online magazine, July 25, 2017.

11 *ibid.*

Lorde's poem talks about poetry, rhetoric, power, brutality, repression, and the interplay or disconnect between these contending forces. Sales offers a counter-narrative, ending on a question about white endeavor. She comes from the Black Southern activism that she describes as "...both a counter-culture and counter-narrative, all deeply rooted in the work that began in the fields during slavery."¹² Choosing these two texts encompasses a broad swath of Black intellectual, theoretical, political, theological, aesthetic endeavor. Kosoko allows Sales' words of homiletic wisdom to penetrate his being. The spirit of her message envelops him—her spirit enters and embraces him and speaks through him. He mouths her words as his body reverberates their power. He incarnates her. Yemoja has entered and is speaking through him, questioning the place and space for a theology, Black or white. The Ruby Sales monologue ultimately puts the burden of racism where it rightfully belongs—in the lap of white folks. It is a teaching moment, a watchful learning. This work is a convergence of Africanist pasts presents futures—an intersecting circularity that spins at the crossroads and invites spirit-speak, as in cosmic questions like "where is the theology?" Axé

12 "Spiritual Activism, A Conversation with Ruby Sales," Harvard Divinity School, April 10, 2017, published April 17, 2017, <https://youtu.be/7fElaln0lj4>