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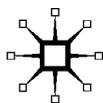
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# Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World

*James A. Noel*

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BLACK RELIGION AND THE IMAGINATION OF MATTER IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD

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To my wife, Diana Nieves Noel and  
my children: Michelle, Kaiya, Daniel, and Amada;  
My deceased brother, Rodney Noel;  
my Pastor, the late Rev. Dr. H. Eugene Farlough, Jr.;  
my teacher, Dr. Charles H. Long;  
and the Saints where I served as Pastor at:  
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City, CA;  
Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church in Richmond, CA, and  
New Liberation Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, CA.

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## Introduction

The phrase “imagination of matter”<sup>1</sup> was coined by Charles H. Long and is central to the conceptual framework that informs the methodology of the many students in the history of religions, African American studies, and the study of black religion. Long was Professor in the History of Religion Department at University of Chicago’s Divinity School along with his colleagues Mircea Eliade and Joseph Kitagawa. His book, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (1986), was reprinted in 1995 and is treated as a classic by many scholars in the History of Religions field. It is slowly dawning on scholars that Long’s thought is indispensable for understanding the nature of religion in the modern period.<sup>2</sup>

This book while exploring the nature of black religion is also the first sustained discussion and application of Long’s thought by a single author and is envisioned as an initial contribution to a more sustained project that investigates the nature of black religion within the Atlantic World’s geo-temporal framework. This book attempts to describe the way modernity was constituted and brought into being by new modes of imagining materiality that occurred within and during the period of the Atlantic slave trade. I understand modernity to be something that emerges from the reciprocal interaction of global economic exchanges, technological advances, cultural symbols and expressions, epistemological categories, and subjectivities/identities that differentiated themselves in Western Europe beginning in the long sixteenth-century conquest, colonialism, and slavery were integral to this process. Race was one of modernity’s epistemological categories that materialized into white, black, and other identity formations. But, since the category of race presupposes an entire world view concerning how the cosmos or world is and ought to be ordered it is not isolated from what we call “religion.” Broadly conceived, religion is not separate from matter. The gods were imagined

through primary material forms. In turn, religion determines how matter is conceived. In Long's thought, materiality is the entire network of contacts and exchanges that humans have with each other, nature, and the invisible forces of the cosmos. This is also the way I am describing religion. Racial identity represents a new mode of being human in the world and, therefore, will be conceived of as a new mode of materiality. Religion is implicated in this because the racialized groups that appear in modernity imagine their selves and the cosmos through religious symbols. The category of "race" that was imposed on racialized groups was initially a religious construct as much as anything else. Thus, the imagination of matter encompasses the self and the cosmos. It is a religious act that operates at the archaic level of consciousness. Since the archaic is not amenable to direct observation, its description requires interpretation—a hermeneutic. This book concerns itself with the original consciousness that constituted religious subjects in the historical space of the Atlantic World.

This book's central argument is that the religious subject and the religious object make their phenomenological appearance simultaneously and the hermeneutical problem in the study of black religion is that of apprehending and describing their mutual appearance. This task is further complicated by the fact that the religious subject has been objectified and signified by the Other's epistemological discourse. In this discourse, the West has posited non-whites and colonized peoples as primitives and, therefore, as the inferior—the dialectical opposite of the West as civilized and superior. But the conquest, slavery, genocide, and colonialism that structured the primitive/civilized dichotomy has been denied and silenced. This is what Long calls the "negative structure of concreteness" and another way he thinks about "materiality." The origin of race and the origin of religion are connected to these materialities and the Atlantic World is the geo-political space where these materialities make their historical appearance.

The nature of the task assumed by this book requires a more circular than linear approach. My contention is the methodological problem in the study of black religion has to do primarily with the issue of how one understands the religious subject and object and only secondarily with other matters. I explore the way black religion and its exemplars are constituted through the imagination of matter on both sides of the subject-object epistemological framework of Western culture. Black folks were imagined as objects through the

discursive practices of their oppressors, and they overcame objectification through their own imagination and religious practice. To intuit what was involved in this process, we must circle around the problem because religious experience is not directly observable or amenable to linguistic description. In placing the genesis of black religion within the historical framework of the “long sixteenth century,” I am viewing it as one of modernity’s fundamental components. It is an essential component of modernity’s epistemological categorizations and subjectivities. Although the chapters of this book are not sequenced linearly but approach the study of black religion from various angles of vision, there are certain categories that are applied in each chapter: contact and exchange, imagination, materiality, opacity, silence, and signification. The interrelated meta-questions are: Under what conditions do black people first appear?—to themselves?—to others? How was God perceived during this appearance through their various modes of cultural expression?

In chapter one, “Studying Black Religion: Contacts/Exchanges and Continuities/Discontinuities,” I assert a thick description of black people’s religious experience that indicates black identity or, if you prefer,—black consciousness—was constituted through their religious experience. Phenomenologically speaking, black religion and black people appeared simultaneously. Black people are visible and material; their religious consciousness is not. The material aspect of blackness required something immaterial—black religion—to make it manifest. Therefore, black religion is involved and implicated in the manifestation of the new form of materiality represented by black people themselves. This appears in the midst of the contacts and exchanges of the Atlantic World. Chapter two, “The Age of Discovery and the Emergence of the Atlantic World” provides an historical overview of the way the Atlantic World was constituted through the slave trade. In chapter three “The Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World’s Political Economy,” I discuss Long’s concept of the imagination of matter by showing how his is distinct from his former colleague Mircea Eliade’s. I attempt to demonstrate how this was played out in Western history by focusing on the Roman Church’s understanding of grace and the way Luther’s attack on Indulgences affected the Church’s material base. I discuss Karl Marx’s definition of the commodity in *Capital* as a form of fetish before discussing William Peitz’s study of the history of the concept of the fetish as something that arose out of the contacts and exchanges between Portuguese and West African traders during the end of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In

chapter four, “Being, Nothingness, and the ‘Signification of Silence’ in African American Religious Consciousness,” I utilize several categories from the Christian mysticism such as the “Dark Night of the Soul” and “the Cloud of Unknowing” in conjunction with the Hegelian notion of “Non-Being” to explore the Middle Passage experience and tie it in with Long’s notion of the “signification of silence.” My description and exploration of nothingness in the black experience relies heavily on Martin Heidegger. This chapter understands the categories of “silence” and “nothingness” in the black experience to demarcate and constitute the hyphen in continuity-discontinuity discussed in chapter one and African American discussed in relation to Du Bois’s notion of “double consciousness.”

In chapter five, “Epistemologies Opaque: Conjuring, Conjecture, and the Problematic of Nat Turner’s Biblical Hermeneutic,” I argue that by relegating African slaves to the realm of materiality the West rendered them opaque. And thus their ways of knowing and experiencing the world was made opaque to the West’s epistemological gaze. What Long terms the “empirical Other” becomes exempt from Western knowledge. This is evident when we try to understand Nat Turner’s Confession. This chapter attempts to make the unintelligibility Turner’s biblical hermeneutic intelligible. In chapter six, “The Mulatto as Material/Sexual Site of Modernity’s Contacts and Exchanges,” I describe how black people make their appearance in modernity through discursive practices that relied heavily upon the U.S. legal apparatus. We can observe the imagination of matter through legal minds that succeeded in determining the boundary between blacks and whites by focusing on the category of the “mulatto.” In chapter seven, “‘The Signification of Silence’ Revisited: African American Art and Hermeneutics,” I argue that African American art is one of the most productive sites for excavating the “archaic” in African American consciousness. It is only in this sense that African American art can function as “text.” Perhaps we should substitute the term “site” instead. “Archaism,” according to Long, “is predicated on the priority of something already there, something given. This ‘something’ may be the bodily perceptions, as it is for Alfred North Whitehead and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, or *a primal vision of aesthetic form*, as it is for the artist” (my emphasis). In chapter eight, “The Meaning of the Moan and Significance of the Shout in Black Worship and Culture and Memory and Hope,” I posit a phenomenology of the African American worship experience that is comprised of two modalities existing in a dialectical relationship

with each other: the moan and the shout. I even assert that these two modalities—the moan and the shout—are present in and characteristic of all African American cultural expressions. I also extend this phenomenological analysis to discuss African American consciousness and identity in terms of the modalities of memory and hope. Memory is to hope what the moan is to the shout. In chapter nine, “The Salsa/Jazz/Blues Idiom and Creolization in the Atlantic World,” I trace the African roots of the salsa music genre as an example of how creolization happens in the Americas. In so doing, I offer an approach to a nonessentialist understanding of African American identity, religion, and culture as a mode of subjectivity.

I hope the sequencing of these chapters will make historical and phenomenological sense to the reader. We notice that chapter one begins historically in Africa and addresses the issues of retentions, and continuities/discontinuities between Africa and the Americas. Chapters two and three situate the study within a description of exchanges constituting the Atlantic World. Chapter four has the Middle Passage as its foci explored phenomenologically under the categories of “nothingness” and “silence.” Chapter five moves from “nothingness” and “silence” into what is revealed in one of black religion’s manifestations—Nat Turner’s Confession—but remains, nevertheless, “opaque.” Chapter six moves from the opacity of black religion to the indeterminacy of blackness as signified in the appearance of the mulatto. Chapter seven revisits the notion of “silence” through its signification in African American cultural expressions—art. Chapter eight can be seen in continuity with the preceding chapter with regard to signification; only in this case the discussion is of the “moan,” “shout,” “memory,” and “hope.” Chapter nine posits the Afro-Caribbean music genre “salsa” as a model of “creolization” that can serve as an analogue for studying African American identity, religion, and culture. All the chapters in this study, while probing the nature of black religion, arrive at the reality of “opacity,” and “Otherness.”