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Eden Segbefia

Barnard College of Columbia University, eden.segbefia@gmail.com

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Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Manijeh Moradian, Dr. Janet Jakobsen, Michaela Harrison, Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and Justin Robinson

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Eden Segbefia

Barnard College

*May we who are plastic become like water. May we who are plastic bend our souls forged by fire.
May we melt back into ourselves. May we emerge again. May it be so. Àṣẹ.*

Preface

Àṣẹ is life force because it imbues power. Breath into stone, àṣẹ is the lung of agency. This project stemmed from two experiences, which infused àṣẹ into the core of my being, rerouting my political beliefs in the process. One. An altar. A small white cloth supported a lemon, a cup of water, a bell, and June Jordan’s *Directed by Desire*. This was the first altar of many, and at the moment I felt unsure of its significance, did it have any? The next day, its meaning paid me a visit in the form of a large, dead moth in the center of the doormat. Next, a praying mantis, also rigor mortis. It was here that the breath that exited those insectoid lives entered every pore of my being, electrifying my belief in the unknown. Two. On a trip to Bahia, Brazil, I was a witness to Michaela Harrison’s Whale Whispering project, which explores the “moan of the Middle Passage” via whale and ceremonial song (Harrison is initiated in Candomblé, an Afro-diasporic spiritual tradition for which the concept of àṣẹ is vital).¹²⁸ Surrounded by humpback whales who cried out intensely beautiful melodies through their blowholes, I was transported back to the lemon, the moth, the mantis. These nonhuman lives were much more than I had been taught. Humpback whales can immerse themselves in 700 feet of water for up to thirty minutes. Emerging from the papery thin walls of a cocoon, this inquiry, too, surfaced from the depths of the ocean. It appeared there millennia ago. I believe strongly that the personal is political but what of the spiritual? What of the limits of the personal? What of flesh and spirit intertwined or... disentangled, ruptured, by the force of the Christian colonial project?

¹²⁸ Michaela Harrison, “Whale Whispering,” Michaela Harrison website, <https://www.michaelaharrison.org/whale-whispering>.

Introduction: Àṣẹ and the Christian Colonial Heteropatriarchy

The concept of àṣẹ (pronounced \`ahh-,shay\` in Yoruba philosophy and cosmology, which has spread via Afro-diasporic manifestations of the Ifá spiritual tradition (Candomblé, Haitian Vodou, Santería, Lucumí, etc.), promotes the idea that a spiritual and generative force inhabits every being, animate or inanimate. Àṣẹ is a divine spiritual power or force that is “the actualization of a ritual utterance or command in order to effect change or to call for the materialization of a given desire (...) it is the power of sanction and authority.”¹²⁹ Through the recombination of objects or words, additional àṣẹ may be given to an object or being. Some examples of this are ebó (spiritual offering), trance possession, song, and dance. Linguistically, àṣẹ is akin to “amen,” “so be it,” “let it be done,” or the authority for something to be done. It is ultimately about power.

Many origin stories and explanations exist about the meaning of àṣẹ. While most textual definitions agree, it is crucial to note that the most accurate definitions are experiential in nature, which are often communicated orally by experienced practitioners of these spiritual traditions, not by academics. Neither English nor the written language, in general, can truly capture the essence of àṣẹ. In this study, I aim to provide an introductory explanation of the concept of àṣẹ for the purposes of accessing the reader’s speculative imagination, in which methods of decolonial thinking are mobile and hold the capacity to embrace multiplicities of meaning.

The generation of additional àṣẹ (which all beings inherit) mirrors that of the transformation from pupa to insect. From potential energy to kinetic energy. A pupa is an immobile and non-feeding being that through the process of pupation, initiated by hormones, becomes a feeding, mobile insect. The potential of a pupa becomes kinetic in its arrival to insect-hood. Non-living beings hold energy too. Simply due to the positionality or arrangement of an object and/or its components, an object can be determined to have a substantial amount of energy. This energy is then transformed, and activated, into kinetic energy, which involves movement. Thus, àṣẹ in its many forms may articulate itself within physics, biology, religion, spirituality, etc. All energy is not only intertwined but undestroyable.

As an indestructible force, àṣẹ is an example of sacred ground upon which the Christian colonial project might shatter. Here, I aim to view Afro-diasporic spiritual concepts not as the antithesis of Christian coloniality but as *a* decolonial framework that could demolish Christian coloniality and its effects. One of the effects of Christian coloniality is what Sylvia Wynter refers to as “the overrepresentation of man.” This term describes a phenomenon in which the descriptive meaning of “the human” is conflated with the “White bourgeois man.” Wynter argues that most social problems can be attributed to the notion that the “standard” human is the White bourgeois man, ignoring the vast experiences and

¹²⁹ Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005): 108.

identities of the rest of the humans on Earth. This belief upholds Christian coloniality by sanctioning the seizing of land and othering “foreign” lands and peoples in the process. The mechanisms by which the Afro-diasporic concept of àṣẹ becomes decolonial do not rely on a binary understanding of Christianity as it relates to Afro-diasporic spirituality. In other words, because Western epistemologies exist within binary thinking, some view non-Western cultures as the opposite of Western ones (centering the West as true and authentic). So, in the case of religion, and in the history of religious studies, non-Christian spiritual traditions are often perceived as “opposites” or “others.” In this essay, I argue that Afro-diasporic spiritual tradition is not the opposite of Christianity but rather *different* than. The distinction between alterity and dichotomy is an important one. In fact, a variety of examples could replace àṣẹ, especially considering that àṣẹ is a universal concept that goes by many names. However, in this case, Afro-spiritual-epistemological inquiry allows one to both reveal and deconstruct colonial epistemologies in a specific way. Investigating the decolonial aspects of the Afro-diasporic spiritual concept of àṣẹ, by way of deconstructing Christian colonialism, will reveal the religio-political and religio-scientific implications of decentering Man from the full and complete representation of the human.¹⁵⁰

The overrepresentation of man relies on religio-political and religio-scientific hierarchies. The Christian-colonial project created religio-scientific taxonomies that rely on “a white patriarchal authority.”¹⁵¹ The phenomenon of hierarchy is a vital pillar of Christian coloniality. I do not suggest that hierarchy is unique to Western Europe. However, Christian colonial hierarchies, specifically, rely not only on White patriarchal authorities themselves but the very conceptions of being that define what it means to be a *human*. A crucial manifestation of these “scientific” taxonomies is the Chain of Being, a system correlated to “the projected hierarchy of a graduated table, or Chain of all forms of sentient life,” which features classifications of “lower beings” and “higher beings.”¹⁵² This hierarchy of power is imbalanced by nature as it disproportionately distributes agency, assigning more value to humans than other beings. These hierarchies fuel White heteropatriarchy by uplifting the notion that one being can be valued over another. When àṣẹ is spoken into existence, energy not only becomes mobile, oftentimes transforming in the process, but it mobilizes to enact balance. In her text *Queer Freedom: Black Sovereignty*, Ana-Maurine Lara emphasizes that Christian coloniality “requires valuation of some lives over others, some knowledges over

¹⁵⁰ Katherine Mckittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 123.

¹⁵¹ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020): 60.

¹⁵² 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 (Fall 2003): 306.

others, some ways of being over others.”¹³³ Ultimately this hierarchization boils down to what Lara calls a “hierarchy of humanness.”¹³⁴ Mel Y. Chen refers to this hierarchy as the “animacy hierarchy.”

The Latin etymological origins of the word animate include the following: “animātus filled with life, also, disposed, inclined, f. Animāre to breath, to quicken; f. Anima air, breath, life, soul, mind.”¹³⁵ At the intersections of breath, life, and soul lies àşę. The term animacy was first popularized in the linguistic field when Michael Silverstein proposed the idea of an “animacy hierarchy,” which originated in a comparison of different languages’ tendency to rank the animacy of different subjects.¹³⁶ Mel Y. Chen uses this concept to point out that “if animacy not only works in different ways for different cultures but indicates different hierarchalization of matter, then it is critical to distinguish between relatively dominant formulations of animacy hierarchies and relatively subordinated” ones.¹³⁷ The “politically dominant” animacy hierarchies to which Chen refers are “shaped by the spread of Christian cosmologies, capitalism, and the colonial orders of things.”¹³⁸ Ultimately, Chen transforms the concept of the animacy hierarchy from a solely linguistic concept to a political one.¹³⁹ Àşę is life force and so is animacy.

Sylvia Wynter and the Overrepresentation of Man

Sylvia Wynter is a Jamaican author, playwright, and philosopher. Many of her works explore coloniality within the contexts of history, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and economics. In her essay “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” Wynter attributes “all our present struggles” to the overrepresentation of the “Western bourgeois Man” as the only standard, full, and complete conception of the human.¹⁴⁰ In the piece, she explores the varying conceptions of “Man” in the West over time, relating each to the political, scientific, and religious realities of 15th and 16th-century Western Europe.

Wynter’s work plays a vital role in this project. Similar to the fact that àşę is only one example of a decolonial framework, Sylvia Wynter’s concepts, and this article specifically, are only one means of explaining the Christian colonial

¹³³ Ana-Maurine Lara, *Queer Freedom, Black Sovereignty* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020): 7.

¹³⁴ Lara, *Queer Freedom*, 7.

¹³⁵ Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012): 3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*: 24.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*: 29.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*: 30.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Wynter, “Unsettling,” 260 and 265.

heteropatriarchy. In fact, later in this investigation, I will be calling in other interlocutors such as Audre Lorde, Ana-Maurine Lara, Karin Amimoto Ingersoll, and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson. The specific ways that Wynter examines the progression of Man and its overrepresentation elicit a provoking and complex interpretation of the pillars of Christian colonialism and its reliance on hierarchy. This interpretation reveals the role of àşẹ in subverting hierarchies of being and the Christian colonial project along with it.

Wynter uses the terms “Man 1” and “Man 2” (Man 1 as conceived during the development of the physical sciences and Man 2 conceived during the development of the biological sciences) to describe the two different conceptions of Man.¹⁴¹ There are great implications for the transition of Man, from a religious subject of the church (Man 1) to a political subject of the state (Man 2). According to Wynter, Man 1 sought to “redeem himself from enslavement to Original Sin by primarily adhering to the prohibitions of the Church.”¹⁴² The Spirit (Redeemed Destiny)/Flesh (Original Sin and Adamic fate) distinction parallels an ethno-geographical understanding of the earth as being divided into “temperate” or “habitable” landscapes and “torrid” or “uninhabitable” landscapes, which translated to the concept of “temperate” people and “torrid” people.¹⁴³ This otherization and sub-humanization of non-Western peoples as “no ones” and an extreme of the Human Other fueled the marginalization of non-western epistemologies.¹⁴⁴ Fallen Flesh then transformed into animalistic irrationality, and the Redeemed Spirit became that of human rationality.

The code of “Redeemed Spirit/Fallen Flesh” was replaced by the code of “rationality/irrationality” so that life is associated with rationality and death is associated with irrationality.¹⁴⁵ In considering rationality as a concept it is important to return to the hierarchy of epistemology. There are “politically dominant” epistemologies (“rational”), shaped by Christian colonial ideals and subordinated epistemologies (“irrational”).¹⁴⁶ Instead of choosing between Flesh (Original Sin and Adamic Fate) and Spirit (Redeemed Destiny), Man must choose between “growing downwards into the lower nature of brutes” or irrational nature or growing “upward to higher and divine natures” or rational nature.¹⁴⁷ The hierarchy was resituated, not in content but in context. The hierarchy or order shifts from one of “degrees of spiritual perfection/imperfection” (a religio-political

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*: 264 and 267.

¹⁴² *Ibid*: 277.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*: 279.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*: 266.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*: 287.

¹⁴⁶ Chen, *Animacies*, 30.

¹⁴⁷ Wynter, “Unsettling,” 287.

designation) to one of “rational perfection/imperfection” (a politico-scientific designation).¹⁴⁸

Wynter insists that the human/subhuman distinction, predicated upon the concept of race, played a large role in the formation of this new order “(resting on the relation between Man and its subjugated Human Others)” which served as the basis of modernity.¹⁴⁹ Thus, modernity hinges upon “the issue of race.”¹⁵⁰ Wynter states that “Black, had become the preferred color for the depiction of ‘demons’ and the signification of ‘sin’.”¹⁵¹ Now, Man 2 has replaced the Judeo-Christian notion of humanity, yet that theocentric order of existence has been replaced by a hierarchy of rational and irrational degrees of perfection. These degrees of perfection correlated to “the projected hierarchy of a graduated table, or Chain of Being, in which all forms of sentient life [were ranked] from those classified as the lowest to those as the highest.”¹⁵² This Chain birthed the “first ‘scientific’ taxonomy of human populations” deeming “the Negro as the projected missing link between the two sides of the rational/irrational divide,” (humans as rational and nonhuman animals as irrational).¹⁵³ The notion of a projected missing link translated to a projection of “Otherness.”¹⁵⁴ Though the former “theocentric slot of Otherness” classified non-Europeans as “Enemies of Christ,” the “secular slot of Otherness” defined non-European populations as subhuman.¹⁵⁵ This “space of Otherness” functioned to validate the socio-ontological line now drawn between the rational and irrational.¹⁵⁶ The disruption of this socio-ontological barrier would require communion between the human and the nonhuman.

Alternatives to Christian Colonial Hierarchies

What is decolonial about àşę, about the concept that every being, both animate and inanimate, has authority through divine force? How does àşę’s disruption of the Christian-colonial animacy hierarchy allow for freedom from racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy? How do different teachings and political frameworks incorporate the concept of àşę under a different name? What happens when spiritual power and political power are at odds? A compelling point within Sylvia Wynter’s essay is that one of the pillars of coloniality, and the Christian-colonial project more specifically, is the distinction between the human and the

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 288.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*: 302.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*: 306.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: 292.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*: 306.

spirit or the spirit and the flesh, which Wynter argues stemmed from otherization. Àṣẹ as a philosophical and spiritual framework disrupts the distinction between the human and the spirit or the spirit and flesh, thus rupturing otherization as a fundamental tenet of the Christian-colonial project.

Animacy most explicitly lives in Wynter’s discussion of the Spirit/Flesh code, where she associates Spirit with “symbolic life” and Flesh with “symbolic death.”¹⁵⁷ The difference between àṣẹ and animacy is that animacy, rooted in Western epistemology, is defined by a hierarchy, whereas àṣẹ depends on harmony, balance, and interrelationship. The notion of àṣẹ disrupts the notion of an animacy hierarchy because of religio-political dissonance. This dissonance is caused by the different conceptions of “Man.” A philosophical paradigm shift around animacy would allow for a literal and figurative reclamation of power by all oppressed peoples.

Western epistemology often assumes that difference and dichotomy are equivalent. The soul/spirit divide engenders difference but not dichotomy. Ana-Maurine Lara draws on Audre Lorde’s definition of difference, which insists that only “within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future.”¹⁵⁸ Interrelated difference hinges upon the lack of a complete knowledge of the unknown, while dichotomy assumes knowledge of the unknown. Karin Amimoto Ingersoll’s concept of “seascape epistemology” approaches difference as an interactive relationship rather than a rigid dichotomy.¹⁵⁹ In Ingersoll’s notion of the human/sea distinction, the human holds the capacity to commune and even become part of the sea but does not possess the capacity to become the sea. Similarly, when Wynter specifies the distinction between the human and subhuman, especially, a colonial epistemology would argue that the slippage between humans and subhumans is so great that one could not become the other; of course colonial epistemology is famously contradictory, allowing the Black individual, for example, to inhabit what Zakiyyah Iman Jackson might term an “ontologically plastic” role, traveling between the human and subhuman based on the circumstances. Conversely, Lara’s conception of the human/spirit distinction mirrors that of Ingersoll, an interrelated distinction or interdependent difference, implying that humans can embody spirits, and spirits, humans (notably through trance possession).

Àṣẹ contains multiplicities. Not only does it declare the existence of a universal energetic force, but it also allows for the creation of material space in which energetic forces may convene. This material space is often referred to as “ceremony.” For example, Bellegarde-Smith declares àṣẹ as a “domain” in which

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 278 and 279.

¹⁵⁸ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (London: Penguin Books, 2019): 111.

¹⁵⁹ Karin Amimoto Ingersoll, *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 98.

“the living and the ancestors commune and communicate.”¹⁶⁰ One major instance of communication between humans and spirits is the process of trance possession. Trance possession disturbs the Redeemed Spirit/Fallen Flesh dichotomy that Christian coloniality promotes.¹⁶¹ This dichotomy suggests that in order to escape the fates of original sin, one must desire the technically unattainable destiny of the redeemed spirit. The Church justified colonization with the notion that those who refused the Christian gospel were barbaric and therefore lost their right to land.¹⁶² Trance possession upends these religio-hegemonic legacies by balancing the power between the human, spirit, and natural worlds.¹⁶³ With Rachel Harding, I assert that àṣẹ stimulates and maintains “right relationship” and the “continuation of interdependence.”¹⁶⁴

In non-western epistemologies, difference does not inherently produce dichotomy or opposition but opens a chasm of new epistemologies via interdependence—here difference is “necessary polarity.”¹⁶⁵ According to Ingersoll, “seascape epistemology” preserves “a concern for Otherness, a relationship of respected alterity that forges rich, complex, and, paradoxically, intertwined identities.”¹⁶⁶ Given the concept of “respected alterity,” returning to Wynter’s correlation between the human and subhuman, as well as the framework of otherization, is vital in understanding the role of difference in otherization, which proves crucial in examining the human/spirit distinction from both a colonial perspective and an Afro-diasporic spiritual perspective.

Returning to Lara and the Spirit/Flesh divide, it is important to note that, as Lara writes, “Christian coloniality points to the violent and continual management of the most intimate levels of being (...) that named as alma (soul, spirit, intangible essence of personhood).”¹⁶⁷ Here, an exploration of the soul as ruptured by the colonial project, which set a precedent for the human/animal divide as it relates to race, allows for the possibility of spiritual repair. If the spiritual could suture a soul affected by colonial-induced ontological rupture, then “the hierarchy of humanness that resulted through Christian colonization” (or the animacy hierarchy) would splinter, collapsing beneath the weight of decoloniality’s rejection of “Christian theo-philosophical” concepts.¹⁶⁸ Lara promotes this

¹⁶⁰ Bellegarde-Smith, *Fragments of Bone*, 108.

¹⁶¹ Lara, *Queer Freedom*, 18.

¹⁶² Wynter, “Unsettling,” 294.

¹⁶³ Lara, *Queer Freedom*, 39.

¹⁶⁴ Rachel E. Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003): 77 and 79.

¹⁶⁵ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 111.

¹⁶⁶ Ingersoll, *Waves of Knowing*, 98.

¹⁶⁷ Lara, *Queer Freedom*, 6.

¹⁶⁸ Lara, *Queer Freedom*, 7, 13.

splintering by reminding us that “decolonization must take place on spiritual-religious grounds.”¹⁶⁹

Àṣẹ initiates transformation. One danger is that transformation or plasticity can serve Christian-colonial notions of being. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s concept of ontological plasticity “maintains that black(ened) people are (...) cast as sub, supra, and human simultaneously and in a manner that puts being in peril.”¹⁷⁰ The role of Black peoples as the physical referent or ontological other (as Sylvia Wynter might put it) is important here. The role of “Other” must be plastic because of the West’s “lack of an ontologically absolute self-description.”¹⁷¹ In other words, Western epistemology requires an Other to counter the white patriarchal notion of being human. Ontological plasticity exposes the West’s need for a plastic Other.

Though Western logic lays claim to a sturdy conception of the human, Christian coloniality actually requires Western conceptions of humanness to be flexible enough to allow for unrestricted expansion. Just as colonizers expanded their territories without restrictions, the colonial conception of Man occupies unrestricted space within the definition of the human. Thus, the “physical referent” or Other, a role that Black peoples have been pushed into, must too be plastic. This phenomenon allows the Black body to traverse between human, subhuman, and suprahuman dependent on the definition of Man that is being referenced. Ontological plasticity is a sort of “material deprivation.”¹⁷² But, what are the implications of plasticity, manifested through the concept of àṣẹ? Àṣẹ, instead, offers a framework in which all beings are inhabited by the same generative force thus creating an infinitive (not dichotomous) understanding of unification between all beings, animate and inanimate. In this framework, plasticity is wielded only to emphasize the presence of agency or force in all beings and does not require ontological shifts in accordance with hierarchies of being.

Conclusion: Intimacy in the Lives of the Dead—Àṣẹ as Refusal

Christian colonial hierarchies not only interfere with the Sacred but impede “mutual embodiment” between humans, nonhuman animals, and other beings.¹⁷³ In chapter seven of her text *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, M. Jacqui Alexander refuses Cartesian worldviews in asserting that intimacy in the context of community or communion is vital to resituating the lives of the dead (dead humans and nonhumans alike). Alexander initially uses the concept of “Mojuba,” which transforms àṣẹ from the spiritual to the material, intertwined, to reject these Cartesian worldviews. Alexander then

¹⁶⁹ Lara, *Queer Freedom*, 13.

¹⁷⁰ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 35.

¹⁷¹ Wynter, “Unsettling,” 282.

¹⁷² Wynter, “Unsettling,” 267.

¹⁷³ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press): 301.

writes that Mojuba embodies an “expansive memory” that refuses “to be housed” or encased “in the physicality of the body.”¹⁷⁴ In this chapter, and the conclusion of this paper, intimacy functions as a vehicle for àṣẹ, life force, grief, and memory to commune. Just as the material and the spiritual are intertwined, so are grief and memory.

Expanding beyond the body, Alexander describes how memory and àṣẹ live within the natural world: “Wind. Sky. Earth. Fire. Thunder (...) *otanes*, stones.”¹⁷⁵ Water as a nonhuman ally, “soaks” and “enlivens all things,” and in the process embodies the Sacred.¹⁷⁶ The ocean, specifically, plays a vital role in holding memory as a site of intense and expansive grief. Here, Alexander refers to a literal crossing of bodies during the transatlantic slave trade, but also an ontological crossing between spirit and flesh, between the human and the nonhuman. Grief, too, accompanied this crossing. Though “Sacred energies,” housed in memory, survived the crossing, Alexander argues that embodied beings nudged these energies into a state of “sentience.”¹⁷⁷

Alexander notes that “the dead do not like to be forgotten.”¹⁷⁸ Can dead human life be distinguished from nonhuman lives deemed to be void of life? If not, then the grief to which Alexander refers provides a reservoir of remembrance for both humans and nonhumans. Taking Alexander’s claims seriously, it becomes important to recognize the Sea as an absorbent force, exhibited by its capacity to act as a container for grief, both fixed and flowing. Not only do “the dead (...) not like to be forgotten,” but, as said earlier, “sentience *soaks* all things.”¹⁷⁹

The multiplicity of the “avatars of the same Sacred force” is a manifestation of àṣẹ.¹⁸⁰ The communion between the Sacred and “the material” provides ample ontological space for the breath of life or àṣẹ to both inhabit embodied beings and reintroduce these beings to themselves.¹⁸¹ Communion, whether via grief, memory, remembrance, or joy, functions as a mirror. The intimacy of the mirrored self features a bringing of the self into close “proximity with the domain of Spirit.”¹⁸² Again, one encounters an intertwining of the spiritual and material.

According to Alexander, the Crossing (of bodies/flesh and the spiritual/material) defined the body as both the “repository of sin” and the “mediator

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*: 288.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*: 289.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*: 290.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*: 292.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*: 289.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*: 290 (emphasis added).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*: 292.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*: 293.

¹⁸² *Ibid*: 295.

between the world of the living and the dead.”¹⁸³ Here, Wynter’s description of the Spirit/Flesh divide, specifically her claims regarding spirit as symbolic life and flesh as symbolic death, becomes important. What are the implications of the body (and the Black body more specifically) as the link between the living and the dead, yet also as the repository of Original sin? For Alexander, the Sacred lies at the intersection of African spiritual practices, spiritual epistemologies, and memory.¹⁸⁴ The transition from the secular to the Sacred allows for positioning “the personal as spiritual.”¹⁸⁵ The intimacy that is required to merge the textured material of the personal to the “disembodied consciousness of the Divine” does not indicate privacy but an intimacy that is social in nature.¹⁸⁶ In the context of the mirrored self this intimacy, by way of communion, simultaneously mirrors one and all, the part and the whole, disrupting the limits of linear space and time

Like Wynter and Chen, Alexander identifies “the challenge that derives from the hierarchies that are insinuated within our knowledge-making projects” (Alexander, 296). For example, what is deemed as “tradition is made subordinate to and unintelligible within, that which is modern.”¹⁸⁷ Here, the Sacred is rendered as tradition, “understood as an extreme alterity,” which “is always made to reside elsewhere and denied entry into the modern.”¹⁸⁸ These origins make it so that “African-based cosmological systems become subordinated to the European cosmos.”¹⁸⁹ In contrast, àṣẹ, both precedes and succeeds the modern. It has no need for “elsewhere” because it is intrinsic to all. It *must* be everywhere.

Àṣẹ, in its manifestation as power or authority, allows agency to be granted to beings, whether animate or inanimate, by way of a source of communal intimacy. Because àṣẹ is defined as the power to get something done, it is akin to the concept of agency and allows nonhuman animals and objects to “do” *and* “be done to.” So, what *of* the mantis, the moth, and the lemon? Why does it matter that in dominant epistemologies they matter less than in subordinated ones? What occurs when we honor nonhuman life? Upholding right relationship between humans and the (un)natural world saves the lives of many, both beings whose lives are recognized as life and beings whose lives are not. Under the regime of Christian colonialism, it is difficult to maintain right relationship but not impossible. In fact, it becomes that much more meaningful and important to, in the face of hierarchy and oppression, hold ceremony, to hold ourselves, and those we love. And in the process, we detach from all that fails to recognize the vital force within us.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*: 293.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*: 293

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*: 295.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*: 296.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

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