

Swarthmore College

Works

Religion Faculty Works

Religion

2014

Mapping Africana Religions: Transnationalism, Globalization, And Diaspora

S. A. Khabeer

Yvonne Patricia Chireau
Swarthmore College, ychirea1@swarthmore.edu

P. C. Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

S. A. Khabeer, Yvonne Patricia Chireau, and P. C. Johnson. (2014). "Mapping Africana Religions: Transnationalism, Globalization, And Diaspora". *Journal Of Africana Religions*. Volume 2, Issue 1. 128-139.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion/231>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

conversations. What it does, instead, is suggest the possible discoveries that can be pursued when we make intellectual space for so many different kinds of scholars studying so many different topics related to Africana religions.

Financial support for the symposium was generously provided by several units of Northwestern University: the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, the Department of African American Studies, the Department of Religious Studies, the Department of History, and the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities. Thanks also go to Suzette Denose and Marjorie McDonald of Northwestern University's Department of African American Studies for their invaluable assistance in planning and coordinating the symposium.

Edward E. Curtis and Sylvester A. Johnson



Mapping Africana Religions: Transnationalism, Globalization, and Diaspora

SU'AD ABDUL KHABEER, *Purdue University*

I teach a course called Anthropology and Blackness that begins with a question: what does it mean to be Black / African-descended in the Western hemisphere? During this course, we examine how anthropology as a discipline has been defined by this question and we explore the ways anthropologists, Black peoples who are not anthropologists, and others have tackled issues of Blackness, which I define to include the histories, traditions, and customs of Black people as well as the circulation of ideas and beliefs about people of African descent. Yet in looking at the relationship between anthropology and blackness, we arrive at another and more fundamental question about the nature of humanity—basically, who counts as a human? And we do so because this question has animated how Africana peoples have been studied and dominated and have deployed their own creative agency and genius. And so I believe the same kind of logic applies when we examine transnationalism, diaspora, and globalization in relation to the study of Africana religions. Studying these phenomena promises to advance our collective understanding of the broader human experience.

When using Africana peoples generally and Africana religions in particular as a starting point, one of the primary conclusions we come to is that today's diasporas and transnationalisms are not drastically new departures from past human movement across time and space, and critically, the meanings humans have given to these migrations are not new either. In my own work, which includes a focus on African American Muslims in the United States, I'm always struck by the ways African American Muslim communities across ideology, doctrine, and politics articulate the Black Muslim soul as a transnational subjectivity. And by way of diasporic consciousness, they construct religious genealogies and discursive traditions to and through Africa that labor through a shrewd mix of grace and faith to affirm and reimagine their identity as Black American Muslims. I want to briefly illustrate this point by quoting one of my interlocutors, Luqman, who in the course of a conversation on hip-hop in the American Muslim community narrated for me a discursive tradition around Africana peoples and music that began around the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and so I'm quoting, "*Salla allayhi wa salam* [peace and blessings be upon the] Prophet Muhammad, [who] had our Mother Aisha, who was his wife, against his shoulder and he was watching the Ethiopians coming into the masjid [the mosque] and whatnot, dancing and whatnot. I kind of envision reggae pumping. I envision our people getting down with drums, singing. And Prophet Muhammad, he's like, 'Yo, these cats, this is what they do,' you know what I mean? And so that I think right there, this is what I envision happening." And so in relating this vision, or his vision, of that moment in prophetic history, Luqman pictures the energy and style of contemporary Black expressive cultures as being justified as well as being continental and diasporic. In drawing these links across time and space, he is enacting a contemporary intervention because these sonic linkages supported by diasporic consciousness are offered to articulate African American Muslims as descended from the Muslim and African past. This anchors Black Muslims in traditions, spiritual and otherwise, that are comparable to both the dominant Euro-American genealogical narrative as well as the origin stories narrated by U.S. Muslims with roots in the "Muslim world."

Thus, as illustrated, this labor locates Africana peoples and times and spaces in ways that explode the narrow horizon provided by white supremacy as well as nonwhite hegemonies. And although this interview took place in the twenty-first century, the narrative construction that Luqman employs is much older and, importantly, came to be long before the Western scholarly tradition

was able to come to terms with the world as interconnected. So I find this kind of orientation particularly critical, especially when regarding Africana peoples, because their cultures are often, even to this day, bracketed off as particularly or peculiarly singular in a way that reinforces older epistemologies that question or deny their or our humanity.

I also believe that it is through the serious engagement of transnationalism, diaspora, and globalization that scholars can be attentive to and hence avoid too often repeated scholarly missteps, namely the privileging of Christianity and the reproduction of U.S. exceptionalism in the methodologies and theoretical frameworks in which Africana religions are studied. There is a problematic trend in the scholarship that privileges Christianity as the foundational experience of Africana religion and diaspora. And as such, the theological orientation, historical events, priorities, and practices of Protestant Christianity as a practice of Black peoples become the default, or proxy, for Black religiosity and thus the paradigm through which non-Christian Blacks are analyzed and interpreted, alternatively underestimated and ignored. Let me illustrate this point by referring to the really exciting, emerging body of scholarship on hip-hop and religion, an area that has been wanting for quite some time in hip-hop studies. While this is a very critical development, there is a conspicuous absence of any discussion on Islam in these studies, which I might mention is not the case in discussions of hip-hop outside the academy. This absence is striking for two reasons: firstly, because of the scholarly brilliance that the people who are leading this charge bring to the table and also, secondly, because of the historical facts. I use the word "facts" here deliberately because Islam's relevance to hip-hop's development is not some kind of obscurity that needs some interpretive gymnastics, but it is really apparent. And yet whereas more secularly oriented hip-hop scholars might frame, for example, the Last Poets, Malcolm X, and Minister Louis Farrakhan as sort of an iteration of Black nationalism devoid of any spirituality, in the religious studies conversation it only offers a sort of Christian spiritual frame, which truncates our analytical possibilities.

Take, for example, Kanye West's song "Jesus Walks." How do you engage a song like this, which although recorded under the name of Kanye West, who I believe is a Black Christian, was actually written by an emcee who is an African American convert to Islam, Rhymefest. And then the song was covered by another African American emcee, Lupe Fiasco, this time as "Muhammad Walks." And Lupe was raised a Muslim. How do we understand

the production of such music by African Americans with such diverse religious backgrounds? If we privilege Christianity, and that becomes our only frame, we miss the dynamic religious exchanges in African American culture.

To conclude, I want to address the question of American exceptionalism. Paying attention to it is important in order to resist the apparent hegemony of U.S. Black American culture. In many ways, we see the cultural flows between America and the rest of the world, as well as U.S. Blacks and the rest of the Africana world, as being unidirectional. And of course this is not the case. We can use hip-hop as an example. The origins of hip-hop were diasporic, and not simply North American. So it is important, so when we bring diaspora to the forefront we can avoid this narrow theoretical landscape. When I am thinking about keeping an eye on American exceptionalism, I am also suggesting that we need to keep an eye on power and how it may function in the study of Africana religions.

So the question that I have this: what is the relationship between Black Americans and America, not as exceptional but as empire? This is something that I find myself increasingly interested in as African American Muslims, much like twentieth-century jazz ambassadors, are participating in cultural diplomacy efforts and this time not in the Soviet bloc but in Muslim-majority nations. They are bringing “Muslim hip-hop” to Muslims. And this could be seen as potentially cooperating with empire in light of how the United States is wielding its imperial power in these same places. Yet, like the jazz ambassadors, these Muslim hip-hop artists are also motivated by domestic concerns and by their locations and experiences as religious and racial minorities. To further complicate the picture, their performances and interactions with their Muslim hosts may destabilize the kind of antiblack racism and the dismissal of African Islamic traditions that you find not just in the United States but around the world. In sum, studying the circulation of Africana religions also requires us to look at the impact of and responses to American exceptionalism and U.S. empire among African American and other African-descended religious practitioners.

YVONNE CHIREAU, *Swarthmore College*

Our mission this weekend is to inaugurate some new research agendas in the study of Africana religions, to explore, to engage, to wrestle with the intellectual formulations of our scholarship, to debate and define theoretical trends,

and to emerge as enlightened scholars ready to apply our knowledge to the most significant of concerns and questions, all with the intention of revitalizing Africana studies in religion. In the spirit of rigorous exegesis, let me start with the first notion, the notion of mapping the Africana religions. Now I don't know about anyone else, but as a religion person, I react most predictably to this term. It takes me to the mapping idea laid out by the esteemed historian of religions, Jonathan Z. Smith, who, quoting Alfred Korzybski, stated that "map is not territory, but maps are all we possess" in a wide-ranging inaugural lecture as the William Benton Professor at the University of Chicago in 1974 and later in a concluding essay in a book called *Map Is Not Territory*. Even though I admit I have not kept up with all of the most current academic literature over the years, and I'm sure that more than a few scholars in Africana religion have engaged the mapping rubric first proposed by Smith, our professor, Charles H. Long, was one of the first to insist that methodological limitations in the study of African American religions should force us to reexamine what he called the "creative possibilities of Black religion" and that the true academic study of religion requires a focused theoretical and historical analysis of its objects such as myth, ritual, and human experiences of the sacred—analysis that can be accomplished through the use of mapping strategies.

Without going into a lengthy discussion of Smith's thesis, I would say that I find his assertion that the study of religion requires a clear, self-conscious recognition of the boundaries between religion as the object and religion as the subject of study to be extremely useful as we reconsider our own roles and placement in the discourses of Africana religions. Smith understood the mapping process as securing not so much a safe place for the historian to stand and orient herself, nor as a way to chart an orderly path along the scenes of a generative chaos that could at any time erupt into placeless utopian terrain, but rather as a way of embracing an awareness of the contingency of both order and disorder. We may have to become "initiated," he said, "by the other whom we study and undergo the ordeal of incongruity." Now, some of us will find this language striking, recognizing in this statement that most central of institutions in the African and African-based religions, that is, the process of sacred transformation of the human person in initiation. But what I really find suggestive in Smith's discussion of all this mapping, constructing, and inhabiting that goes on in religions as well as in the study of religion is the contrast that he offers to our notions of mapping as an orienting endeavor, a perspective that appears to eschew safety, order, and the constraining fit

between map and territory in favor of disjunction, oscillation, and instability. So instead of a map with strict boundaries, rigid, fixed demarcations, Smith gives us movement without resolution, antistructure, incongruity, and paradox. “We may have to relax some of our cherished notions of significance and seriousness,” he says, “for we have often missed what is humane in the other by the seriousness of our quest.” And here is the money quote, where he is refining this idea: “Some religions delight in a lack of fit or incongruity.”

Delight. What a word, what a concept. So instead of the terror of chaos being overcome with a map that provides us with order by fixing our location, we have the messiness of lack of fit. We have possibilities for transcendence and play, delight, frivolity. So this sounds to me like so much jazz, I mean jazz, improvisation, musical signifying, contingency, bebop, delight in the movement, departure from sequence, leap away from linearity, playful disturbance, to jump from order to disorder and returning again, the rhythm, the dance of the trickster until one enters what Sam Gill, a scholar of Native American religions, has called the “freedom of play.” Imagine that. Play for Gill is intentionally embodying the tension between doing religion and the study thereof, and acknowledging the absurdity of the process.

I would ask you: what could be more African in some essentialized sense than a perspective that privileges self-aware play as an aesthetic that might govern the very serious work of mapping religion, which in itself might be perceived as an activity that is fruitless? So I just want to throw out that when we unpack this idea of the Africana religion scholar’s work of mapmaking and mapping, which was influenced by Smith, that we are not trapped by the idea of mapping as a process that predetermines our arrival at some final, set place; instead, we might emphasize the endless movement of experimentation, and we might even have some fun, for God’s sake.

I now want to shift this discussion and speak about what I like—speak about magic and think about some areas where I think there could be some fertile directions for us to consider. We know that the category of magic, like religion, is the invention of those who have the power to make it. So we, the collective of Africana religion scholars and academics, we own it. And my specific concern, my interest, is with the forms, functions, and meanings of a complex of ideas and traditions known in Black American culture as hoodoo. The study of hoodoo, or, as it has been called, conjure, has evolved over the years from the ethnologies of Southern folklorists from the nineteenth century to the pioneering research of Albert Raboteau on folk beliefs in the slave

community to the most recent work on gender and the trope of the conjure woman in art and film. Academics have paid attention to the ways that hoodoo and conjure have been created, appropriated, commodified, and consumed by practitioners, culture producers, and spiritual merchandisers in a vast network that replicates the pull and flow of Africana religious life generally in transnational formats, in diaspora, within institutions, within a wide-ranging transit of ideas, personnel, products, and literature. Today its influence is spread far and wide by digital and electronic means, even returning to Africa in a powerful generative loop. Some studies have given primacy to the issue of provenance and origins, while others consider conjure's expression within religious formations. As Jacob Dorman has most recently shown, some of the most flexible articulations of conjure occur in religious sources as diverse as Black Judaism, Rastafarianism, and African American Islam.

But what I want to talk about with this magic of Black folk, whether it is organized in its therapeutic dimensions, in healing, divination, root working, charms, or around insurgent activities, such as harming, fixing, aggressive sorcery, or self-defense, is the issue of efficacy. The most common question I get asked when I leave my house is "Does it work? Does that stuff work? Does it work?" It is not a question that the religion scholar should or can easily dodge. And how would we know if it worked anyway? How could we say that it worked? Putting aside for a moment that there is a real irony in the query that glosses over the many meanings of the word "work" in the Afro-Atlantic spiritual vernacular, I have to admit that it I have never been able to engage this notion of efficacy within the discourses that are available in our academic system.

"How's that working for you?" I wonder about the limit of materialist and historicist methodologies and the way that we sometimes as religion scholars overemphasize rationality as we strive to understand questions of efficacy. And this pertains to magic as well as religion. So, how does one answer this question? How do we employ modes of interpretation that are explicitly embedded in the traditions from which these remarkable activities emerged? Endogenous beliefs, structures of consciousness, imaginative expressions such as those who were going to the conjurer who creates the mysteries, the hoodoo who manipulates the discourses of power, the root worker who engages nature's most primal and elemental intelligences—does their map demand a kind of primacy in our analysis? If we were to ask "does it work?" for the things we study, how might we take into account the depth and the reality of the experience from where we stand as outsiders looking in and understand that magic does indeed

work within a world in which it is internally consistent with a kind of knowing that we as scholars may or may not possess.

One possible methodology is offered in the inaugural issue of *Journal of Africana Religions* by Tracey Hucks and Dianne Diakité, who in their essay “Africana Religious Studies” challenge Africana religionists’ neglect of what they characterize as phenomenological aspects, all too often in favor of theological or multidisciplinary methodologies. In this article, they argue that there appears to be a structural problem in the work of Africana religionists in that historians, theologians, sociologists, and others have neglected phenomenological description when analyzing Black religious experience. They call for a renewed emphasis on phenomenology, noting that phenomenological questions can serve to “reorient our studies of Black religious subjects in order to address aspects of their humanity, orientation, and imagination that registers subtler dimensions of their conditions as human beings.” This is a worthwhile call to the study of religion in its most foundational sense, a focus on the ways that individuals and communities consciously and unconsciously exist and experience their humanity. In the study of the magical, the supernatural, the occult, the esoteric, and any of the other rubrics that constitute this contested realm of categories, phenomenological approaches might yield new and productive insights. Phenomenology might help us to see how *it* works, whatever it is. After all, hoodoo and conjure are explicitly about people creating and transforming, both materially and figuratively, the manufactured, the composite using an extraordinary idiom, the mojo bag, the love trick, the gambling hand, the charm, the fetish.

I hope that, as scholars, we are both serious enough and playful enough to take on these most profound and important questions. This is where many of us have started from. It is a journey that we have just begun, and it is unknown where our descriptive, analytical, and interpretative tasks of mapping or our mapmaking will end up.

PAUL CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON, *University of Michigan*

I would like to expand the question that we are trying to answer in this question from “where are Africana religions?” to “what, who, and how are Africana religions?” Starting with the where, the clichéd answer would be: they are everywhere. They are in the usual places, in the Americas, but there is a lot of literature now about Africana religions in Europe, Japan—in short, dispersed

across the globe. The question is, what is the nature of them everywhere? And here I think it is worth distinguishing between three of the key words thrown out: diaspora, transnational, and global. These are often freely substituted one for another but are worth keeping distinct.

Sometimes Africana religions are carriers of nation-states' identities across boundaries, and in this case transnational becomes a fitting description. For example, Garifuna practitioners in the Bronx may on occasion embrace a Honduran identity or a Guatemalan identity or a Belizean identity, which are nation-state identities. But often Africana religions are not transnational so much as extranational or supernational or nonnational. They militate against nation-state claims, and so it would be wise, I think, to pay attention to the ways that diasporic affiliations or global practices are not engaged with a nation-state, for that is their power.

Diaspora, too, has a particular history, and it is important to be clear that diaspora involves a kind of territorial identity. "Africana" is the word that has brought us together here, and this is a really interesting word because it is at once a territorial claim and it is also extremely expansive. But diasporic religious practices always have the question of a territory in mind. So I think it is important to retain the idea that diasporic practices exercise the power of territory at the same time as we expand what "territory" means.

Diaspora has two main lineages. One would be the notion of place-focused practices. The other is the notion of lateral diasporas, an idea that came into play with Paul Gilroy's work in 1993 and James Clifford's writing in 1994. We have this kind of tension within the notion of diaspora about whether it is best to think of lateral diasporas or place-focused ones. When does a so-called diasporic religion pass into something that can be called a world religion? This was a notion that I first remember coming out of Sandra Barnes's 1997 book called *Africa's Ogun*, where in her introduction she says that African diasporic religions are now world religions. They exist everywhere. But what does that mean?

It begs other questions, such as what kinds of Africana religions travel really successfully? Why is it that the Orisha form has been so wildly successful, taking hold everywhere in the world, and other kinds of Africana religions are less successful, are less appealing, are less marketable, are less fashionable, are less successful? Since many Africana religions don't have any central hierarchic structure, we have an important example of a world or a globalized

religion that has no centralized authorities. The fact that these religions are successful in traveling across the globe challenges the sociologist Max Weber's argument that if a religion is to survive, it has to be rationalized, bureaucratized, that you have to move from charisma to rationalization. One argument put forth by Kristina Wirtz in Cuba is that actually it is precisely the lack of a centralized authority that produces this discursive ferment, she calls it, about what is the tradition, what is the authentic, and that that brings richness and energy to Africana traditions.

And then there is global. Global implies something quite different. It implies simultaneity in time and space and gestures toward something different from either transnational or diasporic practices. Here we might think about the internet or online Africana religions. So, although Africana religions are everywhere, they are everywhere in different ways. I think it is useful to think about different ways to be everywhere and how those are sometimes a contradiction of each other and sometimes overlap.

In sum, my first recommendation is that we keep some analytical precision about those three words—transnational, diasporic, and global—and that we think about how they work differently and how sometimes they are dimensions of religious practice itself.

Now let me turn to the question "Who are Africana religions?" One of the interesting things is that sometimes, even often, Africana religions are being practiced by persons not of African descent. In an article I read recently by Clara Saraiva ("Afro-Brazilian Religions in Portugal"), she describes the contemporary practice of Brazilian Candomblé in Portugal, and she says it is all middle-class, white Portuguese practicing this religion. Afro-Brazilian immigrants to Portugal are all doing Pentecostalism; they are not interested at all in Candomblé.

This raises the question of whether Pentecostalism is an Africana religion. Given that William Seymour, a founding figure of Pentecostalism, was from Louisiana, it makes sense that he had some exposure to hoodoo and so on. I think we have not done enough work thinking about convergences between Pentecostal practices and other Africana traditions in terms of the role of ongoing revelation in Pentecostalism.

There is also a problem of nomenclature. Do we talk about religions of the Black Atlantic? Religions of the Afro-Atlantic? Afro-descendent? Afro-inspired? Africana? What is at stake in each of these terms? The Black Atlantic

may not be the best rubric, given that many people practicing Africana religions are not Black. Or at least it raises the question of how we should think about these religions and what it means to people who are not Black to be practicing religions related to African traditions. When a Portuguese person is possessed by an African king and talks about maintaining the tradition, what are they talking about? What is tradition for them? It is a placeholder for something, but it is not deep history. It is a sensibility of something. What are they seeking? What is the power of Africana for people who are not of African descent?

“How” are Africana religions? How do they thrive? How do they arrive in places? What are the carriers? What are the modes of transmission? What are the mediations? What are the ritual techniques, the technologies, the arts of appearance by which the gods of Africa are caused to appear and become manifest for the devotees? One of the commonly invoked ways is spirit possession. This has become a cliché since Herskovits; the constitutive factor, the common thing of all Africana religions is this idea of spirit possession. I’m really interested in spirit possession, but I also think we need to think more broadly within that realm. What other kind of technologies are manifesting? So, for example, among the Garifuna, it is not all about spirit possession; it is about long-term multiweek rituals that produce something like a tableau vivant of the tradition through practices, through fishing in the correct way, canoeing in the correct way, dressing in the correct way, dancing in the correct way. It produces an aesthetic over time that makes people feel the presence of the past in a way that takes a lot more choreography and energy and resources than does spirit possession, which has a directness and a focused quality.

When? When are Africana religions? What are the chronotopes? Often Africana religions are located in the past. Pentecostals understand religions like Santería or hoodoo and Candomblé as being part of the past and Pentecostalism as being about the future. They reinforce this opposition of pastness and futurity over and over. We want to look hard at that. Given that Africana religions perhaps do often value the past in discourse, practice, and tradition, what are the futurities, what are the futures being played out in different versions of the past as they are enacted? How is this chronotope of Africa in the past sometimes used against Africana religions, especially by Pentecostals?

There is also an interesting research question about mismatches between the imagined Africa and contemporary Africa. I think often people go to Africa looking for an Africana religion of the past and they find contemporary

Africa, and it does not fit at all with what their expectation was, and this can produce disappointment, learning, conflict, and contradiction. So some people are working on religious tourism, Africana religious tourism, which elevates certain sites to destinations, like Bahia, where people go on pilgrimages. There is an interesting question of pilgrimage and the sacredness of particular places when we think about mapping to remember: what are places that are being selected as centers of something? And what is the something they are centers of? And what is the particular kind of power that resides in those places selected as the center? Again, we get back to this question about the Orisha tradition and why it thrives so much versus other kinds of Africana practices.

The where, the what, the who, and the when of Africana religions—all of these are important for the study of religion more generally.



Africana Temporalities and Methods

GAY BYRON, *Howard University*

I am delighted to participate in this panel discussion, which is designed to call attention to the chronological scope of the *Journal of Africana Religions*. As a New Testament critic, I will focus my remarks on the period known as antiquity in order to set forth some points of departure for our discussion. My intellectual journey into the world of the New Testament has been rooted in an exploration of the symbolic meaning of Egyptians, Ethiopians, and Blacks in early Christian literature. In my book, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, I theorize about the ethnopolitical rhetoric associated with the use of these ethnic groups.

In particular, I have raised questions about the theological assumptions, cultural background, and literary landscape that would have given rise to the many polemical and vituperative images of Ethiopians. In one example from a second-century text known as the Acts of Peter, there is a vivid description of an Ethiopian woman. She is Black. She is demonized. She is clothed in filthy rags. She is dancing with an iron collar around her neck and chains