

Henry Louis Gates: Black Church

Interview of Henry Louis Gates Jr with Erwan Dianteill, Sunday 8 of January 2023, about the book *Black Church*, published in French by Labor and Fides, Geneva.

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Erwan Dianteill: I have been reading your books regularly since *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), a seminal work in Afro-Atlantic studies, and I feel that *Black Church*, in addition to being a factual and bibliographical goldmine, is your most personal book since your memoirs (*Colored People: A memoir*, 1994), and certainly the most emotionally engaged. The last chapter, in particular, recounts an intense religious experience during your adolescence. Do you think it is possible to talk about religion in a detached way?

Henry Louis Gates Jr.: I have been fascinated by the role of the church since I was a little boy, but I am not the only one... When I interviewed Oprah Winfrey for the TV series [Note: This quote from the TV series, “The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song”], she said, and I quote: “The church gave people a sense of value, belonging, and worthiness. I don't know how we could have survived as a people without it”. And Adrienne Kennedy, who's a 90 plus year old playwright, a very dear friend said, I quote: “The Black Church held us together as a people.”

ED: You think that the Black church *created* the African American people in a certain way?

HLG: Thanks to the historians Linda Heywood and John Thornton, we know that the African victims of the slave trade belonged to around 50 ethnic groups. So, we were the first truly panafrikan people, and what united us was the Church.

ED: That brings us to the famous debate between E. Franklin Frazier and Melville Herskovits: the former thought African cultures had been completely erased with slavery, while the latter was finding the African heritage among Blacks in the Americas. What is your position on that issue?

HLG: It's totally false that the Middle Passage was so severe that in effect it created a cultural *tabula rasa*. Herskovits was right. The people who were in those ships brought their culinary tastes, their languages, of course, their system of metaphysics. They brought their gods, and of course they brought their music, their call and response patterns, which are fundamental to African American expressive culture. Words survived, word patterns, syntax, grammar survived. But their religion survived, too.

ED: Do we know more precisely where enslaved Africans in the USA came from? Did it have an influence on African American religion?

HLG: One of the big surprises to me was one of the results of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database created by David Eltis and David Richardson. It's a very sophisticated big data set, analyzing around 35,000 voyages across the ocean, bringing enslaved Africans to the New World. For example, do you know, as you're a major scholar of Yoruba culture and Yoruba religion, that only about 3% of the Africans who came to the United States were Yoruba, from either Western Nigeria or Dahomey, now the Republic of Benin? 16% were from Eastern Nigeria. Now, more importantly, about 25% came from Senegambia and another 25% came from Congo, Angola. Why is that important in terms of the history of religion? Well, we know that Islam arrived in West Africa by the 10th century and was widespread by the middle of the 12th century. So, many of the enslaved people were practicing Muslims by the time that they were captured, without a doubt. But, curiously enough, some are also Roman Catholics, or, we should say, Congolese Roman Catholics, because the King of Kongo converted in 1491. The elites in the Kingdom of Kongo were Catholics. In fact, the king was so savvy that he sent his son Henrique to Portugal to be trained. By 1521, Henrique had been ordained a bishop and settled in Mbanza Kongo. In other words, the African who boarded the ships and came to what became the United States, were of 3 broad religious groups. Some were practicing Muslims—quite a lot from Senegambia in majority. Some were Roman Catholic. John Thornton and Linda Heywood insisted that the ones who came from Congo and Angola had been at least sprinkled with some holy water. And if you look at the registers, many did have Christian names. We don't

have enough names, to be sure, but we do have some. There were no Jewish people. So, of the 3 Abrahamic religions, 2 were represented on the slave ships. But the vast majority were practicing “traditional” African religions and ancestor worship. The Yoruba would take root in Candomblé [Brazil], Santería [Cuba], Vodun [Haiti] and even Hoodoo in New Orleans. In addition, Cuba, Haiti and Brazil were predominantly Roman Catholic colonies. This is a big difference with the United States, which was predominantly Protestant. In Cuba and Brazil, Yoruba religion swept away other African religions, for reasons that you have written about quite, and I have speculated on myself.

So, what organized life for the enslaved people in the New World was religion. Not only did they *not* lose their religion; they needed it in the worst way, because of the existential nightmare that was slavery.

ED: So when did Christianity really begin among Blacks?

HLG: We don't know much about the early years of religious worship of the 388,000 African Americans who came directly from Africa before 1808, which marked the end of the Atlantic trade to the USA. It's only with the Great Awakening around 1740 that Blacks were evangelized. Prior to the Great Awakening, there were huge debates on that issue in the White Christian churches.

Every year, I show to my students a pamphlet published by Morgan Godwin [*The Negro's & Indians advocate, suing for their admission to the church, or, A persuasive to the instructing and baptizing of the Negro's and Indians in our plantations, 1680*], who had graduated from Oxford, and he described himself as the Negro and Indians' advocate. His argument was that these people should be converted because they had souls. It's one of the things I wrote in my book on the Bordeaux Papers (Gates, Henry Louis and Andrew S. Curran, eds. *Who's black and why? a hidden chapter from the eighteenth-century invention of race*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022). Morgan Godwin said: “I know these people are human beings because they can read and write, and they have “risibility”, which means the capacity to laugh. And I always ask my students, “Tell me, what are the fundamental elements of being a human being?” And they never guess laughter.

But Morgan Godwin was not arguing against slavery. This is very important. He was arguing for their salvation in heaven but not for their freedom. In fact, he explicitly says, to convert them is not to free them, because the Bible is very, very clear about servants

obeying their master. It does not say that salvation means that that you should be liberated. Then the Anglicans reluctantly started converting slaves. The Quakers early on said that slavery was an abomination, but you don't have a lot of African Americans becoming Quakers. It's really the Great Awakening, from 1740 on, when the Methodists and the Baptist are opening their doors to our people, and they are converting in record numbers.

ED: Was it the beginning of the Black Church as an institution?

HLG: Yes, the earliest African American formal institutions that we have a record of were Christian churches. In 1773, three years before Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, the First African Baptist congregation in Savannah was formed. Around the same time the Silver Bluff Baptist Church in Aiken County, South Carolina, was formed, while the First Baptist Church of Petersburg, Virginia was created in 1774. So there was something happening, you know, it's one of those cases where someone gets the idea. Those churches are sort of popping up at same time. And there was another one, the First Baptist Church in Williamsburg, Virginia, so we can safely say that the Black Church is the oldest, most continuous, and most important institution in the history of the African American people.

ED: What did the slaves find in those institutions?

HLG: This is something I only realized when I was making the film series and writing the book. It's where they learned to read and write because they had to learn to read and write the Bible to worship a liberating God, to develop a faith in the future. Not only across the River Jordan when they died, but a future here on earth, where their children and their grandchildren one day would be free. It is where they formed their politics and shaped their oratorical skills. In addition, and perhaps most important of all, it is where they developed their music.

And what I realized is that, out of those sacred forms of music the blues, ragtime, jazz, rhythm'n'blues, and even hip hop all eventually emerged. The Black Church was a cultural laboratory. Each week, the preachers would practice their oratory because they had to move the congregation. If they did not move the congregation, the congregation moved them out from the church. It was a very demanding audience. The congregation expected to be entertained, moved, and moved to spirit possession.

ED: So the role of music was linked to spirit possession?

HLG: Music became an extension of oratory, and oratory became an extension of the music. So, they are creating what Du Bois called the “sorrow songs”. And these were individual geniuses, just like Shakespeare, or any great author. It is a myth that everybody was sitting around and inventing songs. They were blessed with poetic ability, and they came up with these beautiful, hauntingly sublime poems to God which were set to music: “Go Down, Moses”, and “Steal Away (to Jesus)”, and all these songs. So, it became a cultural laboratory.

Sunday morning, people were coming to God for forgiveness, because of adultery and impure thoughts, and whatever else. But it was not just on Sunday. They had prayer meetings on Wednesday and choir practice on Thursday, and the Church really did organize your life. And that was true.

ED: Your book is an historical and sociological essay, but it includes also a personal testimony about the Black Church.

HLG: Yes, I was born in 1950 and when I was growing up in Piedmont, West Virginia, it was an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic town, Irish and Italian Catholic. Only 2,500 people, including 386 Black people, but those Black people were Methodists, they were Baptists and Pentecostals, belonging to the Church of God in Christ. All of us went to church. I sang in the choir. Everybody I knew went to church. I mean it just wasn't even thought about. We had to memorize what we called “pieces”. My first one, when I was 3, was “Jesus was a boy like me and like Him, I want to be”, and I was! The littlest kid would always be first in the church, because everybody had to recite. I had to memorize down pat! I was reciting it and driving my brother crazy. My brother Paul is five years older. I stood up in front of the Walden Methodist Church, it seemed like I was at the Amphithéâtre Descartes of the Sorbonne! I was petrified. I was dumbstruck. I couldn't remember even my own name. But finally I heard a beautiful voice in the back of the church, “Stand up!” And it was a female voice, and she said, “Jesus was a boy like me, and like Him I want to be”. It was my mother.

ED: What was the circumstances of your joining the church?

HLG: I joined the church when I was 12 in a private bargain with God to save my mother's life. My mother was not particularly religious. My father was a good Episcopalian, but he told my brother and me that Heaven and Hell were on earth, and that mostly you made them yourself, that to a great extent you shaped your own fate, your own destiny. So he believed in individual agency, but he also believed that when "you're dead, you're dead for a long time". This was my father's favorite thing. He loved the church, but I don't think he believed in life after death. I was part of the Methodist church for two years, and then joined the Episcopal Church.

ED: What was the difference between those churches?

HLG.: There were very few Blacks in the Episcopal church. The Episcopal Church is very elite church. Traditionally, it is "High Church", and very few Black people in the USA, even today, relatively speaking, are in the Episcopal Church, so you can imagine what it was like in the Allegheny Mountains, halfway between Pittsburgh and Washington. Nevertheless, there was a Black Episcopal church in Cumberland, Maryland, 25 miles away. My father was raised in that church called St. Philip Church. It was Black, and the reason was, as you can read in the Book of Acts in the New Testament (Acts, 8, 27-39), that Philip baptized an Ethiopian eunuch, who was reading the Book of Isaiah. So that's as close to blackness as they could come.

ED: So your work on the Black Church is at the same time an objective analysis and a subjective experience?

HLG: Zora Neale Hurston has a marvelous expression about the power of anthropology when you're going back to analyze rituals of the people with whom you grew up. Hurston couldn't analyze her own culture, it was too close to herself: "It was fitting like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it." And she wrote: "Then I had to have the spyglass of Anthropology to look through at that" (*Mules and Men*, 1935). And for me the fundamentalism of the people I was worshipping at the Methodist Church, my grandmother's church, was too heavy. You couldn't go to basketball games. You couldn't play cards. You couldn't dance. I love to play cards, my family loves it, to play every form

of card game. I love to dance. I love basketball, the only sport in our school, and I didn't do any of that stuff for two years. It was good because I read the Bible, that was good for my later career as a literary critic. But no movies, no movies at the time. But when I was 14 my brother came back from school and took me to a Beatles movie, and I then gave up the Methodist church and joined the Episcopal Church, my father's church, and of course that's a very literate religious tradition. That was different. I was confirmed, and so I've always been fascinated by the church, but I have to say that I was always more watching than participating. And I was watching myself participate and more importantly watching others participate.

ED: Can you tell more about that reflexivity attitude?

HLG: I was shooting marbles in the dirt with my two cousins. I was about five or six years old. And all of a sudden, I rose up, and I was watching myself and my two cousins shooting marbles from above. It is like an out of body experience. I didn't physically go anywhere, but I could just watch myself. When I came down with my cousins, I said, oh, my God! Have you ever been shooting marbles and watching yourself shooting marbles? And they go: "What are you talking about?" I went home, told my parents and my mother said: "You have a special gift". Later, I learned that was called double consciousness and self-reflexivity. She said, "The next time it happens, don't tell anybody. Just come home and tell us or they're gonna think you're crazy."

ED: You say your father was a church going person and did not believe?

HLH: A long time after that, I became a student of religion. I was fascinated by it. I was fascinated by the fact that my father loved going to church. He loved the high Episcopal rituals; he loved the incense, he loved the Psalter, the Book of Psalms. He loved everything about it, but he didn't believe in the afterlife.

I see that today on Martha's Vineyard in the summertime. Every Sunday, the Black elite there, many of my friends, go to a place called Union Chapel. The formal chairs on the altar are dedicated to my parents. I love that church. If you look at the film, it opens in Union Chapel. Now these people go, and they laugh, and they cry, and they applaud, and they stand up and cheer, and basically they rate the preacher like: "I'll give him 95, a good

rhythm, but he couldn't dance!" And many of them don't even believe in God, many of them, but they believe in the Church.

So, it was the heart and soul of the Black experience.

ED: The late Cedric J. Robinson, a brilliant Marxist historian who was my mentor when I was a young professor at the department of Black Studies at UC Santa Barbara, used to say that the history of Black political movements, with the opposition of radicals and liberals, came from the difference between slaves and free blacks. More generally what is your opinion about the Marxist position on religion?

HLG: I do a riff on Marx in the book. Everybody talks about the second part of his quote, but not the first part which is more political ["Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people », 1843]. Indeed, the Church is where our politics were organized. Nat Turner was a Christian. Of course you know John Brown was a Christian. Frederick Douglass was a Christian. Martin Robison Delany was a Christian. If you look at Reconstruction, by 1877, there were 16 black men elected to Congress during Reconstruction, and three were ministers. Of the 2,000 Black men who were either elected or appointed to office in Reconstruction, 243 were church leaders. And without the Church there would have been no Civil Rights movement. Martin Luther King organized the movement in churches. They had rallies in churches, they sang sacred songs. He was a minister, Ralph Abernathy was a minister, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a Congressman, was a minister. His father was a minister of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. King's maternal grandfather, King's father, and King himself all led the same church, Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

So we have a different relationship between politics and religion that defies Marx's definition of religion as being the "opium of the people". Our God is a liberating God. A God who would liberate us eventually, sooner or by and by. You know one of the favorite expressions of the Black Christian Service is "Jesus might be late, but he's always on time."

ED: Precisely, don't you think that the Black definition of Jesus as a friend, a sufferer who understands sufferers, is also essential?

HLG: Yes, there is a famous song which says “Jesus is my friend!”. They thought Jesus would be a redemptive force for a nation whose original sin was slavery. So Black people love to say: “God don't like ugly”. That means God didn't like these people who were enslaving them.

ED: Do you see a difference between the USA and Latin America regarding slavery and religion?

HLG. By 1860, roughly, 5 million Africans had gone to Brazil, 1 million to Cuba, 1 million to Jamaica, 700,000 to Saint-Domingue, and only 388,000 to the United States. It is a surprise because, despite those numbers, by 1860, we are the largest community of enslaved people in the New World: 3.9 millions. Why? Because in Brazil and Cuba, they worked them to death on sugar plantations. The average life expectancy on the sugar plantation was 7 years, and then they just replaced them. So, when I was growing up, slavery and cotton work were synonymous. But, when you learn about slavery south of Key West, it is not the same. The world's first commodity was sugar. In the United States, they grew their slaves and they had to treat them well enough, because the Atlantic trade was over by 1808. So they propagated the slave population. When the slave trade was abolished, the population grew naturally. It doesn't mean that slavery was a blissful institution, but they were treated well enough that their numbers could grow. And also, to some extent in Cuba, in Brazil and Saint-Domingue, people could buy their own freedom and become liberated. There was also a large mulatto population, you know, the Portuguese, the Spanish and the French had a more liberal understanding about interracial sexuality.

ED: Maybe New Orleans was different?

HLG: New Orleans was a special place for that. They had a Creole population, a Mulatto community. There was Hoodoo there, too, and a lot of Roman Catholicism as well. So New Orleans is a peculiar case.

ED: But also a very important place for Black religious music and Jazz...

HLG: Yes, Ralph Ellison said somewhere that jazz would one day exist in concert halls like Carnegie – that it would no longer be a dance music – and he was right. The temple of jazz is now at the Lincoln Center, founded by my friend Winston Marsalis. I am making a sequel

to the *Black Church* about the history of Gospel Music and it's a lot of fun because I love gospel music. I will be filming tomorrow Dionne Warwick in New York, because their new album forthcoming is on Gospel.

Back to New Orleans, Mahalia Jackson is a very important figure. Mahalia Jackson represents the golden age of gospel music. She migrated from New Orleans to Chicago around 1927, and became famous in 1947, with an album called *Move on up a Little Higher*. She always wore a robe or a kind of gown onstage, almost like an academic. It is because they told her that she was enticing a man to love. Maybe that was true. We don't know. She came under the wing of Thomas A. Dorsey, the person who brought blues structures into black sacred music, and who created the form called the Gospel. That was very controversial in the Church, but they finally accepted it.

ED: At the beginning of your book, in the beginning of the book you also show that there's a decrease of the Black participation in church. It happens with all the American population and European population. So do you think the Church will overcome that waning?

HLG: I made this film and this book because I was worried. I have an eight-year-old granddaughter and we had dinner last night. She will never know the experience of reciting a piece like I did and all the best of this church. She will not know that sense of warmth and nurture that I received from the Church. It has moved on, you know. That is just inevitable. But the film and the book are living testimonies for young people.

ED: I was struck by the importance given to women in your book, who are not very present in the classical sociological literature on the Black Church (E. Franklin Frazier in particular). Not to mention gays and lesbians. This is a very significant advance, in that the book shows their presence and role in the religious institution. Are there still obstacles to women and gay in the Black Church?

HLG: The Church was suffering because of its homophobia and sexism. There was a boy I grew up with, his name was Chucky Stewart, Charles Stewart Jr. He could play piano like Mozart, he was amazing. He went to Fisk University, and he was active in the church and in the church choir, a local church there. He was one of the first people I knew who was HIV Positive, and who died of AIDS. The church turned its back on him. The church

eventually got better, but the Church did that to a lot of people. Still, I was actually interviewing a person

for this series, a younger person. I asked her about homophobia, and she says : “God loves the sinner and hates the sin”, a traditional sentence in the Church. It means that we can forgive our gay sisters and brothers, but all of homosexuality is an abomination, and she actually believes that, man. I just couldn't believe it. It wasn't my place to give her a lecture in the middle of that interview.

So there is still homophobia in the Church but the Church always had gay people in it!

ED: Like Clarence H. Cobb, famous leader of the Metropolitan Spiritual Churches of Christ, in the 1940'?

HLG: Yes, absolutely. People in the choir, the choir masters... the preacher was dependent upon gay men for shaping the music! And they said all gay people are going to go to hell. So this hypocrisy was disgusting to the people. Regarding women, the Church has always been dominated by women. Today, maybe 70% or 80% of the membership is female, but the leadership of the church is overwhelmingly male. So if you are a woman, you know how much you're going to invest in the Church if you choose it as your profession.

ED: And what about the growing secularization of the American population?

HLG: There is a growing class divide within the African American community because of affirmative action. Since the day King died, the Black middle class has doubled. Well, the more money you have, if your checks are balanced, this is maybe a horrible generalization, you're not so desperate for God's mercy. Now, on the other hand, Pentecostalism is the fastest growing religion in the whole world, and in the USA we have more mega churches, people like T.D. Jakes Church, with 30,000 members. These people are businessmen. They are cultural leaders. They have changed the nature of Black Christianity.

ED: Don't you think that they represent the rise of the theology of prosperity compared with the social Gospel?

HLG: Yes, the Prosperity Gospel has a range of faces. The most vulgar was the Reverend Ike. His motto was “You can't lose with the stuff I use”. I remember one time I listened to

him on the radio, he said: “Well, there's a \$50 prayer and a \$100 prayer, and a \$500 prayer, and God answered your prayers faster with the \$500”. There are a lot of these guys are crooks and cheaters. But, on the other hand, T. D. Jakes is encouraging people to understand capitalism and to use it, to bolster to save to own property. You know he's like the Harvard Business School, you know. I mean he's training people. The Black church was also where we learned how capitalism worked. The Ford Foundation or the Mellon Foundation were not giving Black people grants in the Eighteenth century to start these churches, and of course the first denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, a multinational corporation now, was entirely sustained by Black people and their nickel and dimes.

We can't underestimate the importance of the many facets with which the Church educated the African American community: economic, political, spiritual, cultural.

Black poetry was born out of Black oratory sermons. It is the birthplace and altering, nurturing ground for Black America, socially and educationally. And if I had been born 100 years before, I would have been an African Methodist Episcopal preacher and a bishop in the Church, and I would have run for Congress like Adam Clayton! Probably...

ED: According to W. E. B. Du Bois, the preaching, the music, and the frenzy are the three characteristics of post-slavery Black American religion. Yet you also show that there is, in a more hidden way, a literate tradition in Black American religion. For example, Bilali Mohammed (1760-1855 approx.), a Muslim slave you write about, was buried with a Koran and a thirteen-page notebook written in his handwriting. The Kongo deported to the Americas were Christianized, and some certainly already literate. Moreover, there were also “oral scholars” within the oral culture in West Africa (griots, babalawo, bokono). Could the Black Church also be the heir to that tradition, which is more interpretative than expressive, since there has been Black American religious intellectuals since the eighteenth century (Richard Allen, founder of the AME, for example)?

HLG: It is true that a large number of Blacks embraced an emotional form of religion in the Baptist and Methodist church. But there was also a more reflexive kind of Black religion, with different theological forms in the Black church. Let me exemplify that with the case of three Black ministers, all from the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Richard Harvey Cain was born free and was the pastor of a church in Brooklyn, NY. After the Civil War, he moved to Charleston, and rebuilt the Mother Emmanuel Church, which

had been destroyed as a response to Denmark Vesey's alleged slave revolt of 1822. Richard Harvey Cain, he hired the son of Denmark Vesey, who was an architect, to rebuild the church. Then Cain was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1872, and he was re-elected in 1876.

The second model was a bishop, Daniel Payne. He, too, was born free, in Charleston, South Carolina. He was a very conservative theologian. So, to make a long story short, he was elected a bishop in 1852. He convinced the church to buy Wilberforce University, the oldest of our nation's historically Black colleges and universities, founded by African Americans. He would become the University's first African American president. Now, he strongly disapproved of traditional Africanized worship. He was against the traditional forms of worship of the Holy Ghost. He hated it, all this stuff that you and I write about. With all these statues of Eshu I have in this house, he would have had a hard time! He thought it was the Devil's worship. People were dancing, moving and crying, and you know it's almost like you're summoning the Holy Ghost. But for him they were summoning the Devil. He jumped out of the pulpit and says "Stop, stop you are worshipping the Devil!". He said it was heathenism. He insisted that they sat in straight lines and sing the hymns.

The final example belongs to the movement of Black cultural nationalism, Henry McNeal Turner. He was born free also. All 3 were born free. That's what's interesting about them. Turner was born free in South Carolina, and was one of the African American chaplains in the Union army. After the Civil War, he worked for the Freedmen's Bureau and he even won the election to the Georgia House in 1868. He also became a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1880. Later, he changed his mind, and he was the father of back to Africa. He went to Liberia and Sierra Leone, and wrote about it (*African Letters*, 1893). But shortly after the founding of Black Baptist Convention in the fall of 1895, at the first Black Baptist Convention, Turner gave a lecture that just turn the place out. He said: "I believe God is a Negro", and his people thought he was crazy. Now, I was in Nigeria with Wole Soyinka, and we went to his cousin's home. They had a representation of Jesus as a White man, and I said, "You know God is a Black man, don't you ?", and they look at me as if I was saying the funniest thing... you can imagine the scandal it was in 1895.

So we had those three men, Richard Harvey Cain, Daniel Payne and Henry McNeal Turner, who represent different manifestations of Christianity in the same denomination. There was also another man, named the Reverend R. H. Boyd, with a very different biography. He was born in Mississippi and had spent the first 20 years of his life as a slave. He was unable to read and write, then went to school after emancipation and became a minister

and a business man. He founded the National Baptist Publishing Board in 1895, but was also the head of the Publishing board which published magazines and Sunday School materials. In 1904, he co-founded the Trust Company Bank, enabling Black congregants to open their first bank accounts. Four years later, in 1908, he founded the world's first Negro doll company. Does this sound like the opiate of the people? No, it is vastly more complicated than pie in the sky. Religion shaped every aspect of Black experience and participation in the larger American society. The Black Church was the center of a world within a world, a world behind “the Veil,” to use Du Bois’s metaphor. Our ancestors replicated the world from which they were excluded as political agents. The best thing to do in that terrible situation is to keep your oppressor from defining who you are. That is what they did, and that's the world that I celebrate. That's the world that I celebrate in my book on the Black church.

ED: A last question, regarding the African source of the Black Church. You dedicated an important book to Eshu, the trickster god from the Yoruba and the Fon. You show that “signifying”, that is “double entendre”, irony, indirect speech, play with words, is one essential characteristic of Black culture. Do you find an equivalent of that rhetoric in the Black Church?

HLG: Well, the Protestants demonized Eshu, our beloved patron trickster saint. So Eshu didn't have a chance to manifest himself in the church. He didn't become the figure of the Holy Ghost. That would be a natural connection, but he just didn't. Protestantism obliterated the forms of mediation that characterized gods in African religions and saints in Roman Catholicism. So you can speak directly to God. You don't need a mediator, and Eshu is precisely the mediator between humans and God. The only place that he survived was in the secular world through signifying and the signifying monkey. What do you think?

ED: Sure, but the conception of the Devil in Black popular religion looks a little like Eshu, standing at the crossroads...

HLG: Yes, he is definitely at that crossroads with Robert Johnson, the blues singer. It's the Devil at the crossroads, and that's clearly his legacy.