

Frenzied H(e)avens: African American Post Exilic Realities in J'Sun Howard's "aMoratorium"

by Brianna Alexis Heath

In “Exile,” the fourth chapter in his book *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, Allen Callahan argues that similar to the Israelites, African Americans endured a violent exile, one that resulted in the dispersal of their people across the transatlantic African Diaspora¹. However, unlike the Israelites who were restored to their land post exile, Callahan argues that African Americans “would learn to sing their song in a strange land or not at all”². Kidnapped from their homeland, separated from their communities, and cut off from their social institutions, enslaved Africans would create new cultures and establish social institutions such as the Black Church, as a result of their encounter with Europeans and indigenous peoples in the New World. Through extensive historical examples, Callahan demonstrates how African Americans—as a people without ties to the land or through blood—established new social institutions and cultural forms as a way of redefining “home”. Ultimately, Callahan argues that there is no post exilic narrative found in African American historical accounts or cultural artifacts such as the Negro spirituals or the Black preaching tradition. “African Americans neither looked back to Jerusalem nor looked forward to heaven” instead they “collectively recollect[ed] the challenge of constructing a community”³ through the building of social institutions.

While I agree with Callahan that the African American experience is one of a strange exile perpetuated by white supremacy and the horrors of the Middle Passage, I wonder about the ways in which African American post exilic realities emerge through other cultural traditions as a way of “building...a dream under construction in the future”⁴. Particularly examining

¹ Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, (Yale University Press, 2008), 50.

² *Ibid.*, 50.

³ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

Callahan's notes on the importance and use of dance and embodiment in African American slave religion, I ask the following question: how does the reclamation of the body through dance and movement create space for African Americans post exilic realities? If evidence for the post exilic cannot be found in Negro spirituals or the Black preaching tradition as Callahan suggests, perhaps we can turn to Black embodiment and Callahan's notes on the ring shout and movement as evidence for post exilic realities within African American culture. Engaging Chicago-based choreographer, J'Sun Howard's duet *aMoratorium* as a text for this project, I will consider how *aMoratorium* illustrates African American experience as both an exilic and post-exilic reality through the juxtapositions of Black death and Black hope. How does Howard's work create space for an otherwise h(e)aven for Black masculinity in which Black boy joy, tenderness, community, and pain exist in a beautiful point of tension that mirrors the communal spirituality of the Black Church? By engaging Black dance studies and Black socioreligious perspectives, I argue that it is in evoking the Frenzy of African American religious embodiment, that Howard creates a post exilic, "otherwise"⁵ reality for Black masculinity. In this h(e)aven, Black boy joy, Black boy pain, and Black boy divinity exist in one space, where the sacred and secular collide evoking otherwise possibilities and futures for Black male, Christian embodiment and Black life in general.

We begin with a man, a tree, and the sounds of crickets—nighttime. In this liminal, solemn space between humanity and nature, a DJ emerges in the far-left corner of the stage, and the song "Every Nigga is a Star" mixes with the crackling sounds of a record player. Another man emerges from stage right, greets the DJ with a hand shake symbolic of the gentleness of Black masculinity—a handshake that grips and pulls the body close, hearts touching. The two men acknowledge each other and retreat into their own worlds sweeping their hands up above

⁵ Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: the Aesthetics of Possibility*, (Fordham University Press, 2017).

their heads, undulating their spines, prostrating before each other—before the tree—in a worshipful posture that acknowledges the tenderness and brilliance of Black masculinity as a part of God’s creation. Initially commissioned by the Art Institute of Chicago as a response to visual artist, Charles White’s *Retrospective*, Howard describes *aMoratorium* as “exploring Black male identity, visibility, temporality and its absence; and further examines death as it relates to the Black church and Black spiritual traditions” (artist program notes).

Howard’s work falls within a deep, legacy of Black contemporary dance traditions that engage the complex histories of African American experience through the body. Particularly, Howard’s work is reminiscent of early, Black modern dance pioneers who unpacked Black religious traditions and its beautiful and complicated, inextricable bond to the foundations of Black American culture. Black dance scholar, Thomas DeFrantz—in his book *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture*—writes that

“Working with the excellent musical accompaniment of various vocal choirs, Ailey’s dancers effectively trumped derisive speculation about the possibilities of African American concert dance. They transformed complex encodings of political resistance, musical ability, and religious narrative onto their bodies to imply a historical reach of black culture, continued here by the act of concert dance”⁶

Revelations use of the Negro spirituals such as “I’ve Been ‘Buked” and “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel” communicates a historical, danced freedom that “suggest[s] a political collaboration between his performance and the music’s historical legacy”⁷. While one cannot ignore the cultural annihilation that occurred as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, I argue, as does Callahan, that it is through the “somatic dimension” of African and African American spirituality” (62) that we see perhaps the strongest trace of “African residua” (62). In his book

⁶ Thomas DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance, DeFrantz argues that

“The failure of whites to understand African spiritual and artistic values made it easier for slaves to use dance to exploit crevices in the system of slavery. Attempts to wipe out African culture did not succeed largely because the master’s ignorance lasted throughout slavery. Slaveholders never understood that a form of spirituality almost indistinguishable from art was central to the cultures from which blacks came”⁸.

He continues by saying

“Dance was the most difficult of all art forms to erase from the slave’s memory, in part because it could be practiced in the silence of aloneness where motor habits could be initiated with enough speed to seem autonomous. In that lightning-fast process, the body very nearly was memory and helped the mind recall the form of dance to come”⁹.

Not only are Black literary, visual art, and musical forms valid texts for unpacking the nuances of African American religious traditions and tracing social change, but embodiment, movement and dance also provides “an answer” as Callahan argues, for “American slavery’s relentless assault on the [B]lack body”¹⁰. It is within embodiment—the connection of rhythm, movement and the body within African American religious experience that allowed the enslaved to reclaim their bodies from the dehumanizing horrors of American chattel slavery. I argue that it is in examining this reclamation of African American bodies through dance—particularly Black concert dance traditions—that we discover post exilic realities within African American culture. Perhaps we should begin with the Frenzy that Callahan quotes from W.E.B. DuBois. In his famous essay “Faith of the Fathers,” DuBois names the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy as three chief elements of traditional, African American Christian worship. While the Preacher and the Music extol the

⁸ Thomas DeFrantz, *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, (University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

congregation to fervor and enthusiasm through the “exposition of the Bible”¹¹ and the “syncopated, kinetic strains by turns doleful and jubilant”¹², the Frenzy or “shouting” is that expression of joy and ecstasy; that surrendering of one’s body to spirit, to nature, to gravity, to one’s own community that DuBois recognizes as integral to religious experience, and more earnestly embraced than all the other elements. Although not new to religion, embodied experience through the Frenzy took a particular hold on enslaved Africans. At one time, the West African possessive spirituality could meet the “experimental religion”¹³ of Evangelical Christianity as a rejection of the planter class’s faith—that justified American slavery. Thus, resulting in the creation of a religion grounded in an embodied, ecstatic experience.

Within the creation of otherwise religious experience, in which African Americans found the freedom to not only interpret scripture, but also embody it according to their lived experiences, can we identify the post exilic. It is within the Frenzy, in the privileging of embodied freedom do African Americans dream otherwise dreams and build future realities. Howard’s work exemplifies this well. The two dancers, Dedrick “D.Banks” Gray and Solomon Bowser, merge the frenzy of Black spirituality— slinging their heads back, and stomping their feet underneath themselves, as their torsos fall forward—with the contemporary flow of DJ Jared Brown who orchestrates their worship to the contemporary tracks of hip-hop legend Master P and Mia X’s “Bout It, Bout It” and Boris Gardiner’s “Every Nigga Is a Star.” As they propel their bodies through space, splay their chests toward heaven, shout and lay prostrate, the dancers merge Black social dancing with physical postures reminiscent of Black Pentecostal and Holiness worship. At one point, Gray and Bowser dance with their backs facing the audience as if deciding to take a moment to commune with the divine. They each fall in and out of the floor raise their praying hands before buckling over with their arms stretched out. Their limbs extend past their personal spheres, their spines divinely

¹¹ Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, (Yale University Press, 2008), 63.

¹² *Ibid.*, 63.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 63.

spiral around each other before they, finally, fall into an intimate embrace. By merging the sacred with the secular—Black American social dance vernacular with Black Protestant worship—Gray and Bowser create a space for the tenderness, care, and divinity of Black masculinity that resists binary notions of gender.

This beginning section parallels Banks' solo in which he rhythmically shuffles his feet towards the tree, undulating his spine, as his arms wave above his head. He sits lunged in a chair shooting his arms across his torso focusing his energy out into space. He eventually stands in this chair reaching up above, as if stretching to heaven. He pulls down a durag from the ceiling to adorn his head and begins again into the Frenzy—winding his waist as he twists his lower body against the beat, leaping off the chair, and spinning into the ethers of the DJ's soft piano keys. Bowser sits and observes Banks before he stands and walks in front of the audience softly encircling Banks in a bed of rose petals. Bowser follows behind Banks as if tracing his path, anointing his steps in the flowers. Banks ends his journey back on the chair, balancing his body, chest facing the ceiling.

His hands pump over his heart, like a breath, as his feet dangle at the height of his chest. He expands and contracts in this position before his body seems to give out, limply draped over the chair. Banks's arms slowly fall over his head before he collapses onto the floor. It is finished and still and quiet save for the slow pulse of the DJ's durge. It is within this frenzy that Howard paints an image of Black masculinity that is tender, strong, fluid, and full of energy—full of life. The juxtaposition of Black hope, embodied within the Frenzy, with Black death becomes an indication of African American exilic and postexilic realities. Banks's longing for breath echoes the cries of Black men and women who have died at the hands of police crying "I can't breathe."

Yet, and still, Banks embodies a reaching/searching, extending his long limbs in a pneumological prayer for Black life.

Banks' prayer not yet realized becomes embodied in Bowser's solo. Bowser emerges from a stream of light stage right taking two gulps of a drink before he, too, kneels down close to Banks' limp body—still and quiet. Bowser becomes washed in the stark, white light, when sounds of gunshots come firing from the DJ's booth. A man's voice counts hastily with each shot as Bowser's body stammers, falls and reemerges from the bed of rose petals. He continues to struggle as his sips more of his drink, before his head ricochets back from another shot. Bowser struggles against the sound score of Spike Lee's "Rodney King"—a 2017 one-man show starring Roger Guenveur Smith, that hauntingly retells the story of Rodney King, a victim of police brutality by the Los Angeles Police Department in 1992. With every count, Bowser falls but does not succumb to the gunshots. He staggers for a moment, standing firm and stripping his white shirt off, revealing his brown body. He slowly kneels toward the ground, steadily wiping his forehead and chest with the shirt before noticing Bank's limp body under the tree. He gently walks toward Banks, sits in the chair, and gently gathers his head into his lap. The gentle crackling of crickets and a child's playful chant return from the DJ's set. We witness tender, steady care and grief as Bowser unties Banks's durag. He helps Banks to his feet, and they both fall back into the Frenzy, playfully mimicking each other's jumps, and winding their hips, skittering across the floor, clapping.

In this moment Howard unfolds a narrative and spirit of Black masculinity that resists binaries and cannot be succumb by even death. Gray and Bowser's solos creates a juxtaposition between Black death and Black hope, symbolic of both the exilic experience of African Americans and post exilic realities. Even further, Howard offers an alternative for Black

masculinity that embraces vulnerability, care and community and resists macho performances of gender. Stacy C. Boyd's argument, in his book *Black Men Worshipping: Intersecting Anxieties of Race, Gender and Christian Embodiment*, is centered around a presupposition of "Black male anxiety"—a term defined by Philip Brian Harper as the roots of essentialist notions of black difference. Boyd argues that the intersections of gender, race, sexuality and Christian embodiment "creates unsettled tensions within the psyches of black men and among the perceptions of the Black church"¹⁴. He further argues that Black men are both the victims and perpetrators of this anxiety "by investing in essential notions of racial and gender authenticity that they may have a difficult time embodying"¹⁵.

In the same way, *aMoratorium* demonstrates the irony of Black spirituality and Black Christian embodiment. While the Frenzy as a demonstration of Black religious experience, offers a way in which to enact alternative modes of Black existence, Black theological perspectives have also been a reinforcer of hegemonic ideologies of race and sexuality. Boyd argues that "African Americans [have] embraced conservative dualistic Christianity that was sex and body negative, while at the same time black churches emerged as *the* institutions geared to fight and combat racial oppression"¹⁶. Howard's work subverts this by creating "otherwise possibilities" for Black existence. As I argued above, it is within the Frenzy, in the privileging of embodied freedom do African Americans dream otherwise dreams and build future realities. In his book *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, scholar and artist, Ashon Crawley argues that the aesthetics of Blackpentecostalism "constitute a performative critique of normative theology and philosophy"¹⁷. "Blackpentecostalism is an intellectual practice grounded in the fact of the flesh, flesh unbounded and liberative, flesh as vibrational and always

¹⁴ Boyd, Stacy C. *Black Men Worshipping: Intersecting Anxieties of Race, Gender, and Christian Embodiment*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁷ Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: the Aesthetics of Possibility*, (Fordham University Press, 2017), 4.

on the move”¹⁸. He offers examples of contemporary Black gospel musicians to elaborate the ways in which Black religious ecstatic worship celebrates the flesh, embraces the body¹⁹.

Howard’s work resists essentialist notions of Black masculinity by imagining a world where Black pain—particularly the horrors of Black men being slain in the street by the hands of police—is met with Black tenderness, care, and community. The dancers embody the horrors of Black death and the spirituality of tending to Black trauma—the ways movement and dance create space for collective healing. This juxtaposition is reminiscent of the ring shout’s power and its connection to traditional funereal dances among tribes in southern Nigeria.

Callahan writes, “The dance was a complex ritual action to bring the living in direct contact with the dead and the human present in direct contact with the past”²⁰. In the same way, Howard merges the images of past, Black trauma (death under/by/from a tree) with the sounds of gunshots and the cry against police brutality, with a future glimpse of Black life and joy (the sounds of a child), and positions this future glimpse within a present reality.

This juxtaposition between life and death—between heaven and earth—gives the audience a glimpse into what it means to be Black, male, and living in America. Similar to Charles White’s paintings in which the paint strokes communicate movement and life from the flat, static canvas, Howard’s use of Black ecstatic worship also creates a safe space, a home for imagining Black futures. By situating these two, Black men in tandem with nature and the divine, he communicates to the audience the horror of Black death and the beauty of Black spirituality to hold and tend to Black grief. Howard demonstrates the power of the Frenzy to hold both the exilic and postexilic—the experience of Black trauma and the resilience to create Black futures. It is within this whirlwind, this frenzied somatic dimension, that is Black embodiment, where we find the tools for liberation.

¹⁸ Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: the Aesthetics of Possibility*, (Fordham University Press, 2017), 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰ Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, (Yale University Press, 2008), 62.

In the end, amidst a hauntingly distressed tone of the piano, Banks and Bowser pull back the black curtains from upstage, revealing two identical, glitter, fitted sweat suits. They undress down to their underwear and slide on the pants, when Banks walks toward the audience with a limp and rubbing his hands. The bright white-lavender lights bounce off their pants illuminating their bed of rose petals, and the beauty of their brown skin. They fall onto and away from the floor, using each other as springboards to propel their bodies higher and higher into the air. They skid across the floor, and roll over their heads, enacting one last hurrah into their frenzied world of Black boy joy. Bowser falls to the ground, lying on his back, panting as his chest expands and contracts. Banks puts on his jacket, fully suited up, and daps the DJ one last time as the music fades to silence. He walks to the audience, shaking individual's hands as if to acknowledge their witness to their world. "Ready?" Bowser motions to Banks before Banks sets up to roll over Bowser's body. We hear their panting breaths and bodies hitting each other in their final embrace in the silence. Bowser slips under Banks's legs as he stands holding Banks on his bare shoulders. Banks emerges as if floating on his own in the air, in his full glorious form, glittered hoodie and pants, and we are left with the twinkling of the glitter in the dark.

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