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The Mountaintop and the Trope of Religion, Spirituality and Consciousness in African American Theater

Abstract

This paper examines the trope of religion; spirituality and consciousness in the hit play, *The Mountaintop* (2009) by Katori Hall. In this popular work, on the night before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's tragic assassination, the playwright reimagines the Angel of Death and how individuals who fight for justice, daily battle with fear, responsibility and the precariousness of life.

Introduction

If consciousness raises awareness, then the hidden transcript so often embedded in African American theater that works to reference epic memory and shared-meaning is very much a part of Katori Hall's nuanced drama. Hall uses humor, pathos, multi-media, magical realism, tropes of Christianity and the coveted, sacrosanctity of the Black church to knit together and an all too relevant examination of the albatross of Blackness, violence, and martyrdom that has claimed so many Africana people in the United States and abroad.

On the one hand, Hall's comedy-drama, *The Mountaintop,* attempts to present a more nuanced portrait of the famed Civil Rights leader, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Hall's version of King, however, is sometimes difficult to watch as it

presents Martin (originally Michael) King the man, as opposed to the icon we have come to know as Dr. Martin Luther King. Hall's depiction presents a character that oscillates between appearing engaging and concerning. Complete with references to alleged infidelity, stinky feet and a tobacco addiction, it is through the hidden transcript in the character of Camae's flippant dialogue, which is juxtaposed against King's justifiable fears of white supremacy, that makes this two-character play revelatory for so many audience members. This is because we have never seen King portrayed in this way. Despite a portrait of King that is sometimes troubling for African American audiences, the play offers a recognizable, shared understanding tied to a reoccurring motif of memory and Black religiosity.

Contextualizing the Setting: *The Mountaintop:*

On February 1, 1968, two garbage collectors in Memphis, Tennessee, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death by a malfunctioning truck. Twelve days later, frustrated by the city's lack of response to the latest event in a long pattern of neglect and abuse of its black employees, 1,300 black men from the Memphis Department of Public Works went out on strike. Sanitation workers, led by garbage-collector-turned-union-organizer T. O. Jones, and supported by the president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Jery Wurf, demanded recognition of their union. He would also advocate for better safety standards, and a decent wage.

On February 11, 1968, 700 men voted to go out on strike and the local chapter of the NAACP took up their case. The next day, local police used mace and tear gas on the striking workers. The following day, a meeting was called in a church basement on February 24, 1968 where 150 local ministers formed Community on the Move for Equality (or COME).

Martin Luther King Jr. first arrived in Memphis on March 18, 1968. He left the next day, leaving James Bevel and Ralph Abernathy there from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to organize protests. The proposed protest march was scheduled for March 28, 1968, but King arrived late. As chaos and violence began to erupt, a 16-year old boy was subsequently shot and killed by police. King returned to Memphis on April 3, 1968 delivering his now famous "Mountaintop" speech, foreshadowing his own demise:

> Like anybody, I would like to live a long life--longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now… I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. (King 2001, 222-223).

In King's speech from 1968, "the promised land" referenced the covenant that God made with Abraham (Genesis 15,18-21) to deliver his descendants out of bondage. King's speech skillfully utilized the trope of Christianity in aligning the plight of the African American people with the children of Israel as the chosen people (in their non-violent fight for freedom). There is symbolic capital in solidarity. By tying the movement to a historical symbolic metaphor about freedom from oppression in the most revered religious text in the African American community—the Bible—King was relying on a hidden transcript in his message about freedom from bondage, as freedom from racism, discrimination, poverty, and segregation. The hidden transcript in Katori Hall's play *The Mountaintop*—just like the hidden transcript in King's "I have been to

the mountaintop" speech—might very well appear opaque to those outside of the African American community, like it was supposed to when the communication strategy first developed as a consequence of enslavement. Nevertheless, the hidden transcript or layering of multiple messages in the public transcript is still, to this day, very much a part of the communicative strategies in the African American experience.

Much like the layered messages that would be embedded in the spirituals, work songs and folk art that were created and used to communicate and preserve a shared body of knowledge under the heavy oppressive constraints of enslavement, without whites fully discerning all of the meaning, much of the work of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was taking place in the segregated "Jim Crow" south.[1] Everything could be potentially inflammatory and King was always, strategically, trying to appear conciliatory.

In his speech that day, he needed to galvanize his followers, while not overtly enraging white supremacy. Tying his speech to images of the promised land relied on a shared body of knowledge tied to Christianity and stories about the oppressed, near-slave children of Israel that most of his African American congregation would have learned about in Sunday School and, thus, could readily identify with.

The trope of Christianity then is a term that will be used hereafter to speak to the development and history of Black religiosity in America that begins with the kidnap and forced labor of over 7 to 12 million Africans (Holloway 1991, 1) in the Americas as part of the enslavement process, and also the introduction to and syncretization of Christianity— with all its biblical references and motifs of patience, piety and struggle.

Like every successful Black preacher before him, whether consciously or unconsciously, King used a history of Black religiosity and cultural competence to frame the epic proportions of the Civil Rights Movement through a metaphor that everyone introduced to Christianity was familiar with and could easily understand. King clearly recognized the nature of Black religiosity in America and the importance of collective cultural meaning-making.

The Mountaintop and the Trope of Christianity

The Mountaintop is a two-character play that imagines the last hours of the life of the iconic minister Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The then 39-year old preacher and Civil Rights leader had led a nation on an unbelievable non-violent crusade to end segregation and voter discrimination.[2]

The play's creator, Katori Hall, is a playwright and performer from Memphis, Tennessee who said she created the play because her mother Carrie Mae had always wanted to attend the famous "Mountaintop" speech (April 3, 1968) but, because of the threat of violence, didn't get a chance to see Martin Luther King Jr. alive before his assassination the following day.

Winner of the Olivier Award for Best New Play (2009), the play takes place in room 306 of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, the evening after King's famous speech. Combining magical-realism and historical fiction, the play imagines Martin Luther King Jr. the man—not the icon— hours before his impending death.

The first time I saw the play, I thought it disrespectful. After viewing several subsequent productions—particularly the People's Light's production in Malvern, Pennsylvania in fall 2016—I have come to the realization that audience members like

or dislike *The Mountaintop* depending upon what importance they assign to African American history.

On the one hand, *The Mountaintop* can be viewed as an attempt to diminish the stature of a historical hero to the Black community. Then again, through the lens and symbolism of Christianity, the play might also be seen as a sensitive look at how so many Black leaders are made Christ-like, sacrificial lambs because of the "unrelentingness" of their service towards social activism and the symbolic importance in the trope of Christian ideals—piousness, service, and self-sacrifice.

The set design and sound scape for the People's Light production of *The Mountaintop* was quite extraordinary. For all intents and purposes, the set created in the raked box of the auditorium made audiences feel like the proverbial fly on the wall of the Lorraine Hotel, and throughout the ninety-minute production, the set accommodated all of the play's requirements—from a torrential downpour to snow.

In African American theater, plays that reference Black religiosity and rely on the trope of Christianity often incorporate various aspects of Black church rituals in their productions. According to Paul Carter Harrison, a ritual is any specialized and/or "formalized activity that a people create in order to achieve a particular psychological, physical, or spiritual result for individuals and the community" (P. Harrison 2002, 316). Although not the typical Black church drama, *The Mountaintop* nevertheless incorporated some key conventions of Black consciousness and religiosity—including, the symbolic capital embedded in the Black preacher persona.

The requisite prayer or prayer scene in examples of the canon are one-part theatrical and two parts oral artistry. There is form, meaning and a fixed corpus of rules associated with the discourse. "Like the sermon, prayer was also delivered in a kind of sing-song declamation which evoked musical response from the worshipers" (Lincoln and Mamiya 2003, 349). In the public prayer the component parts of the African American church ritual, as listed in Table 1, include:

Table 1. Seven Component Parts of Public Prayer/Sermon in African American Church Ritual

1. the introduction and reclamation of elders
2. the two verse hymn (optional)
3. setting
4. body (improvisational)
5. dramatic action
6. denouement (restating the main idea, desire or goal)
7. Conclusion (often concludes with an excerpt or recitation of the Lord's Prayer (Mathew 6: 9-13) as a fixed and unchangeable liturgical ritual).

The Frenzy or Shouting

The Frenzy or Shouting, which would later become associated with the Pentecostal sect, would soon become a ritualized, necessary component of African American religious practices. These practices could manifest itself into a variety of expressions from "the silent countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor—the stamping, shrieking and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild

waving of arms, the weeping and laughing, to the vision and the trance," (DuBois 1964, 141).

That Frenzy or Shouting was rooted in memories of African retentions that saw no incongruity with the old rituals associated with worshipping African deities and the worship of Christ (Frazier 1974, 17). The belief that, when the spirit of the Lord passed by, it could make one "mad with supernatural joy" was an essential component in the appeal of Christianity (DuBois 1964, 141).

“We are not Africans because we born in Africa, we are Africans because Africa is born in us” (Higgins Jr. 1994, 233). For continental Africans and their many descendants throughout the diaspora, the African worldview informs much of their spirituality and sacred traditions. Making no distinction between the sacred and the secular, through the lens of this African worldview there is a “oneness that bound together all matter, animate and inanimate, all spirits, visible or not” (Levine 1977, 58). Because African American theater draws on all aspects of African American life, expressions and spirituality, that same kind of transcendent fluidity so much a part of African belief systems that finds no incongruity in the convergence of past and present, time and space that appears in African American religious practices (particularly in the Baptist and Pentecostal faith), is replicated on the African American stage, In African American theater, then, with the church ritual, “the nature of …content and delivery…allowed slave tales to evoke the past and make it part of the living present” (Levine 1977, 90).

Historically, African American people “expressed their religion…pointed to a shared African heritage [that] remained alive not just as quaint cultural vestiges but as vitally creative elements of [their] culture” today (Levine 1977, 53). Because of the sheer importance of religious cultural expression from the early African American community to the present, is it any wonder that the church play or scene has become one of the most prevailing tropes in African American Theater steeped in shared assumptions and traditions.

Call and response

The Black preaching style has to be thought of as a dialogue characterized by call-and-response. “[B]oth speaker and listener must speak a common language” (Vaughne Cooke 1972, 38). What Zora Neale Hurston referred to as “bearing [the preacher] up” through vocalized audience–“amens,” chanting, humming, singing or musical accompaniment—is also known as reciprocity in the Black church ritual. Relying on the call-and-response component of these performances is an essential part of many indigenous African communal rituals. The necessary reciprocity in these church services are "intense antiphons in a liturgical drama between preacher and congregation” (L. Johnson 1971,114).

Funerals and Death Rituals

Because of the history of Black mortality and morbidity in the United States, violence, death and funerals have always been a major part of the African American experience. Poverty, unemployment, inequitable access to education, alcohol and drug addiction, homicides, suicides, the public school to prison pipeline, health disparities, low life expectancy and high mortality are intertwined and, sometimes, mutually-

inclusive in our society (Majors and Billson 1992, 24).Violence, terror, death and funerals are one of the primary cultural universals that informs the African American community's shared body of knowledge. "Just as the sacred ceremony of the church focuses on the power of God, the secular theatrical event invites the potency of supreme spirits" and triggers the power of both personal and collective memory of loss and grief (P. Harrison 1974, 8).

Table 2. Functions of Ritualized Prayer Scenes and the Funeral Scene

1). Purpose
These scenes operate to foster a sense of purpose among participants; both player/performers and audience members alike. Highlighting community rather than individuality, and *fellowship* as opposed to individual *uniqueness*. These representative church scenes delineate and make declarations about celebration and the affirmation of togetherness.

2). Function
The characteristic church scene or prayer ritual in examples of African American Theater function as a practical framework for application outside of the ritual and drama itself. It operates as a larger metaphor about the culture's history and collective struggle.

3). Catharsis
These spiritual scenes in African American Theater provide an opportunity for emotional involvement. That *emotional involvement* is necessary for catharsis and, it is so often accentuated by the use of gospel music. These scenes can be monitored and gauged by the success of the totality of the performance event. Audience members critique the experience by whether the scene or moment provides ample impetus and opportunity for purgation; and, ultimately, through word-of-mouth, the critique of the entire play may hinge on the success of these scenes. (Kimmika Williams-Witherspoon 2006, 223)

Zora Neale Hurston suggested that the African American church ritual operates, for the most part, as "excellent prose poetry" (Hurston 1981, 54). Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was famous not just as a Civil Rights leader and activist, but also for his linguistic acumen. King was noted for his Southern, Christian, Black, Baptist preacher/poet-power of the word. Paul Carter Harrison suggests that examples of word-power come from the same kind of creative word force tied to the hidden activity of God (P. Harrison 2002, 316). "Word-force, spoken or gesticulated, is essential for ritualistic illumination" (P. Harrison 2002: 324).

Rather than the larger-than-life version of King that we often get in the history books, in *The Mountaintop,* Martin Luther King Jr's character is presented as human and vulnerable. As Martin, rather than as King, Hall's character is a man with holes in his socks, that smells his own feet and, when alone in the motel room, urinates with the door open in the first few minutes of the play's opening scene. Perhaps Hall's benign desire was simply to acknowledge King's human frailties (and, by extension, all of our own)—knowing that any one of us can acquire greatness. However, after witnessing several very different productions, dependent upon the director's sensitivity and cultural

competence, from the opening moments of Hall's play to its conclusion, the play can seem disrespectful and even vitriol. Nevertheless, despite the way MLK's character is written, throughout the productions the audience is never able to fully forget or dismiss the expectation of the hero, nor the Black preacher's persona.

Historically, the Black preacher in African American culture developed out of the personification of "the God of Thunder, God's Thunder, God's Trombone" (L. Johnson 1971, 113).

In West Africa, *griots* or *jeli* were the individuals identified with word-power or Nommo. These genealogist/historian/storyteller/shamans were seen as the personification of God's Thunder (Hale 2007). The most common theory of how Africans adopted the term "*griot*" is that the term comes from the French word *guiriot* which first appears in the literature in 1637 (Hale 2007, 8). Others suggest that "*griot*" developed from the word *guewel* of the Wolof of Nigeria, while *jeli* or *jali* comes from the Mande culture (Hale 2007, 8). According to Thomas Hale, author of *Griots and Griottes* (2007), the traditional *jeli* or *griot*, served multiple functions in the African community by working with words.

Griots were historians, praise singers and storytellers. *Griots* recounted history, provided advise, served as spokespersons for the rulers and as diplomats mediating conflicts between villages. *Griots* interpreted their community's oral history and body of knowledge, played music, composed song and were responsible for the education of students. *Griots* in west Africa reported the news, contributed and (sometimes officiated at) at life's social ceremonies.

Their aesthetic products were the bodies of knowledge that they created and maintained. Like diviners that advised and provided oral prescriptions, *griots*:

- Developed narrative sequencing techniques
- Maintained and encouraged cultural memory
- Participated in data collection
- Created portraitures and ethnographic narratives of African leaders and
- Provided depth and texture to the cultural landscape. (Hale 2007, 113-146)

When African peoples immersed themselves in Christian dogma, much like the profile of the diviner or griot so important in indigenous African religious practice as the keepers of knowledge, the Black preacher emerged as a vital leader in religious practices. The Black preacher has historically always been associated with having symbolic capital—not just because of his ways of knowing or ability to interpret the Biblical text as the fixed body of knowledge that it is, but also because of his linguistic acuity.

Using metaphor and parable to connect "allegorical visions of the dramas of persecution, suffering and salvation," the Black preacher, as the leader of Black religious practice, quickly acquired symbolic capital (honor, recognition and prestige) in his community (L. Johnson 1971, 113). While we all know that the figure of King from our history books acquired that level of linguistic, social and symbolic capital during his lifetime, Hall's character is never allowed an opportunity to exhibit it. Rather than relying on all the iconic attributes of the Black preacher that are so often replicated on the American stage, Katori Hall's version of King is never quite given an opportunity to be King.

While audiences are drawn to the play to see how the author elevates or blasphemes one of the Black community's most revered modern icons, interestingly

enough, it is Camae's character, as the brand new maid on her first day of work, that seems lit from within. Camae curses, drinks and smokes. She's aware of her sensual nature and isn't afraid to use it, and, in the play, Camae attracts King's attention.

From moment to moment, the audience never knows what to expect. Camae's character oscillates like a pendulum. She chides MLK and then sympathizes with him. She imitates King's oratorical prowess, hints at her own rhetorical poet-power and befriends him. Theirs is the Mary Magdalene story in reverse (Carroll 2006).

The young Mary Magdalene recorded in Luke chapter 7: 1-2 of the King James Version of the biblical text, had suffered for years from cognitive impairment. Luke recorded Mary Magdalene's illness as demons, while biblical scholars like Edith Deen and others suggest it was probably more akin to paranoia and neurosis. (Deen 1955, 204). Mary Magdalene has also sometimes been associated with the "sinful woman" that Luke also records in chapter 7, verses 36-50. The figure, who has at times been depicted as a prostitute, is shown as someone protected by Jesus whose soul is made clean when she becomes a follower of Christ.

The Mountaintop builds on the conflicting stories surrounding Mary Magdalene and then turns them on their heads. Rather than the biblical story where Jesus befriends and protects the long-suffering Mary Magdalene (so afflicted with demons that it required an exorcism), Camae is the divine character that offers respite and salvation to an increasingly fragile King. From the opening of the play to its conclusion, Camae appears generous, kind and genuinely interested in hearing Martin's story—even though she is also a bit mysterious:

> KING: I just wish you had another one. To share of course. *(Camae pulls another pack of Pall Malls from her maid's uniform. King stands confused)* I thought you gave me your last one?
> CAMAE: I did. But I'm a magician. I got more where than cam from.
> KING: More tricks up your sleeve?
> CAMAE: Well, as yo can tell…I ain't yo' ordinary ole maid. *(He looks her up and down.)* (Hall 2012. 19)

Camae keeps producing cigarettes from her apron pocket—even after her "last pack" is thrown away and King begins to notice that she "knows things" that no one else should know.

> *(She pulls out a pack of cigarettes. Offers him one. He takes it gladly. Looks at it closely. Staring her down, he puts it in his mouth. She takes out a lighter. Lights it for him)*
> KING: Not to many women running 'round smoking Pall Malls. Impressive.
> CAMAE: Quite. My daddy smoked Pall Malls. Said Kools'll kill ya.
> KING: Have yourself one.
> CAMAE: What?
> KING: Smoke one with me.
> CAMAE: (Smiling) Naw, naw. Preacher Kang. You 'bout to have my boss up after men. I don't know what the rules is yet. Don't know where the dark corners in this place is to hide and smoke my Pall Malls. Don't even know which rooms to lay my head for a quick nap.
> KING: What about this one? *(Beat. She looks at the bed.)*
> CAMAE: Last folk up here was doin' the hoochie-coochie for pay. I wouldn't lay down in that bed if somebody paid me.
> KING: So what kind of rules does a little lady like you break?

CAMAE: None that involve no preacher, I tell ya that.

KING: Everybody should break a rule every now and then. (Hall 2012, 8-9)

With a sense of other-worldliness about her, the character of Martin slowly but surely switches from trying to hit on Camae (even while talking to his wife Coretta and his kids back home on the phone) to simply appreciating Camae's gestures of kindness.

CAMAE: You lil' pulpit poet, you. I likes you.

KING: I likes you too. *(The phone rings.)* Excuse me.

CAMAE: Well, I'll just be on my—*(He motions tor her to stay, then puts on his "King" voice.)*

KING: Dr. King, here. *(Voice shifts.)* Oh Corrie. Yes. I did call. You didn't pick up. Oh. You were at a meeting. Oh. It went fine…. (Hall 2012, 9)

King soon realizes that there is more to this woman in the room. In Hall's play, Camae seems to know things. Right away, she seems to be more interested in the man, Michael—before he changed his name to Martin.

KING: You called me Michael.

CAMAE: *(Knowing she did.)* I did?

KING: Yes. You. Did. You called me Michael.

CAMAE: You--you--scared me—

KING: How would you know that?

CAMAE: No what?

KING: To call me that?

CAMAE: Call you what?

KING: YOU KNOW WHAT THE HELL I'M TALKING ABOUT

CAMAE: Calm down. Mich—I mean Preacher Kang. I didn't mean to call you out yo name—

KING: But that is my name. My childhood name. How do you know my real name? My Christian name? *(He slowly backs away from her. Softly.)* Oh. So you one of them, huh?

CAMAE: I am so sorry. I never wanted to do this. This is so hard for me to do—

KING: *(Shaking his head.)* An incognegro. A spy.

CAMAE: I was sent to—

KING: WHAT? Tempt me?

CAMAE: Hell, you was the one tempting me, getting me all off my job!

KING: I don't want to hear it. Get out.

CAMAE: No.

KING: I said GET OUT! Coming in here tempting me! *(Enraged, King overturns the furniture, searching for bugs he may have glossed over.)*

CAMAE: Preacher Kang!

KING: *(He yells to no one in particular.)* What, y'all think you can trap me? Record me with a woman? Well, you're not going to catch ne!

CAMAE: Preacher Kang/ Stop acting so paranoid!

KING: Sending tapes to my wife. Tryin' to break up my family. Tryin' to break my spirit!

CAMAE: Preacher Kang, calm down!

KING: You think you can break me! *(Screaming to no one in particular.)* Well, YOU can't break me! You WILL NEVER BREAK ME AGAIN! *(King grabs Camae by her arm and aggressively pulls her towards the door.)*

> CAMAE: You're hurting me! Preacher / Kang, you're hurting me!
> KING: How much they pay you, you spook? How much? (Hall, 2012, 22-3)

Going from the fragility of suffering an anxiety attack and ending up in a fetal position in Camae's arms in one scene, to a portrayal as a fully-enraged Black man in the scene above, Hall takes a great many liberties with King's character. Eventually, MLK begins to believe that Camae has been sent there to try to set him up and to tarnish his reputation.

Language Dynamics in Church Rituals

One of the reasons why the church and/or references to the trope of Christianity have become such a recognized symbol of African American culture is because of the pervasiveness of the Black preacher as one of the iconic role models in the Black community.

Camae acknowledges MLK's oratorical prowess and symbolic capital as an African American preacher, rather than as a Civil Rights leader. Like the Black preachers of old, King is portrayed as a "hymn-maker ...He [who] invents his own airs and tunes, which are often profoundly touching and musical" (P. Harrison 2002, 232-279). In the play, Camae calls MLK a "pulpit poet" (Hall 2012, 9).

Camae is funny and engaging, and when King asks her what kind of sermon he should give the people, she dons his jacket and shoes and performs his role, delivering a diatribe that is as thoughtful and eloquent as it is simple:

> CAMAE: HOW do we deal with the white man? I have told you that the white man is our brother. And he should be treated as such. We touch our brother with the softest of hands. We greet our brother with the widest of smiles. We give our brother food when he is hungry. Abut it is hard to do this when our brother beats his fists upon our flesh. When he greets us with "Nigger" and "Go back to Africa," when he punches us in our bellies swelling with hunger. Abel was slain by his brother Cain and just like the biblical times, today the white man is killing his Negro brethren, shackling his hands, keeping us from rising to the stars we are booooouuuuuund to occupy…." (Hall 2012, 17)

Tied to the history of Black religiosity, Camae's impromptu sermon is reminiscent of the Negro sermons that Harrison and Gates wrote about:

> [The] Negro sermon nearly always rises to a pitch of exaltation at which ordinary prose accent, intonation, word-order are too tame to express the streaming emotion[s] within; the sermon becomes a cry, a poem, an improvisation; it is intoned with melodious energy; it is full of scraps of Scripture in poem-form, and to say that it becomes an orgy of figures and metaphors sobbed or shouted out with the voice of Boanerges is hardly going at all too far. (J.A. Harrison 1884, 235)

These Black church rituals and the language dynamics in the Black preacher's sermon are all intellectual property and, as such, are actualized through official language strategies that institutionalize them in the public sphere (S. Harrison 1992). Fusing disparate metaphorical and experiential allusions, the Black preacher's discourse was and still is constructed as an example of a "religious and emotional rhetoric, which offered hope, release and entertainment in cathartic proportions" to its listeners (L. Johnson 1971, 114).

As a communication event that relies on Black religiosity and collective cultural meaning-making, *The Mountaintop's* use of the symbolism surrounding the Black preacher's sermon is not just a source of comic relief, but also a nod to our collective, cultural memory. Camae's impromptu sermon proves that the Black preacher's sermon was and still is linguistic artistry—regardless of who's mouth it comes out of. The Black preacher's sermon could easily be localized to a particular time, event or rites, and, although relatively structured and based on a fixed body of knowledge, the Black preacher's sermon, following African traditions of divination,[3] could be "adapted to the changing world around him" (Akinnaso 1995, 235).

Straight no chaser—Camae's character is clearly not as learned or as sophisticated as MLK; but, nevertheless, sufficiently matched intellectually. Every time MLK adopts his righteous Dr. King persona and tries to wrestle back some of his social capital in the play, Camae reminds him of his everyday reality, with lines like: "Sugar, shush, you just a man" (Hall 2012, 14).

Social Realism

The Mountaintop is filled with allusions to the precariousness of the times. In the play, MLK shows his agitation and frets openly to Camae about the sacrifices and terrors he has endured—death threats and white supremacist attempts to quiet him and dismantle his work, that can only be credited to the peculiar brand of American domestic terrorism that African Americans have historically always endured (Hall 2012, 30). But, with textual references to Jesus, as both a retention and survival mechanism from the beginnings of their introduction to Christianity, African Americans have used the faith of their oppressor's religion to contemplate death (Frazier 1974, 20).

Death and Life-after-death as a Recurring Theme in Christianity

Camae: Heaven is where we headed. (Hall 2012, 25)

From the 1700s through King's assassination in 1968, (and, as highlighted by the Black Lives Matter Movement, even today) "because of the cheapness with which his life was regarded," African Americans—particularly, Black men—have constantly faced the imminent threat of death (Frazier 1974, 21).

"White racism and discrimination have long created a crisis in character for whites and a crisis in survival for blacks" (Majors and Billson 1992, 24). For social scholars like Majors and Billson, the albatross of Blackness and the constant stereotypical perceptions imposed on Black men in every walk of life, from the pavement to the pulpit, lends itself to modernized notions of necessary martyrdom. When death is seemingly always imminent, the concepts of life and death begin to have little meaning.

Social factors are not easily separated from economic factors. Victim to the constant onslaught of racism and discrimination, African American men learn to live with the fear of violence and racial assault every day, eventually growing less compassionate and empathetic— resulting in the propensity to perpetuate more and more acts of violence themselves. Karl Marx called it alienation; Emile Durkheim called it anomie (Giddens 1971, 224). Oppressive societies use violence to maintain the division of labor. Where there is societal violence, there is resistance—and resistance replicates more violence.

When King talks about the fear for his future—at the age of 39, he was the same age as Malcolm X before he was killed—he mulls over the notion that “fear makes us human.” King rationalizes that “One thing we all got in common—we scared” (Hall 1992, 18). Without naming adult Black male morbidity, King’s reference to “Being just 39 years old” calls ironic attention to the ways in which violence, domestic terrorism, Black male murder and martyrdom have become even more normalized in our communities (Hall 2012, 20). In fact, between 1963 and 1972, more Black males were murdered in American streets than died in the Vietnam War (Majors and Billson 1992, 20). And yet, to acquire and then maintain reputation or “street cred” as a real man—attempting to act nonchalant about the constant fear that they must learn to live with—African American men must wear a mask:

> The mask or front, which is fused from an amalgam of verbal, physical, and psychological elements, changes according to what the audience wants. The chameleon-like recasting of masks according to audience expectation marks the black actor’s most heroic—and circumspect—performance. (Majors and Billson 1992, 61)

Contrary to King’s usual representation as a much-needed, indefatigable shepherd of a beleaguered flock, in Hall’s play, as King smiles and laughs, the audience gets to know him as a man—funny, flirtatious and even at times, fragile. The pathos in the play is hurried along by King’s exuberance over his plans. As he talks excitedly about wanting to do another big March on Washington, the drama turns tragic as the audience is reminded that he will never make it (Hall, 2012, 28-29). Knowing that his end is near, the poignancy in MLK’s exuberance becomes somber, the tragedy is heightened in knowing, as Camae reminds him, that “walking only gets you so far” and that King will never make it to see his version of “the promised land” (Hall 2012, 14). Hall’s play pushes our contemplation of death even further by highlighting the luxury in not knowing our own expiration dates.

Stripping away still further from the iconic image that many of us in the African American community still have of Dr. Martin Luther King, the pathos of the play is heightened as we watch King desperately fight the inevitable when he first learns of his own assassination come morning. As we watch him beg for more time, cry and then struggle to find some resolve, we think about our own mortality, fielding troubling thoughts about how we might react to find out that death is near.

Morbidity and Sacrifice

> Camae: Civil rights’ll kill ya fo’ them Pall Malls will. *(Beat. They look at each other. Then laugh REALLY hard.)* (Hall 2012, 13)

The Mountaintop forces audience members to think about how intuitively survival—wanting to live—has been hard-wired in our neurobiology. (Immordina-Yang, 2020). As humans, we all know that one day we, too, must die, but through King’s character in Hall’s play, we are forced to think about how difficult it must be for those who, when they know their death is at hand, are required to accept that fate, and to meet death with strength and intestinal fortitude.

Nobody in their right mind wants to die. According to E. Franklin Frazier, for the early African American believers, “death was not only always at hand, but it was also a terrible experience because God holds one accountable for the way in which one has behaved in this world” (Frazier 1974, 21). Whether it is the concept of weighing one’s

soul against truth, in Egyptian cosmology (Saleem 2003, 13-14**),** to ancestor reverence in Yoruba belief systems in Nigeria **(**Mason 1985, 1-8), to the absence of sin in Christianity (II Chronicles 7:14), many religions tie aspects of accountability to death.

As the play nears its conclusion, Camae eventually reveals the tragedy of her life and death:

> CAMAE: …Honey, I've robbed. I've lied. I've cheated. I've failed. I've cursed. But what I'm ashamed of most is I've hated. Hated myself. Sacrificed my flesh so that others might feel whole again. I thought it was my duty. All that I had to offer this world. What else was a poor black woman, the mule of the world, here for? Last night, in the back of an alley, I breathed my last breath. A man clasped his hands like a necklace 'round my throat. I stared into his big blue eyes, as my breath got ragged and raw, and I saw the hell this old world had put him through. (Hall 2012:,36-7)

When it is divulged that she has been sent as her first assignment from the other side to prepare King for death, King first fights, and then pleads for his life. King demands to speak to God believing that he can make an admirable case for himself—to give him more time:

> CAMAE: Honey I know all about your trials and tribulations. I done read you' blessings file. It bigger than yo' FBI file and that bigga than the Bible. I know it might be hard for you to leave this life…yo' family…and all yo' plans. But you gone have to pass off that baton, little man. You in a relay race….
> KING: I know I've dropped the baton so many times over this race. But I promise, I ain't gonna do it again, Tell Her.
> CAMAE: Tell Her?
> KING: Yes, tell Her I promise. I won't ever drop this baton again. Tell Her. She needs to let me stay. Ask Her. For me.
> CAMAE: (*Hissing*.) You ain't supposed to question God. That's the rule. You know that!
> KING: There ain't no rules for an angel like you!
> CAMAE: Shhhiiit! God gots rules! I had to read the whole Bible today—
> KING: Please. Camae.
> CAMAE: Dr. KANG!
> KING: PLEASE! (*Pause*.) (Hall 2012, 30)

As an interesting choice, Hall plays on the history of paternalism in European and Anglo-American Christianity. Camae reveals to the distressed MLK that God was a woman. Taken aback, but not necessarily shaken, by this revelation, King, like his spiritual role model Martin Luther, had a complicated relationship to women. Like Martin Luther,[3] King had a great deal of respect for women and there were a few in leadership roles in his movement, such as Ella Baker. After his death, King's wife, Coretta Scot King, would spend her lifetime upholding his legacy and his mission. Yet, built on a faith so tied to patriarchy and paternalism since the Council of Nicea began to canonize and cut out books of the biblical texts that recorded and celebrated the role of women in the church, women have traditionally had a complicated history and positionality in Christianity:

> CAMAE: When I passed on the other side, GOD—ooooo. She is more gorgeous than men. She the color of midnight and Her eyes are brighter than the stars. Her hair… well,,, just you wait till you see Her hair…. (Hall 2012, 37)

This revelation becomes a light-hearted touch towards the play's denouement, but may also speak to history's reluctance to record and celebrate the varied sacrifices of so many Black women. "Her story" and the womanist movement (Alice Walker, 1983) may know of and celebrate these women, but history often minimizes their contributions. Women like Ella Baker, co-founder and director of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during the Civil Rights movement, was an important part of King's movement who never properly received her recognition. In fact, many of the sects in the Black Christian faith are still fighting over what should be the role of women in the church. As Lincoln and Mamiya suggest. the faith-based institutions in America are still in denial about the reality that "black churches could scarcely have survived without the active support of Black women…and for the most part still remain a male preserve…not generally available to women" (Lincoln and Mamiya 2003, 275).

KING: Wow. An angel?
CAMAE: Yes. I'm here to take you to the other side.
KING: The other side? So I'm not dead?
CAMAE: No. Not yet. (*Beat*.) (Hall 2012, 24)

As King resists facing his impending date with destiny, Camae reveals that God is a woman and that She has said his time is done. In an interesting twist to the social capital that male, Black preachers traditionally enjoy in their communities, King talks Camae into calling God; and then when she does, he demands to speak with Her:

CAMAE: Hello there, God. It's me. Camae. Mmmhmmm. How it goin'? *(she looks at King.)* It goin' pretty good. Yep. Yeah. I'm halfway through my shift. Taking a break…but…uhm…Well, there's a bit of a problem. He say he ain't ready. That what I told him. I know,..I know… I KNOW.
KING: Let me talk to Her.
CAMAE: No—
KING: I wanna talk to yo' supervisor! *(Camae puts her hand over the phone.)*
CAMAE: Shhh! I'm tryin' to butter Her up first.
KING: Let me talk to Her! *(H tries to snatch the phone from Camae.)*
CAMAE: Hold on a got-gum minute, Preacher Kang! *(Pause.)* Yes. But he stubborn! *(She looks at him.)* And quite convincing. He sho'll do got a way wit' words. I know You told me. You wanna talk to him? Well good. Cause he wanna talk to You. *(Camae hands the phone over to him. King snatches it. Clears his throat. Puts the phone to his ear, Beat.)*
KING: Uhm, God? It's uhmmm…*(Putting in his "King" voice)* Dr. Martin Luther King, J—oh, yes. Michael, to you…Yes ma'am…yes ma'am…yes…ma'am *(He pulls the phone from his ear and whispers.)* Is She-
CAMAE: Black. Mmhm. And PROUD….*(King puts the phone back to his ear.)* (Hall 2012, 31-32)

King tries to use his oratorical skills as the iconic Black preacher on God— to little avail; until finally She hangs up on him.

KING: …NOT TONIGHT. I have continuously put my life on the line, gave it all up. Gave it all up for You and Your word. You told me that'd I'd be safe. Safe in Your arms, You protected me all this time, all this time! Glued a pair of wings to my back, but now that I've flown too close to the sun, I'm falling

> into the ocean of death, God, how dare You take me now. NOW! I beg of You. I plead—God? Ma'am? God? *(Long heavy silence.)*
> CAMAE; *(Whispers from the corner.)* What She say?
> KING: I think…I think. She hung up on me…. (Hall 2012, 32-33)

By the play's end, Hall's character of King steps out of the iconic image and becomes filled with rage. Lamenting all he had sacrificed to "lead his people"—holidays, children's birthdays and the like—and, of course, all that he had left unsaid or failed to give his wife, Coretta, it is the realization that he had sacrificed so much and would never see the fruition of all his labor that finally deflates him.

"KING: I've sacrificed my marriage, my family, my health, for what?" (Hall 2012, 36). While the audience watches this character crumble, the iconic image of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is stripped of his epic heroism and he is, instead, reduced to a man—a mere man—no different than any other (Hall 2012, 30):

> KING: Hold me. (*Beat. King's eyes well with tears and this strong grown man dissolves into the child no one ever saw. He slides down on top of her. Crying his heart out. Sobbing. And Camae holds him. And rubs his back as if he were a child.)* (Hall 2012, 35)

As Camae reminds King that "sometimes you done cleared the hurdles and sometimes…you ain't," Hall unpacks the theme of Christian dogma and martyrdom often embedded in the Christian belief and in African American theatre (Hall 2012, 30):

> KING: I don't want to be a martyr.
> CAMAE: But the suit fits you well.
> KING: I am a man. I am just a man. (Hall 2012, 36)

With lines like those who "speak by love die by hate" (Hall 2012, 21, 37) and "powerful the man that gets more done dead than alive" (Hall 2012,36), the audience is left to draw correlations between other men from our history books who sacrificed so much—men like David Walker, Octavius Valentine Catto, The Scottsboro Boys, Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and, of course, Jesus on the mount.

When Drama and Reality Collide

"[W]hile standing on a balcony outside his room at the Lorraine Motel, Martin Luther King, Jr. was struck by a sniper's bullet" (Evans 2015, 6). Hall's play does not sugar coat MLK's demise; but, rather tries to make sense of it, without the usual African American theater convention of the Black funeral scene.

Today, with a fixed corpus of rituals that conjure memory and illusion, the church funeral scene has become so ritualized in African American drama that it now operates as a convention of the genre. With the intention towards collective, cultural memory, these, usually predictable scenes have become ritualized in the African American theatrical canon, replicating funeral or death rituals tied to our own propensity to connect to the otherworldly outlook in our innate spirituality (Frazier 1974, 21).

As the play nears its conclusion, several notable quotes attributed to King come to mind: "Unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality" and "I'd rather be dead than afraid." The resulting denouement is made either uplifting or devastating, depending upon the directorial choices made in each individual production. In the People's Light production, with its accompanying projection design, King's final monologue lamenting all the American history that he would never see is

particularly painful. In King's lengthy final monologue, he muses over who will tell his story, while the audience has to grapple with notions of what part of his story should be told.

How *The Mountaintop* concludes is different in each production, based on directorial and projection design choices in how King's final monologue is delivered. Which images of the future are chosen and how the images and music build to a crescendo varies by production. The reliance on multi-media, however, remains consistent. As King either dreams or is tortured by the projection of nightmares yet to come, the play's denouement is made up of a cacophony of images, sounds and music compiled from the historical record from 1968 to the present day.

Without visually presenting the coffin or grave, and concluding with the image of MLK standing down center swallowed up by the ever-growing darkness of images and sounds, Hall's play evokes the feeling of the characteristic Black funeral ritual. In those multi-media depictions of the advances and challenges of race relations for African Americans since King's death in 1968, even in this uncharacteristic, minimalist funeral scene, the play "contain(s) critical commentaries on social, economic and political events" (Akinnaso 1995, 252).

These death/funeral scenes in African American theater, whether realized or symbolic, trigger the power of both personal and collective memory of loss and grief (Harrison 1974, 8). As a funeral dirge, the music and imagery are often transmuted into powerfully haunting mourners' laments and are as riveting as any other performative death ritual might be from any other culture. In representative examples of African American theater, these scenes and references to Black religiosity resonate beyond the confines of spatio-temporality and become portals of *sankofa*—that unique ability to look back *and* forward—calling to mind the last rites of traditional African death rituals.[5]

Conclusion

As Harry J. Elam, Jr. suggests, "the ways black theater, drama and performance, past and present, interact and enact continuous social, cultural and political dialogues is an interesting one and one, I contend, that must be critically examined and exposed (Elam, 2001, 3). Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* provides an engrossing opportunity for introspection. In truth, despite many of its compelling complexities, for African Americans used to a history of terrorism, violence, death and the discrediting of the contributions of leaders of color, there are parts of the play that still seem sacrilegious in depicting Martin Luther King Jr—one of greatest modern Civil Rights leaders of our time—cursing, smoking, drinking spirits from a flask, flirting, and even having a pillow fight with a beautiful young maid in his hotel room, only hours before what we know will be his assassination. Benign—perhaps. Inflammatory—potentially. Opaque to audience members outside of the African American community—probably—especially to those with little to no sensitivity for the history and national tendency to demonize and discredit the African American experience.

Does that mean that African American playwrights should refrain from examinations of our leaders in their work? Absolutely not; but with the understanding of the way erasure happens—how African American men and women can be disgraced, pathologized and invalidated in the historical record as a way to dismiss or whitewash their contributions to American society. For those of us who write for the stage, we have to expect that there may be pushback and that there is always a cost.

Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* is creative and compelling in the way it transforms the stereotype of Black womanhood (one-dimensionally, either commodified by her sexuality or stigmatized by her anger) that is so often replicated on the American stage. Hall's creation of the principle character, Camae, is smart, funny, compassionate and kind; and, while she is still presented remarkably close to the "tragic mulatto" stereotype, Hall's play makes her *divine* (Williams-Witherspoon 2011,186-87; Williams-Witherspoon 2006, 194-196; Bogle 1974, 9), We also have to applaud any salient examinations of cultural myth-making that dismantle the cult of personality in popular culture affecting our leaders, politicians, athletes and entertainers, which, over time, can be debilitating. We sometimes forget that no one—not even our heroes—are perfect:

> KING: …There's just so much I gotta do. So much I haven't yet accomplished. So much…I GOTTA FINISH WHAT I STARTED!
> CAMAE: It ain't all about you! YOU! You! Gosh, you men are so selfish. They always thank it' about them. Them! THEM! Haha. Well let me tell you something, PREACHER KANG. Let me tell you! Like most men, you ain't gone be able to finish what you started. (Hall 2012, 29)

Katori Hall uses humor, pathos, multi-media, magical realism, the gendered-expectations inherent in Christianity and the coveted, sacrosanctity of the Black church to knit together an all too relevant examination of the albatross of Blackness, the psychological effects of violence and the painfulness of martyrdom that have claimed so many Africana peoples in the United States and abroad. And yet, knowing full well the tragic way King died—some things are still just not funny!

Notes

1. The Black Codes called Jim Crow laws maintained strict rules of segregation in many parts of the United States; but were particularly virulent in the south in the 1950's and 1960's. Some of the Jim Crow laws were legislated like the ones forbidding interracial marriage; others like the "Whites Only" restaurants, water fountains and rest rooms were unspoken.
2. At that time in American history, southern whites tried to dismiss him as just another "Negro".
3. According F. Niyi Akinnaso, divination is defined as "a way of knowing" and "is associated with a specialize ritual which uses extraordinary powers of communication"(Akinasso 1995, 236), not unlike the Black preachers "powerful communications" in the Black church, particularly in the orthodox or Pentecostal sects.
4. According to Herman Selderhuis, author of the biography *Martin Luther* (2017), Luther's relationship to women was controversial and complicated. He increased the valuation of marriage which favored the social and economic capital of women. Luther supported a reform of education and treated women as equals in their capacity for theological understanding. Yet Luther was also known for making crass gendered statements about the physicality of women and their rightful position in the home. He was trapped into marrying Katharina von Bora; but in his letters to her, he clearly respected her. Yet, as Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks write in their introduction to *Luther*

on Women (2003), '[H]is condemnation of witches reverberates in our minds, and his denigration of women's nature and capacities repeatedly presents itself to our gaze…Women were to be pious, quiet and submissive.' (Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks 2003, 12-13) Obviously, Luther, much like Hall's character of King, was both enigmatic and unique.

5. That fluid view of time—looking back in order to move forward—is what the term "Sankofa" means. Originally a word in the Twi language in Ghana that literally means "go back and get it". (san meaning "return", ko meaning "to get" and fa, which means to fetch, to seek and take). The Akan people also have an Adinkra symbol of a bird, in the shape of a heart, looking back to retrieve an egg off of its back. The term and symbol of Sankofa speaks to the African concept of past/present and future time being mutually inclusive or the African notion of cur linear time. (Pennington 1985) "[T]ime is not completely unilinear, but four dimensional, wherein everyone lives along his or her own subjective time dimension (individual growth) which interacts with and intersects the three other dimensions of past, present and future." (Pennington 1985, 127)

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