



God and Blackness

RACE, GENDER, AND IDENTITY IN A
MIDDLE CLASS AFROCENTRIC CHURCH

ANDREA C. ABRAMS

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NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York and London

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York and London
www.nyupress.org

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For Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data,
please contact the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-0-8147-0523-0 (cloth)
ISBN: 978-0-8147-0524-7 (paper)

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper,
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We strive to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials
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Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Also available as an ebook

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend my gratitude to First African Presbyterian Church, especially Reverend Dr. Mark Lomax, Reverend Dr. Will Coleman, Reverend Dr. Itahari Toure, and the church members who participated in my research project. Your graciousness, candor, and insight made this project possible, and I have tried my best to respect the work that you are doing as a community.

I thank Dr. Peggy Barlett, Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, Dr. Bruce Knauff, Dr. Tracy Rone, and Dr. Dianne Stewart, who each provided crucial theoretical guidance, support, and inspiration. With all my heart, I thank Dr. Matsheliso Molapo, Dr. Sally Seraphin, Dr. Riche Daniel-Barnes, Dr. Maurita Poole, Dr. Leandris Liburd, Amanda Hillman, and LaSherrri Bush, the Sisterhood, who provided deeply appreciated friendship and love. I am also indebted to Dr. Martha Rees, who taught me to love anthropology; Dr. James Flanagan, Dr. Marie Danforth, and Dr. Carol Ware of the University of Southern Mississippi, who taught me how to be an anthropologist; and Dr. Yvonne Newsome and Dr. Brenda Hoke of Agnes Scott College, who supported my dream and helped me learn how to teach.

I would not have completed this book without the invaluable critical feedback and patience of Jennifer Hammer, senior editor at New York University Press. I am also grateful for the keen eye of Dorothea Stillman Halliday, managing editor at the press. Thank you, Jennifer and Dorothea. Thank you to my colleagues at Centre College, J. H. Atkins, Beau Weston, Phyllis Passariello, Sarah Goodrum, Endre Nyerges, and Robyn Cutright. I am also grateful for the encouragement and unwavering enthusiasm of my friends Eva Cadavid, Laura Hunt, and Danya Ferraro.

I acknowledge, appreciate, and adore Dr. Demetrius Semien, whose partnership, support, and love have made all the difference in the past five years.

Finally, there are no words adequate to thank my parents, Reverend Robert Abrams and Reverend Carolyn Abrams. You are my rock and my fortress. I thank my siblings Stacey, Leslie, Richard, Walter, and Jeanine, whose love makes all things possible. I am especially grateful to my sisters, who read and reread without complaint and provided essential feedback. You always believed even when I did not. And I love each of you.

Introduction

Sunday Morning

Anthropology of a Church

Eleven O'clock Service

First Afrikan Presbyterian Church is a standard triangle-faced red brick building surrounded by a parking lot, a few acres of grass, and several trees. Located in Lithonia, a suburb of Atlanta, the church is adjacent to several subdivisions and is the religious home of a predominantly African American and middle class population. As I walk up the four steps to the front doors, two smiling-faced gentlemen greet me, one of whom says how nice I look this morning and both of whom seem genuinely glad that I have come to worship at their church this fine summer day. I return their greetings, and, entering the narthex, I see a table upon which rests the announcements for the week, fliers for events throughout the community, and sign-up sheets for one of the Bible study classes offered on Wednesday. Over the door leading into the sanctuary is a black, white, and red banner that reads, "Invest in the First Afrikan Way."

The church has a modest-sized sanctuary with twenty-six pews comfortably seating approximately five hundred people. In the front is the wooden pulpit, a two-tiered choir loft, and, off to the side, a small ensemble of pianist, drummer, trumpeter, and saxophonist. As they

softly play a jazz rendition of “Amazing Grace,” I take my seat and stock of the surroundings. It is at this point that I note, behind the pulpit, a large wooden cross draped with a generous swath of green cloth, as well as a chain of iron from which hangs a multihued fabric ankh, an African icon considered the original cross and the symbolic representation of both physical and eternal life. Absent from the sanctuary walls, painted in warm oatmeal, are the usual pictures and stained-glass images of Jesus and the saints. Rather, the walls are adorned with several large African masks, a portrait of an old and serene black grandmother, and a coffee-colored Gabriel with elaborate wings and a faint resemblance to Denzel Washington, the actor.

Among my companions in the sanctuary are men with low-cut hairstyles, dressed in nicely tailored suits and seated beside women wearing stylish dresses and hairstyles over which some beautician labored the day before to get so straight. I also observe several women and men with their hair artfully arranged in braids, twists, and locks, as well as bouffant afros. As more people take their seats within the sanctuary, I see that many women are wearing West African-style head scarves and floor-length dresses and that the men have on dashikis and pantsuits made of kente cloth. Some women wearing boubous, the traditional gowns of West Africa, have permed hair, while others with natural hairstyles are clothed in Ann Taylor ensembles.

As I ponder this eclectic mesh of styles, a hush falls upon the gathering, and a young girl, the acolyte, enters the sanctuary to light the candle at the front of the church. She is followed by a distinguished-looking man with deep warm brown skin, low-cut graying black hair with a dramatic white patch in the front, and a most neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper mustache and beard. Wearing a black-and-white African pantsuit, this is Reverend Doctor Will Esuyemi Coleman, the resident theological scholar. He proceeds to the pulpit. As he does, the choir of some fifteen persons quietly take their places behind him. Simultaneously, eight women and men, each dressed in black, march with self-conscious authority up the aisle, splitting into two columns as they take their seats on the first row. These are the elders and deacons of the church. Until this point, other than the soft music of the jazz ensemble and the rustling of the persons entering the sanctuary, there has been a solemn hush. This is dramatically altered as the jazz drummers switch

instruments to traditional drums and begin to play a loud and furious African rhythm.

And then enter eight dancing women. They have on varied African print fabrics knotted in intricate ways about their necks, shoulders, and hips. Each wears a different vibrant color, all are barefoot, and they swing their arms and lift their legs and twirl their bodies down the aisle to the beat of the drums in a well-choreographed ecclesiastical dance. The room pulsates with the music and the dancing, and the congregants keep time with the beat from their seats and watch the beautiful women. Even those, like myself, not used to boisterous dancing in the middle of a church aisle, could not help but to feel the spiritual energy infused into the rhythmic movement.

After several minutes, the dance comes to an end, the women elegantly march out, and the choir takes over. This time it is neither jazz nor traditional African drumming but a good old-fashioned gospel rendition of “Woke Up This Morning.” Reverend Coleman’s congregational prayer follows, and the program reads that Harambee is next. A honey-colored woman with thick brown locks atop her head takes the pulpit and explains that *Harambee* means “welcome” in Kiswahili. She asks the visitors to stand. Explaining that this is a different kind of church than they are probably used to, she directs their attention to the third page of the program, which reads as follows:

We are an Afrocentric Christian ministry which utilizes the histories and cultures of African descended peoples as sources for biblical reflection and interpretation, ministry development and implementation, and evangelism in the community context where we exist. We believe that God is the Creator and sustainer of all things and people, and that God is sovereign. We believe, preach and teach that Jesus the Christ was a Northeast Afrikan Messiah of the Jewish faith who lived, died and was risen by the power of God, so that all who believe in God through him might be delivered from their sins and receive the gracious gift of eternal life.

Visitors are encouraged to consider making First Afrikan their new church home, and then the entire congregation is instructed to greet one another. What ensues is a friendly ten-minute melee as people

move around the sanctuary hugging, greeting, and catching up on gossip. After a few unsuccessful attempts, Reverend Coleman is able to get everyone back into their seats, and the choir offers another musical selection, this time of the contemporary gospel variety. As they sing, I note that two more people have joined Reverend Coleman in the pulpit. One is a woman with penetrating brown eyes, regal locks, and a soft and sage-sounding voice. This is Elder “Mama” Itahari Toure and she is the director of education. The other person is about six feet tall, of deep brown skin with a dark beard and mustache and long brown locks that reach to his waist. A good-looking man, dressed in a brown, loose-fitting pantsuit with kente print on the pockets, this is Reverend Doctor Mark Ogunwale Keita Lomax, the pastor of First Afrikan Presbyterian Church. After the choir is finished, Reverend Lomax offers the pastoral prayer and then launches into his sermon with:

There is a tendency to underestimate the life and the ministry of Jesus in North America. Week after week and sermon after sermon, we hear and see sweating radio and TV evangelists imaging Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior. More than that, and the thing that is so terribly disturbing to so many of us, is that the Jesus image is European. Jesus was not and could not have been in any sense European. He came from the wrong family to have been European. He came from the wrong part of the world to have been European. People say, Well it really doesn't matter. His ethnicity, his nationality, his color does not matter. Okay, fine. Let's tell the truth. If it doesn't matter, let's just tell the truth. And nothing but the truth. And ya'll know what that is. He came, he and his family, they resided there in ancient Kemet, many of us call it Egypt, which happens to be in Africa. And they were certainly African culturally. That is all they could have been.

Reverend Lomax continues to preach about Jesus and what African-descended Christian people should learn from his life. When the pastor has completed the sermon and as the musicians play softly behind him, he invites those who are so moved to join the congregation. The church begins to applaud as a young man wearing an Armani suit, his hair a low cap of dark curls, proceeds with a quiet resolve to where Reverend Lomax stands in the front of the sanctuary. The pastor takes him by the

shoulder and asks if there are any others. Another round of clapping ensues as a woman with shoulder-length plaits and dressed in a simple black blouse and skirt walks up the aisle to join them. Reverend Lomax then bends his head in prayer over the two. In that prayer, he welcomes the newest members, and he prays for the congregation as a whole, as well as the entirety of the world.

After the prayer, the woman who earlier explained Harambee now takes charge of the newest converts, moving them off to the side. Reverend Lomax takes his seat, and Reverend Coleman rises to announce that it is *Zawadi* time. He explains that *Zawadi* means “gift” in Kiswahili, that this is now the time to give our offerings, and that we should follow the instructions of the ushers. As people prepare to make their offerings, Reverend Coleman reminds the congregation that it takes money to run a church and that before we give the contents of our wallets to Stonecrest, the local mall, that we should first generously give back a portion of what God has given to us. After a prayer of thanksgiving for the *Zawadi*, Reverend Coleman reads the announcements for the week and formally introduces the two newest members, Jeffrey Hamilton and Issa Fernbank.

Reverend Lomax returns to the pulpit to give the closing prayer. As he prays, the congregation moves in unison to bend their heads and extend their right hands in locked fists, that most striking symbol of black pride. I watch a small boy of three or four raise his left fist in emulation of the father who holds him, and I cannot help but to wonder what the child is learning in this space about what it means to be black, Afrocentric, and Christian. This book is a study of blackness within the context of an Afrocentric church.

Blackness

Blackness is lived in various ways. The experience of a working class Haitian American woman in Boston is different from the experience of an affluent man with brown skin in London, and both are different from that of a woman in Johannesburg whose light brown complexion signals her biracial heritage. The historical and contemporary racial politics of a nation, the intersections of race with gender, class, and ethnicity, the shade of brownness, and whether or not a person even

identifies herself as black are just a few of the factors that shape the experience of the identity.

“Blackness” is a fluid concept in that it can refer to cultural and ethnic identity, sociopolitical status, an aesthetic and embodied way of being, a social and political consciousness, and a diasporic kinship. It is used as a description of skin color ranging from the palest cream to the richest chocolate. Blackness is a marker of enslavement, marginalization, criminality, filth, and evil. It is also a symbol of pride, beauty, elegance, strength, and depth. It is elusive and difficult to define and yet serves as one of the most potent and unifying domains of identity.

Blackness can be employed in multiple ways that may complement, contradict, and compete with one another. It is a foundation of social cohesion and allegiances and, at the same time, is a source of oppression and alienation. For some, blackness conflicts with other understandings of the self, such as class status, sexual orientation, and, for the multiracial, another racial identity. Cross-culturally, blackness is the foil to whiteness in terms of marking the boundaries of race, and, in both contentious and collaborative ways, all other racial identities are in conversation with or are negotiated in terms of blackness.

The complexity of blackness is evident in the national conversations concerning Barack Obama, the first black president of the United States. The son of an African father and a European American mother, Obama is challenged by those who question if he is in fact black or if his biracial heritage disqualifies him. Some challenge his credentials as African American as his African heritage is from the continent and not through domestic channels, while others decree that, by definition, one could not be more African American. In certain spheres his blackness inspires feelings of cultural kinship and political allegiance; in others, it is muted and made safe by his racial and cultural ties to whiteness; and, in yet others, it galvanizes fears of cultural threat and expressions of racist vitriol.

Then there are the ways in which the president’s blackness intersects with his gender, class status, nationality, and ethnicity. How much anger can he express before triggering the dangerous black man stereotype, and how much deference can he show his wife before his very masculinity is questioned? As an affluent and Harvard-educated lawyer, can he identify with and defend the perspectives and needs of poor and

working class African Americans, and does their shared blackness dictate that he do so? What of his relationship to Reverend Jeremiah Wright and the middle class church with a Black Nationalist sensibility that Obama and his family attended? Why would such a seemingly assimilated and accomplished middle class African American join a community critical of American racial and cultural politics? And of course, there are those who ask, “Is he American? Isn’t he Muslim?”

These issues are not unlike those in circulation at First Afrikan Presbyterian Church. As an Afrocentric community, members wrestle with how to understand their blackness in relationship to Africa and in the context of U.S. racial politics. As a predominantly middle class congregation, they negotiate the boundaries of identification with both less-affluent African Americans and middle class European Americans. When the privileges of their bourgeoisie status collide with experiences of racism, members’ conversations become rife with the tensions of double consciousness. A concept posited by W. E. B. DuBois, “double consciousness” describes the experiences of some African Americans as they wrestle with simultaneous feelings of assimilation into and alienation from the large national community. In addition, there are discourses within the church as to the ways in which ancestry, cultural practices, and political consciousness as well as exposure to whiteness and European culture shape the quality of a person’s blackness. Black and womanist theologies are explored and critiqued as men and women navigate gender politics within the church and in their personal relationships. An Afrocentrically infused theology is also employed to develop a collective understanding of the racial and ethnic relationship between church members and people in the Bible.

First Afrikan Presbyterian Church is an established community whose Afrocentric ethos and religious format provide consistent access to discourses on how blackness is imagined and defined as well as examples of how blackness is performed and negotiated on both a collective and individual basis. Consequently, it is an ideal space in which to consider the myriad of questions blackness raises: Given the different experiences of blackness, its fluidity, and multiplicity, how does an individual or community understand and negotiate the identity? In what ways are people differently situated by the intersections of blackness with different axes of identity such as class and gender? What does

blackness mean in an Afrocentric context, or in a theological context, or in a context that is neither? This book addresses these questions employing the perspectives and experiences of First Afrikan Presbyterian Church members.

Does the multivalence of blackness speak to its power as an identity, or to its murkiness as a concept, or to both? This book argues that the answer is both—blackness is simultaneously potent and ambiguous. In part, the power of race lies in its ability to address such ontological questions as, Where do I come from? or What are my cultural origins? Where do I belong? or Who are my people? and What is my purpose? or What should be the values and practices that shape my life? However, as race intersects with other axes of identity, such as class, gender, ethnicity, and nationality, the possible answers to these ontological questions begin to multiply, adopt varied nuances in different contexts and, at times, conflict with one another. As a consequence, the understanding of who one really is can become quite murky.

This book demonstrates that the middle class members of First Afrikan experience double consciousness or feelings of ambivalence as to where they belong and who they should be in terms of values and behaviors. I contend that the allure of Afrocentrism is that it is an established paradigm that advocates specific tenets for the origin, meaning, and practice of authentic blackness. Specifically, Afrocentrism maintains that because of its African genetic, spiritual, and cultural origins, blackness possesses an essential and immutable nature that transcends time, place, and all other axes of identity. Thus, through discourses of essentialism or ideas that there are natural and given ways to be black, an Afrocentric blackness is a powerful construction of the identity with the potential to resolve the double consciousness experienced by middle class African Americans.

Significantly, the class positionality and gender politics of the church's membership consistently destabilize essentialized constructions of blackness. For example, this book makes the case that because of the cultural capital and experiences of assimilation associated with their class status, First Afrikan's members understand themselves to have a blackness that is different from less-affluent African Americans. Furthermore, their middle class status allows the members to perform and rearrange the tenets of Afrocentrism in ways not as available to and

with different consequences for working class and poor black Americans. In addition, womanist theology advocated by the leadership, embraced by some members, and wrestled with by others also results in competing versions of Afrocentrism and blackness. Consequently, within this one congregation are multiple and competing constructions of both blackness and Afrocentrism.

On the one hand, discourses of racial essentialism contribute to a powerful sense of shared identity; on the other hand, heterogeneous constructions of blackness simultaneously contribute to a sense of ambivalence. A core contention of this book is that this tension between essentialism and heterogeneity is not a problem to be solved; rather, it is a fundamental and necessary aspect of racial identity. Blackness is not one thing but a constellation of ideas, practices, values, meanings, histories, sociopolitical dynamics, and intersections with other axes of identity from which those so deemed as “black” strategically pick and choose in order to nurture community and navigate an individual sense of self. Furthermore, as an individual seeks to understand where she belongs and as a community negotiates what it values and will practice, the multiple elements of blackness are created, interpreted, rearranged, deconstructed, re-created, and reinterpreted.

Despite these convolutions, blackness is, in a sense, one thing: it is an essential cornerstone of racial ideology that provides a shared sense of identity that an individual may employ to determine who he is and who he should become. Although communities and individuals may have different constructions of and uses for this shared sense of identity, this book makes the case that the identity is most powerful during those moments when and in those spaces where people believe they are invested in, talking about, and practicing the same essential blackness.

This book describes how members use Afrocentrism to determine what authentic blackness is and how it should be practiced, how biblical narratives are employed to prove the value and essential nature of blackness, and how middle class status and womanist theology promote counternarratives of heterogeneity. Through an analysis of how First Afrikan Presbyterian Church negotiates the tensions between essentialist and heterogeneous constructions of blackness, this book provides a better understanding of the varied hues of blackness as well as the fundamental power of blackness as a shared identity.

An Afrocentric Church

As the project of Afrocentrism is to determine the authentic nature of blackness and how best to practice it, First Afrikan Presbyterian provides an especially distinctive lens through which to investigate the lived experience of blackness. In addition, the church context reveals how Afrocentrism is understood and practiced when married to Christian beliefs and narratives. The church also provides insight into why Afrocentrism retains ideological relevance and power in certain sectors of the African American community.

Proponents of Afrocentrism contend that many black people lack an authentic and healthy sense of self as they are ignorant of their African history and culture. For African Americans, this ignorance is a result of the transatlantic slave trade, which displaced them from their ancestral homes and disrupted their ties to the cultures of Africa. The ignorance is also the result, charge Afrocentric thinkers, of a deliberate distortion and, at times, erasure of Africa in the public imagination. Specifically, Afrocentric thought posits that Africa is misrepresented as a primitive place that has produced no meaningful thought or cultural accomplishment to compare with that achieved in Europe. Consequently, feelings of inferiority and inconsequence are inscribed into the psyches of African Americans as they are positioned as objects rather than agents of political, cultural, and intellectual change. Afrocentrism is understood as the corrective to Eurocentrism, the ethos considered responsible for both the deliberate distortion of African accomplishment and the feelings of inferiority among her descendants in the New World.

Eurocentric thought, or Eurocentrism, is the practice, conscious or otherwise, of centering and privileging European culture, values, and perspectives. As with any ethnocentric perspective, Eurocentrism judges other cultures by the values and standards of its own. Anthropologist Marimba Ani contends that it is not unusual or inherently wrong for a cultural group to privilege its worldview, whether Afrocentric or Eurocentric. However, she argues that European culture “is unique in its use of cultural thought in the assertion of political interest” and that the resultant cultural nationalism is oppressive to persons of color (1994: 567). In other words, European ethnocentrism married

to European political might result in the oppression of others through political and cultural imperialism.

“Perhaps the most distinguishing character of Eurocentrism is its glamorization of its own historical heritage and experiences and its negation of the historicity of blacks, inducing the loss of a sense of history, cultural heritage and identity, rendering them vulnerable to Euro-American manipulation and domination” (Adeleke 1998: 2). Proponents of Afrocentrism contend that with an ethnocentric perspective privileging African culture, values, and perspectives, African-descended people become more substantively empowered social agents better motivated and able to improve their status within U.S. society.

Several criticisms have been leveled against Afrocentrism. A key critique is that scholars cherry-pick information or strategically emphasize and suppress certain aspects of African history and culture in the service of specific goals, such as the justification of antiwhite sentiment or the glorification of African civilization. Another complaint is that, as a deliberately ethnocentric paradigm, Afrocentrism simply reverses the direction of cultural bigotry it claims to oppose within Eurocentrism. Afrocentrists are accused of poor scholarship for emphasizing particular African cultural practices, such as the patriarchal family structure, and social achievements, such as Egyptian civilization, without attention to the myriad other African cultural practices and political organizations, such as female-headed households and rural villages. African-centered scholarship is also reproached for the tendency to privilege cultural practices and mores from the African past rather than those practiced within contemporary African societies.

However, as Wilson Moses has contended, Afrocentric people are not the only ones to commit the sin of selectively remembering and rearranging history: “The practice of creating a monumental past for one’s race or nationality was hardly the invention of African vindicationists. Traditionally, fanciful Englishmen of letters who preferred not to think of their ancestry as crude barbarians could fancy themselves descendants of Trojan heroes” (1998: 11). Nor are Afrocentric scholars the only ones to have invented traditions from a pastiche of varied real and imagined cultural behaviors. For instance, many Scottish people believe that tartan plaids and bagpipes have great antiquity and

are essential to their identity as Scottish. Trevor-Roper (1983) revealed, however, that these great traditions are in fact relatively recent and borrowed from the Highlanders, previously considered both barbaric and Irish. According to Hobsbawm (1983), cultural groups invent traditions and histories in order to meet crucial emotional needs and to fulfill significant ideological functions as they strive to understand themselves as a coherent group.

Gerald Early makes a similar argument in his discussion of the relationships between memory and identity. He posits that identity can be understood as constructed memory or, put another way, that the particular and idiosyncratic ways through which an individual categorizes, prioritizes, and edits past events provides the foundation for how that person understands herself. Moreover, the catalogue of personal memories is percolated through the collective memories of the group. So for Early, personal identity is “the psychological museum of the self that is so dependent on the idea of a collectivity, of a past derived from many” (1999: 703).

Furthermore, this museum of memories is constantly rearranged as individuals change their perspectives or interpretation of the evidence “in the never-ending need to reconstruct ourselves out of the remains of our ancestors, ourselves in another guise, so that they are both like us and unlike us” (Early 1999: 711). Within this logic, Afrocentrism can be understood as an evolving and fluid arrangement of collective history and knowledge with the objective of constructing an authentic and shared black self-consciousness.

In other words, while Afrocentrism may romanticize the cultural relationship between Africa and African America and selectively edit the history and contributions of African descended peoples, these dynamics are part of the process of creating a collective identity—a process that is fluid, evolving, and engaged in by all ethnic and cultural communities. The malleability of history and tradition is an artifact of a cultural group’s efforts to understand who they are by creatively reconstructing who they were. Moreover, during this process, the factual truth is not necessarily required for a feeling of authenticity to be achieved.

Consequently, this book focuses on the resonance of Afrocentric beliefs within the members’ constructions of black identity rather than

judging the factualness of those beliefs. The concerns of Afrocentrism as an inherently flawed and problematic worldview or as a psychologically necessary and social empowering paradigm are not the focal point of this investigation. Both dwell too heavily in issues of accuracy rather than effect. Instead, this book makes its case for the richer examination of identity in this particular community with a focus on how members understand and practice Afrocentrism.

The significance of Afrocentrism and its influence upon a sense of blackness within the members' lives emerge when they speak of their reasons for joining First Afrikan. For instance, Jerome and Nina Kent are a young married couple in their late twenties with two children. Jerome has a perfectly coiffed beard and mustache, deep-set and thoughtful brown eyes, and thick rope-like locks neatly bundled into a ponytail. Nina is a light pecan brown with locks, pretty features, and a stunning white smile. Both are articulate, warm, and engaging. The couple explained that two years ago they attended a predominantly white Baptist church but never really felt a part of the congregation. A coworker suggested that Jerome look into First Afrikan. Jerome explains:

So we went there one Sunday and we saw the African dancers coming down the aisle and we were like, whoa! And we were so, we just thought, that's it, you know. This is it—let's do this! And every time we went we felt the same. We went back three or four weeks after that and we joined after like the fourth week.

I interviewed another member, Valerie Owens, in her home shortly after she had returned from her nursing job. Forty-nine years of age, Valerie was raised in the Church of God in Christ and insisted that she "will always be COGIC to the core." Nevertheless, she joined First Afrikan Church with her husband:

I was very impressed. And when I first came to First Afrikan, I enjoyed the lessons that Pastor Lomax was teaching. And I found it interesting because I grew up in the church and no other church that I had ever been in spoke about the Bible in terms of being a black person in America and being African at the same time. That was what really intrigued me.

The members of the church came from many different religious backgrounds, including Presbyterian as well as Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, Catholic, Nation of Islam, and Sunni Muslim. One woman previously practiced Buddhism while yet another had rejected organized religion altogether for most of her adulthood. Interestingly, nearly half of the members I interviewed did not consider themselves Presbyterian even after formally joining the congregation, and at least one person told me that he did not really consider First Afrikan a church but rather an Afrocentric learning center. For most, whether considering themselves Presbyterian or not, First Afrikan was a place where an Afrocentric ideology could be married to a Christian theology.

Members frequently emphasized that the presentation of the Bible as an African text and of biblical characters as black helped them to more fully embrace Christianity. They spoke of how pictures of a blond Jesus and media representations of the biblical characters as European had been alienating for them and that it was such a relief to be given evidence that this was not in fact the case. Several of the women were to tell me how upon the first Sunday of attendance, “it just felt right and I cried.” The members with whom I spoke believe that Eurocentrism deliberately distorts the historical achievement and cultural contributions of Africa, thus undermining the psychological health and cultural resilience of African Americans. They have faith that learning, celebrating, and practicing African-centered ways of being and doing will result in a more psychologically, socially, and politically empowered community. They also believe that an African-centered theology is the most spiritually fulfilling way for a person of African descent to be in relationship with God.

I asked Reverend Lomax what he thought motivated people to join the church. He responded:

You know, I don't really know. I'd like to think that I was just a great and brilliant preacher. [*He laughs.*] I think for some people its Malcolm-esque. It's that hard, rhetorical diatribe against everything that is wrong with black folks. For other people, I think it is the integration of Afrocentric philosophy. It helps people to see how the story of scripture is an African story and connects to our story as African Americans. Some people, I think it is entertainment.

Elder “Mama” Itahari Toure was of the opinion that people attended the church because it was a space in which they could voice their frustration with and pain from the racism encountered in their daily lives:

People are here for the same reason our people gravitated to the nation of Islam, the same reason our people gravitated to Marcus Garvey, the same reason people have gravitated to anyone who was courageous enough to say everything is not alright with us and it's not okay that it's not alright. So I think that's the main reason—because you're giving voice to my reality. And even though I might not have the courage to change my reality, the fact that somebody somewhere is giving voice is a flame I want to be next to. So for an hour and a half, I feel okay that I'm upset about this, I feel angry about this, and it's okay, and so all my emotions I can bring forth.

That First Afrikan services should provide a release valve for pain and anger related to racial oppression seems correct. During services, one could not help but note the nodding heads as Reverend Coleman prayed for heavenly intervention on behalf of those dealing with personal experiences of struggle and injustice. One is also struck by the shouts of “tell the truth” as Reverend Lomax castigated the Bush administration or the gales of laughter signaling agreement as he lambasted some happening in the news he considered especially Eurocentric. Sitting in a pew among the congregants, I could plainly see the enjoyment of the polemical and often poetic way that the pastor took to task those who slighted the black community.

Of course, political critique and social protest have been elements of black congregations since slavery. Through religion, African Americans have historically found “voice, indeed multiple and variegated voices, to speak not only of their spiritual quest and fulfillment but of their earthly trials and social yearnings as well” (Baer and Singer 2002: xvii). From clandestine worship among enslaved Africans, to the post-Emancipation independent church movement, and, notably, to the activism of churches during the Civil Rights era, the Black Church has functioned as a site from which to articulate social frustration, to mobilize political action, and to build community (Baer and Singer 2002; Raboteau

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