

American Comparative Literature Association, 2011

Vancouver, Canada

March 31-April 3

Title: Vodou Modernism, Literary Theory and Social Justice

Panel: Disputing Diaspora: Reading Transnational Black Literature Against the Grain

**Heather Russell,
Associate Professor of English**



- “Eshu-Elegbara sometimes wears the crossroads as a cap, colored black on one side, red on the other, provoking in his wake foolish arguments about whether his cap is black or red, wittily insisting by implication that we view a person or a thing from all sides before we form a general judgment.”

- Robert Farris Thompson

African Atlantic Modernisms

- Modernism has conventionally been the vehicle through which we arrive at conceptual frameworks of African Atlantic formal production.
- Despite modernism's irrefutable efficacy, I propose here a specifically West African/African diasporic epistemological framework to read the production of the emancipatory poetics with which African Atlantic modernism is concerned.
- A framework that challenges the notion that Africa must somehow be relegated to the sphere of the "pre-modern" in order to arrive at modernity.
- I am also interrogating Paul Gilroy's formulation of a black Atlantic sensibility marked by desired geospatial/political transcendence, as well as the relegation of religion to the sphere of "the folk-cultural, narrowly ethnic definition of racial authenticity."

Vodou Modernism

- Vodou is a modern religion whose philosophical principles foreground contingency, fluidity, complexity, and nuance, especially in relation to ideas about knowledge, power, and subjectivity.
- Resistant to binaries that impose injustice, harm, and universal imbalance, many of vodou's loas and the philosophical principles that surround them are inherently concerned with advocating for the dispossessed, dislocated, and disenfranchised.

Erzulie

- **Erzulie, for instance, or Ezili is loosely syncretized with Catholicism's The Virgin Mary, is the loa, the goddess of love.**
- **She is the protector of virgins, prostitutes, gays and domestic violence survivors.**
- **She possesses both men and women, and both sexes who are her devotees assume her feminine aspects – think about what that concept does to dominant western binary notions of gender.**



OGUN

- Loas like Ogun are warriors, but warriors whose fury is on behalf of righteous justice.



PAPA LEGBA

- Papa Legba is the god of language, meaning, and understanding.
- The crossroads lwa, who is the most potentially liberating because of his relationship to language, to discourse, to challenging fixed ideas.
- He is the god of indeterminacy who oversees the interpretive process.



Social Justice

- Resistance to fixity and privileging fluidity are, I would argue, fundamental requisites of imagining freer, more inclusive and fundamentally just societies.
- Vodou modernism has, as a core value I would argue, social justice concerns.

Literary Theory

- Two classic tropes within African Atlantic modernism:
- Wilson Harris's *limbo gateway*.
- Houston Baker Jr.'s *railroad crossing*.

The Limbo Gateway

- Harris's formulation is the juxtaposition of the linear, phallogentric limbo pole metaphorically pressing down upon the moving, resisting and multi-limbed African Atlantic body.
- Such dexterous subversion seems an apt metaphor to capture the resistance to linearity, the fissuring of disciplinary boundaries such as Literature/History, the narratological, or formal choices that African diaspora writers often make.

The Railroad Crossing

- For Baker, the blues matrix is the sign of African American modernity.
- Within this matrix, the black blues singer is situated at the juncture of the railway and its crossing, and like the limbo dancer innovatively and deftly navigates “injustice, despair, loss, absence, denial,” through his cultural performance -- in the end transliterating torment into “conditions of possibility” (7).
- The blues singer and his expressive power, like that of his Caribbean counterpart are starkly juxtaposed against the hard, linear, metallic rails of the railway track, tracks that bespeak a history of Jim Crow racism, exploitation of labor, and the rise of modern capitalism.

Esu-Elegba

- Harris's invocation of the "gateway" and Baker's employment of the "crossing" as tropes which encapsulate African Atlantic modernity share, however, more than deep structural commonality.
- Both tropes share epistemologically and conceptually aspects of the West African god Esu-Elegba and his New World corollaries: *Exù*, Elegua, and Legba
- Esu-Elegba is the gate-keeper, the god/orisha/lwa of the crossroads.

Literary Theory and Social Justice

- How then, might Esu-Elebga in his new world configuration be serviceable to literary theorists concerned with social justice?
- All of the key historical moments of black subjugation and resistance throughout the global south: slavery, colonialism, cold war imperialism, neocolonialism, and the rise of neoliberalism are always legitimized by discourses typically marked by ethnocentricity and binary oppositions that are hierarchized.
- Binary oppositions that insinuate themselves into narrowly defined notions of identity, culture and progress.

The Violence of Linearity

- There is a linear narrative that moves insidiously from the discourse surrounding:
- ‘the civilizing mission’ of the enslavement and colonizing projects
- “laissez-faire economics”
- “development models,”
- “Reaganomic trickle-down theory,”
- “postindustrial economy”
- globalization, and the rise of neoliberalism,
- the current discourse of “humanitarianism”

- the linear narratives are reminiscent of the repressive limbo pole and the materially exploitative railway tracks.
- Each discourse has always resulted in the subjugation of people of color and the working class, and whose insidiousness lies in the duplicitous nature of language that attends each of these concepts

Vodou Modernism

- Legba, like Hermes from whom the theory of hermeneutics derives, inherently metaphorizes the kind of difficult work all of us are called to do, of reading, interpretation and praxis that is necessary to address the historical and contemporary disenfranchisement of black people throughout the African diaspora.
- Such a praxis demands, I firmly believe that we disrupt, interrupt and erupt, binary oppositions, that we subvert, challenge and give the lie to the linear, chronological, prescriptive discourse of progress, of western definitions of modernity.