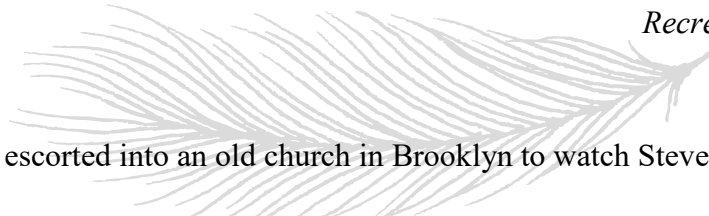


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***Recreating Ancestral Piety in the African Diaspora***  
***11 | 10 | 2021***



10-year-olds escorted into an old church in Brooklyn to watch Steven Spielberg's 'The Middle Passage.' Textbook pages of Emmitt Till's disfigured face and his mother desperately clinging to his coffin. Slideshows of hanging bodies and field trips to life-sized wax figures of Black flesh ripped open. The African diasporic experience is an exceptional one. From an education standpoint, the Atlantic slave trade is often taught as the starting point of our ancestry, as if nothing had come before, and it was there that ancestral piety turned to sorrow. Because ancestral piety is central to African philosophy, the destruction of genealogical ties caused by the Atlantic slave trade was indeed a tragedy. However, the African philosophy of Continuity offers a perspective on ancestry that restores our connections with one another.

In her lecture *Introduction to African Religion* at the African History Project, Apeike Umolu discusses the importance of ancestral piety in African philosophy:

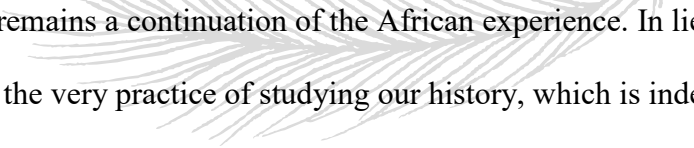
Central to the African Conception of time is the idea of continuity as opposed to progress, and adaptation as opposed to change. Continuity holds that the past, present and future are mutually part of each other's consciousnesses. They are all iterations or imprints of the same entity...central to the idea of time and action as continuities is the role of ancestors in African consciousness. Through their memory, intercession, reincarnation, they remain in concert with their descendants.

(Umolu, 1:15:36-1:16:52)

In African philosophy, all events in time are inextricably bound together so that the present equally impacts the future and the past. Thus, the veneration of ancestors was imperative, because they were considered as living entities who, through direct interaction with the present community, impacted the future. In this philosophy, the imagined dislocation of the diasporic experience from the African experience is impossible because all Black<sup>1</sup> historical events are part of the same African consciousness. Despite the fracture of direct genealogical ties, the

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<sup>1</sup> Black refers to both African and African diaspora people



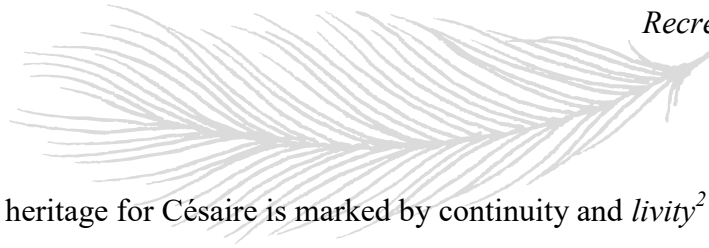
diasporic experience remains a continuation of the African experience. In lieu of genealogical ties to Africa, I posit, the very practice of studying our history, which is indeed multiplicitous, *is* the practice of ancestral piety.

As a Black woman that does research in Black history, the African concept of Continuity and ancestral piety have become central to my academic practice. But things haven't always fit together so neatly for me. Being part of the African diaspora, my lack of direct ancestral ties to Africa had left a curious vacuum. The identity of being an African American was so precariously predicated on our enslavement here. I spun endlessly at the thought of being brought into existence by the same process that sought to destroy me. Centuries of African families captured and dispersed, combined with a lack of official documentation, lead only to faint connections to African ancestry for many in the diaspora. I felt there must be something more to it than slavery. After attending Umolu's lecture, I knew I would have to approach this question differently. So, I began to study how other diasporans had reconnected with Africa.

I began by reading Aimé Césaire, the Martinican poet and philosopher. Césaire pioneered the Négritude movement, the Afro-Francophone literary movement that looked to affirm diasporic identity while still maintaining African heritage. Césaire wrote his seminal poem *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, upon his return to Martinique from studying in Paris. In a profound break with European idealism, he reconnects with his community by acknowledging their collective African heritage.

my Négritude is neither tower nor cathedral  
it takes root in the red flesh of the soil  
it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky

(Césaire, 206)

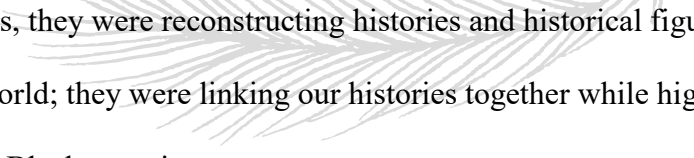


This African heritage for Césaire is marked by continuity and *livity*<sup>2</sup> in which our connection to Africa and each other cannot be severed by any enterprise of humanity; it cannot be confined within a ‘tower’ or a ‘cathedral’ because it is rooted in the soil and sky which traverse the globe. Césaire inspired the Trinidadian historian and political thinker, CLR James, who wrote that ‘Négritude is what one race brings to the common rendezvous where all will strive for the new world of the poet’s [Aimé Césaire] vision’ (James, 401). James also wrote that the experience of slavery and colonialism ‘confined Black [people] to a very narrow strip of social territory’ which lay between the hegemony of the white-western experience and an undesirable African identity. ‘The first step to freedom,’ James wrote, was to rediscover African continuity because ‘the road to [Black] identity lay through Africa.’ (James, 402)

Thus, studying philosophies of African continuity by Umolu, Césaire and James led me to the understanding that despite the physical severance from Africa, my connection was inextricably eternal. As I began to study Black history in this new consciousness, I discovered that it was the diaspora that was shining new lights on our histories beyond the Atlantic Slave Trade, elucidating what our connection to Africa meant for our liberation. Trinidadian CLR James wrote *The Black Jacobins*, centering the Haitian Revolution as the first major revolution among Black people, foreshadowing the revolutions in Africa that were to come. Guyanese historian Walter Rodney described how Sub-Saharan African trade routes spanned peoples, geographies and time, offering historical blueprints to reestablish these sorts of connections in the present. By exploring our past to nurture our future, this new class of Black philosophers were recreating the concept of ancestral piety in African philosophy. In lieu of identifiable

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<sup>2</sup> A Rastafarian philosophy that energy flows through all living things endlessly



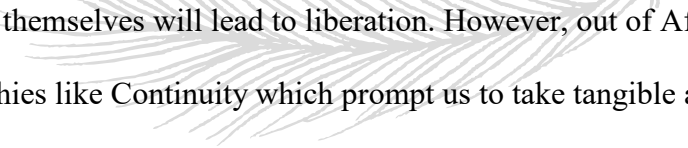
genealogical ancestors, they were reconstructing histories and historical figures which belonged to the global Black world; they were linking our histories together while highlighting the diversity found in the Black experience.

It was here I realized that, through studying Black history, historiographies, and philosophies, I was also practicing ancestral piety. Our ancestors were no longer only just the obscure faces of the enslaved, but the life of the revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture who led Haiti to its independence, and the intellectual prowess of Liberian political thinker and educator Edward Blyden who explored Continuity in the Black experience as the "African Personality." A new topography was being mapped in which the undifferentiated rows of plantations were replaced by the ornamentation of West African empires and African rulers took on mythological proportions, like Shango, the 15<sup>th</sup> century Oyo ruler who was later deified in the Yoruba religion and followed Africans to Trinidad, Cuba and Brazil. Despite a lack of genealogical connections, I began to build a historical lexicon in which these histories and figures belong to me and at the same time I belong to them—proving the philosophy of Continuity.

However, like all peoples, there are moments in our history or ideas from within our intellectual world which do call for critical analysis. This continues to be a difficult exercise for me. For example, Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon criticized the recourse to African spirituality in the placating of colonial psychological distress:

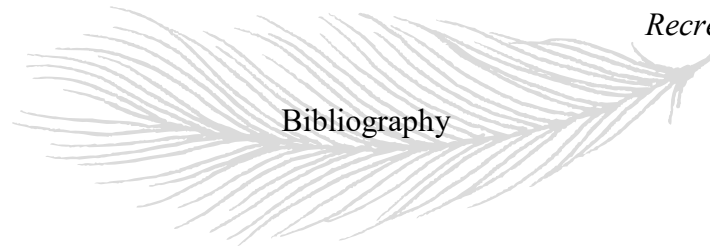
The supernatural, magical powers reveal themselves as essentially personal; the settler's powers are infinitely shrunken, stamped with their alien origin. We no longer really need to fight against them since what counts is the frightening enemy created by myths. We perceive that all is settled by a permanent confrontation on the phantasmic plane. (Fanon 56)

Fanon argues that African spirituality obscures the battle for liberation by removing the oppression from the physical into the psychological. Fanon critiques how instead of taking action on the physical level, the colonized internalize the struggle and are convinced that winning the



spiritual battle within themselves will lead to liberation. However, out of African spirituality, I argue, come philosophies like Continuity which prompt us to take tangible action. For example, Continuity holds that we must have the ability to process multiple perspectives while simultaneously integrating them as one. On the physical level, this is manifest in acts of solidarity across the Black world undertaken despite our historical dislocations. Fanon himself is an example of this, as he left his home in Martinique to aid the Algerian people to independence in the late 1950's, because he saw their struggle as within his consciousness though outside the corporeality of his nation. Arguably, without this solidarity and Continuity present within historical and contemporary events in the Black world, the level of liberation achieved would be impossible.

And thus, these recreated practices of ancestral piety in the African diasporic lifeworld are yet more manifestations of the continuity and solidarity that defines the global and historic Black experience. I associate my practice of ancestral piety with that of Césaire, James, Rodney and their contemporaries and predecessors in accordance with the philosophy of Continuity. Despite the differences in our experiences or eras we are inextricably bound together—their practice is my practice; their piety is my piety. Through them I practice, through my practice they are kept alive and out of obscurity, and through our interaction our future is impacted.



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