

PREFACE

Turning Toward Oshun

“Save her, she’s mine.” Those words have haunted me for years. And in responding to their call, I have been on a long journey—a journey that has taken me to this place of making an offering; an offering to the ancestors and an offering to you, my readers. In doing so I find myself being called to come out of the “spiritual closet,” as it were, for as M. Jacqui Alexander reminds us, “pedagogies of the Sacred” are needed for us to make sense of ourselves (2006, 15). The spiritual teachings and initiations that brought about this work will come as no surprise to those I have worked with over the years in Trinidad, even as they may be news to some people in the academy. Unlike many Western academics who have studied the Yoruba religion, I did not answer the call of Spirit while conducting research in the field. It was in fact the other way around for me. The spirits, specifically the ancestors, sent me to graduate school to study them.

When I was in graduate school, a faculty member warned me that studying the Yoruba people, their culture, and traditional religion could come with a stigma because academics would question my subjectivity if I came to follow the Yoruba spirits, the Orisha. “Too late,” I thought. They were among the spirits who had sent me to graduate school and started me on the path that eventually led me here, to this work that you are reading. Leading me to this place of stark vulnerability where I tell my stories and in doing so offer a secret that I had tucked away back when I started school. Holding on to it until I was ready to take it out and put it on, simultaneously coming out of the spiritual closet and embracing my power. As Audre Lorde tells us, “The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white, nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient and it is deep” (2007, 37). It is from this deep space that I move forward on this journey (for it is ongoing) to answer Oshun’s call. This offering began a long time ago.

Standing behind the counter in a pagan bookstore, surrounded by herbs, candles, and crystal balls, I had no idea that the next few moments would be critical to changing my life. I didn't know enough to recognize the voice of God/dess talking to me, talking about me. I couldn't have named that voice. I couldn't have named her if I'd been asked. I did know enough to be aware that something was happening—and that it was an important happening.

From my black combat boots and up through the many piercings, I looked like any other Bay Area punk rocker. (This was the early 1990s. Were we post-punk yet? We certainly didn't think so at the time.) Well, maybe with the exception of my darker skin and nappy hair. There weren't many black punk rockers then (or now). And there was definitely no Afro-punk scene back then. This was back in the "primitive" times of no popular Internet (sure, DARPA existed, but who knew about that?!). Strangely enough, for all my uniqueness, the woman standing next to me could have been my twin—another pierced black woman dressed head to toe in black. She was my coworker, my neighbor, and my best friend. And she was my coconspirator in all things not good for us.

So what was going on that day? How did two disaffected black punk rockers come to the attention of God/dess? This may be hard to believe, but it started with a candle. You know those seven-day candles in glass you can buy at the grocery store? Among many other "magical" supplies, the store where I worked sold these candles. And for a small fee the candle could be dressed. "Dressed" here does not refer to putting on clothes but rather to anchoring a blessing with glitter and oil. I would take a candle, say green for wealth, and sprinkle glitter on top from a shaker. Gold glitter would go first—for money again. Then maybe some blue (the color associated with Jupiter, for luck in material endeavors). And then an added dash of silver for blessings of spirit. The color associations were seemingly personal and arbitrary. Everyone had his or her own system, yet the associations were only somewhat arbitrary—they were linked into a larger system of signs drawing heavily on astrology and pagan cosmologies.

So on that day I dressed a candle; yellow, I think. After sprinkling the glitter, I added a few drops of oil. I don't remember which oil, but it would have been one labeled something like "Attraction," "Court Case," "Fire of Love," "Job," or "Money Drawing." These oils are another level of dressing designed to attract specific energies (as clearly designated by their names) to that candle. Once the glitter and oil are added, a prayer can be said, and then a film of wax stretched over the top seals the newly "consecrated" can-

dle. This keeps the energies (and glitter and oil) in place until the customer activates them by lighting the candle. All this for less than \$2.50! Which was a bargain even in 1990s dollars.

How, then, did dressing this candle for someone else lead to God/dess talking about me and to me? How did this change my life and put me onto the path that would lead to this book, this story? All I can say is that opportunity presented itself: opportunity for the divine to lay a claim and give a charge. And I was not completely unaware. I felt the tremors of energy then. Even now, twenty years later, I can remember how that buildup of energy felt.

I had recently been reading from the books that we stocked mainly on Wicca and other forms of European paganism. Among the very few titles on African diasporic religion and spirituality, I recognized the book *Jambalaya* (1985) by Luisah Teish. The cover, with its drawing of a snake encircling a black woman's head, was memorable. I knew this book from my college days. One of my classes was Womanist Theology, with visiting scholar Carol P. Christ. Though the class was largely focused on European paganism, we had read parts of this book based on New Orleans voodoo and drawing on Afro-Caribbean/West African Orisha religions. *Jambalaya* was a groundbreaker when it came out in the mid-1980s. Nothing like it could be found in bookstores—a strong black woman's voice asserting the power of her ancestral traditions. In the calls to listen to “she who whispers,” that inner voice (or spirit guide), she addressed the power in her own voice. And while doing so she asserted the power of women's voices everywhere, especially the voices of women of color.

Yes, I'm still talking about how dressing a candle led me to hear the voice of God/dess. Remember that in that moment I had felt a charge of energy, which I largely attributed to dressing the candle. As I bagged the candle and rang up the sale, I marveled, “I just dressed a candle for Luisah Teish. She wrote that book, *Jambalaya*. Wow!” Left there, I would have taken it as a good sign, as a shift in fortunes perhaps. Maybe better things were coming?

I had just recently come back. For I had run away from Oakland. You know, the fight-or-flight response? Mine had been triggered, and I had fled—all the way to Los Angeles! All the way to the home of my former college, tucked in the San Gabriel Valley. What would cause me to fly so far? In those days I had little to no money from my part-time, seven-dollar-an-hour cashier job at the pagan bookstore. And keeping up my bad habits took most of that. As broke as I was, LA was really far (and to this day I have no idea

how I got there and back; for sure it wasn't by plane, so I must have gotten a ride somehow). What was I running from? Mookie died. Rather, Mookie was killed. Run over by a car on Martin Luther King Drive, five times. They hit him, backed over him, and then did it again and again. Living on the margins, Mookie had crossed the wrong person. He was my friend and his death filled me with horror and fear. A fear for him, already realized. And a fear for me, a fear for my future. Is this how little his life, our lives, my life was worth?

So I had fled to the last safe place I knew. I went south to SoCal and away from this place where my friend was run down in the streets. After seeing old friends, old haunts and getting grounded in affirmations of life I came back to Oakland and my shared apartment, to my part-time job, and to my best friend and partner in crime. The fall of 1993 was an unsettled time for me, to say the least. I would later recognize this as a period of liminality,¹ where I was not what I had been but not yet what I would become. Or, in less abstract terms, I was ready for a change.

This context frames this moment when God/dess talked—and, more important, when I listened. “Thank you for your purchase. Please come again.” I imagine that I said something this innocuous to Luisah Teish as I handed her the brown bag wrapping her dressed candle. And I am sure that she thanked me before she turned to leave. A tall, beautiful woman, she had a strong presence even in the mundane movement of walking to the exit. Part of the grace in her bearing came from a background in dance, including time studying with Katherine Dunham. Maybe this was why I was watching her. And maybe it is why when she turned it was so fluid. As if she was dancing, her lifted leg leading her body 180 degrees to face the counter.

And then again, maybe it was the God/dess in her. Literally the God/dess in her.

“Save them!” a voice cried from where she stood. And there was a look on her face that I had never seen. Her eyes were wide, fixed, and bright. As she stared straight ahead, her hand lifted to point a finger, first at me and then at my friend. Swinging toward a third person, our senior coworker, she commanded again, insistently, “They are my children. Save them.”

With her message delivered, all the energy left the space, like a light going out. She was Teish again. She looked at our coworker, her goddaughter, we would learn later, as if to say, “You hear?” Glances were exchanged. Seemingly satisfied, she turned and departed. Teish/Oshun had left the building, but she had left behind a charge—in fact a divine charge. And that meant it

was not to be questioned, it was to be obeyed. Our coworker was an “older” African American woman, and she let out a loud sigh as she came to this realization. (I must remark that my friend and I were both in our early twenties, and at that point everyone seemed older. Our coworker could have been thirty or fifty!) She turned to us, her skeptical gaze looking us up and down, then said, “That was Oshun who spoke. And whether I like it or not, I’m going to have to try.” We didn’t know what she felt compelled to try. And we also didn’t know at the time that she was an Orisha devotee and served that Yoruba feminine energy called Oshun, the energy of fresh water, creativity, and women’s power.

The “save them” part remained unspoken between us. Again she sighed and looked us up and down, taking in our black boots, our artfully torn black jeans, and the flashes of metal from our piercings—nose and belly buttons hinting at others unseen. She was dressed all in white, making for a sharp contrast, one echoed by the difference in our energies, like the difference between a gentle breeze and the storm winds of a tornado. Her repeated sighs conveyed both her distress and her submission—distress at the task in front of her and simultaneous submission to Oshun’s charge. Working together until our shifts ended and the last customer left, we locked the door and turned the battered “Open/Closed” sign in the window. It was then that she addressed us: “Look, I’m going to invite you to my house, to a ritual. And before you come you’ll have to do what I say.” The instructions that followed would turn out to be a litmus test. Were we committed? Were we up to the challenge? Were we ready?

I offer this story, one of my more precious memories, as the turning point. This was the key that led me to this journey of spiritual citizenship. Oshun provided the key, but it took me (and my Ori, or personal divine consciousness) to turn the key in the lock and then go through the opened door. Since then, I have walked a path illuminated by the ancestors, those upon whose shoulders I stand. Orisha, divine emissaries of God/dess (Olodumare), and Ifá (wisdom of Olodumare) have provided help along the way. And twenty-plus years into the journey, Egbé Ọrun (spiritual comrades from heaven) revealed the direction, gifts, and company that had been mine all along. Indeed, it turns out that Spirit has been with me all along.