

12. Dark Matter: Formations of Death Pollution in Southeastern African Funerals

CASEY GOLOMSKI

Dark matter is an evocative percept for an embodied religious phenomenon called *sinyama*, *sintima*, or *umnyama* in southeastern African deathways and an example of what anthropologists have called *symbolic pollution*.¹ Symbolic pollution is a phenomenon reflective of power inequalities, gender ideologies, and sociocultural systems of classification. The substance of bodily pollution—blood, hair, mortal remains—has been a standard focus of ethnographic interpretation. Descriptions of how, where, and by whom pollution phenomena are situationally embodied are also critical (Crumbley 2008; Masquelier 2005). Many cases from African and African diaspora religions illustrate how the situational embodiment of religious phenomena is relational, meaning that dynamics of embodiment can involve intersubjective and collective experiences of affliction, healing, and, here, symbolic pollution.

Despite its cultural and phenomenological prevalence across many southern African communities, dark matter as symbolic pollution is differently embodied (or rather disembodied) depending on the socioecological and political context. This chapter shows how contemporary negative valences of *sinyama* in the region echo a history of racialization originating in modern European Christian colonialism. An ethnographic comparison across national and cultural boundaries also reveals how gender and race are key variables in symbolic pollution's diverse forms of (dis)embodiment. Recalling Yolanda Covington-Ward and Jeanette Jouili's introduction in this book, *sinyama* has become a racialized

representation of Black religion in several societies sharing this stigmatizing colonial history and its hangovers.²

Using terms like *polluting* or *contagious* for the embodiment of religious phenomena is provocative because of their culturally negative connotations (Crumbley 2008, 94). These terms are historically and ethically fraught, having been used in colonialist discourses as means to symbolically “other” and denigrate Black people’s bodies. Black African and African diaspora embodied religious experiences and rituals, like spirit “possession,” have long been subject to spurious representations or political control. For example, anthropologist Deidre Crumbley’s (2008) insights on women’s bodies (including her own) and menstrual pollution in southern Nigerian Aladura churches speak to how the anthropology of religion in Africa and its diasporas is itself ethically charged in its political history and ethnographic methods.³ She leads us to ask, What forces deem someone or something polluting? What lines of difference are drawn in this attribution of embodied experience, and how are relational dimensions of this experience excised, erased, or expanded? What meanings are foregrounded in particular representations of these experiences, and how?

My own consideration of these ethical dynamics in African studies of religion involves documenting “the ways people interact with and recognize each other across different social worlds” and the ways “such interactions are qualified through peoples’ simultaneous engagement with global and material aspects of those worlds” (Golomski 2016, 461). Perceptual and material dynamics in religious performance are then also ethical, as is the fact that religious performances and their communities are politically differentiated and made historically unequal.⁴ Globally, the long-term scaling of modern European colonialism scattered and segregated peoples into altogether new social worlds and also bound these worlds together in shared legacies of violence and radical cultural change through racialized and gendered tropes of modernity (Pierre 2013). The cultural and religious lives of contemporary peoples in Africa and its diasporas embody these dynamics of displacement and differentiation and shape how ethical recognition of and among religious phenomena and communities unfold. This also foregrounds the necessity for cross-cultural comparison and interpretation.

To wit, this chapter offers a comparison of funereal dark matter in southeastern Africa—including corpses, embodied experiences of bereavement, and mortuary ritual ephemera and spaces—to show how its materialities are diversely valued and (dis)embodied while deriving from a shared cultural domain. Specifically, it shows how dark matter emerges differently between South

Africa and Eswatini, and brief comparison of the two places helps situate my interpretive motive.

Regionally, Eswatini—which since 2018 is the new official name of the country formerly known as Swaziland—is a neotraditionalist bastion of African alterity. The small country of 1.3 million citizens is the continent’s last absolute, divine diarchy, ruled by King Mswati III and his mother, Queen Mother Ntfombi Tfwala, along with a retinue of state-appointed princes and princesses who administer the country’s 350 chiefdoms.⁵ Prominent Swazi state representatives and businessmen often go shirtless and wear animal loinskins and customary textiles during international travel and at the United Nations. The national calendar is punctuated by ceremonies specific to the societal regimentation of gendered age sets, *emabutfo*. For example, each August at the Umhlanga rite, over forty thousand girls are summoned as “virgins” by the state for a weeklong rite to harvest reeds for presentation to the Queen Mother in celebration of their gendered identities and bodily-sexual purity. The kingship decrees seasonal tributary labor in communal projects of weeding, harvesting, and hunting, and its proclamations on what is authentic “Swazi culture” are taken as sagacious ultimatums by political elites and traditionalist citizens. These state-originated postcolonial cultural productions drive regional sensibilities about the veracity of African culture and identity, including those about “traditional” deathways.

With respect to sovereignty, geography, and population, Eswatini is radically different from its multicultural, multiracial, and democratic neighbor South Africa. Eswatini is dependent economically on South Africa, and the two have deeply intertwined histories of their Indigenous polities’ territories and cultures being altogether transformed in European settler colonialism since at least the sixteenth century. The geographic lines where Eswatini ends and South Africa begins are a product of this history, and such modern borders complicate how everyday practices, whether those surrounding death or others, unfold. South Africa is far more urbanized; its 40.5 million citizens emerged from white-minority rule only in 1994, after the fall of apartheid, but today have one of the world’s most liberal constitutions. Contrasting to this is Eswatini, which became independent from British colonial rule in 1968, with its autocratic leadership and small-scale societal dimensions in state-driven ethnocultural nationalism, shared language, and a religious synergy of (post)mission Christianity and traditionalism embodied in African independent churches (AICs), which predominate in the kingdom.

A comparative and historical perspective on formations of death pollution in these two places shows how some people and things come to be dark

matter-out-of-place. In peri-urban Eswatini, dark matter condenses as a problem of women, where bereaved widows embody *sinyama*, signified in mourning rites and dress, with churches aiming to contain and dissipate its power. In urban South Africa, dark matter is a more diffuse, negating, diminishing force associated with immorality, criminality, and socioeconomic disintegration. It is a surfeit problem, portending communal affliction and religious ritual remedies. It is a more disembodied phenomenon. These differences reflect particular geographic and political configurations born out of colonialism in different places and at the same time reveal shared experiences of racialization.

To make this case, I draw from ethnographic research on death, dying, and funerals in Eswatini and document research on popular literary, cultural, and media texts in South Africa on the same matters. Much of the ethnographic material derives from my own participation in and observation of funerals in Eswatini (Golomski 2018a). Similarly, I observed many rituals in both Swazi and South African churches indicating measures to avoid or contain *sinyama*. Less of this material is explicitly phenomenological or experience-near, as fewer of my main consultants or interlocutors claimed to experience *sinyama* themselves, but they reported that others did. Using these sources along with popular literary and cultural accounts, my interpretation embodies a “methodological attitude that demands attention to bodiliness even in purely verbal data such as written text or oral interview” (Csordas 1999, 148) and critically combines phenomenological and textual evidence in making ethnographic knowledge about religion. I now trace how embodied knowledge and practices surrounding *sinyama* have been revalued over time in the broader region.

The Origins of Dark Matter

Several contemporary southeastern African communities have similar percepts of *sinyama*, *sintima*, or *umnyama* that denote blackness or darkness and are associated with night, shadows, malevolence and evil, illness, and death.⁶ Death imbues *sinyama* as a dark penumbral emission that affects bodies, emotions, and relationships. The bereaved are said to feel it and have it. A related precept is *libhadi*, sometimes translated as “badness” or “bad luck,” which may derive from *sinyama* and may sometimes be characterized as dark or black. Both are possessive and/or qualify the presence of this phenomenon: *kuyisinyama lapha*, “there is darkness here,” or *unelibhadi*, “that person has bad luck.” But what are the origins of these present connotations?

Tellingly, the ethnographic record shows that *sinyama* as an endogenous and precolonial percept has fewer negative and more empowering connota-

tions. Domestic objects and leisure activities had positive connotations derived from their black colors.⁷ For Zulu peoples, the ethnically “insider anthropologist” Harriet Ngubane (1977) located black color symbolism in cosmic orders of night and day and bodily processes of eating and defecating, noting that blackness had significant power. It was associated with the immensity of rain and thunderstorms, which produced both fertile rains and dangerous lightning. The South African–Swedish missionary ethnographer Axel-Ivar Berglund (1976) noted that Zulu ritual specialists produced blackened medicinal objects in the form of beads, brooms, and parts of animals to use as protection, invoke ancestral beneficence in sacrifices, and cure illness. “After completion of the period of treatment with black medicines, the evil of death and danger is believed to have been removed,” Ngubane (1977, 126) wrote, and black can “stand for both goodness and badness” (113). Blackness was a constitutive, animating quality of bodies and materialities in the religious cosmologies in the region.

This endogenous ecological and religious ritual symbolism changed, however, in the historical confluence of colonial technologies, racial ideologies, and gendered Christian stipulations for death in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries especially.⁸ Historians Rebekah Lee and Megan Vaughan (2008) comprehensively show how death and funerals were revalued and performed in this period, and their work is pivotal for understanding contemporary funerals. They do not, however, interrogate race and racialization (explicitly) as factors in the cultural production or valuation of ritually embodied practices surrounding death, despite the trenchant colonial racist sciences and policies that violently categorized peoples by skin color and other bodily qualities in the region (and globally). This Linnaean colorist system of classification rendered difference as rigid, requalifying persons and things as human and/or nonhuman and driving new associations among them along axes of unequal value.

Writing from the United States about colonialist and colorist racism there and in African countries in the early twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois argued that this contemporaneous “theory of human culture and its aims has worked itself through warp and woof of our daily thought with a thoroughness that few realize. Everything great, good, efficient, fair, and honorable is ‘white’ . . . a bad taste is ‘brown’; and the devil is ‘black.’ These changes of this theme are continually rung in picture and story, in newspaper heading and moving-picture, in sermon and school book” ([1920] 2007, 22). Du Bois invoked “the sermon” to suggest that this diffusion and internalization of color-based racism is operable in religion too, opening up possibilities to see how religious forms of blackness, like *sinyama*, emerged and were embodied in different religious traditions.

More recently, Aisha Beliso-De Jesús (2015) traces this process in a dynamic she calls *blackening*. Beliso-De Jesús conceptualizes the religious ontologies of African and African diaspora societies as having been racialized, citing entangled histories and present realities of enslavement, tourism, migration, and wage labor that members of these societies experienced. In her account from Afro-Caribbean and diaspora contexts, Cuban Santería religious practitioners' embodiment of religious phenomena happens both virtually and in cities, with the latter deemed perceptually dark places in the materialities of scents, religious media, sexual encounters, and funerary rites. Using Frantz Fanon's writings on racism, she posits that these dispersive virtual and urban dynamics of material assemblage are phenomenologically and racially "blackened" as African diaspora religions for both its practitioners and global audiences.

Drawing on these critical arguments that racialization is constitutive of African and African diaspora religions, I trace how this kind of blackening forms the "warp and woof" of present southeastern African deathways where contemporary experiences and terms of symbolic pollution are iconic of negative blackness. The diverse polities and religious practices in southeastern Africa give rise to diverse spiritualities associated with universal matters of death. And, finally, understanding why death is construed as a negative, polluting formation necessitates historicizing death itself in the face of a colonial racial gaze, which I comparatively explore in the following sections on Eswatini and South Africa.

Eswatini: Dark Matter and Gender

As the previous ethnographic examples show, blackness was not always determinatively negative as an element of local social worlds. Clothing was one such form of material culture where blackness was favored in Eswatini. Borrowing the style from Tsonga peoples, many esteemed and mature headmen wore grub-wax head rings "as black as jet . . . [and] made to shine brightly" (Junod [1912] 1966, 129–130). Married women's attire formerly included long, pleated skirts made of blackened cowhide, a style that is made today from cotton or other fabrics and worn by brides at customary weddings.⁹ The skins were derived from cattle sacrifices, the animals culled from family herds, or those exchanged as part of bridewealth ceremonies. These were and are valuable and beautiful pieces of customary clothing, *imvunulo*. This symbolism of ritual and clothing, along with the color symbolism of herbal medicines, represent a customary religious assemblage where blackness is a constitutive, enduring cultural value (Berglund 1976; Makhubu 1978; Ngubane 1977).

Contemporary perceptions of *sinyama* as a negative phenomenon in Eswatini surround both embodied experiences and materialities of death and can be traced through the civilizing missions of Christian churches and the racist policies and ideologies of Afrikaner and British settler colonialism (ca. 1840–1968). The siSwati word *kugula* means “to be ill or sick” and is a synonym for *kuzila*, “to mourn,” connoting difficult bodily experiences of bereavement, through which *sinyama* emerges in longing for tangible connections with the deceased. Clothing and other domestic or personal objects bind people together in Eswatini “as a materially embodied, intersubjective process wielded to enact presence, absence and transition between self and other” (Golomski 2015, 325). The loss of an other is materially mediated through bodily ephemera to restore socioemotional well-being for widows especially, as the immediately bereaved, and then, by proxy, the community. Ngubane (1977) described this ritual and practical ordering of persons and objects in the socioecological environment as rendering cosmological “balance” (*ukuzilungisa*, or well-being among the living and between the living and the dead).

In precolonial and colonial mourning customs, Swazi widows formerly undertook elaborate clothing rites, turning their black cowskin skirts inside out and making and then later ritually destroying hats, ropes, and other attire made of grass (Kuper [1947] 1980). Beginning in the 1840s, Christian missions like the Wesleyans, Nazarenes, Methodists, and others (the predecessors of what are today called *mainline churches*) began unsettling indigenous cultural stipulations of gender and clothing through overtly civilizing or modernizing missions related to existential, socioemotional, and material matters of death.¹⁰ Through the colonial period, acculturative changes in clothing, including patterning, tailoring, and coloring of cotton fabrics, were spread through traveling merchants like Dups Bazaar. Today Dups is Eswatini’s largest mortuary and funeral insurance retailer. European-style clothing mainly replaced clothing made of grasses and various animal skins and leathers. Today’s formal mourning gowns are an outcome of this history, taking the form of completely black pinafore dresses, aprons, shawls, skirts, and tams. If not black, gowns are dark blue, sometimes indicative of the church groups that widows belong to.¹¹

This negative clothing symbolism paralleled broader racially charged revaluations in colonial society. Hilda Kuper’s ([1947] 1969) ethnography of race relations in colonial Eswatini shows white settlers’ veritable racialization of Swazis as “black” and stereotyping of them as hypersexual, barbaric, and stupid. The royal Dlamini Swazis she worked with understood skin-color variation as beautiful but came to self-deprecate themselves for their technological inferiority

to whites. These stereotypes were further embedded in unequal economic policies and the dispossession of Swazis' land during the colonial era. These racist representations and policies endured into the postcolonial era (Dlamini 2007), laying the structural grounds for variable embodiment of a negating blackness.

Despite the history of black customary medicines' potency for healing and purification, Christian churches across the ecumenical spectrum today propound eschatologies that describe grief and mourning as symbolically dark or black. This is stronger in mainline churches and newer Pentecostal churches in Eswatini. Pentecostal churches are notable for their ideological assault on anything deemed traditional. Some Pentecostal churches are criticized for being racist against Black southern Africans (van Wyk 2014, 77–78) and are arguably the principal religious institutions driving these negative valuations today. At a Pentecostal church I attended in Matsapha in 2010, I documented a Bible-study session on the topic of “dark African customs” surrounding death, dying, and funerals. The pastor, a prominent public theologian, spoke at length about *sinyama*. The following quote is from a recording of the pastor's words (my translation, along with other passages in this chapter, from siSwati), with key vernacular terms in brackets:

People talk about death's dark matter [*kufa kwesinyama*] and bad luck [*libhadi lesikufa*], but here in church we talk about death in God. Dark matter moves and affects all of your relatives as they move around too. At funerals we see people whispering to the corpse [*sidumbu*]. They think if they don't say or do something ritually, the spirit will be flying here and there, like “Ffft! Ffft!” These are not going out from the body to kill us. God is there, and these rituals do not protect us as we go around or our children go to school. We Africans think death is unnatural; we take it as bad luck happening all around us.

In his contrastive retelling, Africans (wrongly) associate death with darkness and evil. The soul or spiritual entity is set loose from the body, if not contained by some (non-Christian) rite. The circumstances surrounding death portend unnatural, ungodly forces that potentially undercut the bereaved and their families. The fleeting velocity of unleashed spirits is dangerous, almost ungraspable, and affects daily routines and travel; his sounds of “Ffft! Ffft!” were meant to indicate something flying around like an insect. At a later point in his lecture, he mimicked women crying in front of the body at the funeral, saying that they should think about the dead's godly resurrection rather than wallow in grief.



FIGURE 12.1. Women cover widows of the deceased in blankets at the graveside during the burial at an AIC funeral, southwestern Swaziland (now Eswatini), May 2011. Photograph by author.

Contemporary funeral rites condense *sinyama* and *libhadi* in bereaved persons' bodies, especially widows, which effectively contain symbolic pollution and can affect others. Men who are widowers in Eswatini face none of the *sinyama*-related rites and prophylaxes detailed here. As in the Pentecostal example, bereaved women and widows are the main subjects of ritual criticism and control. This is most evident in customary religious rites and those of AICs. Their rites operate on embodied processes of sequestration and purification. Most funerals have a night vigil, *umlindzelo*, where mourning wives, daughters, and other women are kept separate from other attendees in a room or small house on the homestead with the body. Their spatial containment is repeated at the burial site during interment, where they are shielded from attendees' view with blankets held up by other women. This can be seen in figure 12.1, in which women drape a dark, rose-ringed blanket across their shoulders, arms linked, to shield one of the deceased man's widows, who is crouching behind the blanket at their feet. After the burial, some widows have their heads shaved. When attendees return to the homestead for a morning feast after the burial, kettles

are commonly used to pour water over people's hands to both purify and wash them before eating. That this water is sometimes mixed with ash, especially in AICs, hearkens to older forms of purification using black medicines (Makhubu 1978).

After the funeral is over, widows are effectively made into social pariahs according to traditionalist stipulations: their presence and the wearing of black mourning gowns make them iconic of *sinyama*, from which people elaborate a host of ideas about their ability to emit *libhadi*. Many in-laws confine widows to a patrilocal home and induce abstention from sex. Widows' physical activity and mobility are limited beyond the home, where they remain silent and deferential. When I was living in a rural community in 2011 next to the late chief's compound, his widow rarely left the homestead. When she did, it was in the company of one of her brothers-in-law. This man was also her prospective new husband, as widows are often entrusted to their deceased husband's brothers, a rite of levirate marriage that some claim is solely part of Swazi culture but that was also arguably revalued as Swazi after the introduction of Old Testament biblical lore in the colonial era (Nyawo 2015).

Widows are often headliners in Eswatini's two national newspapers in stories about stolen mourning gowns, in-law disputes over property and personal autonomy, and women's and their natal families' refusals to ritually mourn. I estimate I collected over fifty widow-specific stories between 2006 and 2009. Widows are later purified from their condition in a rite organized by their in-laws that takes place after one to three years or winters, called *kugeza emanti*, meaning "to wash [with] water." It involves the bodily application of water and a reintroduction of the purified widow to her relatives, church members, neighbors, and potential new husband (her brother-in-law). At some widows' reintegration rites I attended, the widow was again covered with blankets as gifts for her mourning work (figure 12.2), symbolically reaffirming the containment of the woman's body as part of her deceased husband's patriline. The thanksgiving, purification, and containment of *sinyama* associated with widows show how pollution surrounds mourning and is gendered in the confluence of (post)mission Christian and endogenous religious practices.

This negative valuation of widows and their bodies also moves from domestic domains to the public. Widows are sometimes avoided on public transport, in workplaces, and in queues and are joked about as apparently emitting *libhadi*. One interviewee I spoke to in 2011 was a women's rights and gender-based violence researcher at the Eswatini office of the Women and Law in Southern



FIGURE 12.2. Widow with gifts and wrapped in blankets at a purification and reintegration rite (*kugeza emanti*) at an AIC night vigil, southeastern Swaziland (now Eswatini), August 2008. Photograph by author.

Africa Trust. She explained how women faced undue gendered pressures as widows under the guise of tradition:

Some women will leave the house wearing the gowns, but when they get to work, they take them off. Then when they leave the office for the day, they put them back on to go home. . . . People will not want to speak to her at the front desk. They may send her in the back then to do things like make tea, but then even the men at the office will not want to drink the tea that she makes. . . . You see, maybe the mourning thing was fine in the old times when women just stayed in the house all day, but now they are going out to work, and then it causes problems.

In her account, men especially perpetuate the idea that because widows embody blackness, they are bad luck and contagious in the exchange of food-stuffs and movement in public spaces. At the end of the interview, I made a reflexive cautionary note, saying that others I met could perceive my research

as potentially dangerous, at least according to the etiology of libhadi we had discussed. “Oh no, they won’t say that,” she said. “Libhadi is just for us Swazis. For you [as a white person], you may talk to her or even brush up against her [a widow], but libhadi won’t go to you.” As Ngubane (1977, 24) suggested for the category of *ukufa kwabantu*, “African disease,” the women’s rights researcher explained that I would not be affected. Only other Black African Swazi could succumb to widows’ darkness or bad luck, a discrete ontological configuration of death-related illness where no affliction is transmitted outside of a single racial category.

In Eswatini, dark matter condenses like a bruise or welt that slowly disappears over time but from which contagion emerges and moves surreptitiously. Pollution is strongly gendered as a problem of women as widows (rather than men as widowers). Modes of containment and prevention happen in women’s mourning seclusion, traditionalist or AIC rites of purification, and their discursive obviation in Pentecostal settings. The local concentration of these rites is arguably due to ongoing cultural elaborations of death amid HIV/AIDS in the shadows of state-driven authentications of culture (Golomski 2018a). But as the next case shows, when moving across modern geopolitical borders to multicultural urban South Africa, *sinyama* becomes a phenomenologically diffusive ground for embodying tradition in more violent terms and places in which people live and die.

South Africa: Dark Matter and the Metropole

Again, modern geopolitical borders should not belie continuities of cultural formations like death-related symbolic pollution, although the settings people find themselves in also reconfigure these formations and their lived experiences. For example, as the Eswatini–South African border was created in the late nineteenth century, Swazis found themselves living in South Africa and outside of their sovereign then-protectorate kingship. These South African areas later became designated as segregated “native” territories or “homelands.” Many men from Eswatini were conscripted into circuits of labor migration to the geographic area of South Africa known as the Rand to work in the infamously dangerous gold mines. The effects of capitalist industrialization and its concomitant racial segregation under apartheid thus inflect the religious pluralism and multiculturalism that predominate in South Africa.

Having lived and worked with many folks and families in urban and peri-urban areas in South Africa’s Gauteng and Mpumalanga provinces in 2009, 2014–2015, 2017, and 2019, I documented several domestic rites of ancestral

thanksgiving and attended worship services at Pentecostal charismatic and mainline Catholic and Protestant churches. Sinyama, or the isiZulu equivalent umnyama, did not feature as strongly in biblical exegeses or ritual concerns as it had in Eswatini religious ritual settings. What more systematic ethnographies of religion in South Africa, as well as contemporary fictional literature by South African authors, show is that dark matter is indeed present, but it casts much wider shadows.

Dark matter surrounding death is indeed a problem for women in South Africa, who may be made peripheral in accordance with “African tradition.” An important difference, however, is that widows there also embody a powerful will to live and mobilize politically. Women whose (male) partners died in the fight against state racial oppression featured prominently at African National Congress (ANC) political rallies. Widows were foregrounded at massive funerals for their husbands—rather than hidden like in Swazi funerals—in the 1980s–1990s as the antiapartheid struggles reached their climax, publicly embodying survivorship of racialized violence. Widows also had central testimonial positions in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the aftermath of apartheid (Ramphele 1997). In 2014 the figure of the politicized widow returned to the televised spotlight as the primary bereaved family members of the forty-plus who were protesting male miners killed by state and private security forces at the Marikana platinum mine. Here the strife of widows and their bereavement were mobilized against the violence of enduring racialized political economies.

This is not to say that widows or the bereaved are not associated with sinyama. Rather, in South Africa, like in Afro-Caribbean contexts (Beliso-De Jesús 2015), this penumbral phenomenon is more pervasively disembodied. It constellates uneasily across multicultural persons, objects, and technologies in congested, underdeveloped urban spaces. Cities are where death is imminent because life is uncertain. Dark matter materializes as a problem of the postcolonial metropole and can afflict urban dwellers in their daily lives. Melekias Zulu and Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon (2015, 138–140), for example, describe how some Johannesburg migrant-residents are tainted by umnyama, a “flow that captures an environment” and morally and physically affects and transmits among bodies and objects. A site of death—like a bloodstained stairwell of a high-rise following a suicide or murder—can be perceived as dark matter, as are entire inauspicious “dark buildings” with precarious electricity connections and streetcorners rife with criminals.

The uncertainty, mobility, and dynamics of evictions and failing infrastructure constellate, for some migrants, as zones iconic of darkness, which are also effectively non-white because of their inhabitants’ racial demographics.

Julia Hornberger (2008, 288) describes how state electrification in the Black-occupied segregated townships like Soweto came about only in the 1970s to quell increasing political protests. Instead of the brighter white-colored mercury-based lighting that was systematically erected in white-occupied areas, townships were provisioned with low-lit, orange-colored sodium-based lighting. “Because of [sodium-based lighting’s] monochromatic nature, it does not allow for color rendering and dips everything within its reach into an abnormal atmosphere. . . . [T]o have a less distorted nightlight became the privilege of the city” rather than the township.

On weekends in Johannesburg and other major, often-violent South African cities, funerals are followed by huge parties called “after tears,” sometimes held near the bereaved family’s house or at urban megacemeteries like Avalon in Soweto. Francis Lukhele (2016, 36) describes this “mourning” practice as “gangsterly”; attendees are partiers whose “happy-go-lucky demeanour conceal[s] a frightening brutality,” that of the death, injuries, and struggles that mark the lives of postapartheid urban youth. Men broadcast music videos on their laptops, drive expensive cars over grave mounds, rival each other’s sound systems, and drink heavily with women in a “nonchalant, consumerist exhibitionism incongruously coexist[ing] with the parasitic appearance of hordes at funerals,” writes Lukhele. Rather than being covered fully, as widows in Eswatini would be, women (and men) at after-tears parties dress stylishly or as if they were going to a club. The scene can be considered profane in what is seen as a transgression of customary or ethical ritual conduct.¹² Or, as a lecture class of University of Johannesburg undergraduate anthropology students collectively explained to me and the Swazi anthropologist Thandeka Dlamini-Simelane in 2019, “South Africans like partying too much.”

Further evidence of darkness as a problem of deathly urbanity can easily be drawn from contemporary South African literature. In Niq Mhlongo’s (2007) novel *After Tears*, for example, the protagonist Bafana’s licentious uncle Nyawana describes the urban cemeteries of Johannesburg as sexually rife locations where sex drives death, subsequent funerals, and new risky sexual encounters at funerals: “‘Some [women] wear revealing miniskirts just to challenge you, man. That’s why Avalon cemetery is full, it’s because these ladies are living advertisements for Aids. . . . I got this new chick at a funeral some months back. When I saw her by the graveside that day, I knew she was going to be mine,’ he said, touching his left breast tenderly” (48–49). Later, Nyawana is shot on New Year’s Eve and kept alive in a vegetative state but dies while being transported in an ambulance to another hospital during a township-wide electricity blackout. The family argues about the choice of undertaker, saying the

one Nyawana's sister chooses is owned by racist Afrikaners, extending the settler colonial legacy of "killing abodarkie [a derogatory term for Black people]. The only difference is that these days they're making a huge profit out of it because they kill you today and bury you tomorrow" (196).

The historical process of blackening is articulated as funeral attendees and township residents understand their lived reality of home, work, and now burial places as one of racialized structural violence. Given the superdiverse, cosmopolitan space of the city, a multitude of Black African traditional religious rites and practitioners are mobilized to contain *sinyama* and related forces. In Mhlongo's novel *Way Back Home*, the protagonist is Kimathi Tito, a sly, aging nouveau riche war hero and hustler, his personality seemingly embodied in features like "black smudges around the edges of his neglected lower teeth" (2013, 64). He is haunted by the ghost of Senami, a young woman and his national comrade, whom he killed while they were fighting pro-apartheid forces in exile in Tanzania. Years after he kills Senami, she returns in the night in "dark, bloody dreams" (74). Darkness pervades Tito's bodily being, and to contain it and relieve his illness, he is forced to go to Senami's parents' home and hire the healer Makhanda. Because Senami died and was buried in exile, the family has to hold a "symbolic funeral"; it is a veritably disembodied rite without her corpse. Makhanda makes ritual incisions on Tito's joints and applies "black medicines" to the wounds (64) to contain the haunting presence of the dead young woman, but only for a short while.

This *sinyama* emerges from antitheses or failures to mourn and only condenses uneasily in funeral rites similar to those found in Eswatini. In *After Tears*, at Uncle Nyawana's funeral (which takes place at the same Avalon cemetery where he found sex and which he also derided), some funeral attendees keep his corpse covered at night and peripheral from the proceedings; Bafana deems this "strange" rather than customary (Mhlongo 2007, 190). Like in Eswatini, ritual attempts to contain *sinyama* and purify mourners from dark matter at funerals involve using "big steel baths of dirty water. Everyone who came from the cemetery was required to wash their hands and erase all thoughts of death and human decay as they did so" (200) before eating. The substance of purification or containment is here again black medicine, but the timbre of the novel's conclusion, which involves Bafana failing out of college owing to financial limitations, and his effective social death, suggests that purification has been less than efficacious.

In Mhlongo's novels, men are lecherous and women are made to be sexual or spiritual culprits, victims of the violent precarity of postcolonial life without moral means to mourn. Their urban environment is consistently painted as

dark, and life runs aground in spates of misfortune. Dark matter is all-consuming of life in the metropole, not just embodied in women's bodies or rites. In fact, widows' bereavement may embody the symbolic potential to regenerate communities altogether in the wake of racist political violence. The religious practices they engage in here and in other literary (Mda 1995) and ethnographic examples (van Wyk 2014; Zulu and Wilhelm-Solomon 2015) of urban South African cultural life are similar to what is found in more traditionalist domains like Eswatini, yet their value is configured to accommodate a surfeit of dark matter not relegated to the embodied purview of a particular gender.

Conclusion

What, then, is this dark world thinking? It is thinking that as wild and awful as this shameful war was, *it is nothing to compare with that fight for freedom which black and brown and yellow men must and will make unless their oppression and humiliation and insult at the hands of the White World cease. The Dark World is going to submit to its present treatment just as long as it must and not one moment longer.*

—W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," 1920

It is early Sunday evening under the trees outside the Matsapha Prison liquor store: we wring out a few dance moves, drink beer and whiskey over ice, and watch a wintering sunset beyond His Majesty's Correctional Services College. Black and white birds grace the sky. "Kumnandzi sintima," says my friend Mphile—"It is nice in the darkness."

—Author's field notes, Eswatini, June 3, 2017

Documenting how experiential phenomena like embodied metaphors of darkness and pollution emerge in situ counts as important methodological grounds for comparative inter- and intracontinental African diaspora studies of religion. The geopolitical influence of settler colonialism and apartheid structured the material world for many southeastern African religious practitioners by driving the unequal development of more monocultural and multicultural spaces. Arguably, in the case of both Eswatini and South Africa, discourses and policies devaluing the lives of non-white peoples and women shored up negative prejudice about darkness as a quality of materiality in religious ritual deathways. This is a continental example of the dynamic of global historical blackening that Beliso-De Jesús (2015) describes and a formation of materially ethical life (Golomski 2016) that we must account for in understanding Black African and African diaspora embodied religious phenomena.

Historically, blackness has been structurally-symbolically and diametrically opposed to whiteness, the outcome of European- and American-driven extractive colonial projects and war, rendering a mirage of distinctive racialized social worlds. That this was affirmed in the imperatives and “souls of white folks” in the modern era (Du Bois [1920] 2007; emphasis added) suggests that violence is immanent in the sacred. Anthropologists of religion must historicize what are presumed to be universal perceptions and ethical values. Blackness has not always been negative in Black African and African diaspora religious cosmologies, as I documented here. It has been spiritually potent and medically restorative in the face of illness and death and, as my brief field notes in the epigraph hint at, leisurely and aesthetically pleasing. Blackness has also obviously been a symbolic and embodied resource for political liberation. Overall, the (in)auspicious penumbra of dark matter, as I take it, is a manifestation of ongoing ethical and embodied engagements with a changing world, indicative of the ways that the world has been materially shaped by modernity and life in the postcolony.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This chapter is crafted from ethnographic material and theoretical ruminations from a variety of venues. Thus, I thank many people: my informants in Eswatini and South Africa, Mark Auslander, Thandeka Dlamini-Simelane, Jessica Hardin, Michael Jackson, Anna Jaysane-Darr, Laura John, Ieva Jusionyte, Sarah Lamb, Janet McIntosh, George Paul Meiu, Casey Miller, Danai Mupotsa, Sonene Nyawo, Gcobani Qambela, Ellen Schattschneider, Mrinalini Tankha, Allison Taylor, and Hylton White, and also, from the University of Pittsburgh workshop, Mari Webel, Yolanda Covington-Ward, Jeanette Jouili, Stephanie Mitchem, Rachel Cantave, Jaison Youssef Carter, Bertin Louis, and Jacob Olupona.

NOTES

1. In astrophysics, dark matter is hypothetically high-density, high-energy matter born from particles that cannot absorb light and is undetectable by visible-light telescopes. I draw rather on past metaphorical uses of the term in Black or African American and African diaspora studies to signal sociocultural and religious dynamics of racism, such as in W. E. B. Du Bois's ([1920] 2007) invocations in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*.

2. When quoting from a source that uses lowercase *b* in *black*, I maintain the author's original usage. Of note, it is conventional in Southern Africa not to capitalize *black* when it is used in racial terms.

3. Crumbley (2008, 95) argues that gender-segregating menstruation-related rites in these churches are less about women members' polluting qualities and more about keeping separate elements valued as profane and sacred. In Yoruba cosmology, for example, menstruation has the power to make life and "may indicate cosmological subtleties of holy otherness," she writes. Ethnographically, Crumbley prohibited herself from entering the church during her period as part of her ethnographic methods, a situational act she ethically aligned with Aladura principles that women should not approach altars because of their bodily powers.

4. Michael Jackson (2009) and Michael Lambek (2010) write that religious communities organize themselves by culturally intellectualizing, performing, and materializing what are fundamentally human ethical practices.

5. By royal decree, and marking fifty years of independence from the British, King Mswati III changed the country's name to Eswatini from Swaziland in June 2018. Eswatini means "land of the Swazis" in siSwati, which, along with English, is one of the country's two official languages.

6. Specifically, I am referring to siSwati-, isiZulu-, isiXhosa-, xiTsonga-, (Southern) siNdebele-, and seTswana-speaking peoples.

7. Among Tsonga peoples, Henri-Alexandre Junod recorded a lullaby to soothe babies invoking blackness: "'Keep quiet *Makaneta*, of the black hut,'" meaning a "village where the huts have had time to become black; they have never been destroyed by enemies, as no enemy dares to attack your clan! So the roofs have blackened inside from the effects of the smoke and outside from those of rain!" ([1912] 1966, 361). Here blackness indicated natural environmental and domestic processes of lived accretion, rather than violent destruction. Blackness was also a valued quality in leisure activities like "saliva contests" in men's hemp-smoking games, where when spitting from their pipes "the saliva must be blackish . . . produced by hemp, and not the ordinary white saliva" (344–345).

8. See Comaroff (1993) and Junod ([1912] 1966). The latter wrote about Tsonga funerary practitioners, for example, that their "heathenism is so poor . . . even if we had no religious convictions at all, should we not earnestly desire that, for these people, the bright comforting Christian hope may dispel the darkness of their thoughts and the sufferings involved in their rites?" (168).

9. I use the term *customary* to reflect local terms used in Eswatini to describe these phenomena as "traditional" or part of "Swazi law and custom," which people there contrast to "modern" or "white people's" ways of doing things. *Traditionalists* is the term I use for Swazi citizens who overtly promote the kingship's political regime and their associated cultural productions.

10. The kingship and traditionalists have incorporated diverse forms and values of Christianity into their religious practices since the late nineteenth century. For example, the kingship supports the largest network of ATCs, which combine forms of customary healing and symbolism with biblical lore. Newer Pentecostal charismatic "ministry" churches have also mushroomed there, as they have across the continent in the past twenty years; royalist elites maintain pastoral and prophetic positions in both these types of churches. Altogether, they make up a religiously plural field in which religious ritual phenomena, like *sinnyama*, are ecumenically negotiated (Golomski 2018b).

11. For neighboring Tswana Apostolic churchwomen, “a blue dress . . . lets people know that your husband has passed away, but it doesn’t make them think about death in the way a black dress does. . . . [A] black dress cuts your heart, intensifying your grief because anyone who sees you is reminded of death” (Klaits 2005, 55).

12. Karabo Ngoepe, “‘After Tears’ and Mourning in the 21st Century,” *News24*, April 21, 2016, <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/after-tears-and-mourning-in-the-21st-century-20160412>.

REFERENCES

- Beliso-De Jesús, Aisha. 2015. *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Berglund, Axel-Ivar. 1976. *Zulu Thought Patterns and Symbolism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Comaroff, Jean. 1993. “The Diseased Heart of Africa.” In *Knowledge, Power and Practice: The Anthropology of Medicine and Everyday Life*, edited by Shirley Lindenbaum and Margaret Lock, 305–329. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Crumbley, Deidre. 2008. *Spirit, Structure, and Flesh: Gender and Power in African Instituted Churches among the Yoruba of Nigeria*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Csordas, Thomas. 1999. “Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology.” In *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*, edited by Gail Weiss and Honi Hern Faber, 143–162. New York: Routledge.
- Dlamini, Nhlanhla C. 2007. “The Legal Abolition of Racial Discrimination and Its Aftermath: The Case of Swaziland, 1945–1973.” PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1920) 2007. “The Souls of White Folk.” In *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., 15–25. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Golomski, Casey. 2015. “Wearing Memories: Clothing and the Global Lives of Mourning in Swaziland.” *Material Religion* 11 (3): 303–327.
- Golomski, Casey. 2016. “Religion and Migration: Cases for a Global Material Ethics.” *African Studies* 75 (5): 449–462.
- Golomski, Casey. 2018a. *Funeral Culture: AIDS, Work and Cultural Change in an African Kingdom*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Golomski, Casey. 2018b. “Work of a Nation: Christian Funerary Ecumenism and Institutional Disruption in Swaziland.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 44 (2): 299–314.
- Hornberger, Julia. 2008. “Nocturnal Johannesburg.” In *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, edited by Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, 285–297. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Jackson, Michael. 2009. *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Relatedness, Religiosity, and the Real*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Junod, Henri-Alexandre. (1912) 1966. *The Life of a South African Tribe*. Vol. 2. New York: University Books.
- Klaits, Frederick. 2005. “The Widow in Blue.” *Africa* 75 (1): 46–62.
- Kuper, Hilda. (1947) 1969. *The Uniform of Colour: A Study of White-Black Relations in Swaziland*. New York: Negroes University Press.

- Kuper, Hilda. (1947) 1980. *An African Aristocracy: Rank among the Swazi*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lambek, Michael, ed. 2010. *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Lee, Rebekah, and Megan Vaughan. 2008. "Death and Dying in the History of Africa since 1800." *Journal of African History* 49 (3): 341–359.
- Lukhele, Francis. 2016. "Tears of the Rainbow: Mourning in South African Culture." *Critical Arts* 30 (1): 31–44.
- Makhubu, Lydia. 1978. *The Traditional Healer*. Kwaluseni: University of Botswana and Eswatini.
- Masquelier, Adeline, ed. 2005. *Dirt, Undress, and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Body's Surface*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Mda, Zakes. 1995. *Ways of Dying*. New York: Picador.
- Mhlongo, Niq. 2007. *After Tears*. Johannesburg: Kwela Books.
- Mhlongo, Niq. 2013. *Way Back Home*. Johannesburg: Kwela Books.
- Ngubane, Harriet. 1977. *Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine*. New York: Academic Press.
- Nyawo, Sonene. 2015. "'Sowungumuntu ke nyalo—Now You Are a Real Person': A Feminist Analysis of How Women's Identities Are Constructed by Societal Perceptions on Fertility in the Swazi Patriarchal Family." PhD diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Pierre, Jemima. 2013. *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ramphela, Mamphela. 1997. "Political Widowhood in South Africa: The Embodiment of Ambiguity." In *Social Suffering*, edited by Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, 99–118. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- van Wyk, Ilana. 2014. *The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zulu, Melekias, and Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon. 2015. "Tormented by Umnyama." In *Healing and Change in the City of Gold: Case Studies of Coping and Support in Johannesburg*, edited by Ingrid Palmay, Brandon Hamber, and Lorena Núñez, 135–148. New York: Springer.