

“Tribute to the Ancestors”: Ritual Performance and Same-Gender-Loving Men of African Descent

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This essay explores the ritual performance of the “Tribute to the Ancestors.” Specifically this ethnographic essay situates the “Tribute to the Ancestors,” a ritual of death and loss by a community of same-gender-loving men of African descent, as an experimental practice that reveal both transformative powers and social tensions in contemporary society relating to the black gay male body.

Keywords: Ritual; African American Studies; AIDS; African Cosmology; Black Gay Studies

Adodi is a place where it is not negotiated. (Clarence, Adodi member)

The performance, in its incompleteness, lingers and persists, drawing together the community of interlocutors. Utopian performativity is often fueled by the past. The past, or at least narratives of the past, enable utopian imaginings of another time and place that is not yet here but nonetheless functions as a doing for futurity, a conjuring of both future and past to critique presentness. (Muñoz 9)

A community that doesn't have a ritual cannot exist. (Somé 53)

For African Same-Gender-Loving men living in [the] diaspora who have been taught that homosexuality is a white construct and that there is no such thing as same-gender-attraction in African [culture/society] it is very important to reconnect with our ancestors and learn that we did play an important role in our culture and how in fact they embraced us as important members of the community. (Simone, Adodi member)

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Ritual performance is a meaningful way for the men of Adodi to connect with their ancestors and legacy. The Adodi is a collective of men who identify as same-gender-loving men of African descent whose purpose is simple: to create a safe space that is affirming to black men who love black men and whose experiences and voices have been excluded by both mainstream American culture and the African American community. This essay explores the power of ritual performance in relation to the lived embodied experience of the black gay male body. Though my focus here is mainly the “Tribute to the Ancestors” ritual, which is pivotal to the retreat experience, I cannot adequately explore the significance of this particular ritual without addressing other communal ritual performances. Ultimately I engage in a set of rituals by the men of Adodi as performative transgressive actions in which the black male body violates restrictive laws that limit its embodied lived experience. In this essay, a brief history of the organization is provided to reveal the meaning of ritual performance to this community of men, followed by discussion of transgression as rooted in Africana ritual thought. I then explore the meaning of loss to this community of men by positioning the Adodi and their ritual performances as a rupture in the discourse regarding the black male body and the AIDS epidemic in the African American community; in so doing, I outline how ritual functions as a performative language which, Connerton explains, aids a community in recalling “to itself the fact of its constitution” (59). I provide a descriptive account of the “Tribute to the Ancestors” through a reflexive account of my participation in the ritual performance. Finally, I reveal how the men articulate, negotiate, and conceptualize the transcendence of the institutional variables that confine and restrict them to unravel their understanding of ritual as site of danger, transgression, connection and (re) memory.

In 1997 I was introduced to the Adodi through social activist Kevin Spears who requested that I give a workshop on the topic of narrative and identity that reflected that year’s theme “Telling Stories, Recording our History.” The men who participated in the workshop engaged in interviewing and recording each others’ life stories. My impetus for such a workshop (in addition to my academic interest in personal narrative) was primarily at the behest of the several members who had articulated the need to document and archive the organization. It was through this workshop and subsequent request for others that I became connected with the Adodi community. However, and most profoundly after my initial ritual experience in 1997, I bore witness to the healing powers and the need for such a community formed through a unique position of marginality. Moreover, after the death of Kevin from AIDS, my function took on an even greater archival purpose. Thus this project embraces the work of such thinkers as Conquergood (1989, 1991, 1992), Madison (2005), and Stroller (1997) who situate ethnographic inquiry as a site of “dialogic performances” of culture where “the culture’s status as object is redefined as subject,” and the space in which the ethnographer and their co-participants create a performance anchored in the politics of “doing” the ethnography (Conquergood, *Performance as Moral* 9–10). This essay is part of a larger critical ethnographic project that began six years ago with the purpose of commencing a dialogue about the many complex strands of

African American same-gender-loving identity, the phenomenon and use of ritual as a communicative practice, and how these communicative practices aid in the construction of sacred spaces, identity and community. Hooks (1992) describes the complications of theorizing about the black experience, for “the more painful the issues we confront the greater our inarticulateness.” Citing Baldwin, hooks continues, “there has been almost no language” to describe the “horrors of black life” (2). The action or the “doing” of the ritual by the community of men is a language, an utterance of the unarticulated. The data used in this essay is garnered from in-depth interviews, written journals by the men, and my fieldnotes from the 2001 summer retreat in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. This essay describes how the performance of ritual becomes a way for the men of Adodi to utter the “inarticulateness” of the “horrors” of marginality.

The Adodi: the history, the men, the ritual

Created in the early 1980s, the Adodi was formed in Philadelphia by Clifford Rowlands, an art therapist and Yoruba priest. The group held their first retreat in the fall during the weekend preceding Thanksgiving Day in 1983. “It was only twelve of us who gathered at Cliff’s house” says Donald, a member who attended the first meeting,

He [Cliff] felt the need to bring black men together to do some mourning rituals. We were all walking zombies, with all of our friends and partners dying not knowing how to process . . . It was a very sad time . . . we all knew that we needed each other, we needed a space to be with each other.

The first summer retreat was held in 1984 in Pottstown, Pennsylvania under the theme “Self-esteem: loving ourselves through the 80’s.” Since then the group has grown to three major monthly meetings in Chicago, New York and Philadelphia with an average attendance of 80–100 men and an average of 100 men at the annual summer retreat, which is considered the “main” gathering.

The gathering consists of workshops on African drumming, recreation, and most importantly, the performance of traditional African (mostly but not exclusively) Yoruba rituals such as the “Tribute to the Ancestors,” Orisa chants/shouts, the burning bowl performance, and other daily meditational Yoruba worship practices. The performance of such rituals is a form of affirmation for the men. The Adodi constitute a loose fitting organization; there is no president, instead it has an open planning committee. Anyone who is willing to dedicate time and energy is allowed to help in the planning of the summer retreat experiences. The retreats are “sex, alcohol, and drug free weekend[s]” (*The Adodi Registration*, 1998).

Perhaps more significant is the Adodi collective’s embrace of the complex interweaving of identity, gender performance and spirituality as understood in African cosmology.

ADODI, the plural ADO, is a Yoruba word that describes a man who “loves” another man. More than just a description of partners, in Africa, the ADODI of the

tribe are thought to embody both male and female ways of being and were revered as shamans, sages and leaders. (<http://www.ADODIINTL.org/>)

According to Somé, in various indigenous African belief systems the link to the spiritual and to those who embrace same-sex desire is significant to the community and is simply a way of being. He suggests that “gay” individuals are more intuitively connected to the spiritual realm and are regarded as the “gatekeepers” of the community, who serve as intermediaries between the human and the spiritual realm, often referred to as shamans. Gender then is located as purely an “energetic” state in which “a male who is physically male can vibrate female energy, and vice versa” (*M.E.N.* 1993); It is within this history and legacy that this community of men situates its existence. As Clay states:

I knew that Adodi had an African intention. It had an African descent or African cultured purpose and intention in terms of how it brought the brothers together. So when I got here I was able to experience that that’s indeed what the intent is here, is to provide a more African spiritual base to providing camaraderie and support and empowerment to black men who love men and the rituals like the memorial ritual which is profoundly African, the drumming, the use of African language and greetings like *Ashay*, and it’s just what I dream about.

A variety of men participate in the Adodi retreats. The average age of the men who participated in the 2001 summer retreat was 37. Of the 89 participants at this retreat, 41 held graduate and/or professional degrees with occupations ranging from school administrators, artists, actors and accountants to caterers, flight attendants and bankers. The men assembled were just as diverse in other dimensions, representing every hue of blackness and ranging from the flamboyant drag queen to the conservative Log Cabin Republican. “I only invite Black middle class men to the Adodi retreat,” explains Phillip, a member who at the time of his interview was thirty-five-years old, unemployed, and attempting to finish his college degree part-time:

... Middle class, having very little to do with income but more to do with values. Adodi is not for everyone ... I would tend to share Adodi with more of a professional group of people, a student, a teacher, a nurse, [and] a male secretary. I see Adodi as a very casual white-collar group ... I don’t think that we are sanitation workers and if we were that would be okay—I mean we’re doing a spiritual and intelligent thing. Although I don’t see Adodi as being exclusionary I do think by the same token it attracts a certain type of person. ...

Phillips remarks aptly describe the noticeable issue of “class” among this community of men. Though very present but rarely if ever explicitly articulated, the men, gingerly albeit reluctantly tap around the topic. However, remnants of labor and class identity seep and ripple through intra-group interactions and the divergent views are revealed particularly during the planning committee meetings.

At a winter meeting in New York City at which I was present the topic of discussion focused on the site for the next summer’s retreat. After finding a “suitable” site that would “accept 100 black gay men” a member reported that the site needed an immediate deposit. Within minutes, checks were written to the total amount (three

times the deposit) needed to rent the space by the ten men in the room. No dialogue was had. It was simply done.

“Its amazing that we have the power to make things happen” says Phillip responding to the group’s ability to garner a large amount of money, in a seemingly effortless fashion. At the conclusion of the meeting, and away from the others, Phillip shares with me:

You know I don’t have a career . . . I give the appearance of having a career, maybe. But I strive to have a career and I don’t know if you asked me why I come to Adodi but I’ll tell you I sure as hell admire many of my brethren who have paid a lot of dues to be where they’re at and I like to see, I want to become some of what I’m around, as quiet as it’s kept. You know. I’m not an Adodi so that I can become a New York City police officer. I’m in Adodi so perhaps I can find the resources and the avenue to publish creative writing someday or to get my catering business off the ground or to finish my degree. So I would tend to tell people who [sic] I think would have something to offer to what the organization is about.

Phillip’s desire for middle-class “taste” has to do with access to resources to achieve his “aspirations.” Bourdieu articulates the relationship between class mobility and formal education and extends the concept of taste as something “learned rather than the product of inchoate powers of discrimination” (Strong 33). Hooks succinctly informs us of the link between class and black masculinity, citing the rise of the black educated class as a shift between labor as a means of survival to labor as subsumed by “white middle class aspiration.” Hooks is not suggesting that aspirations for higher education, entrepreneurial desires, and access to resources are inherently “white middle-class” but the exclusionary politics that often accompany such discourses are.

For many years information about the Adodi and the retreat was spread largely by word of mouth. Not until recently has the organization published announcements in select gay and African American periodicals, mostly for economic reasons and at the behest of a contingent of men who view the retreat as “an intensive workshop atmosphere with some luxuries . . .” as John, one of the members, expresses it. To afford such “luxuries” the organization is forced to increase both retreat fees and enrollment. For many years the fees have been kept to a minimum lingering between one hundred and fifty to two hundred dollars with a multitude of scholarships available to defray the cost for some. At the conclusion of the 2005 summer retreat held in Tennessee, it was announced that the fee for the 2006 retreat would be \$1,000 per person.

“I don’t appreciate the group supporting such exclusionary politics,” shouts George who has been a member for six years:

We are not reaching many men who need to hear of what we are doing, many who need to partake of the healing powers that the Adodi has to offer . . . the men who walk the streets at night in my neighborhood in Chicago should have access to this transformative activity.

A planning committee member explains that the 2006 will be a special 20th anniversary retreat. “Wouldn’t it be great for us to throw a free retreat . . . perhaps we—the group can just donate money, not to mention the money we have accrued

throughout the years and invite as many men as possible?” George refers to the special account the organization has established to which many contribute annually. Some in the group applaud George’s alternative suggestion. A planning committee member replies, “if you pay for it, you’d appreciate it more.” To which George snaps, “what a white middle class thing to say!” Solomon, an actor and first time attendee, passionately emotes:

I want everybody to hear. And I think it’s important that we take what’s here, this spirit, and we bring it to whatever rooms or forums that we have so that those who may not have had the opportunity to envision this wonderful thing will have an opportunity outside of Fellowship Farm. And that’s what we have to do . . . and it’s a wonderful thing. But it doesn’t have to end and it shouldn’t.

Conversations continue among the Adodi regarding the direction of the organization, with some pushing for quantity of membership. Others enjoy its exclusivity, citing the intimacy experienced as their rationale. Subsequently, the registration fee for the 2006 retreat was slightly reduced to make it more accessible.

The Ritual

The ritual performance of the “Tribute to the Ancestors” is pivotal to the men and the retreat experience. “It’s a moment for us to remember the dead,” says Malik, a 31-year-old community activist, as we gather with others, outside a barn on Fellowship Farm, nestled in the mountains of Pottstown, Pennsylvania. The site hosts members of the Adodi organization, who like a cascade of snowflakes falling down the mountainside, arrive in white garments for this ritual performance, from the elaborate African styled and patterned kente cloth robe, to the simple white undershirt the men prepare for this most sacred event. “I lost my entire community,” says Malik. Now as we stand awaiting the procession of the first ritual of the retreat, he grabs my hand as tears trickle down his face. “This ceremony is about dealing with the pain of still living . . . as it is about the loss—the loss of loved ones, the loss of family.” Hand-in-hand we enter the doors of the barn, walking toward the sound of the beating drums, as the men chant “Oyade’ winds of change” to summon the Orisa of change, as the leader of the ceremony invites the spirit “to visit with us in this place.”

“This moment is the most difficult for me . . . last evening when I overheard some of the organizers talking about the tribute, I got all teary eyed,” says Malcolm a 47-year-old banker. Three months later, we sit at his dining room table and I interview him about the Adodi organization. His tall perfectly structured frame and inquisitive demeanor give way to a child-like and somewhat sorrowful vulnerability as he weaves the story of his life with precise recollection of key events and dates that chart the rise of the AIDS epidemic in his Chicago community. During the course of our conversation, he reveals a stack of wall calendars dating back to the early 1980s. On these, he has inscribed the names of significant loved ones who “made the transition,”

in tiny almost perfect handprint. The blocks represent each day of the year; the names are memorials to the dead.

Malcolm and the men of “Adodi” engage in what Connerton (1989) terms incorporating memory, a process whereby the ritual ceremonies rely on the mnemonic powers drawn from sensory and emotional experiences that sediment memory in the body. “Tribute to the Ancestors” then becomes an embodied memorial that invokes legacies of the past to transgress the pain and loss of the living body. Furthermore, the men recognize that “ritual is inevitable and necessary if one is to live” (Somé 12) and understand that the articulation of the African American gay male’s experience through ritual reveals the intersection of race, gender and social class with language, history, and culture. Malik’s narrative is his theory of death and loss. It reflects the pain of existing in a world where his marked body and gender performance marginalize his lived experience.

Transgression and Accessing the Zones of Death

African theorist Malidoma Somé’s treatise *Of the Water and the Spirit* (1994) and *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community* (1993) highlight an Africana philosophical dimension of ritual activity often marginalized in the literature of ritual performance. Recent work in ritual (Browning 1995/1998; Comeroff and Comeroff 1993; Connerton 1989) gestures to the buoyancy and limitless performances in which memory, corporeality and transgression are foregrounded. Furthermore, these theorists resist the formalisms of Western categorization and objectification, instead reminding us to consider ritual as

a site of and means of experimental practice, of subversive poetics, of creative tension and transformative action; that, under its authorship and its authority, individual and collective aspirations weave a thread of imaginative possibilities from which may emerge, wittingly or not, new signs and meaning, conventions. It is in this sense that ritual is a always a vehicle of history-in-the-making. . . .
(Comeroff and Comeroff, xxix)

Therefore ritual performance in this context is one that acknowledges both the supernatural and physical and highlights ritual as a transgressive phenomenon of black bodies against “laws” that confine and restrict them. Ritual produces healing powers to be sure. Somé reminds us of the dangers, the fears and the pain ritual can evoke as well. Ritual is a contested performance between the supernatural “spirit world” and the physical body and in some instances, it serves ultimately as a “yardstick by which people measure their state of connection with the hidden ancestral world” (Somé 12). Ritual is a performative action where the body in this case—the black body—transgresses the constraining laws as to then better negotiate and liberate them from everyday restrictive forces.

The “discontinuous subject” is the focus of Bataille’s (1986) theory of transgression in which he explores the experience of the subjects attempt to transgress the limits of individual existence by leaping or falling into the realm of continuity or limitless being in order to access the zone of death. As Bataille insists “at all costs we need to

transcend [limits], but we should like to transcend them and maintain them simultaneously” (141). The transgressive experience is thus organized and produced by the imposition of a limit always existing in relation to it, even and especially at the moment of its rupture. The sensation of transgression is conditioned by a cognizance of the taboo and is, as a result, fundamentally “duplicitous,” performing as it does “a reconciliation of what seems impossible to reconcile, respect of the law and violation of the law” (36). Foucault (1963) supports Bataille’s concept by suggesting, “transgression thus *heightens* or creates an awareness of the law” (193). Bataille continues: “If we observe the taboo, if we submit to it, we are no longer conscious of it. But in the act of violation, if we feel the anguish of mind without which the taboo could not exist . . . That experience leads to the complete transgression which, in maintaining the prohibition, maintains it in order to benefit by it” (42).

I suggest that Somés consideration of ritual and transgression, echoed by Bataille and Foucault, better explains the ruptive and transformative transition of the body in the performance of ritual activity. For Somé, transgression is a set of negotiated variables that problematize social and supernatural positions of the body hinging on choice and options. Through the engagement in ritual performance, the men of Adodi become enlightened to the multitude of subject positioning of their bodies, both negative and affirming, by which to contemplate points of identity. I posit that the participants, in this case the bodies of black-same-gender-loving men, transcend the imposed boundaries of power and upon their return become aware of the subjection of the body/self, which Foucault believes is central to developing awareness of subjugation. Most importantly, the body is transformed and liberated through the exploration of the liminal transgressive realm.

If one is able to experience other subjective positionings of the body, only then can one comprehend the multiple vestiges of power and understand the multifaceted reality as well as the lived experiences of others. To achieve the requisite level of transgression, the participant must explore and make the body open to the existing laws, only to violate them, in order to understand the power strategies that exist. The “Tribute of the Ancestor” is a moment where the body(s) of the same-gender-loving male of African descent is made deeply aware of to the existing laws—the contested realms of power that limit and define identity in accordance to a anti-black structural discourse. Later in this essay, I discuss points of subjugation and violation, and even the contested taboos to reveal the structural oppressive discourses that profoundly influence the lived experience of the men of Adodi. In so doing, the narratives of the men reveal the subtleties and transient nature of oppressive discourses and the struggles of the men of Adodi to resist them.

Death a Rupture in the Discourse

Death is not a new phenomenon in black communities, and, unfortunately, the death of young people is not uncommon in the history and current circumstances of African-American lives. (Cohen xi)

Some of us are willing to die because it's painful to be alive and feel irrelevant.
(Clay, Adodi member)

If whales, snails, dogs, cats/Chrysler, and Nixon can be saved,/the lives of Black men
are priceless/and can be saved/ . . . If human chains can be formed/around nuclear
missile sites,/then surely Black men can form/human chains around Anacostia,
Harlem, South Africa, Wall Street, Hollywood,/each other. (Essex Hemphill 17)

Ritual performance involves relations between the past and individual agent's
interpretations, inscriptions and revisions of the past in present theory and
practice. (Drewal 5)

The mid 1980s brought about a plethora of African America gay cultural production. Joseph Beam's anthology *In the Life* (1986) offers a first-of-its-kind collection of essays, poems and prose with the rhetorical intent, "to end the silence that has surrounded our lives, as we begin creating ourselves, as we begin to come to power. We are survivors and have come to tell our stories of men loving men" (17). Beam's work inspired other transformative productions such as *Brother to Brother* (1991) and *Ceremonies* (1992), as well as dance performances (Bill T. Jones), video/film (Marlon Riggs; Issac Julien) and embodied performances/installations (Assoto Saint/Pomo Afro Homos). The artifacts of this movement espoused a rhetoric of collaboration and posited the centrality of the black male body. They encouraged community formation and recognized the legacies of the past as a source of strength to live as affirmed black same- gender-loving men. Amidst the wave of celebratory and redefinitional politics, a subtle yet powerful discourse of loss and mourning pervaded. Riggs confesses, "I discovered a time bomb/ticking in my blood/Friends/faces disappear./I watch./I wait./I listen/for my own/quiet/implosion" (Beam 204). The AIDS epidemic was silently claiming lives of men of color.

On the morning after the "Tribute to the Ancestors" ritual, I interview Carl under a pavilion-like structure on the farm. He began attending the Adodi retreat after the death of his partner in 1986. Though he is eager to share, at moments I sense some apprehension and sadness as he recalls his journey to the Adodi. His tearful outbursts are frequent. At one point I paused to ascertain if he wants to proceed with the sharing. He insists:

I was at the hospital when my partner was diagnosed with some awful virus. Immediately after being told by the doctor that it might be this new cancer, I thought how could this be? I had not known [a] . . . black person until that moment that was infected with the virus. Two weeks later my partner died. I get tested, I am positive. I disclosed this to my best friend who had informed me of this "support group" as he labeled it. I came to the Adodi that year. I remember my first "Tribute to the Ancestors"—it's given me the power to continue living, really!

Carl reflects on the symbolism of the ritual as a hallmark, a distinct moment in which death and loss are paramount. To deepen the understanding of death/loss for the men of Adodi and the implications of the "Tribute to the Ancestors" ritual it is crucial to discuss the impact of the AIDS epidemic on the African American community and explicate the significance of the ancestors in African cosmology.

Cohen's (1999) comprehensive archeology of the AIDS epidemic in the African American community provides a descriptive account and thorough assessment of American cultural institutions (media, churches and educational institutions), both mainstream and within the African American community, and their response to the epidemic that began in the 1980s. Cohen credits the mobilization of black gays and lesbians as the initial stage in the black community's response to the disease. With the emergence of the epidemic came a visible black gay community that developed political and social networks, or collectives that "openly claimed and wrote about their race and sexual identities" (93). Grassroots political groups, writing collectives and social networks alerted black communities of the epidemic long before mainstream health organizations and literature began sending messages of the virus to communities of color. The overall objective of the groups was fourfold: to disseminate information about AIDS to African American communities, to function as sanctuaries of growth and liberation where the love of self was honored and privileged, to use their talents and gifts for political action, and most importantly for this project, to recognize the ancestors.

The narratives in the opening chapter of Cohen's text echo those of many who are affiliated with the Adodi, as articulated during my fieldwork. Their initial understanding of the AIDS epidemic was that it was a white gay men's disease. Clay an Adodi member, opines:

One of the reasons why the white gay community despite a horrendous HIV epidemic has minimized the numbers down to damn near nothing is because everything about HIV is about them. The white image, the triangles are everywhere, the Lambdas are everywhere, all throughout literature and everything it's all about the white gay movement and their German and Greek ancestry or beginnings. Our images are not in there so we're still questioning whether we should get HIV services or not. Whether we are worthy of being cared for or not because it ain't about us.

Cohen suggests that the ferocious attack of the disease on such a large proportion of communities of color was mainly due to the problematic representation of AIDS discourse in media and in literature. Even "while [the] AIDS epidemic increasingly becomes a disease of people of color, the literature, images, and general representation of the disease stay predominately white" (23).

The writings and artistic expression of this period are generative epistemological and ontological claims about living as African American gay men. Through artistic expression, black gay men theorized their experience and critiqued white patriarchy and other pervasive oppressive discourses in contemporary society. The artifacts have performative implications. An example of the artistic and communal response is the New York-based writing collective named *Other Countries* whose purpose draws from:

... the passionate belief that the lives, voices, and visions of Gay men of African heritage are inherently valuable. It was founded from the desire to create an opportunity for our precious visions to be developed and shared with each other and with the rest of our communities. (1)

Moreover, their goal is to “leave something valuable and permanent of our Black Gay lives and work for our future generations” and to perform an “excavation of a past that has been, lost, hidden, stolen. It is our homage to our forebears” (1). The collective published two issues of the journal *Sojourner*, both of which are dedicated to the pronouncement of the AIDS epidemic. A discourse of urgency signifying the need to mobilize is apparent in its pages. The introduction of one issue states:

Sojourner is about beginnings. For many of us, it is the beginning of our search for ways to face the day after the wakes, the funerals, the memorials of yet another friend-lover-family member . . . These pages are to remind both the Black community and the Gay white community that black faggots are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS! We do not get the attention of infants born to infected mothers, we are not seen on Broadway stages, nor are we invited to address major political conventions. For the glaring absence of Black Gay face-voice-presence in the national consciousness, one could surmise we had somehow been spared this scourge. (1)

The first essay is twenty dark pages with names embossed in white, one after another like a commemorative wall, names that will remain permanent as they are imprinted and inscribed on the pages of the monograph. The memorial is a visual performance of “calling out the names of the ancestors.” This performance triggers memory, or an act of doing the present. For Somé the comprehension of memory in some African belief systems is “calling up,” an act of recalling the ancestors, to equip, to protect, and to serve as intermediaries between the living and those in the outer realm. The honoring of the ancestors is obligatory. Gordon (2002) reminds us of the importance of the ancestors in Africana cosmology: God, ancestors, humans.

Since degrees of power follow the hierarchy, ancestors stand above human beings on the plane of spiritual power . . . What this means is that ancestors are in touch with a wider field of knowledge and can affect the outcome of human affairs, but the relationship cannot work in the reverse. Thus, it becomes vital to show ancestors respect. (122)

Gordon explains this dictum as a complex network of community formation. “Community does not just stop with those who live around us, but also to those who precede us,” signifying the importance of the actions of the living and their influence on those who are to come: “I am because we are “(123). Thus community becomes the site of definition, power and change. The insertion of the ancestral presence in this discourse constructs community and self-definition and provides support for self-articulation. As one Adodi member, Kelvin, states upon the arrival at the farm, “for the next five days, we are at the center.”

Death therefore is the commencement of an ongoing complex network of dialogical communication processes between the living and those who “precede us.” The Adodi and other collectives formed during the 1980s summoned the ancestors for guidance, strength and power to form community as a strategy to cope with the AIDS epidemic in the United States and to mobilize toward social action. The significance of this requiem is an awareness of the presence of a real, familiar and

tangible essence of death, but also the power and comfort it produces toward self-affirming identity and community.

Below I share a descriptive account of my first experience with the “Tribute to the Ancestors.” Because the ceremony is regarded as the sacred opening ritual, cameras and other recording devices are not allowed. The text is written from the fieldnotes I recorded immediately following the event. The ruptures, taboos and negotiations of the men of Adodi and how they attempt to make sense of community, identity, and ritual follow this segment.

The “Tribute to the Ancestors”

A community that does not grieve together cannot exist . . . Humans must be able to feel grief and be able to express it sincerely in order to free the dead. (Somé 73–4)

Communal grief therefore provides the opportunity to reach that important cathartic peak that grief must logically lead to, as well as serve as an energy that transports the dead home. (Somé 75)

The “Tribute to the Ancestors” ritual took place in a building dubbed the “barn.” The Adodi were adorned in white t-shirts, which the spiritual leader reminded them is in accordance to Yoruba tradition where white is the color of purity and holiness. “We do this in respect, to honor our ancestors, that’s what this event is all about.”

The men were assembled outside the barn, paired, and then began to quietly proceed into the barn, solemn, quiet, participating with a very sacred spiritual meditational attitude. Three men led the processional, each of whom carried an item to be placed on the altar created in the center of the barn: A bowl of fruit represents food that we continue to provide for those who have “made the transition”: a vase of fresh flowers represents the beauty of both life and death and a white candle represents the wisdom that the ancestors provide for those who continue on the earth. Directly in front of the altar sat a small table with necklaces made of colorful beads representing the special Orisha for which this year’s retreat is in honor. In front of this small table sat several traditional African instruments such as sekere gourds.

We filed in the barn-like structure in pairs and were handed unlit candles upon our procession through the doors. The naked walls and distinct beams were still visible in the sparsely lit room that was overcome with the smell of incense. As we assembled we stood in front of chairs that were arranged in a horseshoe formation and listened to the soft sound of beating drums coming from the hidden cassette player. We stood in an atmosphere that bred reflection and solitude as the “Spiritual Leader” walked about the room with a branch and a bowl of water, which he would sprinkle around the room to symbolize purifying the space and making it sacred.

After a few moments of silence, the leader had completed the cleansing of the space and requested that we “call to the center.” The call to the center is a time for us to reflect, to call on our ancestors for “sustenance and strength to claim and create our sacred space” according to the leader. The first segment of the “call to the center” is the fellowship of prayers. Several men went to the center to read passages from sacred

texts such as the Bible and the Koran, and some shared personal reflections and prayers. The lighting of the flame followed. The leaders lit candles at each end of the horseshoe configuration where we sat, and as we began to light each other's candle, the barn was illumined with the glow of the candles. When all the candles were lit, we were asked by the spiritual leader to shout out names of those we know who had made the "transition." Like a rush of wind, I heard voices. I heard shouts of names and the wailing of men crying uncontrollably. Not anticipating such a response, I sat there emotionally moved, but unsure how to participate in this moment. I then felt Charles a long-time friend and co-participant, who was sitting next to me, fall over with what seemed like overwhelming emotional intensity. I reached out and caught him with my arms and held him while he wept uncontrollably. The ceremony had entered a realm of the spiritual that I had not encountered before. I, too, soon began to "lose control." Thoughts of people who I loved dearly: my grandfather, Trey Johnson, Mr. Kuhn—people who were important to me, people who had given me so much. I began to call—no—shout out their names. I saw their faces, I heard them talking to me, I felt their presence one last time. Charles was then holding me. We began to comfort each other.

Though it felt like hours, the calling out of names lasted perhaps twenty minutes. The voices then settled quietly, and we began to sing the words from *Patchwork Quilt*, a song performed by Sweet Honey in the Rock: "Yes, I remember your names, and yes, I remember your name and I will be loving you like a patchwork quilt . . . Yes, I will call out your name!" The candles were still lit, and the song came to an end. The leader suggested that we perform a chanting dance circle, a dance that was performed by black slaves. On Sunday afternoons the slaves would sing, arm in arm, in a circle with bags over their heads so the slave masters would not hear them worshiping. Despite our lack of drums we sang Negro spirituals arm in arm; we created our music and we danced around the barn until the wee hours of the morning. What a joy! We were no longer in an ordinary barn, but a very special space.

Ruptures, Taboos and Negotiation

Each time we do the "Tribute to the Ancestors" . . . [it] is more than just a memorial. It is accepting a legacy that has been given to us and saying well we're going to move out with it from here. And each time we do that I move to another level . . . I like to characterize it as a very dangerous ritual. Dangerous because you can get empowered in that place and everybody ain't ready for you when you get empowered . . . and it can be the most uplifting thing that you go through and so you're ready to step out and say yes I am gay. Get over it. (David, Adodi member)

In the morning after the "Tribute to the Ancestors" ritual performance, an air of freedom was displayed as the men paraded about wrapped in sarongs, some made of finely embroidered and designed fabric. Others stroll topless revealing pierced nipples, protruding bellies, tattooed bodies, skirts, and mundane everyday wear.

"For the next four days we are at the center" shouted a member as he made his way to the dining hall for breakfast. The declaration was appended with the repeated

phrase, “this is a sacred space.” But the spiritual leader the night before exhorted, “Adodi is a place where we get stuff done . . . we deal with the self.” The sacred place “is the place of chaos and turbulence. It is the place where disorder must be acted out” (Somé 78). As mentioned earlier, because of the centrality of the “Tribute,” it is impossible to talk about the “Tribute” without addressing other communal ritual performances. The “Tribute” is the beginning and the ending, it is a set of ongoing ritual performances that extends though out the retreat. This portion of the essay reveals how the men articulate, negotiate, and conceptualize the transcendence of the institutional variables that confine and restrict them to unraveling their understanding of ritual as site of danger, transgression, connection and (re)memory.

“I Liked What I Saw”

You want to hear something funny?” says, Victor as we gather at the dining hall, I got up this morning and you know we got a last-call [for] breakfast. And I ran into the bathroom and looked at the mirror and I smiled. And I liked what I saw. And that was the first time I had liked what I saw in the mirror in so long.

Despite the outward performance of self, Victor’s statement reveals internal tensions indicative of this complex intersection. This speaks of the internal condition through which many men lament their *feelings* about black bodies, their own bodies and each other.

Later in the day at the creative expression workshop, lead by an art therapist, the men were instructed to produce collages reflecting how they “see themselves.” After the cutting and pasting of images from magazines and other periodicals, the collective visual pastiche provided the gamut of representations and also clues to the pervasive self-identity and self-esteem issues among the men. At the “time for sharing” phase of the workshop, the men presented oral remarks about themselves as reflected in their accompanied collages. I quickly noticed Tyrone’s, a 33-year-old college professor, whose poster was sparse with a few images of disconnected body parts and headless figures. When the workshop leader asks him to explain his collage, he refuses at first, but minutes later, eagerly lifts his hand and explains to the workshop coordinator and the group:

T. It’s a bit difficult for me to talk about this . . . because it’s hard for me to look at myself.

WC. Why?

T. I don’t like how I look, I mean, I don’t think the average gay man would find me attractive.

WC. How is that? What do you mean by average gay man?

T. Well . . . You know what I mean

WC. No I don’t, can you unpack that for me? What is meant by average?

T. Well, I don’t exactly have the body type of one found on QAF! [*Queer as Folk*].

Tyrone compares his body to those found on a popular HBO television program whose main characters are white gay men. The show’s themes and lived realities maintain a white perspective. The only racially marked male bodies are seen

periodically, scantily clothed, their roles limited to engaging in sexual acts. The only recurring black body appears in the opening prologue of the show, donning a “positive” t-shirt and holding hands with a white man wearing a “negative” t-shirt. It is the black male body that is labeled as HIV-positive.

Tyrone compares his body to those of white men whom he claims are “the average,” the center. David a teacher from the South posits a similar thought:

I tried to shape and mold my body, and even dyed my hair blond like one of those white guys on the cover of many popular gay magazines. I thought that was what being gay was all about . . . being a white boy. Being in a space with so many black men, I realized how beautiful we are. I am beautiful . . . I am learning that we have our history and way of being . . . even our own language—it’s a powerful thing.

Tyrone and David’s utterances iterate the Dubosian concept of double consciousness “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (45). Often referred to as double vision, it is the internalization of disparaging and derogatory representations, in particularly in this case the black male body in contemporary US culture. “Unable to perceive themselves through their own eyes [the men of Adodi are] unable to measure their own value” (Gordon 216). Clay most poignantly explains this problem, “Some of us are willing to die because it’s painful to be alive and feel irrelevant.” The black male body in contemporary US society is positioned as an object of “desire” on which “domination and submission” are enacted and/or the “exotic supersexed” monster, a position which hooks describes as one of “disgust and desire” (*We Real Cool* 79). McBride (2005) acknowledges such politics, which he aptly labels as a “gay market place of desire.” A space mediated by the mores of capitalism the body is produced (advertised) sold and objectified at the dictates of whiteness. For David, his understanding of the concept of gayness is defined in what he sees as white. Another tier of identity formation articulated during the interviews with the men is the salient connection between language and identity.

“Wow, Barbara [Walters] has nothing on you, you made me go places I’ve not even been with my therapist,” says Michael at the conclusion of the interview that was held outside near a pond on the farm. My individual interviews with the Adodi men were more than one-dimensional and uni-directional information gathering sessions. Rather, they were comforting emancipatory moments carved out through a mutual swapping, signifying, and speaking in a familiar and often silenced language, to utter our life stories. We entered a realm of vulnerability, a sanctum of intimacy where we expressed fears, insecurities, and the circularity of identity in our lives. Inevitably in every interview there were moments of emotional outpouring (usually expressed through tears) and an element of touch: a hug or the holding of the hands. First astonished by the depth of disclosure by the men, one member reminded me, “I’ve never been asked to tell my story.” Though the term “gay” is rarely uttered at the official Adodi retreat gatherings or in the materials produced by the organization, during the interviews most men identified themselves as “same-gender-loving.” Clay,

a 40-year-old teacher from the West Coast recognizes and articulates the connection between identity construction and language during his interview:

Most things I've experienced in my life that were called black and gay I've tried, and most of them have really bothered me because I felt like they were really a bunch of lost black homosexual men trying to become affirmed through a white gay model with a black face on it . . . I use the word loving and way of being and not gay because I know where it originated and the whole formation of gay is not affirming . . . it's time that we create [our own] linguistics, like same gender loving, same-gender-loving brothers of African descent.

Clay's remarks highlight how the politically charged and highly contested word "gay" in communities of color is often read as "white." The complex terrain navigated by many people of color leads them to feel that they must choose between being "gay" (something that is coded as white) and being situated in one's own community and culture. This dichotomy is often endorsed by the limited—or lack of—representations of meaningful same-gender-loving images in mainstream American culture. Clay's remark articulates the yearning for a language that can connect their identity to "one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves" (Azaldua 204). While affirming phrases such as "same-gender-loving," "Adodi," and "same-gender-loving men of African descent" are presented in all public performances and printed materials of the organization, in the individual interview process and in sharing their life stories, "gay" was the term most frequently used. When I asked one member about the use of the term, he simply replied, "it comes out naturally." The language used in the telling of their stories brings to fore the subtleties of oppressive discourses internalized in marginality (Haymes). The struggle of identity, among the men of Adodi, is the ability to peer beyond the veil to recognize one's worth, value, and beauty. But as Clay articulates, the men attempt to name themselves and claim their own identity in meaningful ways.

I began this segment with David's description of ritual as "dangerous." This word suggests a transgressive force that imbues the participants with the ability to transcend the fixed and prescribed categorization of black male identity in the United States. By confronting and unpacking the realities of the pain and horrors of living a life situated in feeling "irrelevant," there is a recognition that even the living body, the non-affirmed same-gender-loving body is absent, empty, and itself a form of death. Terrence, a 43-year-old carpenter says, "biblically it's like killing the old man—a desire to kill or rid oneself of the coats of oppression." The ritual then is not only a tribute to the dead, it is a cleansing, purifying ritual that allows for the shedding and removal of the non-affirming self which when left unaffirmed, according to Terrence, leads to "death."

Considering ritual as dangerous also points to the seeming paradox of the politics of embodying an "affirmed black-same-gender-loving" identity, which David claims, "everybody ain't ready for." Likewise, Terrence claims that,

in a world of so much hatred, when we walk in such strength and love for oneself, people, and I'm talking black and white, try to beat you down, and put you back in the box where you [are] supposed to belong.

The danger of the ritual experience for the men of Adodi is confronting the self, the internalized oppression that only then is transported to a place where they become equipped to combat the compound racism and homophobia that exist in an anti-black world. The “Tribute to the Ancestors” ritual is a risk-taking venture, an action that transcends the restrictive systems in society and encourages self-affirmation and strength to “live my life.” Yet it is met with less affirming tactics in mainstream America. “You know, society don’t want to see us like this,” David says with his very direct, assured presence. “As black gay men, America ain’t ready to see us like this.” After pausing, he speaks, with a quivering but forced tone saying, “but we must stand strong, walk out of here with this strength. For the ancestors demand it of us.”

“I’m Talking About a Real Connection”

I am usually exhausted. I am usually in tears. Tears of joy and liberation mostly, with a little sadness thrown in. I love looking around at my brothers and seeing the spirit of those who have gone on reflected in their faces. I love seeing them responding to the ritual in their own personal ways and sharing that private moment with them. (Simone, Adodi member)

You know I like the “Tribute to the Ancestors.” I’m sort of like a liturgical ritual person and I am a firm believer that ritual takes us to new places, to another level and so it’s important to me that people—that we do ritual. (David, Adodi member)

The “Tribute to the Ancestors” allows a freedom of sharing that many Adodi members perceive as not permissible in mainstream America. Intimacy is nurtured through touch, tears, and trust, hence setting the tone for the retreat experience. Ron describes how the use of touch encourages that level of intimacy during the ritual performance:

I felt these pair of hands on me and you have your hands on someone and the comforting, it’s a feeling of peace of mind—that’s what I want to say—the hands on your shoulders, the brothers’ voices singing, like calling—it was a feeling of acceptance.

David concurs and highlights the level of emotion exhibited in the ritual: “I got hugs and people whispered affirming thoughts in my ear . . . I started crying and I knew I was safe.” David continues by acknowledging the emotional intensity of the “tribute” claiming, “[it’s] my wildest dream, you know to have that kind of energy flowing without even having to say anything to anybody.” David’s use of the word “safe” expresses the security and trust he finds embodied within this ritual. However, Rashid notes that the depth of emotion and touch is not sexualized:

In this ritual I’m affirmed spiritually and intellectually and emotionally by another black man without the finality of having to go to bed with him. You know . . . it’s a whole different kind of package deal that exists here.

The men speak of the yearning for sincere intimacy and wanting to establish healthy interpersonal relationships. After the ritual, one member shared that it is “a sanctuary of truth and purity of the self that we are able to share with others.” The tribute

creates a space of safety and sets the tone for the forthcoming retreat by establishing trust and the freedom to enjoy physical and emotional expression.

On the second day of the retreat, the men were called together for a communal affirmation ritual in which they had to “look at each other.” The men were asked to embrace and support each other by holding hands, looking at one another in the eyes, and communicating nonverbally, the four A’s of the Adodi, which are accept, acknowledge, affirm and ashe. This ritual was performed in the span of about two hours. After a period of silence when one of the men who felt led to do so stated, “The power I see in you is . . .” and began to state a certain quality and/or characteristic that is special and in need of affirmation. The other man, then responded, “Yes, I know, thank you!” The entire exchange would occur while the two men gaze into each other’s eyes. The men then would float around the room seeking to engage and repeat the exercise with other men as music plays softly in the background. Phillip describes this ritual as:

The opportunity to love one another without restrictions on our tongues of what we can and cannot say and how something would be interpreted . . . I was able to love unconditionally.

“Ritual is called for because our soul communicates things to us that the body translates as need, or want, or absence. So we enter into ritual in order to respond to the call of the soul” (Somé 25). Leon, a member from the South comments, that ritual is “the moment of sincere connection with my brotha’s and I’m talking about real connection.” It is a space where “we get our stuff together and do some real work.” The “real work” as suggested by Leon, “is a getting our shit out in the open in a non-judgmental environment.” The “connection” is an interpersonal and communal bonding, developed through disclosure in the form of confessional embodied performances.

“It’s one of our rituals” explains Tom as we await the first performer to take the stage for the “talent sharing” a much anticipated event during the retreat, “Men work all year to display a talent before an affirming audience.” Clay a forty-five-year-old attorney from Atlanta walks before the men and croons a Steve Wonder hit. Visibly nervous and anxious, though flat and off-beat, he stands with great confidence. At the conclusion of his performance, the audience rose to their feet, some rushing to the stage to hug him. Clay explains, “I’ve always wanted to learn how to sing, and I have always wanted to participate in the talent sharing.” He discloses that he enrolled in voice lessons for the sole purpose of presenting at the Adodi retreat. He is followed by Brun, at 6’ foot tall with well defined muscular arms and legs, who moves across the stage in knee high patented-leather boots and a black faux leather mini skirt, engaging the audience in a autobiographic solo performance titled “Two Pork Chops.” With the men participating in the telling (akin to call and response), Brun evocatively utters the story of meeting a man in a grocery store in front of the meat counter. A romantic tryst ensues and Brun decides to order two pork chops instead of one for himself. The tone changes once Brun discloses his HIV status as positive. “The brother begins to back away, I feel the scarlet H branded on my brown body . . .

I went home and prepared the two porks chops, and they were damn good!" he concludes. Brun's performance provides insight into the level of disclosure emitted at the gathering of the men. Shortly after Brun's performance, a member explains, "in this space, we reveal our true selves." Not comprehending his statement initially it became apparent after the following performance by a first timer who evocatively performed a self-authored poem explaining, "why I sleep with crack heads."

The well-crafted descriptive poem, at moments was painful to witness. The same audience who just moments earlier sat galvanized in an active and auditory participatory performance, now sit in a silence of solidarity with the performer, empathizing with his loneliness and his desire to be loved. He laments, "though temporary, they provide the touch I so desire." The stage of the "talent sharing" becomes a space for the public confessional. As an act of speech, Foucault asserts, "The confession is [as] a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement" (60–62). Rooted in what Foucault labels as *ars erotica*, this form of confessional is freeing, pedagogical, and a "speaking of truth" (61). The confessional embodied performances on the stage that evening of the talent sharing, where bodily yearnings not muted and silenced by the "order of power." Instead, the stage becomes a site of truth telling of lived realities and "speaking of truth" to each other (61).

Shortly after the performances that evening, while some congregated about the barn and others moving about to the loud dance music, I sat outside with the planning committee as they processed the day's events and planned for the forthcoming one. "What did you think of that crack head poem?" says one committee member. Amongst mostly laudatory responses, was a "well I don't know about that one . . . I can't believe he stood up there and said such things." Another committee member quips, "hey, it's not about being judgmental," while another posited, "he had the courage and freedom to say what many of us are afraid to reveal or share . . . I think we need more of that honesty and realness." The level of intensity to which he aspires exposes several contested domains of this "sacred space."

For months prior to the retreat, the planning committee had entertained discussions about men having sex at the retreat. Two men (out of twelve) had written in their journals of their sexual escapades that occurred during the retreat. Printed on the retreat material states: "The Adodi retreat is a sex, drug and alcohol free weekend." During the meeting one leader stated, "How can we not talk about this? It's like a public secret, everyone knows that it happens occasionally . . . at least with me." One of the founding members retorts, "I don't want this experience to become a sex retreat, where men only come for a hook up. I am concerned that our image as black men not be reduced to sex." I responded at the meeting, "don't we have the power to create our own image?" "The Adodi is a sacred and spiritual space and I think we need to keep it that way," said the elder, the founding member responded. Another member quips, "Can't sex be a sacred act?" When I attempted to push the elder for a rationale for his disdain for sexual activity, he jokingly replies, "I'm a church going man!" Though in jest his comment speaks to the tenuous relation between same-sex desire and the power of the African American Christian church.

The church historically has been the place of spiritual nourishment, refuge, and supposed liberation, an institution where membership is mandated and honored within the community. Baldwin, like many of the men of Adodi, struggled fiercely with institutionalized religion and viewed the “church as an institution that perpetuates homophobia and continued oppression with the African American community” (1972, 33). While some men liken their experience at the retreat to “like being in church,” many feel uncomfortable with the “non-Christian” elements of the “Tribute to the Ancestors” and other rituals. “Despite the multitude of contemporary interpretations of religious texts from many African American religious scholars and leaders (West, Dyson, and others), homophobic rhetoric continues to be espoused from the pulpits of many African American churches (West, 1999). “I love my church, I grew up in the church” says Brun. “Though I know it is a non affirming place for me, I feel a sense of connection to home, to community . . . it’s so powerful, but it’s more powerful here.” He concludes, “I’m still working on it.” For Brun the church symbolizes a connection with community—home, to which he yearns despite the church’s rejection of him. For the desire to remain a part of the community for him is worth the price of the non-affirming discourse (Nero 1994). However, some Adodi members like Ron, adamantly claim, “I refuse walk into a place they call a church that won’t accept all of me. I struggled for years; not loving myself, my body, and not loving others because of that church stuff.”

Later in the day, the conversation surrounding sex and dating men at the retreat continued before the entire group. As seventy men sat in a large circle, the leader of the session asked, “how many of you are currently involved in a relationship?” Less than five men raised their hands, two of whom were a couple. “How many of you have a desire to date someone in this room?” More than half of the hands are released. “It seems to me, since many of us are looking to date and be partnered with the type of men in this room, why are we not using this time to meet men on that level during the retreat experience?” The men sat silent. One man shouted, “perhaps we just need to get this all out in the open, how many of you have had sex during a retreat?” Not a single hand moved for several seconds, then slowly and in some cases sheepishly as if someone had given a cue that it was okay, ten or eleven hands leapt almost in unison. Many begin to just look at each other as if they were just given permission “to *really* look at each other.” Derrick, a forty-year-old who has attended six retreats claimed, “This was a defining moment for the group—it’s good for us to speak the truth about Adodi and what goes on here. This space is sacred because we demand a certain level of intimacy.” “We should not be ashamed of wanting to meet men on a romantic level here,” says David. “Perhaps we’re afraid . . . afraid what those outside of this place will think of us.” The discussions regarding dating and “having sex” during the retreat reflect the profound yet subtle influence of internalized whiteness as the men exam their bodies against the “average”—white-center and not wanting to “buy into the image of black men as solely sexual beings.” Within the past two years the phrase “a sex free weekend” was omitted from the retreat brochures.

“Recalling the Rich Legacy They Have Bestowed Upon Us”

At first I was really intimidated by it but it's part of us, it's part of our heritage, it's part of our rituals. I like what it stands for. I like tapping into the energies of the ancestors and calling out names of people who have gone before us, who have paved the way, who've knocked down barriers and walls. (Clarence, Adodi member)

Teary-eyed, hand in hand, embracing each other, the men assembled in a huge circle on the campgrounds. The leader stood in the center, walking about, gazing at the black bodies assembled in that space in preparation of the final ritual performance before the departure. The retreat ends as it begins by the men honoring the ancestors, themselves and the special time they have shared together.

But at this moment, there is a different silence from the one that pervaded the hollowed buildings and sites of previous ritual engagements throughout the week. This silence is a heavy stillness, tinged with anxiety and apprehension, which characterizes the magnitude of the moment as the men set forth to re-enter the non-affirming world outside of this very sacred ground. The sputter of the nearby Greyhound buses, packed with luggage and waiting to be filled with bodies, can be heard and the toxic fumes ingested as the men stood hand in hand responding to the leader, in liturgy like fashion.

Leader. The earth pulsates with excitement—excitement about our coming to this place to do good!

All. And our spirits thunder with anticipation with all we can be for one another. Already think of how we can change our lives. How we can change the world.

Leader. Here on this firm ground let us welcome the ancestors as we recall the rich legacy they have bestowed upon us.

All. Come and be with us.

Leader. Let us welcome also the Winds of Change.

All. In so doing, our possibilities become limitless. My brothers sharing becomes my power. New horizons open to me. Change for the better cannot help but come.

Leader. Now greet one another with, “I respect the divine in you and honor the mystery.” (Brothers greet one another)

Leader. Now go in peace to serve the earth, the skies, the waters, creation, and one another as we pull the glories of one another up to the stars. ASHE'

All. ASHE' (Ritual Text)

After the final “Ashe” the silence is broken when Devon, a thirty-six year old clergy member, wails “I can honestly say,” he shouts “I'm afraid of the loneliness.” His voice echoes across the open vast area about half the size of a football field, “. . . the pain, and the rejection,” his guttural wail is greeted with shouts of support. Others follow, some weeping and uncontrollably gasping for air between each word or phrase attempted, while some are only moved to embrace and hold those so moved to speak their bodily yearnings.

Just moments earlier the men honored each other by asking distinct groups to come to the center of the circle to be recognized. Often the men surrounding those called to the center embrace them, and some whisper affirming thoughts in the ears of those being honored. In the case of the planning committee members and the

oldest member (who are referred to as elders), the group would collectively hoist their bodies, lifting them up above their heads for a few moments as if presenting them as offerings to the Orisha. This was a way of collectively praising and recognizing their presence. It began by honoring the youngest members, then moved to acknowledge the brothers who are living with HIV, then concluded by once again recognizing the ancestors by calling out their names, a return to the “Tribute to the Ancestors.” David, who stands beside me during the ceremony utters, “what we do here is more than a memorial, it’s accepting a legacy that has been given to us.” Simone, a member for seven years, further explains that “to memorialize is to simply remind us of the dead; to position the ancestors as a legacy is to suggest lineage, something that is handed down, passed on, something that remains living . . . it’s our responsibility.” The responsibility rests in remembering the ancestral energies by the “calling out of names.”

The act of calling out names awakens the dead. According to Somé communities must be able to “feel grief and be able to express it sincerely in order to free the dead” (74). The ritualized shouting and uttering makes real their existence and reminds us of the legacy that “those who have gone before us” embody (Gordon 123). This recollection has long occupied an important role in the African Diaspora and is evident in how the men grant significant consideration to the names that are called during the ritual performance. Solomon recalls:

I remember another friend of mine, an ex-lover who had passed some years ago who also saw that spirit and tried to nurture it. He unconditionally stood by me. Then I remembered my mother. No matter how dissatisfied I am with myself I know she would be proud of me; or she is proud of me. And all these feelings just came and I cried.

A similar sentiment is shared by Simone:

I call the names of my parents, my other relatives, and the friends who have made an impact on my life. I only used to call out the names of my friends because I was not sure if my family fully accepted all of who I was, but I overcame the notion that I could not honor them for what they gave me even if I was not sure they understood and accepted all of who I was. Calling out names also makes me remember the place in my life those people had and the place in my life where I was when I knew them and where I am now. I can see the growth in me and feel the pride in them. Calling out the names to me just lets them know that I have not forgotten them and that I do love and remember them.

For Jeremy, a 44-year-old physician:

The calling out of the names is the most important component of the tribute for me. It is about recognizing love. I mean so many of us spend the bulk of our lives looking for love and wanting someone to love us. We are not loved by society.

Solomon recalls this love and shouts the name of his ex-lover “who also saw that spirit and tried to nurture it” and his mother “who is proud” of him even when he is “dissatisfied” with himself. And Simone’s apprehension at first gives way to the uttering of the names of his family members, but soon shows that he can “honor

them for what they gave” him, “even if I was not sure they understood and accepted all of who [he] is.” The names shouted speak to the deep commitment to the men by family and friends. The calling out of names is a ritualized performance where the men engage in a convergence of the past and the present with the living and the dead situating the concept of legacy as a form of accountability.

Legacy, as defined by the men, encompasses an accepting of the responsibility to move forward as affirmed men of African descent by accepting and honoring each other. “We can also consider our brothers here at this moment, part of the legacy” says Tyrone “you don’t have to be dead to be honored here.” The lurking presence of death creates an immediacy of the present as the comprehension of the past becomes the present and memory is an act of the living to be acknowledged. During the recognition of the men living with HIV, a young man dashed toward my friend Kevin. Crying and visibly emotionally wrought the young man eagerly embraces him. Kevin stood still, holding him and kept repeating, “I’m here, I will always be here, I’m not going anywhere.” The following year Kevin, along with several members of the group, “made the transition” and were not physically present at the retreat. The responsibility to move forward is to acknowledge and honor their lives and their spirit and drawing from their strength daily. “The whole thing is about recognizing our peoples [*sic*], how we’ve overcome,” says Carl. Simone provides us with a meaning of legacy and its purpose more poignantly:

The past holds keys to how our people survived, overcame and thrived [in] some of the same situations we are experiencing now. We call out the names to remember to remind us of the techniques used—more importantly also that we must accept them, use them and pass them on.

The ancestral legacy of the men of Adodi offers survival techniques to live in this world as affirmed same-gender-loving men of African descent. The ancestors are summoned, their energy is incorporated in the lives of the living, and they play an essential role in sustaining an affirmed community.

Conclusion: Ritual as Community

A true community begins in the hearts of the people involved. It is not a place of distraction but a place of being. It is not a place where you reform, but a place you go home to . . . In community it is possible to restore a supportive presence of one another, rather than distrust of one another or competitiveness with one another. (Somé 51)

In 2006 both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* published special serial articles announcing the bleak reality of black men in the United States as more “dire” than previously thought and worsening. Despite the rise of black educated men than ever before in U.S. history, the HIV/AIDS-related deaths of black men continue to outnumber those of their white counterparts. Despite the disabling rhetoric toward and the harsh realities of black men in contemporary U.S. culture, the men of Adodi maintain a unique sphere that many call home. It is a sacred space where they confront self, engage with each other, and welcome the past through ritual

performance—a utopian performativity in the words of Muñoz (2006), one engages the “then” and the “to come” to critique the here and now. The ritual engagement of the men of Adodi is a lens by which to explore the lingering oppressive political, economic and race conditions in contemporary U.S. culture.

This ethnography reports a sustaining power of ritual performance. As the men of Adodi embrace an Africana approach to ritual, this research endeavor reminds us of the diverse interpretations and approaches of ritual, and how this community of men of African descent reinscribe these performances in a contemporary Western context. Moreover, it is the ritual that aids in the construction of this sacred space, and it is the conduit by which the men chart the multiple, shifting and ever contested layers of identity. Rituals such as the “Tribute to the Ancestors” constitute a dialogue with the past, a conjuring of memory—memories of the dead specifically, which sustains community and provide equipment to negotiate an anti-black and anti-gay world.

Note

[1] All the names of the members in this essay are pseudonyms.

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