



Introduction

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Of Sacred Crossroads: Cultural Studies and the Sacred

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Introduction

The Seventh International Association for Cultural Studies Crossroads Conference, held in 2008 at the University of the West Indies, in Mona, Jamaica, was staged for the first time with an overarching theme. Based on the cultural, spiritual and geographical diversity of the Caribbean region, the local conference organizing team insisted that the conference needed to reflect key aspects of the space. Consequently, the theme selected was “Of Sacred Crossroads”. The conference call for papers asked for a consideration of issues surrounding the dialogue between humanity and spirituality. In the face of increasing materialism and consumerism, as well as the prevailing emphasis on science and technology in contemporary society, participants celebrated the intangible heritage of humankind--that found in religion, art, dance, song, oratory, healing, re-creation, performance, ritual, belief systems, ethics, globalization and communication, among others.

Between the 2008 iteration of the conference and the present, this focus on issues of the sacred amongst the community of Cultural Studies scholars has continued to be a concern. Cultural Studies is not a discipline that immediately calls to mind reflection on matters of the sacred. But Cultural Studies is known for identifying distinct, multi-disciplinary perspectives, and in these papers we see a willingness to critique the role of the sacred in daily life and an openness to thinking about its representation in everyday cultural expressions, from literature to music to food, politics and beyond.

This special issue concerns itself with offering new ways in which the sacred is represented in the popular realm or communicated at the intersection of the secularization of society and its inherent ideological, philosophical, existential and methodological crises. All voices in the issue, some new, some experienced, are wrestling with ideas about and perspectives on the sacred. The goal is to provide different perspectives on the sacred, revealing, through Cultural Studies practices, the multifaceted nature of belief, ceremony and ritual.

Each essay engages with the sacred--perhaps more the spiritual--and the similarity that draws them all together is this idea of trying to grapple with the spiritual. We read thoughts about the ways that musicians, filmmakers, and migrants have made use of artistic or aesthetic practice to express spirituality. Michael Spanu focuses on the language of spirituality in French pop music, thinking about what happens when this music circulates globally. Chantal Poch turns to the work of Werner Herzog and his ability to represent spiritual faith through the medium of cinema. It is possible to view the Herzog films in question as documenting religious practice, and the way that Poch outlines the choices made by the director means that her work addresses how visual representation shapes the possible readings.

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There is also, however, work on the feeling of the sacred in public, such as through festivals like in Swapna Gopinath's discussion of India's Ganesh Utsav and Carlton Turner's treatment of Bahamas' Junkanoo. Monique Charles's discussion of the musical genre grime vis a vis the sacred reflects the development of grime as a cultural form, and, next to Michael McMillan's meditation on the relationship between sacred and secular migrant musics in the UK, the two essays can be viewed as documenting the Black British cultural experience, so important in the 70th anniversary year of the arrival of Caribbean people on British shores via the Empire Windrush.

Thinking through the cultural realities of ghosts and haunting, Huber reads these phenomena through Wynter, Derrida, Cesaire, Tuck/Ree and others. She plays with a range of different objects of analysis and theorizations of ghosts open up so many possibilities in terms of thinking about the relationship between the dead and us. The work of Fernanda Gonçalves Castro presents an analysis of the spiritual life of a woman in the 1800s through the use of Cultural Studies analysis. It's an interesting treatment of an interesting text—esoteric yet useful in terms of presenting an example of travel/pilgrimage literature during the colonial period. It's almost a test of Cultural Studies—as if the author is asking “what happens when you look at a text like *From Naples to Jerusalem* through the lens of Cultural Studies?”

Kimberley Jane Anderson and John Bolland provide a unique look at the interaction between art and theology, but also between these and other potential sources of inspiration—such as hip-hop and grime, for example. It's also an effective way of engaging with the process of writing poetry (both the successes and missteps) as well as grappling with the issues around class and audience. Over all, the artistry is demonstrated to be a means of how to connect creatively with spirituality through art and culture.

Each of these essays takes a different perspective, but they all engage the sacred and the spiritual through the lens of culture. It is clearly important to consider what it means to engage spiritually with (or see the spiritual elements of) a range of things, from grime to various forms of pilgrimage, and public cultural practice. Cultural Studies, through these essays, is demonstrated to be an ideal intellectual space to talk about the sacred. As Turner writes in his paper, “Cultural Studies and analysis require the theological sensibilities to see a deeply engrained theological methodology within such religiocultural productions. Because of both, we discover more about the sacred in ordinary life.”