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# Subjectivity: Offerings from African Diasporic Religious Ethnography

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## Abstract

This article focuses on subjectivity in the ethnography of religion by considering the multiplicity of subjectivity and their relationalities, drawing from the author's ethnographic encounter with the orisha Oshun in Trinidad. This reflection on the implications of taking seriously the spectral or spirit, in their many forms and aspects, as active agents involves the expansion of subjectivity and the relational aspects of inter-subjectivity from the singular to the multiple. Written from a purposefully provocative compound subject position of "I/we", this article asks that ethnographers of religion grapple with the offerings of ontologies outside the Western "normative" intellectual tradition. I/we offer that this shift will impact our engagements with the people and communities that we work with, expanding our capacity to share multiple worlds and our ability to engage numerous theorizations.

**Keywords:** subjectivity/subjectivities; inter-subjectivity/inter-subjectivities; African Diasporic religion; ethnography; Trinidad; Yoruba religion; orisha; Oshun.

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## Opening: Oshun Drives!?

Oshun drives! Osun Drives? This simple phrase hurt my head a decade ago and even now still echoes faintly. Never mind that an earlier version of this ethnographic story didn't end up in the book and now is lost! Never mind that (see me shaking my head here). Never mind that it's almost ten years later. Really, never mind that, as I can still remember that day, that moment.

I can remember the sticky heat and busyness of the shrine. I can remember the flurry of activity as people worked to get the shrine ready for the international Ifá conference that was starting there the next day. I remember looking up and seeing painters on scaffolding putting a new coat on the multi-story double headed axe (*ọṣé*) for Shango that was the shrine's most visible statue. I remember the sounds of hammering from the area of the stage and watching as a rickety delivery van navigated the steep road down to the shrine to deliver all the rented chairs and tables. Amidst all this activity I clearly recall asking myself, "What you doing up here ('behind god's back' as they say in Trinidad, conveying a remote location and/or difficult access), what you doing up here sweating in this heat when you'll be spending the next four days here from early to late?" Really, I would have tried to stay on the shrine overnight to spare myself the journey if it wasn't for the tarantulas as big if not bigger than my hand. Travelling from the shrine to where I was staying involved going to the capital city (only an hour for that part), then crossing "town" as it's called to go deep into another valley. The alternate quicker route involved curvy mountainside roads with sharp drops and blind corners. And then going through a third valley before more windy roads. While definitely faster the route felt precarious, especially at night with streetlights few and far between. I always felt like I was taking my life into my hands on that journey.

All of this is to say that day I didn't really mean to be there. And yet there I was looking for a friend of mine from Los Angeles that I hadn't seen in a while. I knew he was in the country, staying at a hotel (a different valley over). I wanted to connect, hoping to catch up before the conference started. Yet amidst all the people on the shrine he was nowhere to be found. Asking people for him felt like a futile task as everyone was characteristically vague. "Yes" they thought he had been there. "No" he wasn't there right now. "No" they didn't know where he went. "No" they couldn't tell me when he would be back. (There would be a note of frustration in my voice if you could hear me telling this story.) Ack! What was I to do? As hard as it was to get to the shrine it was even harder to get out! First you had to wait for someone leaving, beg a lift to the main road, and then flag down a pirate taxi. That car would go to a *croisée* (Trini creole for crossroads, specific to San Juan junction) where another taxi would go to "town" (the capital Port of Spain). From there another taxi again to go into Diego Martin, another valley, where I would hope for a drop (off-route). If not, I would need to drop early and try to get yet another (how many was that?) taxi. Alternatively, I could hang out at the shrine hoping to run into someone who lived near where I was staying. So, I waited, only to partake in a different journey. I turned my ethnographic gaze to observing and documenting the set-up for the conference. I met some early arrivals from Venezuela who were milling about. And I took some photos and short videos. I even managed to be helpful

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> arranging chairs (when not being dive-bombed by the drone-like mega mosquitos that suffused the forest where the shrine was located).
>
> There I was, hanging out and doing ethnographic research, when it happened. A car drove up. Were they dropping someone heading out? (Maybe a ride then.) Or was it my friend back from wherever he had gone? I ran up to the car, peering at the darkly tinted windows, unable to see inside. "Eh, eh, what was going on here?" For what seemed like a long beat there was no activity. Then a door opened and I heard my name. "Come Fadeke". It was Iyalode Sangowunmi, the elder of the shrine gesturing me over as she strained to get up from the car. I ran to both ritually greet her (touching the ground with one hand, saying "Aburo, aboye") and help her out of the car, respectful and curious. Who was in there? She firmly closed the door behind her and had me escort her to the heart of the shrine, calling for people and things as we went. Still focused on my friend I wanted to ask "Iya, is he with you, is he in the car?" Perhaps reading my energy (as I don't believe I verbalized anything) she shook her head, no, and gesturing to the driver's side said, "It's Oshun there".
>
> "She's there. Oshun's there, she drove". Did she utter these words or did her gestures convey them? After all this time that memory is unclear. What stands out is the impact from this communication—she was there, it was Oshun, she drove. I stopped in my tracks, astounded. Did I get that right? Who drove? Oshun drove? I shook my head, "Nah". And just as I reached for clarification another door opened, this time the driver's door, and a figure got out. I recognized the person as a priest from the shrine, Iya Omilade. Or so I thought. Then I saw their face, their expression, their eyes. And quickly lowering my gaze I realized that indeed, it was Oshun there. Which meant that Oshun had driven up the windy road, deep into the valley and down the steep dirt road to the shrine. Oshun drove!
>
> As my head rang with the thought, the realization, the revelation, "Oshun drives", Oshun gathered everyone, received her offerings of honey and *otí* (clear alcohol) to greet a visiting dignitary—the *ọba* (monarch) from Oyotunji Village in South Carolina, US (who had also been in the car). Then she (or they) would guide us all through an impromptu ritual. This was directed at healing a rift we were yet to experience she prophesied would emerge over the next few days. And during all this more cars would arrive bearing visitors for the upcoming conference, including my friend from Los Angeles, California.[1]

Almost a decade later I can still feel the weight of that moment and its impact on me, on my senses of self and its contribution to the disintegration of boundaries that I had once held (and unquestionably so) dear. What are these boundaries? That is a good question for this context, one I/we link with the central concept here of "subjectivity" to illustrate/illuminate how I/we end up at the position of multiple subjectivity. That is, multiple subjectivities and the need to talk about subjectivities, both internal(ly) and external(ly). This extends to the

1. The scene that followed next is described in greater detail in the last chapter of *Spiritual Citizenship* (Castor 2017: 160–62).

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term inter-subjectivity which I/we propose may be more understandable as the plural "inter-subjectivities".

My focus here is on the multiplicity of subjectivities and their relationalities and the impact of this for ethnography in general, specifically for the ethnography of religion. More than offering definitive take-aways I/we prefer to offer some points for consideration as the start of an engagement leading to more discussion and dialogue. I/we suggest that if we take seriously the agency of the spectral, of Spirit, in its many forms and aspects then we must expand not only our ideas of subjectivity but also the relational aspects of inter-subjectivity. This in turn will impact our engagements with the people and communities that we work with, the extent that we can shift ourselves to share worlds, and even our ability to engage their theorizations.

## Offerings

I/we offer this creative ethnographic story here as an insight into the power of the ethnography of religion.[2] One that has theoretical and methodological implications for both ethnography and religious studies. Within our suggestion to take seriously the agency of Spirits, or sociality if you will (Blanes and Santo 2014), is a recognition of instances where there are multiple subjects in a singular corporeal body. This then led to this consideration of the plural nature of subjectivity. (For example, Iya Omilade and Oshun as co-presences in one body are a multiplicity of subjectivity, so actually "subjectivities".) The very fact that it was Oshun driving the car caused me to confront (after almost a decade in the community and over a decade in the religion) my own limits of thought about the nature of expressions of the divine; in this case the limits of my apprehension of Oshun, the Yorùbá orisha of creation, creativity, joy and love. While I/we will raise many questions here, one focal point of this article is to ask: How is it after years and years of witnessing possession, what did I hold tightly to that limited my perception of the divine's agency and subjectivity? Below, I/we offer in response, more questions to help tease this apart and open our consideration of contributions offered to us in African diaspora religious ethnographies. There in the ethnographic embrace of multiplicities of subjectivity I/we arrive at an offering of *African diasporic religious subjectivities*.

2. Note that the story "Oshun Drives!?" overlaps in time and place with a small part of the section "Alásùwadà: From Conference to Movement" in Chapter 5: "Ifá in Trinidad's Ground" (Castor 2017). I invoke the descriptor "creative" here for this telling as through the shift of elapsed time, with faded memories and shifted perspectives, the story has a predictably different resonance. And yet, I/we would claim that it is no more or less true.

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Our capacity to hold multiple subjects within one body has long been the subject (pun intended) of anthropological inquiry.[3] The fascination with possession can be seen in a wide and expansive literature from the canonical to the contemporary.[4] I/we offer that engaging this literature and these theoretical approaches from a strictly normative perspective, that is as a distanced detached 'observer' of that thing over there, will simultaneously leave one's subjectivity untouched and one's perception (as mentioned previously) partial and limited. I/we offer further for consideration that in the engagement of different subject positions there is an opportunity for transformation of one's own subjectivity. And when this shift (and the attendant being open to this shift) occurs then there is an opportunity for new ethnographic explorations and vistas. And this is what the methodological and theoretical engagements with African diasporic religious ethnography both offers and demands of us.

## African Diasporic Religious Subjectivities

I/we propose an exploration of "subjectivity" where ethnographic approaches to the study of religious expressions raise questions of our relation to each other and to the divine, and indeed if they are separate at all. As Crosson points out, the "emphasis for those who live 'spirit possession' might fall ... on the making of human subjects through (often difficult) co-habitation with other-than-human powers" where there is "a permanent spectrum of ebbing and flowing 'co-presence' with other-than-human powers" (2019a: 550). I/we consider as one point of departure that "subjectivity" is imbricated in—and beyond—the symbolic, the body, the individual/collective, affect, agency, and social identities (Furey 2012). And then I/we ask us (as said in Trinidad "all o' we") to take seriously the contributions of Indigenous and decolonized practices understood under the Western umbrella term of "religion". This encourages us to ask questions: What does the construction of subjectivity reveal when examined through a genealogical lens of historical, philosophical and power commitments?[5] If we embrace decolonial,

3. See Covington-Ward and Jouili (2021), especially the section in the introduction, "Embodiment: Self-Formation, Epistemology and Intersubjectivity" (8–11) where they name a shift "from a focus on individual bodies, subjectivity, and individual personhood to a better recognition of the relational character of subjectivity—namely, *intersubjectivity*" (10; italics in original).

4. See Boddy (1994) and Johnson (2011) for literature reviews.

5. One area where this question has been engaged, as mentioned, is in the scholarship on possession. See Crosson (2019a) for an exploration of possession and sovereignty on the nature of subjectivity as part of the West as "project" (Trouillot 1991) that touches on the philosophical and power commitments raised here (see also Crosson 2019b, 2020). See Johnson (2011, 2014) for a genealogical approach.

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feminist and queer theories what is opened up in our theoretical engagements, analytics and methodologies of subjects and subjectivities (including possibilities of the multiple alongside/in conjunction with the singular)? One implication of multiple subjectivities is the need to take up decolonizing anthropology calls to decenter the researcher and their gaze as a singular subject, thus breaking down the ethnographic power relation that objectifies the people and communities we work with (Bejarano et al. 2019: 36). What are the further implications of these questions for our ethnographic methodologies and representations?

I/we concur with Csordas who offers two definitions of subjectivity that he finds lacking:

> [We] distinguish two meanings of subjectivity, both inadequate to our purpose. In reference to the state of being subject to sovereign power, the notion of subjectivity easily excludes experience; understood as a mental or psychological phenomenon, subjectivity privileges the isolated and sovereign cogito, or the "rational man" actor. In both instances, if it is introduced at all intersubjectivity is secondary and added on as a transaction between subjects. (2008: 120 n.2)

He calls for a greater focus on inter-subjectivity and inter-corporeality than these meanings of subjectivity, rooted as they are in the Western enlightenment project and its racialized and gendered hierarchies. One consideration is the complex relations that become visible in inter-subjectivities (plural).[6] It is these singular constructs that are disrupted by the co-presences, "other-than-human" powers, spirits that I/we recognize in multiple subjectivities. And this recognition also complicates our relations of interiority (self with self) and exterior relations (self with others) that still rest in binary oppositions. I/we think of that hard-to-pin-down barrier of perception (or apperception?) and knowledge that conveys an impression of separation and divisibility that we are individuated from each other. That barrier–line–boundary which feels both fixed and porous to me is broken down through embracing multiple subjectivities, including that hard separation often perceived as bounded by the body. It is through opening up the singular to the multiple that I/we can experience the plasticity of the body and its ability to broach the perception of separation.[7] Maybe I/we think this because at 10 years old I/we read Carlos Castaneda and Richard Wright from my mom's bookshelf. At least that's what I/we remember. On the other hand, my perspective may be shaped by initiation to *Egbé* (Yorùbá entities from the spiritual realm; who themselves are both multiple and singular). I/we raise this in part to expose the temporal nuances

6. Thinking of those fleeting moments when spiritual forces through embodiments interact with each other, and though there may be only two bodies, there may be four or more subjectivities.

7. See Covington-Ward and Jouili (2021) for recent explorations.

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of subject positions. While the former instance laid the groundwork for an expansive embrace of plural subjects it may have been the latter experience that facilitated a shift in perception. And it is this shift that released my hold on a singular subject and resolved the cognitive dissonance of "Oshun Drives!?" years after the fact. The totality of our experiences informs our ethnographic endeavors and our approaches to the concept of subjectivity and subjectivities.

Alongside subjectivity there are two other key terms, both in the "ity" of it all, reflectivity and positionality. First, reflexivity—inherent in the term subjectivity—is "subject", aware of itself and reflecting on this awareness. And in that awareness is a reflection on location or position—and an awareness of reflecting on that, leading us to positionality (see Selka, this volume). All of these reflections are not surprising. Certainly, the construction of the subject was a project of the enlightenment that was constructed in bicameral cojoining with its didactic other—the object.[8] Yet, there have always been the theories from below, from the borderlands, from the margins that offer counter-narratives, alter-native perspectives (Trouillot 2002, 2003), that we as ethnographers often locate in our experiences while doing research (or in the "field", see Thornton, this volume).

For as Barbara Christian reminds us, "For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic" (1988: 68). I/we go back to the touchstones of Black feminist scholarship here, especially the works of Audre Lorde (2012) and M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2006; esp. 294–95 for her engagements and entanglements with the spiritual visitor Kitsimba) to follow these strands that interrogate given fields and definitions. Part of the task in this article is not a historical overview of the "subjective" and it is not a comprehensive theoretical engagement. Rather, in this article I/we are signposting notable parts of the terrain, pointing at the shadows and overlooked (often overgrown) paths, that both raise questions (what are some ways to navigate the terrain?) while deploying the tools at hand to illuminate the shadows (not too brightly though) and clear the paths (while keeping them protected).

Informed by our foremothers in Black theory I/we turn to our own research, over two decades with many co-contributors (both corporeal and non), whose published ethnographic works focused on spiritual citizenship and spiritual ethnicity (Castor 2017, 2021). And it is from here that I/we ask myself a set of questions reflecting on subjectivity, extending them to you: How do African Diaspora religions (ADR) add an interesting dimension to our debates and understandings of religious subjectivities? One answer comes from an earlier era of ethnographies

8. Considerations on the nature of "objectivity" are beyond the scope of this article but certainly call for future examination; see Daston and Galison's *Objectivity* (2007).

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on ADR, in the works of Maya Deren, Katherine Dunham, Lydia Cabrera, and Ruth Landes and Zora Neale Hurston.[9] Diana Burnett's exploration of Zora Neale Hurston's legacy calling "attention to Africana Religious Subjectivities" (2016: 253) resonates here, highlighting that "For Hurston, Black lives and Black religious and spiritual subjectivities are robust ontological and analytic entities and categories, not simply 'defensive reactions to white actions'" (2016: 257). Burnett points us to how this dimension is accessed through ethnography. Alongside other ADR scholars their work asks us to keep at the forefront our question: How can ethnography and ethnographic methods provide access to the non-material yet embodied forms of religious subjectivities? One response is from a broader methodological stance where Solimar Otero combines innovative historiography of the ethnographic record to create an "archive of conjure" that asks us to conjure with "the dead as method for creating polyvocal subjectivity", alongside approaching "spirit mediumship, divination, and sacred art-making, as the central components to creating ethnographic reciprocity" (2020: 9).

I/we challenge us (both myself and you, the reader) to think beyond the spectacular of embodied possession for the specter of multiple subjectivities. That can be found in the quieter walking with evident in Luisah Teish's "she who whispers" from the canonical *Jambalaya* (1985) and in the epistemologically complex concept of "*orí*" or divine head in Yorùbá *ìṣẹ̀ṣe l'àgbà* (traditional religion/culture) (see also Pérez 2013). Once I/we started looking for examples, I/we wondered if the view of the isolated atomized singular subject (and its antecedent relations of object/ivity) that we're all taught as universal is in actuality the odd man out—the very particular, very "Other"—that is being projected in the writing and discourse of both Western enlightenment philosophy and (the preceding and coterminous) Christian political theology that it was so closely tied to (even, and perhaps especially, in sites of disavowal).[10] What would it mean if instead of decentering the Western subject we turned it upside down—on its head so to speak—and pushed it all the way to the side?[11] Would then the whole edifice of disciplinary division and categorical conceit (say between anthropology and religion) collapse? Would the foundation for property ownership and exchange values that informs the system

9. For a contemporary re-engagement along these lines of the work of Cabrera and Landes, see Otero's *Archives of Conjure* (2020).

10. As Strongman asserts, "Afro-diasporic religions operate under a transcorporeal conceptualization of the self that is radically different from the Western philosophical tradition. Unlike the unitary soul of Descartes, the immaterial aspect of the Afro-diasporic self is multiple, external and removable" (2019: 17).

11. One example that comes out of ADR ethnography is Ochoa's "Versions of the Dead" (2007) and its intervention of creating a language within the English language for a presentation (rather than translation) of the Cuban-Kongo dead, of Kalunga.

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we're in—i.e. capitalism—follow?[12] Approached from another direction, if we're free—and a plural multiple subjectivities "we" here—to imagine and occupy an otherwise,[13] would that then be a space of relationality, grounded in the multiple and reciprocal collective and communal that span shifting geographies and circuitous temporalities?

Considering these questions in relation to (reflecting on) ethnography bring us to ethnography as method and form of knowledge production that happens through subjectivities of the researcher and through intersubjective relations. And I/we would put forth, from my own experiences, that to be an effective ethnographer it is vital to be open to different formations of subjectivity and subjectivities. And these differences are not only in relations with people outside one's self. In other words, it is not as simple as being open to observing difference in the world outside of self. What the self is able to see, to observe, to perceive depends in no small part on one's own subjectivity, on one's relation to self as subject and the position(ing) of that subject. I offer here the importance of considering internal inter-subjectivity and inter-subjectivities.

An example of this takes us back to the beginning: my ethnographic retelling of the story "Oshun Drives!?". In this situation the limits of how I/we understood our "selves" in the world constrained my apperception of the lived worlds that my friends and community members were actively engaged in, including the complex agency of Oshun. And more than that it limited my ability to perceive what was possible for them in their lives. To the extent that "I" (a singular subjective here) was involved in research with limits in place I was doing partial and limited research. And though one could say: aren't we always? (and certainly many have) that on its own doesn't seem like reason enough to give up on the project of sharing worlds.

## In Closing

For ethnography the issue of subjectivity and subjectivities is central even as its meaning is often taken for granted. Though we cannot fully transcend the perceived limits between self and other (including distinctions of positionality between people) this lack of reflection risks undermining one's own project. One

12. See Crosson (2019a), both the Introductory essay and other essays in the special issue which "brings together two seemingly opposed concepts—spirit possession and sovereignty—to ask how possessing lands, spirits, and selves can alter the theorization of political practice in contemporary worlds" (546).

13. Invoking here Michel-Rolph Trouillot's "otherwise modern" that marks both the historically plural structure of the modern and its heterology (2002: 228). See also King, Navarro and Smith (2020).

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area that can be positively impacted by these considerations are in the power differential between researcher and research "subject" that exists in much (if not most) ethnographic research.[14] While this difference can't be erased it should not be accepted "as is" with a shrug of the shoulders or dismissive wave of the hand. Feminist anthropology, Black anthropology and decolonizing anthropology[15] have been at the forefront of pushing us to do more and ask more of ourselves as researchers and ethnographers.[16] African diasporic religious ethnography both draws from and contributes to these critical theoretical engagements to illustrate that shifts in our social relations and the structures of our ethnographic research emerge from the expansion of one's own world both internally and externally. In my case, Oshun's offerings of the possibilities of multiple subjectivities were accepted, which ultimately lead to the expansion of my way of being in the world, my own subjectivity/ies and the uncovering of new ethnographic worlds.

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14. See Pels (2014) for a different approach to these issues of subjectivity, objectivity and the ethnographic project.

15. See Harrison (2010) and McClaurin (2001) for examples at the intersection of all three.

16. See Allen and Jobson (2016); Jobson (2020).

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