

TRADUÇÃO¹

HOSPITALITY, HEALING AND HAINTS:

AFRICAN AMERICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGION AND ACTIVISM

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Resumo: Este texto é um trecho do livro *Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism and Mothering*, publicado por Duke University Press em 2015. *Remnants* é uma colaboração entre Rachel e sua finada mãe, Rosemarie. Através de memórias da vida de Rosemarie enquanto militante no movimento negro dos anos 60, e da história oral da família Freeney-Harding, o *Remnants* examina o papel de compaixão, e uma espiritualidade mística, afro-indígena do sul dos estados unidos como recursos para militância social e racial na comunidade negra norte-americana. O texto está escrito na voz de Rosemarie.

Palavras-chave: Ativismo. Negros Sul-americanos. Espiritualidade. Misticismo. Família.

O ACOLHIMENTO, A CURA E OS VULTOS: REFLEXÕES SOBRE A RELIGIÃO E A MILITÂNCIA NEGRA-NORTE-AMERICANA DO SUL DOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

Abstract: This text is an excerpt from the book *Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism and Mothering*, published in 2015 by Duke University Press. *Remnants* is a collaboration between Rachel and her late mother, Rosemarie. Drawing on stories of Rosemarie's life as an organizer in the southern freedom movement of the 1960s, and on the Freeney-Harding family's oral history, *Remnants* explores compassion and an Afro-Indigenous, Southern mystic spirituality as resources for social justice activism in African American life. The text is written in Rosemarie's voice.

Keywords: Activism. Southern Blacks. Spirituality. Mysticism. Family.

My family is a southern family. Though we have lived in Chicago for five generations, we are, in many respects, still deeply influenced by the rituals and traditions that traveled with us on the Seminole Limited north from Macon, Georgia. My parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and most of my brothers and sisters were born in small Georgia towns — Leesburg, Pou-

¹ Colocamos primeiramente o texto original e, em seguida, a tradução.

² Rosemarie Freeney Harding (1930-2004) was an activist, educator and counselor who worked in the US Civil Rights movement and other peace and justice struggles in partnership with her husband, Vincent Harding. Freeney Harding co-founded Mennonite House in Atlanta, Georgia and the Veterans of Hope Project in Denver, Colorado. She held an MSW (masters in social work) from the University of Denver and an MA in history from Goddard College.

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lan, Albany, Macon. In the nineteen-teens and twenties, they began to move north. First my mother's sisters, their husbands, my father and his brother. Then other relatives — wives, children, parents. They were drawn to jobs in steel mills and railroad yards and escaping nightmares of lynching and the stinging, arbitrary humiliations of daily life in the South between the wars. In some ways they were pulling up roots, moving to Detroit, New York and Chicago. In other ways, they were simply stretching the roots, changing the contours a bit, but holding fast to the deep nourishment rising there.

The values of black religion and culture that influenced me in my Chicago youth were grounded in traditions of hospitality; healing practices; ghost and spirit stories; and a welcoming and inclusive community. All of these aspects have deeply impacted the way I live and move in the world. Among them, perhaps, hospitality has been a central model for the meaning of activism in my life. Starting before my children were born, I have been what some people would call an activist — working in political campaigns; organizing alternative schools; training, mobilizing and reconciling in the Black freedom movement, the women's movement and the peace and justice movement. I've worked with some magnificent people, deeply committed to spiritually-engaged, compassionate, social change. People like Bob Moses, Anne Braden, Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Prathia Hall, Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, Clarence Jordan, Bernice Johnson-Reagon, Marion and Slater King, Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs, Julia Esquivel, Ndugu T'Ofori Atta, Staughton and Alice Lynd. I've learned a great deal from these marvelous women and men, as well as from many others like them. But as I think about my own movement work and its deepest inspirations, I am continually drawn back to the model of my family — especially my mother, Ella Lee ("Mama Freeney"), and great grandmother, Mariah ("Grandma Rye"), and the profound mystic spirituality and deep hospitality they cultivated and passed to their descendants.

Some who remember the stories say Grandma Rye was born in Africa. She was probably born around 1827 and may have come to the United States as a young girl because she died in 1934 at the age of 107. She was a slave in Virginia and Florida and she worked along the eastern seaboard on a ship where she cooked for the captain and crew. By the time my grandmother, Mama Liza, was born, freedom was three years away and Mariah and her children were living in Georgia.

In my efforts to trace and understand the religious and spiritual values that have come down to my family from Grandma Rye, I have learned from the work of historian of religions,

Charles Long and dramatist-philosopher George Bass.⁴ The meaning of religion for black folks, they insist, is in the heart of our history, our trauma and our hope. It is what makes us indigenous to this place, to modernity. As Long puts it, black religion is the way we have oriented ourselves — over the centuries in these Americas and extending back before our arrival on these shores — to “mash out a meaning” of life in the midst of tremendous suffering and pain. Religion, in this sense, is not simply a doctrine of faith or the methods and practices of church, rather it is all the ways we remind ourselves of who we really are, in spite of who the temporal powers may say we are. Religion is how we situate ourselves, how we understand ourselves, in a particular place and time vis-à-vis Ultimate Reality, vis-à-vis God.

Black religion, then is not only in the music, the drama, the communion and the interpretation of text within the walls of the physical church; it is also in the orientation of Black people to so-called secular culture. Black religion is Otis Redding and D’Angelo as much as Mahalia Jackson and Mary Mary; it is as much hip hop as holy dance; and root work as much as the laying on of hands. It is how we make meaning and joy out of our human experience. Keeping this understanding in mind, I am looking within the cultural and spiritual traditions of my family for the meanings and manifestations of a distinct southern, African American orientation to being.

This orientation is not unique to my folks. I grew up with many extended families of black Mississippians, Alabamans and Georgians — and I lived for many years in Georgia as an adult. I am keenly aware of the pervasiveness of the orientation that I describe. Even now, at the end of the 1990s, there are ways to see it and feel it in African American communities all over the country. It is part of how we have come this far and how we continue on. And it was in the ground where the Movement rose up and offered new fruit to the nation.

⁴ See Charles H. Long, “Perspectives for the Study of African American Religion in the United States,” in Fulop and Raboteau, *African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). Also, lectures by George H. Bass in his African American Studies courses at Brown University, and conversations Rachel had with him when he was her professor, 1983-1990.

Hospitality

My mother and aunts kept a ready pitcher of iced tea or lemonade in the refrigerator and a plate of cookies, a fresh-baked cake, or rolls with homemade preserves on the counter. Anyone who came by to visit was offered something cool to drink (unless it was winter, of course, when they'd be offered coffee or tea) and something tasty to eat. In the years when I was growing up, people visited back and forth at each other's homes more regularly than folks do now and our house seemed to be an especially popular destination for neighbors and relatives. This was partly due to the fact that we had a large family and my older brothers and sisters were all outgoing with lots of friends. And it was partly because my mother and father made the house so welcoming. Sometimes, it seemed almost "too" welcoming — all kinds of people would come through, not just relatives and neighborhood friends but peddlars and preachers, professional gamblers and union organizers, petty thieves, street walkers and people we would probably refer to today as homeless. Mom loved "bad" people — that is, people other folks thought were "bad." She didn't judge and she taught us how to respect, how to listen, how to learn from everybody. Mom would set out beautiful china dishes and slices of her homemade pound cake for all of them — especially for the most transient-looking people it seemed sometimes. As if she knew they needed the extra attention and acknowledgment. But then too, mom genuinely enjoyed their conversation and wisdom.

I remember there was an itinerant bookseller, an immigrant from Europe, who would come to visit mom now and then. The two of them would sit down in the dining room with mom's best dishes and talk for hours about the events of the world and the world of books. The man was not always very clean and sometimes, especially in the winter when the heat was on full blast in our house, we could smell the mustiness of his old and ragged clothes, the heavy acrid sweat of his body. He talked funny too, and as children, we were tempted to laugh — as much from awkwardness as anything else. But if we let loose the tiniest snicker, mom would cut her eyes at us, and we'd abandon the temptation and keep our faces straight.

As I said, I have a large family. My mother birthed sixteen children, although only nine lived to adulthood. We nine were just one contingent of a large coterie of cousins, uncles, and aunts, some of whom I didn't know were *not* blood kin until I was grown with children of my own. Until 1976 when my father died and my mother sold the house, there was always someone living with my parents at the family home at 4160 South Wentworth — a child, a niece or nephew, then later grandchildren, grandnieces and grandnephews. Mama and Daddy Freney

always made room and any of us could always come home. Hospitality was a foundation of my family's spirituality, as it had been for so many southern blacks. The efforts my parents made to be neighborly, welcoming and to reserve judgment against those the society viewed as outcasts, served as important examples for their children and grandchildren as we grew older.

One of my first tasks as a young organizer in the southern Freedom Movement was developing an interracial social service project and community center called Mennonite House in Atlanta, Georgia in the early 1960s. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC — the service arm of the Mennonite Church) sponsored Vincent and me to be full-time witnesses and participants to the Freedom Movement. In addition to our work of placing volunteers with various movement organizations, training young activists and coordinating early efforts at interracial dialogue and reconciliation, Mennonite House became an important place of retreat for many who were struggling and sacrificing so much to transform the South and the nation. Sometimes movement people would call us from the bus station and Vincent would drive over and pick them up and they'd stay for a few days or a few weeks, because they needed a place to get some rest. Because of my mother's example, I understood very clearly how important it was to have spaces of refuge in the midst of struggle. Spaces of joy and laughter, good food and kind words. In fact, this kind of compassionate care is a transformative force in itself. As the Cape Breton novelist Alistair MacLeod writes, "We are all better when we're loved."

Healing

Most of the people in the family who remember Mariah Grant are gone now. But the stories that remain of my great grandmother include recollections of her healing work and her connection to African ways of perceiving and inhering in the world. Grandma Rye was a root doctor, an herbalist. She collected plants and flowers, roots and leaves in the fields and forests around her Leesburg home and made these into medicines to treat her family members and others who came to her for advice and counsel.

Mama Liza, one of Mariah's daughters, carried on her mother's healing tradition in another way. In Lee County Georgia, Liza Harris was known to be an excellent midwife, assisting the deliveries of both black and white women. My cousin Pansy tells me that Mama Liza brought hundreds of babies into the world and that the area's white doctors would often

call on her to help them with difficult pregnancies because of her tremendous knowledge. Following Mama Liza, there has been a steady tradition of nursing among women in my family. My Aunt Mary and my sister Mildred were nurses and I too studied for a time to practice nursing.

My mother, Mama Freeney, shared many of the healing qualities of her mother and grandmother. When I was a child, she kept herbs in the kitchen pantry to make teas and poultices for us when we were sick. Her pantry was something akin to a local herbal pharmacy, serving friends and neighbors as well as family. She also used home remedies such as placing a sock with thin slices of onion on the foot of a person with fever to bring the temperature down. My mother and her sisters were firm believers in the power of nature and spirit to heal, to transform. When my sister Alma was a little girl, she was struck with tuberculosis of the bone and doctors told the family that Alma's leg would have to be cut off. Instead of yielding to the doctor's orders, mom and Aunt Mary took Alma home and between prayers and poultices she kept her leg.

In my own life, I am drawn to natural healing modalities, remembering the tea recipes and home remedies of my mother and great-grandmother and learning as much as I can about laying on of hands — massage therapies, acupuncture, therapeutic touch, Feldenkrais and other techniques of alternative care. But even beyond issues of personal health and well-being, I try to follow the examples of my mother and aunts in recognizing the need to create a larger atmosphere of healing and wellness at the level of human relations and societal structures.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, my husband and I co-taught a course at the Iliff School of Theology called, "Healing of Persons and Healing of Society." We introduced our students to the concept that the body politic is, in many ways, analogous to the body human — intensely interdependent in all its parts and very responsive to both negative and positive stimuli. Texts from folks as varied as Joanna Macy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Howard Thurman and Thich Nhat Hanh were central readings, emphasizing that the Spirit, the Universe, does indeed provide abundantly for all living beings on earth. There is truly enough for everyone. The offense is greed and it is just as destructive to societies as it is to the organisms of individual people. As part of the course, we had visitors come to share their perspectives and stories with the class — community activists, philosophers, physicians, scientists, religious leaders, writers. Our students were always deeply encouraged by the connections the guests made

between caring for the well-being of individuals and creating more humane and compassionate societies.

In fact, our present work, The Veterans of Hope Project, arises directly from this experience of sharing the “testimonies” and encouragement of older activists with a younger generation of people concerned for justice, healing and nonviolent social transformation. It is fundamentally to my mother’s credit that I am able to recognize and appreciate the links between personal health, generosity and sharing, and social change — for Mama Freeney’s hospitality and welcome were as healing as her teas and touch.

Haints

Ghost stories were a tradition of the Georgia woods that my mother brought to Chicago and practiced expertly. She could scare you so bad you’d be afraid to go to the bathroom by yourself to pee. Some of the stories she told were regional favorites that she most likely inherited from older family members like Grandma Rye. But many of my mother’s ghost stories were from her own experience. As my sister Mildred says, she wasn’t telling “stories” she was telling “what happened” — meaning, what she said was true. She would talk about the lights that lit themselves in the family home when no one was there, or she’d reminisce with my father about a beloved and well-trained horse that reared up on its hind-legs and absolutely refused to cross a haunted bridge one moonless night. The fact that she often had corroborating witnesses only made the stories more terrifying and delightful.

But I remembered very few of the tales on my own and had to ask my sisters and other relatives to help me piece the stories together. I seldom heard the full versions as a child. When I did hear them, they were so persuasive, that I did my best to forget them. I wasn’t very good at being terrified.

My own sensibilities aside, these stories were a great entertainment for the family. But they were not just entertainment. My mother told these stories and others as a way to pass on lessons. Lessons about caution, about discernment; but her stories were also a way to acknowledge the reality and presence of spirit. Whether we called them ghosts, haints, angels, spirits, presences, or winds, the beings that inhabited Mom’s stories were, on some level, real.

The stories gave us a respect for the concealed/the unknown and an appreciation for the transmutability of reality and form.

Conjure and healing are both forms of transformation, processes of change. As is activism. I recall a story that Bernice Johnson Reagon has told on many occasions about the alchemy of singing in the mass meetings, demonstrations and marches of the southern freedom movement. Bernice, an extraordinary musician, organizer and scholar, describes the experience of marching out of a movement church into the streets of Albany, Georgia and toward the particular store or public facility that was the object of the day's demonstration. Raising their voices with freedom songs, in the cadence and spirit of church, Bernice and her fellow marchers could feel the songs swell into the air around them and *transform* the space. The songs changed the atmosphere, becoming an almost palpable barrier between demonstrators and police, giving the marchers an internal girding that allowed them to move without fear.

The work of transformation, changing the insides and outsides of a situation, is a long and venerable tradition in the southern African American experience. Looking back on our history one sees a tremendous flexibility among people who had to navigate the vicissitudes of life under an arbitrary and violent Jim Crow segregationist system and yet continually cultivate a sense of their own personal and collective dignity.

Music, and particularly the sacred music of the black experience has long been an alchemical resource for struggle; a conjured strength. As Bernice explained in her interview with the Veterans of Hope Project, there is actually something about the experience of traditional black congregational singing that, over time, “does something to the material you’re made of...It really connects you up with a force in the universe that makes you different. It makes you capable of moving with a different kind of access. You’re connected to something else, other than what people think you’re connected to. And they can’t get to you...”⁵

Ruby Sales, a member of SNCC who was active in the movement in Alabama, says that in her moments of deepest terror and anguish she called on the power of black singing. “[The] thing that got me through is what has always gotten me through, black songs. Singing those songs and hearing those voices...I sang, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?, Tell me How Did you*

⁵ “Bernice Johnson Reagon: The Singing Warrior,” Veterans of Hope Project Pamphlet Series 1, No 1; Denver: VOHP, 2000; p. 12

Feel When You Come Out the Wilderness?... We've Come this Far by Faith...” Calling on these old songs, Ruby linked herself to a tradition of sustenance in trauma much older than herself. In fact, she says that as she sang she felt connected to her grandmother and to all that her grandmother’s generation had witnessed and survived. “It is in that moment, through song, that I am able to feel something other than myself. I become part of a community. I become part of a struggle...”⁶

Ruby’s dynamic connection to her grandmother, through the struggles and the songs, is suggestive of the rich, intergenerational engagement that imbued the lives of many African American communities. In my family, as in most of the southern Black families I knew growing up, children and adults of various ages spent a great deal of time together. Often at least three generations lived in our household, and the young people benefited from the loving presence and guidance of grandparents and other older relatives. Conversely, older members of our family could count on the energetic companionship of younger ones and did not have to worry about being alone or abandoned in the final years of their lives. Children were taught to respect their elders and to recognize that there were spaces and times when they could not enter “grown folks’ business.”

There was also a certain formality of relations, rooted in southern and African traditions. Respect was shown through courteous forms of address when talking to strangers, persons of authority, and anyone in an age-group higher than one’s own. Women were always “Miss” or “Mrs.” So-and-So and men were called “Mr.” (unless the adults were relatives, and then they were called Aunt, Uncle or Cousin.) As children our responses of “ma’am” and “sir” indicated the good “home-training” we had received from the adults who raised us. Even among adults of comparable age and status, who had known each other for many years, there was often a kind of quasi-ceremonial care in the way they interacted with each other. In some respects, this must have been an antidote to the indignities these men and women regularly suffered. But, from all I can tell, this practice of almost exaggerated mutual-deference and politeness was an important element of interpersonal relations in many of the West and Central African communities from which the majority of North American blacks originated, and it was a common feature in black communities throughout the Americas.

⁶ “Ruby Sales: Standing Against the Wind,” Veterans of Hope Project Pamphlet Series 1, No 3; Denver: VOHP, 2000; p. 6-7

For those of us who lived and worked in the small towns of the rural south during the freedom movement, these relational dynamics became an integral part of the organizing model we developed. Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, the SNCC Project leader in Laurel, Mississippi in 1964, describes how she and her teenage and young-adult colleagues in Freedom Summer interacted with older community members with whom they were working to mobilize political and educational reform in the area. Zoharah says:

We were seen as ‘leaders,’ people who brought a vision, people who brought resources, ideas, materials that they wanted. Books and pamphlets and all of this. At the same time, because of our youth we were also children to them...⁷

Living with local community leaders, Zoharah and other young activists were expected to replicate time-honored African American forms of intergenerational association. Mrs. Euberta Sphinks, a long-standing local activist in the Laurel community opened her home and her heart to Zoharah. The relationship the two women developed was generally indicative of the way younger organizers and the older local citizens engaged each other:

I had to obey Mrs. Sphinks when it came to what time I could come in and where I was going. I had to tell her where I was going and where I had been. If she said I had to go to church, I had to go. But at the same time, they were willing to follow me into the jaws of the jail...It was a very interesting dynamic.⁸

This “interesting dynamic” with roots in the family and cultural traditions of the Black south, was a central element of the organizing strategy of the movement and a large part of the reason for the movement’s resonance and success all over the region. While there were probably times when the young people of SNCC, CORE and other movement organizations felt constrained by the behavioral expectations of their elders, those norms of comportment were practical measures insuring the well-being of the youth who (even if southerners by birth) were often not familiar with the local community where they were assigned. The young activists benefited greatly from being integrated into family and church structures of connection. “Obeying” the elders was a way of showing respect and acknowledging organic leadership and home ground authority. Furthermore, the closeness and familiarity created by relationships modeled on family interactions, were important sources of comfort, stability and support amid the extreme tensions, uncertainty and terrorist violence that were constant threats to everyone in the rural southern Black communities.

⁷ “Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons: Following the Call,” Veterans of Hope Project Pamphlet Series 1, No 4; Denver: VOHP, 2000; p. 13

⁸ Ibid.

This indigenous African American organizing model reflects many elements of the religious and cultural orientation I learned as a child. Those who opened their homes, their churches and their struggles to the young freedom-workers exhibited the kind of hospitality and great generosity of spirit that I knew from my own family experience. Relationships between younger activists and older local community members recalled the ways my siblings, my younger cousins and I interacted with the elders in our family and neighborhood. Finally, it was the pervasiveness of Spirit, the healing and transformative power of Black cultural and religious resources, and a recognition of God's accompaniment in even the greatest of dangers, that sustained the movement — as it yet sustains so many of us still on the journey.

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