

The Crossroads Project: Black Religious Histories, Communities, and Cultures

Ethnography and Black Religions

December 13, 2022

Speakers: Judith Weisenfeld, Judith Casselberry, N. Fadeke Castor, KB Dennis Meade, Eziaku Nwokocha, Todne Thomas

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[Judith Weisenfeld] Well, good evening, everyone. My name is Judith Weisenfeld. I am Agate Brown and George L. Collord, Professor of Religion at Princeton University and a director of the Crossroads Project, a four-year project aimed at fostering a robust understanding of the complexity of Black religious life in the US and its connections to broader geographies. The project is devoted to supporting new creative and scholarly work that explores Black religious histories, communities, and cultures, past and present. The Crossroads project is supported by a generous grant from the Henry Luce Foundation and located at Princeton University's Center for Culture, Society, and Religion, and we're grateful for the CCSR's support, and the assistance in particular of Center Manager Jennifer Klumpp, and technical support specialist Jeffrey Guest in making this event possible. And we're also grateful for the participation of Dr. Megan Goodwin, the project's media and technology consultant [Judith Weisenfeld] who is tweeting about the event at @XroadProj. You can find out more about the Crossroads Project on our website, crossroads dot Princeton dot edu.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] Last spring we convened a virtual symposium, A Meeting at the Crossroads: Transitions and Transformations in the Study of Black Religions, organized by Dr. Alfonso Saville, an Associate Research Scholar in the Crossroads Project. That event engaged the intellectual legacies Albert Raboteau other key figures and Black Religious Studies who we have lost in recent years, including Katie Geneva canon Charles Long, James Cone. The symposium featured scholars in biblical studies, religious ethics, and religious history to discuss the history and future of the field. This evening we gather to consider the place of ethnographic approaches in the study of Black religions in North America and the Caribbean, mindful of the contributions of scholars like Zora Neale Hurston, Melville Herskovits, and Katherine Dunham among others, as also foundational to our field.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] And so I invited an exciting group of scholars whose work sits at the crossroads of ethnographic methods and religious studies, history, Africana studies, performance studies, visual and material culture studies, and the digital humanities among others. To talk with me about how they approach their work. As a historian who works on late 19th and early 20th century African American religious history. I have great admiration for the craft of ethnographic research, which I'm not suited for. The craft of the art of ethnographic writing. I'm delighted to moderate this conversation and to invite you to join me in listening to discussion among the scholars that I have been privileged to hear over the past few years.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] So we have with us Judith Casselberry, Geoffrey Canada associate professor of Africana Studies at Bowdoin College, teaching courses on African American women's religious lives, music and spirituality and popular culture music and social movements and issues in Black intellectual thought. Her interests in African American religious and cultural studies, with particular attention to gender, guides her research agenda. She's the author of *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism*, which was published by Duke University Press in 2017, and co-editor with Elizabeth Pritchard of *Spirit on the Move, Black Women and Pentecostalism in Africa and the African Diaspora*, also Duke Press 2019. She's currently working on a biography of the cultural icon Grace Jones entitled *Solving the Mystery of Grace Jones: It's the Holy Ghost*. Casselberry's interest in links between lettered and performed scholarship comes from her career as an academic and performer. As a vocalist and guitarist, she's current. She currently performs internationally with Toshi Reagan and BIGLovely.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] N. Fadeke Castor is an assistant professor of religion and Africana Studies at Northeastern University and award-winning author of *Spiritual Citizenship: Transnational Pathways from Black Power to Ifá in Trinidad*, Duke University Press 2017. A Black feminist ethnographer, African Diaspora Studies scholar of Trinidadian heritage, and Yoruba Ifá initiate, she is both inspired by and aspires to create Black liberation imaginaries. Her writings, which can be found in *Cultural Anthropology*, *Fieldwork in Religion*, and *The Black Scholar* emerged from an engagement of spirit with the Black radical tradition and social justice. In her current project, she explores how Black spiritual practices often drawn from non-Christian religious and spiritual ontologies and epistemologies, shifts, centers of being and ways of knowing toward collective care and healing and social transformation. And currently she's a visiting scholar at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] KB Dennis Meade is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Northwestern University with a courtesy appointment in the Department of African American Studies. A scholar of Africana religions and Caribbean Studies, her research areas include the study of the modern African diaspora, religious cultures and politics in the Caribbean, ethnographic methods, and the digital humanities. Dr. Dennis Meade's current book manuscript explores the role of religion in the history of social change in Jamaica from the late 19th century to the present. The project centers the voices and experiences of her interlocutors living within an inner-city community in Kingston, Jamaica. Through ethnographic fieldwork and archival research. Her study analyzes the salience of religion and shaping national politics and everyday life. And her findings prompt scholars in the field of Religious Studies and Black Studies to attend to the impact of anti-Blackness, globalization, colonialism, and state violence against African diasporic religious communities and practices.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] Eziaku Nwokocho is an assistant professor of Religious Studies at the University of Miami. She's a scholar of Africana religions with expertise in the ethnographic study of Vodou in Haiti and the Haitian diaspora. Her research is grounded in Gender and Sexuality Studies, visual and material culture and Africana studies. She's the author of *Vodou en Vogue: Fashioning Black Divinities in Haiti and the United States*, which is forthcoming soon in early 2023 from University of North Carolina Press. An ethnographic study of fashion, spirit possession and gender and sexuality and contemporary Haitian Vodou, exploring Black religious communities through their innovative ceremonial practices. And the book is featured within the UNC press' "Where Religion Lives" series. And she's currently working on her second book which is tentatively titled "Tell my Spirit: Black Queer Women in Haitian Vodou," which investigates Black queer women's interactions with Haitian Vodou divinities, performance of ritual work, and their formation of religious communities in multiple locations in North America and the Caribbean, Europe.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] Todne Thomas is a socio-cultural anthropologist and Associate Professor of African American Religious Studies at Harvard Divinity School. In collaboration with Afro-Caribbean and African American congregants, Thomas conducts ethnographic research on the racial, spatial and familial dynamics of Black Christian communities in the US. Conceptually, her work integrates critical race and kinship theories to understand the racial and moral scripts of evangelicalism and neoliberalism. She's the co-editor of *New Directions in Spiritual Kinship: Sacred Ties Across the Abrahamic Religions* and the author *Kincraft: The Making of Black Evangelical Sociality*, Duke Press 2021, which explores the internal dynamics of community life among Black evangelicals who are often overshadowed by white evangelicals and the common equation of the Black Church with an Afro-Protestant mainline. Drawing on fieldwork and in an Afro-Caribbean and African American church association in Atlanta. Thomas locates Black evangelicals at the center of their own religious story, presenting their determined spiritual relatedness as a form of insurgency. And her current research examines the familial and spatial experiences of Black evangelicals and the neo-liberal displacement of sacred Black sacred space.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] We'll take some questions after the discussion, so please use the Q&A feature for that to direct questions to our panelists as we go on. But we'll start with some discussion and some guiding questions that I posed to them. Again, as someone who does not work in ethnography and who is really interested in what they do and how they do it and why they do it. So my first question to them was, how do you think about the relationship of ethnography to the study of Black Religion in your work at what crossroads is your work as an ethnographer located? I'm thinking about different fields: Religious studies, Anthropology, history, ethics and Africana studies. And how does that crossroad shape your approach to Black Religious Studies? So the broadest question of where, where do you feel located in terms of the study of Black religions? I'm going to start with Dr. Casselberry.

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[Judith Casselberry] Okay. Hi. Thank you, Judith for convening this and I'm very excited to be in the Zoom room with all these wonderful women who I so admire. I would. My training is ethnomusicology. First well, first undergrad, music and then master's in ethnomusicology. And then my graduate work was in Anthropology and African American studies. So I really come to Religious Studies as an anthropologist, but also as an ethnomusicologist. And my training, my training is very interdisciplinary. And so that really has formed how I approach what I do. My work really sits at the crossroads of Anthropology, of religion, of gender women's studies, gender women's sexuality studies, and of course, Africana studies. But it really, it really sits in, at that crossroads. And for me it's a, it's a, it's a nice it's a nice kind of hub to be sitting at that spot because it's enabled me to think really broadly about what I can possibly do. And then also think about what kinds of things can influence how I'm thinking about my space and where I am.

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[N. Fadeke Castor] I want to echo Dr. Casselberry and say, thank you so much for having me here and for convening this conversation across Zoom with these amazing Black woman ethnographers. I'm honored. I also come to Black Religious Studies from anthropological foundation and an interdisciplinary perspective. I would say my PhD training was in cultural Anthropology. And I look at myself at the intersections of Africana studies, Caribbean Studies, Women, Women and Gender and Sexuality Studies, specifically queer studies. And of course, Black, a Black feminist informed approach to critical ethnography. That I would say shaped my engagement with religious studies as a discipline, which I came to after I had already engaged with religion in the field, in my fieldwork, right? So there's sort of been constructing of religious studies from that position of having already engaged, quote unquote, the religious. Which I think both has been helpful and a little bit daunting at times.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] That's interesting to hear again that these different directions where you are aware of religion and in some way it came to occupy a certain kind of space in your work for a variety of reasons. And I think other people may share that as well. I'm going alphabetically. Dr. Dennis Meade

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[KB Dennis Meade] Thank you, Judith for bringing us all together for this wonderful discussion. So why, how I came to the study of Black religion is, I'm thinking about ethnography. I was always studying religion from when I was an undergrad. I actually started out as an Anthro major, but I could not manage the weight of the colonial history in Anthro, at least it the way it was taught in my undergrad. And so I ventured towards religion, which is kinda like a partner discipline. So my study, Black religion, really sits at the overlap of the subfield of lived religion, the study of philosophy and ethics. Broadly speaking, Black studies and engaging historical methodologies. I can't refer to myself as a historian proper, but I think I do my work with some historical flair. So my disciplinary home is squarely in religious studies, but also Black studies and Caribbean Studies. And a lot of my teaching and writing overlap, right? Exists in this

overlap of those different fields and methodological approaches. And a lot of my work means that how I approach my work is that the questions kind of emerged from reading and watching people. I am a people watcher, um, and then I choose how to pursue these questions through. I'm thinking of Tracy Hucks and Dianne Stewart, the transdisciplinary approach. Where letting the question guide my methodology. So I am doing a bricolage and bringing these different fields together. Also working in this sort of overlap, particularly Caribbean Studies means that I'm also listening to folks who centered the kind of literary and social science research sort of foregrounding literary tradition in the Caribbean. And it's a way to access Black spirituality and diaspora spirituality. And so that means I'm always trying to connect the sort of creative and imaginary work that is central to Black religion with also the context in which it's practiced.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] I did not know that you were an Anthro major to start. Dr. Nwokocha.

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[Eziaku Nwokocha] Yeah. No. Thank you so much for inviting us the space to have a conversation. I think that some of my favorite people are on this panel right now and I'm just so honored to have a conversation. So if you see me go like, this is a fellowship and I think that sometimes you might hear me take off my mic so I can let you, know like I hear you, I see you. But I want to open up by thinking about when we think about our training, how we are thinking about who picks us and how we get picked. Because it's kinda easy to say that we're interdisciplinary. But then there's also another conversation of what, who is actually coming, who's actually inviting you to be in these academic spaces? For me, for somebody who's applied to many schools and have gotten rejected by a number of schools. I've noticed that when it came to Africana Studies, I have found that has been my biggest home. And then from there I've been moving to Religious Studies, Gender, Sexuality and all these, and also Anthropology. I always go who, who loves you? It's not just about who you choose but who's choosing you. I think that for me, when it comes to this thing about interdisciplinary isn't sometimes it's never really as equal. But to see the lens and the land landing point that everything is layered with each other. But then also when it comes to ourselves, I think about, and then think about what Fadeke says as a Black feminist ethnographer, that your whole self is coming into the work. And then with the training that you've had gotten and you can see my bio for, for all the universities I've gone, gone into. But this helps you think of specific myself, helped me think critically about the role of Black religion and especially thinking about how, in my, in my case, how women's lives, religious practices impact contemporary African diaspora religious traditions.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] Dr. Thomas.

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[Todne Thomas] I'd like to also echo my thanks to Judith for organizing this and to be on a panel with people whose work I've taught in my own class or whose work I know I'll end up

teaching is a delight and a pleasure to have such a great turnout on a weekday evening, right, is a real testament to I think, the dynamism of the conversation we'll have. For me, I think the work that the crossroads my work has inhabited, some of them are selected and some of them are very much a product of fate. I started out as an Anthropology and an Africana Studies double-major. I echo what KB said. I couldn't just do Anthropology alone. I needed something else to partner with it. As an undergrad, I found that sitting with both was easier for me putting them in conversation. Then as a doctoral student, I went to an Anthropology program and I was very interested in Afro-Caribbean, Afro-diasporic kinship systems. So I tell people I was a scholar of kinship before I was a scholar of religion. And my, I felt like I stumbled into religion like it's a crossroad that I tripped over and fell into, partly because of the challenges of doing fieldwork in Atlanta and how decentralized the city was and where and how do you find people? That being said though, I mean, I had a whole life growing up between two religious systems myself, like going to an evangelical school, growing up in a Black church context. So the crossroads that we inhabit some of them I think are a product of selection and intention. And then sometimes I think we're brought into conversations that we don't expect will have. It's ironic to me because my very first job outside of grad school was in a religious studies department, right? So one of the last kind of variables of my research ended up being definitely one of the most substantive and significant. I think it's also, even as we talk about training and genealogy and all these things, I think it's also important to talk about which, ethnographers well know there's the project you pick, the project you think you're gonna do, and then the work that you end up doing. And I think my crossroads of reflect some of that kind of idiosyncrasy of ethnography.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] There are some questions that will come up that I hope we'll build on that as well. And I will say that your question of, you are interested in kinship and wanted to know where to find people in particular contexts. And so you went to religious institutions. Lots of people do that sort of thing, but they don't then necessarily become scholars of the substance of] religion with the kind of nuance you bring to it. So it was more than just a frame, a place or an occasion. You took on the substance of it. And that's again, the kind of great benefit of that kind of crossroads work. I'm going to skip the next question because I think people have talked about it a little bit and maybe come back to part of it. But I'm interested in questions, and this is really a discussion I heard some of you all have that gave rise to this panel, about the ethnographer's position. I'm mindful of something KB said in her response about the colonial legacies of the practice. That might be a question of like, what do you do with that as you are entering into a project or doing the work of ethnography. So how, how do you, I think this really was what gave rise to this panel was hearing you talk about what it means to be Black women ethnographers in particular contexts of, of, of patriarchy, of physical danger, of all manner of complications and joy and all of that. So whatever you're interested in saying about how these kinds of personal factors have shaped your work as you're in the field and what kind of care you show for yourself and for others in the process of what I'm sure over extended field work must be very complicated relationships with ups and downs and twists and turns. So I'm going to say anybody who wants to jump in.

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[Eziaku Nwokocha] Yeah, mind if I start this because this is something that I'm so passionate about. And as someone that I just became a tenure-track professor, I was on the job market and I applied to 70 jobs, got interviews for like 20 jobs and then went to like ten campus visits before I got this job. And then, you know, over the years just collectively thinking about my position. And I noticed that when I was on the market, it's one thing for us to have ourselves talking about our scholarship. It's another thing, that thing about how people are seeing us. And when I tell you that, and I'm also curious to hear what the panel has, thinks about this. But I've noticed that there has been certain scholars that have, have thought that what we do, who we are as Black feminist ethnographers, studying Black religious traditions, that it's easy. I remember one person, of course I'll never say the person's name, they said that, "oh, Eziaku, your work is, is like ethnic ethnography." Like basically like that it was easy. And I was so offended by that because I have studied Haitian Vodou for over ten years, have been to over 300 ceremonies. Move back and forth between different regions internationally and nationally. Montreal, Haiti, different parts of Haiti, Boston, like just a lot of spaces. So I'm like this is easy, and then to learn a new language, French and Haitian Creole, like this is not easy. So it was very. We need to understand like when we say that we're studying Black religious traditions, that these religious traditions are rigorous. They have, they have a beautiful canon, they're full of beautiful cosmology. And it's honestly quite insulting [Eziaku Nwokocha] to think about, though. Not thinking about how we, when we come to the field that you're in sometimes for, especially for me, I'm coming in entering a space that people don't know me.

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[Eziaku Nwokocha] So I don't have a background of like saying, Oh yeah, I'm Haitian. my parents practice Haitian Vodou. That's not it. So again, it takes away and minimizes the time. [Eziaku Nwokocha] But one thing I want to say that as a Black feminist ethnographer, we like for, especially for myself, that I come in bringing my full self. And I noticed that in terms of these being reflexive, I'm understanding that because I'm cisgender, queer, but then sometimes people think I'm straight passing, and brown skin on thicker body. I'm taller. Like all these like things that are listed about me that impacts the whole field and how people view me so much. So that's the way that people engage with me, and the gendered, and I know Judith Casselberry is going to talk about this, even the way that labor is shaped, in the way that we come into the work shifts. So, for example, you know I talk about fashion. And when I'm studying Manbo Maude, who is again, this is my main person that I'm studying, an interview and ask them questions. She asked me to help her tie her head wrap. And luckily, luckily everyone luckily, my my auntie is a big, big Nigerian head wrapper in the Sacramento community and people come all over to get her head wrapped by her. But then I was thinking to myself for Manbo Maude, I'm like how how you know I know how to wrap hair like how you know I even know how to do hair?

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[Eziaku Nwokocha] Luckily, because of my background training, this really I was able to do that. And in my case, touching a Vodou practitioner's head without being initiated is a very sacred, is a very sacred thing. And then also, like you're not actually allowed to do that. Because of my background being Nigerian, I was able to move into different boundaries and

have boundlessness because of my my space. But again, it did not take away from the amount of work that I had to do and the time that I had to do to take to be in these spaces, the language and to build, to understand these spaces that illuminated major things about gender, sexuality, and also spirit possession. So thank you.

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[KB Dennis Meade] Yeah, If I could jump in. Eziaku, you bring up a really good point about what we bring with us with us into the space. And I've been thinking a lot about inheritances. There's a wonderful essay by Alice Walker called "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience." And Walker goes into this beautiful explanation about the things that we can ascertain, right? Being somewhat in but not perhaps of a community. And so for me, I've, I've, I've latched onto that because it's helped me reframe the, the imperative to be objective observers and to really think about this idea of pure objectivity. It's supposed to be an intellectual achievement in doing ethnography, right? And it's supposed to be a strength and that's actually not true. It's not true. So I think about, instead of framing from myself, what, how am I being a researcher and an academic in this space? I know my questions, I know my interests, I know my framing. But really framing that as a kind of thinking about my inheritances, like what I actually bring to the space. That's something that's not to be corrected or adjusted for, but rather contextualized. And thinking about my background and I, sharing that storytelling has always been a big part of my family and my culture.

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[KB Dennis Meade] I'm Caribbean, so Caribbean people, I think pretty much the same as Nigerian people. A three-minute story becomes a three-hour story, right? So this idea of like kinda holding space and listening and telling stories. And also my research was in Holiness community. And I am a Holiness baby, right? I come out of that tradition. But what these, and I'm also Jamaican, right? But what I've learned or a kind of where I am, I've sort of evolved into this place of really thinking about what it means to do this work in the body that I am in. To be able to hear things through an accent that sometimes I'm not familiar with because quiet as it's kept, Jamaicans have different accents, right? Their Patois differs across different regions. And trying to consider these as kind of like assets. These are the things, this is my whole self I'm bringing to this space. And what it means for how I frame my questions, things that I admittedly, I might take for granted, right? But not framing that as a deficit in my research, right? But just what I kinda come to the table with and that all of these ways of knowing, Walker said it beautifully. She said that these kind of ways our inheritances that we bring to the spaces our inheritances, right? Allow us to describe this space with quote like this kind of remarkable silent accuracy like things that perhaps the intrepid white male ethnography or an anthropologist might not kind of tune into right? Like we bring those intelligences to the space that we're doing our fieldwork.

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[Judith Casselberry] I'll jump in. I wanted to tag both what Eziaku and KB are saying. One is when I first. Well, I'm going back a bit. African American studies saved me from Anthropology at Yale. So if I had not been in African American studies, I would not have been able to

complete the Anthropology program. And when I was speaking to one of the professors in Anthropology, thank goodness this person was not on my committee or anything. And I was explaining to them. They asked me what my research was about and I'm saying I'm going to be very broad, but I was like I'm gonna be looking at aspects of Black churches. And he said, Don't we know about that already. And I said, well, what do you know about it? And that was the end of that conversation. But this is but this is the thing, is that the assumption is that we're Black, we're female. We must know all about church, right? Well, I was raised, my dad was in the Army. So I'm I'm an Army brat. We moved all the time. We were we were very rarely in one place for an extended period of time, which meant that we didn't have, we didn't have a home church. And my parents, my dad wasn't religious. My mom was more religious, but she wasn't like we have to do, we have to get to church every Sunday. She wasn't that kind of person. And when we did go to church, if we were on an army base, it was the driest hour of your life, right? So then for me to say, okay, well, I'm gonna actually how I, how I wound up getting into Pentecostalism, and I didn't intend on studying Pentecostalism at all.

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[Judith Casselberry] But once I wound up there, I was in a very, very strange new place for me. I didn't know anything about it except what I had read, right? And so this idea that there's a comfort zone, it's just the comfort that I had was that the home church was in New York and they were Black women. And that was it. Right. So I didn't, I didn't, I didn't know anything about living in that culture. I didn't know anything about being immersed in it. I didn't know anything. So once I was there and this goes back to what Eziaku was saying, it was hard. You know, you gotta be on your knees for hours. You have to be in church. I was in church Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Sunday Sunday from nine o'clock to nine. It's hard. It's really hard. But I think the other thing about the position that we hold as ethnographers in that, in that space. And this, this goes back to what you were saying about not being initiated but participating, right? There's something if I think that if as ethnographers we move into space this successfully, we can actually bridge prohibitions if you will, right?

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[Judith Casselberry] So I wound up singing in church on Sundays and playing my guitar at this Pentecostal Church. I wasn't saved, right? But it was, I was there. I had developed relationships. And that's just by being there and being on the ground and just doing that day in, day out, deep hanging, going everywhere with everybody all the time, then you become a part of, you can become a part of a community, it's a very unique position. But you can't become a part of the community. But the idea that I love the way you started this off, Eziaku, the idea that because we're Black women and our research is in Black religious studies or Black religious culture. That doesn't help us at it. It doesn't make it easier at all. Then in some ways I think it kinda complicates it. Because, because there's sometimes expectations that you should be, you should be more comfortable. You should be doing, this should be easier for it. You should not be freaked out. I was freaked out a lot.

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[Eziaku Nwokocha] Say it.

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[Todne Thomas] It's like having done like a book where like done research in a community where I was a cultural outsider is that all people would assume when you're Black, you must be Caribbean and I'm like I'm not right? Then having written a book and done field work in my hometown, right? It's always been assumed that both were easy, right? That somehow it's not just about the assumptions people make about Black women, it's the assumptions people make about Black people and Blackness. That Blackness is inherently familial. Yeah, it's inherently open-ended. It's inherently comprehensible and understandable. That Blackness is trusting and it's open doored. And if anything, even as a scholar of kinship, even as a scholar who's done, tried do home girl Anthropology, who wrote a book because my mama told me to, right? That the feeling where those familiar, those, those those passes you think you might have it assuming that you feel those at all, right, because we all have our own, I think, you know, Black people growings up, right? Like I'm from the South, but I'm from Appalachia, right? Like that's not the Black Belt south. That we all have different particularities that make us who we are. But it's always been amazing to me that there are assumptions that people make about ease. These are also assumptions attached assumptions that people make about Blackness.

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[Todne Thomas] And I think if we really look at the history of social scientific research in Black communities, right? If we look at that particular historical record, like the assumption that a Black ethnographer moves in and out of Black community with ease, right, is a very erroneous assumption, in part because of the epistemic violence that anthropologists have done in Black communities, right? And sometimes these are Black people themselves. You know we have Saidiya Hartman reckoning with the legacy of Du Bois and Philadelphia, right? There was never a time in which the work of getting to know people, the work of showing up, the work of who are your people like. And even if your people aren't my people, I still want to know who your people are, where you have to locate yourself in space and time and in a people. Like there's never been an instance in which I've had to bypass that work, even being from Knoxville. Oh, you're from Knoxville? Is your mom from Knoxville? What street did you grow up on? What what side of town? What high school did you go to? Who are your people right?

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[Todne Thomas] Right. I had someone in Knoxville tell me you should've stayed. Right? Oh, everyone's congratulations about Harvard. Brain drain, you should have stayed in our community. You represent the central problem of our community. I think it's also worth stating that those same assumptions have to do with. I also like to add another thing about bringing our whole selves. I like to add the labor issue of ethnography and it's intersectional demands because I'm a single mom. Okay. To say something. Ethnography was not made for single mothers. Was not it was not made for] someone who was solely responsible, mostly for the care of a child. Right. But the day-to-day care of a child, it has a real equity and accessibility issue for for not for doing fieldwork in my hometown.

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[Todne Thomas] I'm also very clear that my mom created a big ask, but I also still consider my mom a sponsor for my second book because if it were not for her child care, housing. Right, the second book would not be done. Right? It would not have been possible at this particular stage in my life with a certain care demands. So when we talk about bringing your whole self and we talk about the work of ethnography, I think we need to also talk about some of its hidden intersections and assumptions about what kind of person, what kinds of flexibilities, what kinds of support they have doing this work and why sometimes we don't see more people who look like us doing field work, especially at certain stages in their lives and careers.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] Before I turn it over to Fadeke, I wanted to recommend Jamil Drake's new book, *To Know the Soul of a People: On Religion Race and the Making of Southern Folk*, in which he takes up. He examines the history of social science research in a particular period in producing ideas about Black folk in relation to religion. And then I'm always reminded here if the problem of Reema's boy, that's his name in *Mama Day*, right? Are you what happens when you go away and you come back to try and study the familiar, right, is just as complicated as the other kinds of situations you all are talking about here. Fadeke did you want to add to that in general?

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[N. Fadeke Castor] I did. I just I wanted to pick up on a couple of themes that I'm hearing and just echo them or reinforce them, that Black people are not a monolith. And the fact that in this here 2022, that we're still talking about, disciplinary conceits that perceive and reproduce Black people as a monolith. All the work that has, all the scholarship that has been done. If that hasn't taught people that Black people are not a monolith, right? Then they're not listening. So I really need academia as a whole to listen to the complexity of this category with, that was constructed out of this violent history.

00:41:18,905

[Judith Weisenfeld] Can I ask you a question about this though? Does, does studying religion promote this sense of sameness, of false sense of sameness? Is the fact that the subject matter is religion make people fall back on a, well, it's all the same.

00:41:37,579

[N. Fadeke Castor] So I don't think so. I think that religion complicates it. If it's not for anything, because there are so many religious, racial ...

00:41:51,844

[Eziaku Nwokocha] You know we're going to cite you, Judith. No sorry.

00:41:57,429

[N. Fadeke Castor] This scholar came up with this framework at the intersections of the religion and the racial that has been so compelling and so generative, right, for us to think

about and open up a space in that monolith, right? And so in a sense, I think Religious Studies enables us to sort of highlight and really focus in on these distinctions of difference. And I just wanted to take that back to ethnography and being the ethnographer and one of the things that I learned over the many years of ethnography is that insider outsider is a complex concept. That it is not something that's fixed, it's mutable, and it shifts over time and locality, right. And how you are perceived in your communities. Right? Judith Casselberry was saying that if you do it right, if you do it well, you become embraced within the community. And it's going to shift your positionality, right? And it's going to shift how, not only how you're perceived by others, but how you perceive yourself.

00:43:12,919

[N. Fadeke Castor] And I think sometimes we don't talk enough about those shifts in internal perception that ethnography engenders, right. Like our shifts in our relationships, what I call it an internal inter- subjectivity, right? Where your conversations with yourself about the world that you're encountering is shaped in part by the communities and the relationships that you've engendered over the years. And I know a one dimension of this question was about care. And I wanted to just mention that in terms of graduate training, even coming out of Anthropology, I felt maybe it's just, it's, hopefully it's changed over time. I felt that as a woman, as someone who presented as a woman going into the field, I was not prepared for situations of exposure, situations where I might be subject to violence. The difficulty of enforcing and protecting your boundaries, and doing ethical ethnographic work. And taking care of yourself as a person and moving in the world just going to a different location.

00:44:37,880

[N. Fadeke Castor] One of the first things when I went to Trinidad, didn't know many people and I was like, I just want to go and have a drink in the bar. And they're like, No, no, no. You can't do that. You can't do that. You can't be the woman who goes into the bar, right? I was like, in my naive early 30-something. So I was like, but why? why can I just go get a drink? Right? And that was very early in my fieldwork and it was one of the first instances where I realized that it's not only about clock time, right? It's not only about when I'm going to the ritual, when I'm doing the interviews, when I'm doing the deep hanging out. It's also my downtime. It's also when I'm trying to get some rest, get some relaxation. I'm actually still literally engaging with the constraints of fieldwork in terms of not only gender, but I want to add one more dimension that we haven't explicitly talked about, which is class. Class is a structuring element in a different way, in different places than perhaps you've experienced where you grew up? Yeah. When you, when you move across those borders and boundaries, sometimes the impact can be, can be experienced in a type of both an epistemic and occasionally a physical violence. So I just wanted to bring that up. Yeah. Yes. Yes. Yes.

00:46:25,189

[Eziaku Nwokocha] To class, yes. Everything that you said. I was still thinking about Judith's Comment about labor, about being on your knees and doing the work. And I want to talk, I think that the labor is something that's so intrinsic to the work that we do and how, again, how we show up. And I just wanted to talk about this funny thing that happened to me in the

field where I had to really address] like how I was showing up. As I said, I'd talk about fashion and I have a Cali vibe. So I would say that my aesthetic is hobo chic, athleisure. So, you know, you're gonna get some, you can get some leggings, a nice top, and then there you go. But my mom has always said, you know Eziaku Please, you know, you're going to Harvard. Please don't be looking like a bum. You have to dress up and be nice. If Oprah comes to you right now, you, she can say, Oh, you are, you are someone. You have someone's mother. And I was like, man, whatever. Stop talking to me. It's okay. No, because my mom, for her, dressing up and being present was a really big thing. And even no matter the work that she did, she was always showing up because she was always say how she's a Queen of Africa.

00:47:36,844

[Eziaku Nwokocha] So now thinking about even Manbo Maude's work about showing up and dressing for the Divine. How the Divine is royal more than just the, we're just all kings and queens. But how do we think about ancestral? How do you honor ancestral divinities in African diasporic religions? The way that I was showing up in the field, y'all, I was coming in, they're wearing white. I was like basic white. So it's taking only 15 minutes to dress up. And I noticed my mom's thoughts kept running through my head and this is like the second to last year that I went. Last time I went to Haiti. But I was like, You know what? I'm gonna do something different because I'm watching how people talking to me a little bit different. What would I do if I do more work? So I was going on YouTube, putting on, trying to learn how to do more mascara. That's enough trying to figure out how to do my head wraps, buying extra clothes. I had to use my graduate school money, y'all know I'm broke graduate school money to spend more money on clothes so that I can show out. And y'all, when I stood in front of the space and walked into the temple and walked through the space. I watched like this sea of Black people just part when I walked in and they're like, Oh, belle, you look so beautiful and I was like, weren't paying attention to me before?

00:48:53,980

[Eziaku Nwokocha] So now I go to ceremonies. I know I had to come up, I had to I had to not look like a bum. And I noticed that when I was showing up, that will do more than just 15 minutes, because the people themselves, they were spending an hour, hour-and-a-half. The men were shaving their heads having different designs. And noticed I was not doing the part of the ritual and religious work that was needed to be a part of the aesthetic traditions in the religion. So even just shifting, when we talk about our full selves, even just shifting how I was coming into the field. That changed the way that people were asking me questions about about, about work and oh, Eziaku, you're serious now, you know. So let's talk. I was like, what I didn't do that? So again, Fadeke, I'm sitting with your thoughts about like how this changes over time. But I was there for years and also the level of intimacy and intimate conversation wasn't the same until I showed up. So I just can thank you all. I just, you're seeing me here because I think that when we're talking about ethnography and being] in this space, you're hearing me just cosign with a lot of y'all because we've been sitting with this for a while. And again, I appreciate this this this time to talk with each other.

00:50:05,910

[Judith Casselberry] I don't want to take too much more time on this question or this point, but you raise a really fabulous point Eziaku, because the thing about dress and clothing and appearance was a real deal for me because Apostolic women have to present in a very particular way. It's not the way I present. So literally, like I had to go out and get clothes. I didn't have any clothes that I could go to church in on a regular basis, at least an Apostolic Apostolic Pentecostal Church. I didn't have any, I didn't have and so I had to do that. But also in terms of like bringing our full selves. I couldn't bring my full self. Could not bring my full self.

00:50:54,280 [Eziaku Nwokocha] Tell us why.

00:50:57,399

[Judith Casselberry] I brought as much as I could. And this is very interesting because I feel like the people that I got close to in that church know me really well. And I feel like I know them. Right. But were I to actually say, Okay, I'm a lesbian, I wouldn't know them the way I know them. I would not know them the way I know them. I would not have had the deep, beautiful, intimate conversations and experiences that I had with people. I wouldn't have had the deep spiritual experiences that I had with people. And I know that there are ways that, so to me it's a very interesting kind of conundrum which I feel in some ways. Earlier on it was something that was weighing on me. I knew I couldn't come out, but it was something that was weighing on me. [Judith Casselberry] But after being there a while it was like, well, you know, I'm I'm who I am, right? I am who I am and I'm presenting who I am. They actually, there's a part that there's parts of all of us that we don't know about each other. Right. And that was a part of me that they didn't know, even though at some point my wife came with me to church a couple of times. But but the thing of it was that we can't always bring our full selves. We cannot always bring our full selves. So it just really is going to depend on where we are and what we're doing, and what's going to enable us to do the best work we can do.

00:52:33,594

[Judith Casselberry] And as a Black feminist, Black lesbian feminist, I knew that there were, my perspective was not a perspective that I was going to present. I wanted to know what they were about. They didn't need to know what I was about until we figured out, but I wanted to know what they were about. So my inserting something into the situation, which would have been very disruptive and would have actually hindered my whole project for no good reason really, except to say, well, I am, this is who I was like, Oh, it didn't really matter after a point, I felt like it wasn't important to stake my claim. Like to put to put my flag in the ground. I didn't feel like it was really necessary to do that. I felt like I would just it would be much better if I didn't.

00:53:29,110

[KB Dennis Meade] Yeah, I appreciate you sharing that, Judith. It resonates so much. I mean, it even I think at this point at it within the writing, right? Like how much of yourself do you actually disclose knowing that you have potential readers? And the implications of that for future research. If you do choose to go to that site again or touch that, that field site for future

work. And I think that the point about just not bringing your full self, there were things that I knew I had to kinda keep under wraps, one from my own safety. Because Jamaica is, by law, a very homophobic place. But in practice, perhaps not as more homophobic than other places, including the US, but it's trying to keep myself safe. This is a, you know, to Fadeke's point earlier, right? Thinking about where my body was at a particular time of the day, right? Even invitations to give myself to God, you know, like to convert. What I chose to share about my own background in the church to this day, that they don't know that. I'd already been through that. Right. Been there, done that and separated myself from it. Right.

00:54:49,060

[KB Dennis Meade] But if I brought that up right, like what would that mean for the kind of conversations that I could have? [KB Dennis Meade] How would that perhaps foreclosed certain kinds of insights that will generate if I just don't think that it is factual, it's a matter of just the thing that's in the air or is it something that's actually going to help or hinder the work I'm trying to do at my field site.

00:55:13,440

[Judith Weisenfeld] I want to own a pick up on the question of writing and how you position yourself in your writing. And you all do such marvelous and different work in being present in your writing. I had that question. So how do you do that? Are there ethical issues you faced in the writing that are particular to the study of Black religion. And there I'm thinking about contexts in which there might be spiritual knowledge that you may have had access to, but that should not be written about, those those kinds of things. And I think Fadeke's discussion of the ethnographer's own changing self and Eziaku's story about what happened when she dressed differently leads me to ask like, how do you know when when can you write this, like and when is it done? I know there are out there external pressures about when you decide, I'm done wrapping this up, but it seems so. I mean, I have the same problem still researching two books ago on the side because there's still more to know, but, but it seems really difficult to me or can be a challenge to imagine how one exits a project like this. So that's a whole set of questions and I also want to remind everyone if you have questions for the panelists to put them in the Q&A box and we'll turn to some of those in not too long.

00:56:49,080

[Todne Thomas] I think it depends. I mean, I think sometimes learning how to exit a project, it really takes a community because you could really, my first book took me so long and I would be writing stuff and I was like, I felt like I've written this before. You know what I mean? Like I feel like this thought like I would go back and drafts and I was like, I'm like I'm not producing any new thoughts. Um, but I remember when I knew that like the argument I had, which is different than the dissertation, but it was a conversation that I had and I ended the book with it, but that was when I knew it was there was nothing new to write for me. And that was, I've been writing this whole thing about Black evangelicals and how heteronormativity, so much work was being put into producing heteronormative families. But there's this whole spiritual complex that people were engaged in working together to do. And we miss the forest for the trees if we miss this broader spiritual complex. But I still expected that my church parents to

judge me for getting a divorce. And they didn't, which was the whole point of my book and then they demonstrate it and that's when I was like. Okay. Stop writing. Right. Like, you know, it was a way for me to after fieldwork like kind of test the argument and be like, no, that's that was that was to me the universe saying that's it. That's that's the point. Stop.

00:58:14,754

[Todne Thomas] No more new things. You can, you can revise, you can polish, but no, no more new stuff. I think for the second project it really took, it really took a lot of people just being like this, just please stop, step away from the, you know. I also think the first book helped with the second book, right? Like knowing that the end of a book doesn't have to be the end of your research on it. It doesn't have to be the last thing you write about it. But I do feel like there are times in which you, for me, and I think some books are louder than others, but the voice is kinda go quiet after a certain point and learning to hear that, right? And so I feel like I was not good at this with the first book. I just I'm one of those people. I'm just, it's like loaves and fishes. Like I'm just going to keep writing instead of just getting still. And then like, Okay, am I done? I would just keep writing. And then I had a moment where I was like yo like the universe told you stop, stop. No more new stuff. And I think it's really been the community being like okay, like. Don't, don't loaves and fishes this like this is this is do you do, Do you have like your arc? Do you have your points? And just like letting people, letting you know that this doesn't have to be the last thing that you do. It doesn't have to be your last pass at this.

00:59:33,940

[Todne Thomas] That helps a lot because I think you could keep trying to, what information do people need, what stories are? There's always stuff that you know there, There are some really great stories that never made it into the book and it still bothers me in *Kincraft* And even there are conversations I had in [Todne Thomas] the second book that were so amazing, but there were also so intimate and deeply personal. So some of the stuff that people were talking about, what do you share of yourself also, what of other people's stuff do you share? The kind of real ethical and moral compass you have to develop one as a researcher, but that each project requires you to develop like, what are the, you know, like, I'm not going to. I also decided not to join the church where I did research and I knew that if I did, I could have gone to the Caribbean and then done a transnational project on Caribbean Bible camps. But it felt like I can't do that, right. Like that's because there's, joining a church means something and it's not, it's not going to mean to them what it means to me. Or in this project. And working with Adventists and kind of like understanding what could I write about. But also like what was I'm not going to write about. So I'm not going to write about white supremacy in the way that people think I'm going to write about it for church arson because Black people weren't that interested in it, right? Like, white supremacy is not news, big news to Black people.

01:00:57,954

[Todne Thomas] So I think there's some people I realized as I was writing this book like a lot of people are going to want the Klan, right? They're going to want the countrified supremacy that we have to talk about, a white liberal imaginary that wants those kind of white people, right? Versus being like, you know, I'm gonna tell the story, I'm going to stick to the

assignment. I'm going to tell the story that Black Knoxvilleians told me, I'm going to go, I'm going to express the stuff they were excited about and downplay the stuff that wasn't interesting or important news to them, right? So I think also when you are working with voices like you don't consider it a catalog, but like you are always in conversation, the point is to sustain the conversation that's also helped me get off the hamster wheel and stop multiplying and being like okay, like also what's the assignment? What story am I supposed to tell? And that has helped me. Hopefully I will be able to get out and help students get out of, out of projects as well. But that has helped a lot because I was not good at that the first time.

01:01:56,460

[Eziaku Nwokocha] Thank you. Thank you, Todne. I mean, this is amazing. I love the way that you brought up the role of ethical questions and how we deal about talking to people and knowing that when you finish a book, especially now that I'm closing in on the page proofs. Like it's not like it's the end for the book, but it's not, there's other stories that you can tell and there's other things that you can talk about the different avenues, but for the book, it's done. So I'm glad that you brought up the way that the community can help you tell you to stop. And I want to say this for myself, especially when we think about the role of religion. I think that there's a thing that sometimes we, as scholars of religion, we feel there's sometimes they feel like maybe we talk, KB, when you brought up this objective thing. Where our own beliefs don't come in. I want to add that for me. The spirits told me like, we're done. And again, especially in African diasporic religion religion and in my own background where I always say I'm African plus. And that is a blend of ancestors, indigenous African or Ibo religious traditions, as well as Christianity. Because my parents are heavy, heavy Christians and they were, initially, they were so afraid of me studying Haitian Haitian Vodou, you know Christ is the only one for us. We choose Jesus Christ. And then I got into Harvard. They're like, Eziaku is studying culture, she's in Black studies. So I'm like, okay. so now it's cool because the white man.... but I didn't really want to bring this up about the role of possession and spirit, possession and engaging with the spirits. And that is at the heart of my work that especially for the people might in my space that the spirits speak to the practitioners. And they speak to the real lived realities of the people.

01:03:46,830

[Eziaku Nwokocha] It's important to know that even when, for me, when I talk about this in one of my articles, like like Todne, you brought up like being a single mother. Well for me, the spirits were telling me to have a baby and I was arguing with one of the spirits her name is Ezili Danto, this is the goddess spirit of protection. And there's counterparts or two [like Yemaya in Yoruba religious tradition or Yeomoja .And I turned around and told Ezili Danto, So I'm like, you got baby money? You got baby money? And I was like, I don't I can't I can't do this. You try having to have a child? I said I'm not trying to do is while I'm broke. So I'm like, Listen, I said I said I want an education. And if you want me to have this child, this child.

[Eziaku Nwokocha] I need my education, [to be done. I need to have, I need to have wealth. And I need to have a book. And the spirit responded and it was like, Oh no, you'll get that, all that and more. And then y'all, I'm noticing the way that people have come to my life, the way

that people have helped me out and brought in so much beauty, so much joy, and even like I was able to work with Judith Weisenfeld in the post-doc at Princeton. And then have this collective beautiful people in the Religious Studies Department and in the Center.

01:04:58,194

[Eziaku Nwokocho] And then you know, Judith Casselberry was one of my readers for my book. Like the way that people dropped in their gems. For me, I was I was thinking about dang, Ezili Danto, you really want me to have this baby, huh? So again, I really want us to think about how the divine can also be a part of this. And again, for my work that the way that dreams have been impactful have been impactful for me, like the Spirit will come and say exactly, You forgot about saying this, this, this about the work. So I just want to add that in before, for I don't know, I don't want to go too much time, but I want to add we still cannot leave, and Judith Casselberry has talked about this, we cannot leave out the divine because they're always present and they're coming to talk. They're talking to us and saying things to us.

01:05:40,000

[Todne Thomas] I think that's beautiful. I had a dream about T. Michael Flowers shortly like we were in heaven talking. And he died the founding but died after I had done my field work or whatever. But that's what I was like. It's okay. Like even if it's flawed, even if it's what, we were just chatting. And yeah, I mean, I think that's also like the other point. You know, there's, there's like society telling you you have to like you, there is a tenure clock, you have to let go of the book, but you can still hold onto a thing. Like even if you press in you can still be stuck. And that was probably the, last, like when I was like, okay, I think he's okay with it. He's fine. He's an ancestor now, felt like, and also he looked like he was good in the afterlife to. But I think also those things like I to me, those, that's the community too. That's the community that tells you to get out of it. They're not just human people on this plane. There are people. And we can also talk about the [Todne Thomas] spirits that wake up in the middle of the night. The middle of the night.

01:06:39,940

[Eziaku Nwokocho] ****. Sorry. Sorry.

01:06:41,125

[Todne Thomas] All right.

01:06:42,024

[Eziaku Nwokocho] Exactly.

01:06:43,180

[Todne Thomas] Me having to tell people listen just because y'all are dead and don't have stuff to do. Listen, I'm tired. I'm and insomniac and I don't want to write at 3AM, please, please knock back later. Okay. I'm I'm sleeping now.

01:06:57,699

[KB Dennis Meade] Yeah. Yeah. I appreciate that, with the, what you all have shared about process. I think I was sharing with you that I've had my own sort of reckoning in thinking about the actual writing of the project and you know, Eziaku has also heard me, my spinning. But I think that's when we think about the way that African Black diasporic, African diaspora cosmologies operate really. There's this and there's always this recognition that there's an unseen force, right? It shows up in these different ways. It could be your dreams, it could be that soft voice. It could be you kinda fighting with yourself about your hyper-rational side versus the side that's that very still whisper. That's kinda giving you some kind of guidance that you just have to be obedient to. And when you're not obedient to it, your life gets frustrated. Everything is just not connecting if things don't work out. For me, the process of writing and researching in Black diasporic spaces where people have a very robust language, understanding of spirit, right? And what spirit does and how spirits feels, right? How spirit sounds, right? That, that kinda shows up in my own sort of unfolding the kind of work that I'm doing in the writing itself. That the writing is not just this kind of instrumental process to get from one place to the next, but it becomes a kind of working out of my own spirituality and my own ability to hear and surrender. That's the piece I struggle with. The surrender, right?

01:08:35,845

[KB Dennis Meade] So I think the kind of work that we do and what we put out into the world, just to kind of bring it back to some of our earlier points is they're not just intellectual exercises. That is meant to just show our intellectual weight. Meant to just demonstrate why we ought to be in these institutions, why we ought to be paid, even though we get paid \$0.78 to the dollar, right? It's really thinking about what this labor, and this is the point, right? Judith Casselberry's point, like this, it's labor, right? What this labor, where we're at different points of gestation, birth you know, all of these things, right? But really looking at the work as a kind of working of the Spirit as well, right. To use Joseph Murphy's work. So yeah, someone to submit that as well.

01:09:22,584

[Judith Casselberry] Yeah. [Judith Casselberry] I wanted to say Oh, go ahead.

01:09:25,405

[N. Fadeke Castor] Go ahead. No, go ahead.

01:09:27,730

[Judith Casselberry] I want to say about the writing a couple of things. One is that the question of what can you have and how much you can share. And I found that after being immersed in this community for an extended period of time, that women were sharing extremely intimate stories with me. And, and, and sharing things that they might not necessarily share in the same way with other people in the church. And so at some of those things I really, I felt was really important to get into the book because that was really so much a part of the entirety of their religious existence, right? And then, and then on the other side, questions of Anthropology or pseudonyms. Don't use people's real names, et cetera, et cetera.

So that was that was I was doing that, but then there was something else going on at this, at the same time in which certain people who were prominent in the church wanted their names to be used, right? So I had to make that like parse whose, who wants to be identified, who wants to be clearly recognized. Then those people who I felt like I could tell their stories and that they would recognize themselves. And after reading somebody's story, they would recognize each other. But then I hit these parts where I didn't want anyone to know who had said something to me, so then I would really I would just not say who said it.

01:11:10,094

[Judith Casselberry] And I would really have to kind of I really had to think about when and where I put those things in so that to prevent someone within the church community of making the connection and identifying who that person is. And so that was something that was very, in the writing process, it was really tricky and trying to figure out how to nuance that. And then the other thing about actually the actual writing process and figuring out when to stop was like, I I didn't I didn't know when to stop. And I went, I did I did a chunk of field work and then I went back. And then I went back again. And the idea of like When is this over, right? I mean, I had a pretty good idea of I had everything I needed. I really I was so clear that I would know when to stop even though I didn't know. But I did hit a point where it's like that's it. I think a lot of that, I think for me that also has to do with like, I think the whole my whole journey was Spirit-led. Like there's no question in my mind that how I even wound up at this denomination was divine intervention, period, right? And so, and so at different points along the way, we've talked about dreams like I had this incredibly vivid dream with a bishop who was the head of one of the churches. And it was such a powerful dream. And it was like a baptism dream. And we were in water at all this stuff was going on it it was it was one of those moments where it's like, okay, I know I'm on the right. I know I'm doing the right thing. Like I know I'm doing the right thing.

01:12:59,255

[Judith Casselberry] And the kind of bringing together both the like, listening to yourself, listening to the spirit, and letting those kind of letting having the, the knowledge that those are, that that's real information and not and not blowing it off like, Oh, that's a thought, but knowing when it's real knowledge and then being able to say, okay, I'm not saying I always did it. Because we don't because we miss, I'll speak for myself. I miss. Right. But just like trying to be aware of that and being aware of that in the writing process also. So that as I was actually crafting the texts to try to give myself the space and time. And I'm not a fast worker, I'm a slow worker, to give myself the space and time to actually massage the text in a way where I felt like it had the, the rhythm and the feeling of what was happening in this space. And a lot of that was just like, okay, I have to I have to I have to know that, I as they say in [Judith Casselberry] the church, I know that. I know that. I know that I know. You have to, I mean, and you don't know. You don't know. But you have to know that you know that, you know that, you know, if you know what I mean, I'll stop there.

01:14:27,430

[Judith Weisenfeld] I'm going to pose a question from the from the Q&A. And I know that

Fadeke you also want to respond to this. And I think I'm hoping that you might also want to respond to the question. Samiha Rahma says loved Dr. Castor's comments about internal inter-subjectivity in one's relationship with the community. For those of you who consider yourself to be practitioners of the community you do research with, could you discuss how you grapple with representing the community in ways that honor them when academia tends to demand critique of the communities we study? And so I just wanted to put that into your potentially for you to also talk about writing about this community that you had connection to. But you can also answer the other one.

01:15:15,760

[N. Fadeke Castor] Thank you. I'm going to sit with that for a second as I speak to something to this last kind of theme that resonated with me, which is about writing with spirit, right? And writing with the messages that you get from spirit. And writing with, with engaging with an ontological field that includes spirits as active subjects and agents. And what does that demand from us as writers? And I tried to go there in my book. But I've recently have pushed myself even further, right? And that in a way that was kinda scary because it was experimental for academic writing. I wrote an article on multiple subjectivities, and I invited spirit to write with me, and I wrote the article from a compound subject of I/We. And so I bring this up to say [that our ethnographic engagements and our shifting negotiations of that internal inter-subjectivities over time can then push us for forward in how we push back on the theories that we engage with and have inherited and even our training, right? Because if your ethnographic work has you grounded in an ontological system, that is, has distinctions and has differentiations from the conceits of the western intellectual tradition's ontologies that you were trained in. There is going to be what we would call friction, right? And how you choose to represent, to share, to work with that friction, I think can change over time. And I think that there is definitely a first book kind of constraint that shapes many ethnographies, where you feel bound to certain conventions and to stay more within a specific lane.

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[N. Fadeke Castor] And as I get ready to work on the second book, I see some articles that I'm working on as my attempt to break out of that lane. And to say, for me, the richness of ethnography and especially the richness of ethnography in Black religious worlds, is the way it produces epistemologies. The way it is knowledge making. And it shapes how you think and see the world. And I don't want to just leave that in the field, right. I want to bring that back and put that into conversation in the discipline and push back against some accepted norms that aren't even questioned. And have that be a contribution both from the communities that I worked with and from spirit, and spirit in its multifaceted. And now, Judith, the question that you asked me that ...

01:18:46,029

[Judith Weisenfeld] That actually is an answer to the question that, I think. So you grapple with representing the community in ways that honor them is to really work from within the epistemology of the world in which you, you are situated for your work that you're trying to represent with the spirit.

01:19:09,610

[N. Fadeke Castor] And can I add that. Yes, academia asks us to be critical but are the communities that we work with are are critical, they're critical of themselves. And they're often critical in ways that are telling, that speak back to academia in very interesting and provocative ways. And nobody that I knew had like, sort of like an agenda. I need you to tell this story just this way, right? They were all engaged in also wanting to find out, wanting to know as they shape their communities. And they're like, You're just doing that with them in a different way, in a different forum, right? So if we have time later, we can talk about what it's like when you know the people that you're writing about are going to read your work.

01:20:07,690

[Judith Weisenfeld] Judith, Eziaku, did you want to add?

[Eziaku Nwokocho] No, I'm just, I'm just cosigning.

01:20:15,100

[Judith Casselberry] Yes. Yeah. I was I was cosigning. They read they do read the work.

01:20:20,125

[Eziaku Nwokocho] They do read.

01:20:21,790

[Todne Thomas] I did an interview with a couple whose daughter majoring in medical Anthropology at Harvard. So they knew what Anthropology was, like. Oh, you have your IRB? They were, like this idea that somehow you're working with people, like this was an upper middle-class. One person was like, oh, this Georgia State student interviewed me for her honors thesis on Caribbean medicine or whatever, like traditional medicine and healing, right? So several people had been interviewed by anthropologists and sociologists before. Like it was, some people were like, why are you doing this thing? But some people were very like, I can sign your form for you or one-person was like, my son's a journalist. So I kinda get what you're doing. So yeah, they will. But I also wanted to say that one of the things that excited me about this conversation and like his moment is that [I think that Black women and method-making right now. Like I just, it's just, there's just, so, there's just, just really catalytic energy, right? And, you know, and it's not new, right? Because these epistemological questions, I mean, we can talk about our doctoral training,] but where do we really learned about storytelling, right? And like what a good, I remember one time I call my dad and I was like, remember how you used to talk about how gopher was a turtle.

01:21:38,304

[Todne Thomas] I was reading *Mules and Men* and Zora Neale Hurston said the same thing and he was like, I don't give a **** that book. Like I like basically I don't need that book to tell me me that a gopher is a turtle, like he was so offended, but I was all excited because the world aligned and he was like, No disrespect to Hurston. I'm a real person. I don't need this

book to make me real. But there's such a real] to me, like catalytic energy like it is, it is, it is a moment that I am honored to participate in, like seeing one Black women, how Black women are making method and speaking back to method and resurrecting and resuscitating, and crafting, and how people do that in their work and sometimes without even naming it, but they're doing it. Like I taught Judith's book and students were crying and class, right? Like here's the story about the woman who worked her early death. Students were crying, right? Like there's, there's sort of a majesty in this method making. And so I, I don't know, there's just, there's this real sort of sort of catalytic energy that I am like we're in it and I'm so excited to be in it.

01:22:54,370

[Todne Thomas] And I also want to see how it goes. And I think even as we're talking about relationships and ontologies and the spirits and I, even to me, the voices of the people that I do research with. Like, ethnography is embodied those conversations, they stay with you. They're in your body. could still hear those chunks of conversation. You have people who live in your head, like everybody thinks ethnography, so cool. It's weird too, right? Like there are conversations that I have that have made me a better person and I'm going to walk with them for the rest of my life. I also think that something that I've appreciated is growing as a writer and learning to trust my own Black woman flesh, right?

01:23:33,549

[Todne Thomas] Like just learning. The first book was like, I called it the Pinocchio book. Like I'm going to show them I'm a real boy, whatever that means, right. Then the second book being like, I know my argument and it came to me and someone's like, how do you know? I was like, I just trust myself now, I know it. Like I'm gonna figure it out, but I know I know that. I know that I know right? That to me where the thing I was inspired by Toni Morrison, one of the eulogies for Toni Morrison's funeral. And an editor that worked with her said it was beautiful, how much she trusted herself. And so when we think about our interlocutors, right? And I'm not trying to like, I think therefore I am yeah, this Cartesian stuff. But to me growing up and getting older and turning 40, like walking with myself, my relationship to myself has changed. And I find it very important for my work in my craft, but also very radical to be like. I'm going to trust what my Black woman flesh is telling me. I trust myself, I trust my ability to find it. I trust my instincts more, my intuition. This is not throwing away and just, you know, this is not a meditative whatever, but those nudges, those whatever those things. And this can be growing into your craft as a writer where you're like, oh, this is important or go follow that lead. Working with that plate, working with that trust has been really transformative for me as well. And I do think it comes from like just working in the craft more and aging.

01:25:07,480

[Todne Thomas] But I think it also comes from this moment that Black woman are method making. And some may have been method making. But maybe you're finally getting credit or people finally. And so it's, these two things to me are feeding themselves and I'm I'm excited to hear about how people's own sensibilities are changing as they continue working in and through or even working past ethnography.

01:25:30,894

[Eziaku Nwokocho] Yeah.

01:25:31,944

[Judith Casselberry] Yeah, I want to just say one quick thing about the writing process is that kinda goes back to what I had, which was a very ambivalent relationship with Anthropology, to put it mildly, because of the history of it. But one thing that I was really clear about from early on in writing is that I was not going to use the word believe or belief. And I made a decision about that early on and I said, Okay, well, if somebody says that, if somebody says that, I will write that. But I'm not going to ever use that as a frame for what's happening here because that's not what's happening here. Just something like that. When I made that decision and then how that changed how I had to think about everything I wrote and how I and then what did I, what would I say instead of that? Which actually proved for me to be much, much deeper, it took me to a deeper place. Instead of using the kind of grabbing the language that that Anthropology had taught me was to say, that's not actually what's happening here. And I think this kind of goes to, but some of you have said, you know, there's a, you'll get the information and it's not part of your training. And it kinda actually in some ways goes against your training. But if it's if it's right, you know. For me, it turned out to be right.

01:26:57,265

[Eziaku Nwokocho] Yeah, yeah. This is wonderful. This is wonderful. And I want to connect this, all the conversation that's been happening. Because again, I'm thinking about the way I came into this first book. And again, I'm talking, I'm thinking about when you're saying that things that you wish you'd done in the first book or that you are going into it, you're doing the second book. On my end like, I was a McNair Scholar in undergrad and I have been studying Haitian Vodou for over ten years, over a decade. And I noticed that for me it was important to listen. Not only listen to my elder, the senior scholars, but then also listened to people when they were four years out on their tenure track, listen to the adjuncts or to lectures, and listen to people that were my peers and what I've heard, especially when people had written their first book, they're like, Oh, I wish I had done this. I wish I'd been more bold. I wish I wish I'd said this. I wish I had been more clear. I wish I had leaned into myself. For me, I'm really, really proud of my first book. Like I've been My **** is the **** because of the fact that I have been, I always say I have been strained by the best. The best told me to go. They said go ***** go. And I was, it was important for me to make sure that not only my Black feminist ethnographic writing that I was bold, that I was vulnerable. I was able to talk about my mistakes and what I learned in my mistakes because these, all, these, these mistakes, the way that we come into the field and the things that we, that are faux pas, these are all learning lessons.

01:28:21,954

[Eziaku Nwokocho] And I think that when we think about writing, sometimes we want to say I will sound like like we got it right. And then sometimes we don't get it right, and that's also

part of the learning lesson as well. Then lastly again, think about Fadeke's question about class. Again, this is something that we all talked about, about, like how people think about Black women as a monolith there is something that's really anti-Black. That's really about white supremacy, about how we think about Black people, Black wealth, and cap, about capitalism. But there's a moment when we think of that like our work is not legible to a cross across the field and spaces like I had people that were janitors that we're talking about my, about my article. Working class. People that are, that are doctors and lawyers talking about my work. So again, I'm like, there's a moment when I'm going How dare you? There, Because Black people we know they're reading and like, okay, so what you have to say, what are you doing? And so I wanna make sure I say this. There's a way that I'm going to write. I make it particularly legible for the people in, the practitioner and other practitioners or people that are interested in African Diaspora Studies at large to read my work. So again, we're thinking about audience. Who are you writing for.

01:29:19,119

[Eziaku Nwokocha] And I want to make sure I say this, that if you as a scholar, because I know there are scholars here, that are like, well what if I want to only talk about a particular subject, then you do that. You're hearing all our stories about how we're coming to the work. But again, I'm talking about myself, about how I want to be read. It is also important for me that after this. when this book comes out, I'm hoping that I can get my books translated into Haitian Creole because my work is in, is in Haiti and the United States. So I think for me it's an injustice. I'm only writing in English. So again, and then with Haitian Creole, I hope that it goes into French as well. But Haitian Creole, more importantly, lean on because the people speak Haitian Creole. So again, I'm adamant about how we talk about work, how, how is it made legible? How that we have to talk about the vulnerabilities of the work that we do. That again, when we have our whole selves that being vulnerable, being, being not this is more than just saying, soft, but just being open and saying like, I'm hurting right now or I can't show up to I can stay seven or eight hours in this ceremony because, I'm tired. I need a nap. And so I think that we should we should, there's another conversation. I mean, that that been had that's been had that I'm hearing from other people as well.

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[Judith Weisenfeld] We are at the close. I saw Fadeke's hand up. But if you're, if someone's willing to engage this, if it strikes you. Seth Gaiters has a question about whether the category of religion is adequate for you in getting at the range of religious, spiritual acts you're analyzing, or are you experimenting with other terms that. And this might be a question that's. Both about your professional context, what's required of that, or I don't know if anybody wants to respond to that before we wrap up or continue on the conversation.

01:31:35,379

[N. Fadeke Castor] Well, I will say that you have IRB, right? And when I did IRB for my research, they were like, what is your research instrument? It's like I'm going to go and do some deep hanging there. Like, yeah, we can't approve that. We need to know. We need you to standardize your research instrument. I was like, I came up with a research instrument so

that I could get IRB approval to go do my deep hang. And in that research instrument, it was a questionnaire. I said I was doing open-ended oral oral interviews, but to make IRB happy. I had like five questions that I was going to ask everybody. Where do you live, how long have you been there? And so one of the questions was, how did you come to this religion? Well, as they in Trinidad, who tell me to ask that?

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[N. Fadeke Castor] Because as soon as I ask that people were like, Ifa is not a religion, it's my way of life. That's not my religion. You know, I was born, promised it, but that's not my, I have come to Ifa and Ifa is so much more than a religion and people went off. So in terms of the category of religion, yeah, no, religion is not suitable and is not adequate to describe the, the social and spiritual lives of the people that I engaged with. They definitely associated religion with a violent, colonial imperialistic history of domination. And for them, religion was something that was organized to oppress, right? And it was something that they were very clear that what they were doing was not religion. Now, if you ask them if what they were doing was religious, right? Because these are critical thinkers who use nuance. They're like, oh yes, we do religious stuff all the time. But this is not religion. And so I just wanted to offer that to the discipline's conversations about what is religion, right? In that lives, religious practices are often not, quote unquote. Religion.

01:34:08,990

[Judith Weisenfeld] That's really helpful. Sounds like the question may have been productive of figuring out some of these positions. I want to note just Hakeem Pitts' question in here about solidarity from scholars in the academy with those who are not formally or institutionally educated in doing similar kind of work. And I, one of the things that the Project, this project can do, the Crossroads, is to assemble an amazing panel of scholars like this with these experiences and expertise and open it up to, to everyone for engagement and for learning. And I'm really happy that you are here, and we will have more of these kinds of things. And it's been really such a pleasure to hear from you. We could have gone on and on and on, I know. Maybe we will reassemble at some point. Judith says, yes. And I'm thrilled that there were so many people here again to join me in what has been such a pleasure for me of just listening to these really talented, amazing scholars talk about their work. And I can't recommend their writing enough and there's more to come from them. So we are going to end here. And I apologize for not having made it through all of your questions, but there will be more. And of course, you can get in touch with us if you have specific questions. This will be posted at some point on the website. So thank you all so much.

01:35:52,510

[Judith Casselberry] Thank you.

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[Eziaku Nwokocho] Thank you. This is wonderful.

01:35:55,836

[Judith Casselberry] It flew by.