

Stephen C. Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory, & Hugh R. Page Jr., (eds.). *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience: "There is a Mystery"...* Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014. xxi + 406 p. ISBN: 978-90-04-28342-8. €148 / \$193.

The history of Western esotericism has tended to be the history of dead white people. This is not due to explicit racist discrimination; it is rather a consequence of the fact that the concept of the “West”, an often complex and fluid cultural and geographical term, has historically been built around “whiteness” as the norm for what should be included. The contributions of people of color to the history of esotericism, along with their particular historical experiences, have for that reason often been neglected when researching cultural milieus that are almost always seen as “Western”, like North America. For this reason alone, the anthology *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience* is an important and welcome addition to the study of Western esotericism.

The volume is edited by Stephen C. Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory and Hugh R. Page Jr, all scholars who have done extensive work in the study of African-American culture and religion. The contributors offer a variety of theoretical perspectives, from the mostly descriptive to Lacanian analyses, giving the work a multidisciplinary impression. The book is in many ways exploratory, mapping out a new field of study and working to locate African-American religious experience in terms of esotericism. If African-American experiences have tended to be neglected in the study of Western esotericism, a similar situation has been the case in academic studies of African-American culture and religion, where esotericism’s role has often been neglected. One example is lack of interest in the role of Prince Hall Freemasonry in the development of a black middle class; another is esotericism’s central presence in some of the most significant cultural movements within the African-American community, most notably the Harlem Renaissance and later the development of Afrocentrism. As the editors of the work explain in their introductory essay, this lack of interest seems to be because of two primary factors, one the above-mentioned inherent racial dimension of the term “Western”, and the second the search for respectability within the study of African-American culture, resulting in a focus on the role of Christianity in African-American religion rather than more heterodox movements.

In terms of the first problem, it is hard not to agree with this critique of the use of the term “Western”. We tend to regard North America as part of the West, often connecting it to the migration of people defined as white. Of

course, “whiteness” is in itself a shifting category that has never had any clear definition. Some ethnic identities that today are regarded as “white”, like Italian or Irish, have been included in the category quite recently. While this review is not about the concept of Western or whiteness it is necessary to remember this background. Despite being a part of the geographical West for hundreds of years, African-Americans have in large part been neglected in the study of Western esotericism, and as a counterpoint esotericism has often been neglected in the study of African-American culture. This leads to the second problem. As the editors present the case in the introduction, Africana studies have often seen Christianity as the norm. The “African gods” did not, in this line of reasoning, survive the crossing of the Atlantic to North America.

In order to encompass the vast phenomenon of esotericism in African-American culture the editors use the term “Africana Esoteric Studies”. With “Africana” the editors refer to the experience of being African, with a focus on diaspora communities. As such the term usually refers to the racial construction of blackness rather than discussions about Pan-Africanism that can be found among African writers, where Africana usually refers to attempts to find commonality among people living in Africa, which can include people of European descent. In America, however, the term African is clearly associated with ideas of blackness, juxtaposed with an equally racially coded notion of European. For the editors, Africana esotericism is a rather essentialist phenomenon that is found in African-American religion, including mysticism and Gnosticism, a direct experience of the Divine, as a central component of not only Africana esoteric movements but of African-American and American religion as a whole. This means that esotericism, far from being a fringe phenomenon, is instead presented as the hidden core of African-American religious experience. Problematically, however, while there is a need for a term that will address the specific historical and cultural experience of African-American people and how this affects their view and interpretation of esoteric traditions, the term tends to become too static and essentialist, disregarding the often contested meanings that the terms “esotericism” and “African” have had within esoteric and African-American traditions. For example, both the African continent itself and Ancient Egypt have been used as positive references within African-American culture, but also as the opposite, with Africa functioning as a symbol of primitivism and Egypt of slavery. Hopefully in the future a more nuanced definition of Africana esoteric traditions can develop from these early attempts to define the field, taking account of the complexity of these traditions.

Apart from the introduction, the book consists of twenty articles that cover the history of Africana esotericism in a roughly chronological way, beginning

with the nineteenth century and earlier currents. Here we find articles on Vodou, Paschal Beverly Randolph and New Thought within African-American communities. While Randolph is often presented as central to the development of modern Western esotericism, the chapter by Lana Finley focuses instead on Randolph's role in the African-American community. The second part of the book deals with early to mid-twentieth-century currents. The range of topics is wide, from folk magic and conjuring traditions to new religious movements like the Five Percenters, Nuwabians, and the Nation of Islam. In the case of the latter, Stephen C. Finley goes through the central role that numerology played for key writers of the movement and Justine M. Bakker looks at the role of concealment and revelation. While there have been a number of studies on the Nation of Islam, the movement and central figures like Elijah Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan, have rarely been discussed as representatives of an esoteric tradition, despite the prominence of such themes in their writings. This makes Finley's and Bakker's contributions valuable not only to the study of Western esotericism, but to scholarship on the Nation of Islam. Part Two of the book also deals with spiritualist churches and cultural movements like the Harlem Renaissance, perhaps the most famous and well-covered esoteric movement in African-American culture. Jon Woodson's chapter on this gives a clear introduction to how this tradition was developed, the role of Gurdjieff and his disciple A.R. Orage, and how this heritage was developed by Jean Toomer. With the Harlem Renaissance we are clearly dealing with a cultural and literary movement where esotericism was a prominent feature and it would be interesting for future studies to further explore its impact on the Black Power movement of the 1970s.

The third part deals with the late twentieth century until today and also includes more chapters that deal with the impact of esotericism in African-American pop culture, as in the case of Sun Ra. Today Sun Ra is more integrated in the broader field of Western esotericism and was included in the exhibition "Black Light: Secret Traditions in Art since the 1950s", an exhibition on art and the occult which took place in Barcelona 2018, also featuring work by artists and writers like Aleister Crowley, Cameron Parsons, and Genesis P. Orridge. Marques Redd, who writes about Sun Ra, also has a chapter on Ishmael Reed's modernist classic, *Mumbo Jumbo*, a novel filled with references to both esotericism and African diaspora religions. Redd shows that these themes were central to Reed's often ironic writings: Reed created an alternative history that included Iwa (the spirits of Vodou), ancient conflicts between Egyptian gods, and an order of Knights Templar. The story centers on the force or virus known as the "Jes Grew", a threat

to social order and monotheism, promising freedom, ecstasy and polytheism, manifested as jazz music and ragtime. The term Jes Grew was invented by Reed to create associations with jazz, and cast as a threat to white hegemony. Reed's novel is of course a reference to social changes and the fear of white society that their own young would become influenced by black culture, but, as Redd shows, the esoteric aspects of his work are a key to understanding the meaning of it all.

*Esotericism in African American Religious Experience* is a pioneering work that seeks to map out a new territory. While some of the topics that are included have been written about before in relation to esotericism, like the Harlem Renaissance, Randolph, and Vodou, there is no doubt that the impact esoteric traditions have had on African-American culture is greater than many understand. It is regrettable that this impact has been neglected in studies on both Western esotericism and African-American culture, and for this reason alone the book is one of the most important works on Western esotericism published in recent years. But as a pioneering work there are also several white spots that remain to be mapped. For example, I was surprised not to see a chapter on Prince Hall Freemasonry or Afrocentricity, especially since there are direct connections to early Afrocentric writers like George G.M. James, author of *Stolen Legacy* (1954), who based his understanding of history on Rosicrucianism. Also, while the role of esotericism in the Nation of Islam is addressed, the esoteric aspects of other Black nationalist movements like Maulana Karenga's US movement are absent. As a new field it is to be expected that all cannot be included, and the field of Africana Esoteric Studies is hardly exhausted after this volume. While the chapters are somewhat uneven and the definition of Africana Esoteric Studies a bit essentialist the work is still of significant value as it points to a new area of research on Western esotericism that will only enrich the field. Hopefully the volume will inspire more academics from the field of Africana studies to engage more actively with the study of esotericism. And hopefully it will also lead those in the field of Western esotericism to become more engaged with Africana studies, creating a more open and critical discussion on the problems associated with the racialized legacy of the term Western, discussing how to move forward without forgetting the past that has shaped both fields, and identifying how so-called European-based and African-based esoteric movements have integrated and mixed with each other, creating the cultural hybrid that has become "Western" and even more so American esotericism.

Fredrik Gregorius  
[fredrik.gregorius@liu.se](mailto:fredrik.gregorius@liu.se)