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# Multiple Meanings: The Role of Black Gospel in an Interracial and Multi-Ethnic Edmonton Church

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Article abstract

This paper examines the process by which Black gospel music (performed according to aesthetic standards determined by African Americans) has become a site of meaning for both Black and White congregants at Edmonton Community Worship Hour, a church with an interracial and multi-ethnic ministry. Certain "transformations" (or "inversions") are at play in the conceptual systems of the people who attend; each individual has disparate, though intersecting, webs of meaning which become operational in a cross-cultural setting, relating to: the music itself, the method of worship, and the interpersonal relationships of the church's Black majority and White minority.

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## **MULTIPLE MEANINGS: THE ROLE OF BLACK GOSPEL IN AN INTERRACIAL AND MULTI-ETHNIC EDMONTON CHURCH**

*Angela Taranger*

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Meaning, at least ethnomusicologically, is presumed to be a cultural construct. It can be defined simply as the ideas that one has about something experienced in any of a number of ways through one's physical senses. The determination of meaning implies interpretation, and is conditional, therefore, upon one's history and experience. Logically, any experience—for example, listening to certain music—should be most meaningful to those individuals who have a significant history involving the music. It should follow that people who share personal or cultural memories would be most able to respond communally to such an experience. It was, therefore, intriguing to me to attend a church where “Black gospel,” a genre of music rooted in American churches characterized by a de facto segregation, has become part of the pattern of worship of an interracial, multi-ethnic congregation. Subsequently, I became involved in examining the dynamics which make this music, performed according to aesthetic standards determined by African-Americans, a site of meaning for Black and White congregants at Edmonton Community Worship Hour. I suggest that this development has been possible because of certain “transformations” (or “inversions”) at play in the conceptual systems of the people who assemble; each congregant is the repository of disparate, though intersecting, webs of meaning which become operational in a cross-cultural setting, relating to the music itself, the worship experience, and the interpersonal relations that obtain.

Edmonton Community Worship Hour, or ECWH, as it is more commonly known, is located centrally in Edmonton, Alberta, a city of well over 600,000 people. Its congregation practices a style of worship permeated by the music and speech idioms of the American Black church—understandably so, since the church's minister and founder, Rev. Johnny T. Collins Sr., is African-American. However, its mandate is not exclusionary; rather, it has proclaimed itself to be, since its inception in the late 1980s, “a multicultural congregation, coming from many nations.”<sup>1</sup> ECWH now numbers a weekly congregation of about 150 people, and has an increasingly visible profile in the greater Edmonton community, not only because of the heterogeneity of its people, but also because of the distinctiveness of its music.

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase forms part of the mission statement, printed weekly in the church bulletin.

The people at ECWH are visibly diverse, Black congregants outnumbering White at a ratio of about three to one. However, these obvious differences may mask others, just as significant, suggested by the variety of speech patterns to be heard from the pulpit, in the foyer, or during pre- and post-worship visiting in the pews. These patterns reflect places of origin in Africa, Europe, and the Americas, notably the Caribbean.

My association with ECWH extended from the fall of 1994 to the fall of 1996, during which time I attended the Sunday morning worship service on a semi-regular basis. Music played a far more significant part in the structure of this service than in any other of which I had previously been a part. It was present, in one form or another, during more than half of the two-hour program. As well, the boundary between song and speech was indistinct, songs being embellished by spoken responses, and prayer and sermon often characterized by a chanting, semi-musical style. In addition, the members of the congregation acted as participants in the dynamic creation of the worship space, seeming sometimes to take ownership of the process of praise. Thus, particularly in songs, but also, to some extent, in prayers and sermons, participants prolonged the moment through clapping, bodily movement, verbal interjections, poly-phonic responses, and applause. Such participation was condoned (even encouraged) by the leaders.

I became fascinated by the process through which this style of music had assumed a personal importance to individuals representing unusually varied histories. When people who attend the church are asked, on their first visit, to indicate what brought them there, often the response is that they have "heard about the music." Sometimes it is unclear if they are referring to the choirs, to other music performed by soloists or ensembles, or to the congregational singing. Perhaps they are uncertain themselves until they have attended, listened, and participated. Regardless of the vehicle of performance, however, all of it embodies stylistic features commonly found in Black gospel and, by extension, in African-American-influenced contemporary music at large. Mellonee Burnim and Portia Maultsby have noted the correlation between Black sacred and secular music performances:

Afro-Americans repeatedly point to a resonance between Black sacred and secular musical performances, which have in common certain components: dance, vocal and instrumental technique, style of delivery, manipulation of text, timbre, rhythm, visual image (e.g. dress), and audience feedback. For each type of music, *the principles underlying the performance remain the same*; only the outward manifestations of the components differ, and frequently these differences are negligible.<sup>2</sup> (Italics mine.)

The familiarity of such features to the people who enter the doors of ECWH can be assumed, in that much of the contemporary secular music with which

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<sup>2</sup>Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, "From Backwoods to City Streets: The Afro-American Musical Journey," in *Expressively Black: The Cultural Basis of Ethnic Identity*, ed. Geneva Gay and Willie Baber (New York: Praeger, 1987), 132-33.

they are familiar has been produced in accordance with aesthetic standards informed, defined, and performed in significant measure by African-American musicians and scholars. That is, certain qualities of style and content found in blues, rhythm and blues, jazz, soul, and, of course, gospel, are perceived as “cool” by consumers of popular culture, including those of us attracted to ECWH precisely because its music demonstrates these. As April Dunbar, a white, classically trained musician who sings in the ECWH choir, explains:

There’s a lot of joy in it, y’know ... and it’s cool! It helps me to realize in a way that God is not just ... up there—He’s cool! He’s mighty! He’s the inventor of music, and He has fun with it.<sup>3</sup>

Upon what basis has this woman, and other persons to whom I spoke, made this judgement? How have African-American musical standards become so meaningful to them? Ingrid Monson suggests one answer, in discussing the process by which pioneering Black jazz musicians recognized, appropriated, and commented upon other musics.<sup>4</sup> According to Monson, these musicians inverted customary canonic musical standards through their improvisations upon European-American art music and popular music forms in ways which “improved” them. In the process, they used elements of harmonic, rhythmic and improvisational complexity—qualities also valued by the classical Western aesthetic—with skill and sophistication. They thus satisfied the criteria of both European and African-American musics. In ways such as these, African Americans have been major voices in the articulation of a musical aesthetic which allows for the mastery, transformation, and, frequently, the inversion of mainstream musical expectations. Of course, it should not have been necessary for musicians operating in an “other” aesthetic system to prove their legitimacy by playing the game according to “classical” standards. However, by so doing, they have provided a bridge of understanding by which people of both cultures could (to some extent) enter into, and appreciate, the musical world of each “other.”

Accordingly, when the congregants at ECWH hear, or perform, Black gospel music, they are better able to relate to it in terms of its own aesthetics. One of the choir members, an African Canadian who has a history of performance in Western art music forms as well as rhythm-and-blues, speaks of “adjusting his throat” when he wants to sing “Black” rather than “White.”<sup>5</sup> Other congregants, both Black and White, express the process of learning how to produce a good Black gospel sound. Some of them have come to the church precisely because this *sound* is meaningful to them. It is a point of entry. They may become members of a praise team or of the choir, singing in a Black musical style to homogeneously Black churches in California<sup>6</sup> and to all-White

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<sup>3</sup>April Dunbar, interview by the author, 1 March 1996, Edmonton.

<sup>4</sup>Ingrid T. Monson, “Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation: Irony, Parody, and Ethnomusicology,” *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (1994): 293.

<sup>5</sup>Choir member and congregant Jae Mack, interview by the author, 1 May 1996, Edmonton.

<sup>6</sup>The choir at ECWH regularly travels to the western United States to perform.

churches in Alberta. Or, they may participate as worshippers in the pews who, nonetheless, find themselves, in some sense, “performing” music. In so doing, they find it an increasingly personal expression of their own religious feelings.

It was in exploring with several people how this process occurs that I realized just how individual such experiences are. When we listen to, or participate in, a musical performance, our *prior experiences and knowledge* contribute to a continuous reappraisal of what we see and hear. Our expectations regarding aesthetics and behaviour result in a fluctuation of associations—*successive and repetitive inversions* during which certain significances advance and recede with the coming to bear of new perceptions; assessments are revised in accordance with whatever set of expectations becomes momentarily foregrounded.

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As an illustration of this process of interpretation, I cite my own experience, during a Sunday morning performance at ECWH, of a hymn called “In the Garden.”<sup>7</sup> In so doing, I make reference to a conceptual model developed by Steven Feld who suggests that we consider the action of listening in terms of five general categories—*locational, categorizing, associational, reflective, and evaluative*.<sup>8</sup>

The *locational* move positions a musical object in relation to the listener’s own identity and history. As a White woman whose childhood religious experience was within a small-town, homogeneously White, fundamentalist church, I first remember this song as a solo sung only by people who were then much older than me. It always seemed to me to be in some sense old-fashioned, in that the waltz-like 6/8 rhythm and garden metaphor connoted sentimentality, something which was, of course, anathema to a young person concerned with “coolness.” In those performances, I would have sat passively, enduring until the end. Certainly, I would never have applauded.

At the same time as I was remembering earlier musical encounters with “In the Garden,” I was *categorizing* it, placing it within the rubric of old gospel hymns written during the later- nineteenth or early-twentieth century and distinguished, on one hand, from hymns with a more venerable history, such as the ones written by Martin Luther and Charles Wesley, and, on the other, from so-called contemporary gospel songs and choruses which began making an appearance in the 1940s. The latter were a staple of the churches I attended, while the former also retained a position there, representing tradition and orthodoxy. Gospel hymns of the vintage of “In the Garden” had, however, dropped out of favour.

These historical remembrances became part of the *associational* moves I experienced as I listened to the solo sung by Renée Collins, the minister’s wife, that Sunday morning at ECWH. This time, the song moved slowly and delib-

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<sup>7</sup> Words and music by C. Austin Miles (1868–1946). This hymn can be found in Wesley L. Forbis, ed., *The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Steven Feld, “Communication, Music, and Speech About Music,” in *Music Grooves*, ed. Charles Keil and Steven Feld (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 86–87.

erately, with spaciousness and metrical freedom, the voice employing stylistic devices—pauses, mid-phrase and even occasional mid-word breaths, and added notes in the form of embellishments—which had the effect of highlighting particular words. The piano accompaniment facilitated this process by maintaining a seamless fabric of scale, chord, and arpeggio motifs, allowing the soloist the freedom to stretch and condense notes at will.

The vocalist declaimed her words with very clear articulation, employing an almost “punching” delivery. The voice itself had a grainy quality and the vibrato, very slight during the quicker notes, became much wider and more pronounced on notes that were held longer. The pitch of some notes was approached obliquely, moving through a series of microtones before settling into the middle of the note.

The congregation listened intently, many individuals commenting verbally during the sustained intervals, (“Yes!”, “That’s right!”, “I hear ya, Lord!”). Gradually, people began to stand, swaying, raising hands, and breaking into applause, once at a point midway through the length of the song, and again at the end. The whole process seemed less a performance than a communal activity, involving soloist, pianist, and congregation in both a collective expression of praise to God and an affirmation of the ministry of the musicians.

The juxtapositioning of this experience with my own previous familiarity with “In the Garden” resulted in my being acutely aware of every deviation from what had been my norm. I found Renée Collins’s interpretation involving, as well as beautiful, but the deviations themselves had a curiously disorienting effect on me and, more than anything else, made me aware of the interplay of different and sometimes conflicting expectations. At times, when I had become deeply engaged in observing the (to me) unusual techniques of breathing and improvisation, my attention would abruptly shift to the nuance of a word and I would focus momentarily on its textual import. Simultaneously, the mental image of the musical score would be unscrolling in my mind. The shifting multiple associations were often distracting and, at times, almost overwhelming. My senses were being bombarded with unfamiliar sounds, images and movements, and the effort required in the attempt to make meaning of them all, of, in some way, imposing order upon them, was enormous. My experience has on occasion been echoed by that of other people who have spoken of their initial difficulty in focusing on worship when confronted by so many differences.

The experience resulted in my own *reflection* about “similar and dissimilar,” pertaining not only to the techniques of performance, but also to the process of interpretation. Each time Black gospel is sung at ECWH, widely differing sets of associations and expectations are being brought to bear upon it by many people with different histories—Black, White, Canadian, American, male, female—and with different experiences of being alone, part of a family, or the partner in a biracial marriage. In order for all of these people to function as coequals within the community of the church, each must be able to identify with the music.

This identification is particularly meaningful to African Americans in the congregation, reflecting as it does their heritage. But how does it relate to Canadians, both Black and White? What of the African Canadians, for example those of Caribbean origin, or from Winnipeg, or from Amber Valley, Alberta?<sup>9</sup> These congregants are the heirs of music and customs which either move to another beat,<sup>10</sup> or are far removed in time and geography from their American roots. Yet, the enthusiasm demonstrated by African Canadians as they sing American Black gospel leaves no doubt that this music is meaningful to them. Perhaps a part of the answer is suggested by the following comments of a man whose family had emigrated from Jamaica to Toronto, and whose work subsequently brought him to Edmonton:

The music is a unifying force ... The church is a connection to my roots, which I haven't had before. The gospel church is an American-culture church from the States. A lot of the comfort, the feeling of security and belonging, is part of the culture, which I don't have, [but] I can see it through them.<sup>11</sup>

To this man, the music of American Black gospel represents him in a way that other music forms do not, even though he is classically trained in Western art music. It expresses a cultural orientation which, in a sense, he has chosen to embrace, although his own past history makes this more difficult than, as he says, "if I grew up in a culture where I was allowed and taught from the beginning to be expressive." Coming to ECWH is, for him, an identification with a form of worship which expresses his own pride of heritage, and desire to complete his life, in ways that his previous church experiences could not. To him, and undoubtedly to many other African Canadians, American Black gospel is still in some sense *their* music, carrying with it cultural memories of strength and resilience, qualities which enabled the creation of a worship idiom, capable of triumphing over pain and oppression. And ECWH, so publicly identified with the expression of this musical genre, then becomes "home," a place to belong.

It is intriguing that something of the same sense of "instant belonging" was experienced by a White Canadian woman who came to the church desperately needing healing. She was ill, she says, "physically, mentally, and emotionally," but when she walked into the church, she knew this was the place where she would find help. Why? In her case, it is not primarily because of the *sound* of the music (she freely admits to being quite unmusical), but because of the

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<sup>9</sup> Amber Valley is a community in northern Alberta whose residents are the descendants of Black settlers who moved from the southern United States during the first decade of this century, in response to the repression of the Jim Crow laws in the States. The Black community in Winnipeg is also, in part, the result of the same wave of migration.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, a discussion of African-Caribbean calypso music aesthetics by Annemarie Gallagher, in "Trinbago North: Calypso Culture in Toronto," in *Canadian Music: Issues of Hegemony and Identity*, ed. Beverley Diamond and Robert Witmer (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1994), 359–82.

<sup>11</sup> Gene McKenzie, interview by the author, 25 October 1995, Edmonton. (Gene McKenzie grew up in a British Methodist Episcopal Church which delivered what he calls a "White program" to Black parishioners.)

message inherent in the words of the songs. She feels that the church met her need, and perhaps part of the explanation is that she could relate immediately, both to people who would understand (and help her deal with) suffering, and to a message which emphasized hope. Reverend Collins explains it this way:

The seed of gospel music comes out of adversity and a lot of pain. You may work a whole week, but you know when you get to church and Sister Jones, who's had a rough week, sings "Amazing Grace," she is going to sing it in such a fashion that the whole congregation is going to be lifted. What you're really tapping into is the historical tradition of Black gospel music.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, shared experience can result in the blurring of boundaries and colour differences can gradually become unremarkable. The same woman says:

I don't even look at the culture anymore; I just see people as they are. I feel very comfortable.<sup>13</sup>

My own adjustments were complicated. I clearly remember my first time at the church. Never have I been so aware of my "whiteness," in spite of the considerable effort to make me feel welcome. It was a revealing experience which exposed me to the sensations that come as the result of being a member of a visible minority, even if only temporarily. Gayatri Spivak considers such encounters to be essential to the redefinition of intercultural and interracial roles:

What we are asking for is that the ... holders of hegemonic discourse should de-hegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other.<sup>14</sup>

What Spivak seems to be asking for is yet another inversion, that of traditional power relations. To re-present oneself as a cultural minority, when one has been accustomed to feeling comfortable and in control, is to become truly self-conscious. I was extraordinarily aware, for example, of my body—of how I should move (feet, hands, head, hips) during the congregational singing, of which there was a great deal—and I was convinced that I appeared awkward and insecure to anyone who might be watching. Feelings of inhibition may have also resulted in part from what the African-American artist Adrian Piper has identified as a "sense of intrusion," a reluctance "to pretend to be what one is not."<sup>15</sup> In other words, I was conscious, to a degree unusual in most situations, of my self-representation. That this feeling became progressively less acute as time passed indicates the potency of what James Clifford calls the

<sup>12</sup>Rev. J. T. Collins Sr., interview by the author, 1 November 1995, Edmonton.

<sup>13</sup>Congregant Virginia Holmqvist, interview by the author, 12 February 1996, Edmonton.

<sup>14</sup>Gayatri Spivak, "The Intervention Interview," in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 121; quoted in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 346.

<sup>15</sup>From Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 71.



“ironic play of similarity and difference, the familiar and the strange,”<sup>16</sup> to bring about transformation, not only of our images of “others,” but of our “selves.” As we grow increasingly familiar with norms of behaviour and what these signify to other people, they become in some sense a part of our own personal response, factors in our construction of new perspectives, and, perhaps, new identities. We are changed.

These interpretive nuances were only very dimly articulated at the time of Renée Collins’s solo. But already, early in my study of Black gospel, this event provided a practical demonstration of the power of contrasting aesthetic and interpretive languages, formulated through distinctive cultural experiences, to bring renewal to our understandings of music, of ourselves, and of one another. In the words of Erving Goffman, each “hearing” of a song has “a biography and a history” which have implications for remembered, present, and future musical experiences.<sup>17</sup> Certainly the history of this specific hearing has entered my store of memories and will flavour all of my future listenings. As well, it has affected my *evaluation* of both “In the Garden” and the aesthetics of Black gospel, informing this particular performance of it. The connotations suggested to me by the song have been modified; it has, in a very real sense, become “cool.”

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Reflection and evaluation did not, of course, end there. Those of us whose field of study is within a local community, operate with the knowledge that the people among whom we work and whose experience we interpret will, very often, be in a position to critique the product. For us, the potential audience is not only academic; it includes the subjects of our study. Our awareness of this wider audience, and our response to the challenge of giving it voice, has major ethical implications. bell hooks has spoken of the empowerment to be attained through the control of how one is represented.<sup>18</sup> In order for peoples of differing cultures, colours, and creeds to relate as coequals, each must be able to participate in the formulation of self-images which most truly reflect how they perceive themselves, i.e., with complexity and individuality. This necessarily alters our ethical concerns; no longer are we the sole arbiters of what is included and excluded. We may write very much more carefully if we know that we will be held accountable by people who recognize the subtleties of appropriation and condescension as well as, or perhaps better than, we do. Accordingly, when I first attended ECWH, I had been troubled by the whole concept of “studying” people whose experience was, I thought, so different from my own. Initially an outside observer, an academic voyeur, it was only after talking to Reverend Collins that I realized that, in turn, I could become part of *his* agenda. Firstly, as a White congregant, I provided insights regarding

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<sup>16</sup>James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 146.

<sup>17</sup>Erving Goffman, “The Interaction Order,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 1 (1983): 2.

<sup>18</sup>bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992), 1–7, 165–78.

my personal process of accommodation. Beginning to add to my own impressions the insights of other members of the congregation, testing my perceptions against theirs, becoming less a stranger and more a part of the church community, my experiences of "sameness" and "difference" assumed meaning and significance within the context of both the study and the ministry.

Secondly, as an academic, I was recording what he has described as "the search for a blueprint for the church." For ECWH is a very young church, actively engaged in moving out into liminal space, in which former conceptualizations of what it means to be "Black," "White," or both (or perhaps Asian or Latin-American) can be re-examined, revised, and/or discarded in the light of present experience. While together in this context, people are confronted by variance; in a sense, they are setting themselves up for the possibility of discomfort and dislocation. They are actively involved in the transformation of long-cherished conventions. African Americans and African Canadians have fashioned a church identity which most clearly represents them, but are already engaged in modifying it to conform to the evanescent requirements of a living, breathing body of believers. White congregants indicate by their presence their desire to dissociate themselves from positions of hegemony and racism. All of these people are prepared to be vulnerable to possible misunderstanding in the process of learning to communicate and share meaning. And for each of them, in some way, Black gospel music is a catalyst in this process. It has become a language of expression for many people, illuminating aspects of themselves that they may not even have known existed. It cannot mean the same thing to us all, nor is this necessary, but sharing in its experience can have the effect of moving us away from dichotomies of "self" and "other." And surely, learning to see ourselves in creative, transformative ways, where "difference" implies potential rather than threat, is the most powerful inversion of all.

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the process by which Black gospel music (performed according to aesthetic standards determined by African Americans) has become a site of meaning for both Black and White congregants at Edmonton Community Worship Hour, a church with an interracial and multi-ethnic ministry. Certain "transformations" (or "inversions") are at play in the conceptual systems of the people who attend; each individual has disparate, though intersecting, webs of meaning which become operational in a cross-cultural setting, relating to: the music itself, the method of worship, and the interpersonal relationships of the church's Black majority and White minority.