



GTU

Berkeley Journal of  
Religion and Theology

**Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology**

**Volume 6, Issue 1**

ISSN 2380-7458

---

*Editorial*

**Larcenia Floyd and Representations of the Divine: The Path to Justice  
is Black, Feminine, and Interfaith**

Author(s): Ayanna Grady-Hunt

Source: *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 6, no. 1 (2020): 4-9.

Published by: Graduate Theological Union © 2020

Online article published on: December 12, 2020

---

***Copyright Notice:***

This file and its contents are copyright of the Graduate Theological Union © 2020. All rights reserved. Your use of the Archives of the Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology (BJRT) indicates your acceptance of the BJRT's policy regarding the use of its resources, as discussed below:

Any redistribution or reproduction of part or all of the contents in any form is prohibited with the following exceptions:

- You may download and print to a local hard disk this entire article for your personal and non-commercial use only.
- You may quote short sections of this article in other publications with the proper citations and attributions.
- Permission has been obtained from the Journal's management for exceptions to redistribution or reproduction. A written and signed letter from the Journal must be secured expressing this permission.

To obtain permissions for exceptions, or to contact the Journal regarding any questions regarding any further use of this article, please e-mail the managing editor at [bjrt@ses.gtu.edu](mailto:bjrt@ses.gtu.edu)

The Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology aims to offer its scholarly contributions free to the community in furtherance of the Graduate Theological Union's mission.

## **Larcenia Floyd and Representations of the Divine:** *The Path to Justice is Black, Feminine, and Interfaith*

**Ayanna Grady-Hunt**

*Managing Editor (2020-2021)*

*Graduate Theological Union*

*Berkeley, California, U.S.A.*

*Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology*, Vol. 6, No. 1

© 2020 by the Graduate Theological Union

On May 25, 2020, the world watched in horror, fear, disgust, rage, and spiritual despair as a Minneapolis police officer murdered George Floyd, a Black man, in cold blood, on a crowded street in broad daylight. I was with my 97-year old grandmother—a regal Black woman born in the South, with memories both precious and harrowing. Together we sat and watched the news unfold, in sickened silence.

Floyd had been arrested for suspicion of a nonviolent offense. Despite this, and despite his compliance once detained, the officer, Derek Chauvin, lodged his knee into Floyd’s windpipe for eight minutes and 46 seconds, cutting off his air supply, and ending his life. *Eight minutes and 46 seconds*. Later, I read that bodycam transcripts revealed George Floyd cried out “I can’t breathe” more than 20 times. Chauvin’s mocking response was: “It takes a heck of a lot of oxygen to talk.” Chauvin was training a new recruit that day, showing him the ropes.

As George Floyd was dying, he used his last breaths to call out to his mother, Larcenia Floyd. “*Mama, Mama. I love you.*” Larcenia Floyd preceded her son George in death by two years. George Floyd’s devotion to his mother, Larcenia, struck me as a holy utterance. More on that later.

For those who believe in a Divine origin of life, George Floyd’s murder by police in the public square was a spiritual transgression. A complete hollowing of the soul. For those who believe in democracy, in the

rights of all people, regardless of color, gender, class, caste, religion, politics, or sexual preference, George Floyd's murder was a deep breach in the human contract. For those who truly endeavor to be community, as defined by Malidoma Some<sup>1</sup>, the murder of George Floyd was a barbaric, inhumane display of inbred White supremacist ideology. For those who believe, George Floyd's murder demands a systemic rebuke.

Derek Chauvin deserves to spend his life in prison, multiple times over, but a larger evil is at work, much more sinister and cunning. Derek Chauvin represents the recurring cycle of overt racism that rises every generation in this country. The ideology that formed Derek Chauvin—that fuels Make America Great Again, the current Republican Party politics, the behavioral amorality of the conservative religious right, the President of the United States—is a disease that has metastasized and it has infected every facet of U.S. life, including religious discourse.

Beginning with the earliest days of this country's illegal "founding," to the removal of indigenous North Americans, chattel slavery, Jim and Jane Crow, the War on Drugs, mass incarceration of Black and Brown men and women, and now, the murder of Black men and women by police, this country has willingly allowed itself to be governed by a violent White supremacist ideology—Melanie Harris has defined this as the "logic of domination"<sup>2</sup>—in service to its own self-image.

However, just as cycles of evil rise, so do theoethical justice paradigms rise to counter them.

## **The Enduring Legacy of Slavery and Plantation Politics**

Many White citizens in the United States, and global citizens abroad, were shocked by the brutality of George Floyd's murder at the hands of the police. Black citizens worldwide are, unfortunately, not unused to embodying these tragedies on a recurring basis. Case in point, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Aubrey, Rayshard Brooks, and Daniel Prude were all non-violent, unarmed Black men and women killed by police or former police in

---

<sup>1</sup> Malidoma Some, *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community: The African Teachings of the Dagara* (New York: Penguin/Arkana, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Melanie Harris, *EcoWomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017).

the first six months of 2020. Black citizens have no realistic expectation that the full measure of justice in any of these cases will be served.

The history of violence against Black and Indigenous Americans in the United States is as cunning as it is devastating in its longevity. Meticulous research has uncovered the insidious routes the legacies of slavery, Jim and Jane Crow, and segregation have taken to maintain White supremacist power, all while under the guise of being post-racial. Research has also revealed how police departments across the country have been enforcers of that hidden code.

In her stunning 2016 documentary, *13<sup>th</sup>*, Ava DuVernay exposed the hypocrisy embedded within the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. DuVernay's documentary exposed the amendment's fine print which reads, "*Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, **except** as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States.*" DuVernay linked the legacy of this amendment to the staggeringly disproportionate rate of imprisonment of Black men and women compared to Whites. The mass incarceration of Black people in the United States is a moral epidemic hiding in plain sight.

The 1619 Project, published in the New York Times Magazine in August 2019 and curated by Nikole Hannah-Jones, is an investigative religio-social-cultural examination of U.S. slavery and its lingering imprint on existing social structures, ideologies, and policies. In a recent dialogue, Jones connected the legacy of pre-Civil War slave patrols with modern day policing. Jones says: "Whites were deputized to police enslaved communities, to ensure slaves were only in the places they were allowed, to put down slave insurrections, and gave them practically unlimited power to stop, question, and even execute enslaved people."<sup>3</sup>

As I listen to Jones speak, I am reminded of the 2015 stalking and murder of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. Zimmerman, a judge's son, claimed to be part of the Neighborhood Watch when he killed unarmed Trayvon, 17 years old. At the time, I held a mother's fear for my

---

<sup>3</sup> CBS News, "Nikole Hannah-Jones on protests and the roots of racism in the U.S.," accessed September 20, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/nikole-hannah-jones-1619-project-roots-of-racism-slavery/>.

then-15 year old son, who reminded me in so many ways of Trayvon Martin. I held and hold the fear of all Black mothers.

## **The Theo-ethics of Divine Black Mama**

Following the murder of George Floyd, White people in large numbers began protesting all over the globe. I believe the economic and physical moratorium that the novel coronavirus ushered in created mental, spiritual, and emotional space for people to see and hear what Black people have been trying to show them for years: a searing and acute awareness of the systemic killings of unarmed Black men and women by police.

My grandmother and I watched as people all over the world protested police brutality. Black Lives Matter slogans and mantras were seen and heard in major cities all over the globe. Night after night for several weeks, protests filled with many White and young adult faces, were displayed on news screens.

I found myself lingering on George Floyd's final words. The wrenching, raw despair within them, but, also, the inherent hope they offered. When he called out for his mama, in his abject isolation, he connected to an instinctual awareness of who Mama *is*. For most of us, she is our first experience of love and protection. George Floyd—in a state of semi-consciousness or, as African religious traditions believe, already existing somewhere between the ancestral realm and the material realm—drew on his most profound awareness of that protection and love.

George Floyd's sacred utterance holds crystal clear specificity—Larcenia Floyd was a Black mama. George Floyd cried out to the one who *knew*. In her collection of essays, "Christ Our Black Mother Speaks," Christina Cleveland writes: "Unlike most of society, Christ our Black Mother does not need to be convinced that we've been wronged, that we're hurting, that amends need to be made. We don't need to beg her to see our humanity, our bruises, our bleeding."

I believe Larcenia Floyd was with her son in his final moments—as an African ancestor and a Divine presence. I also believe that she delivered a message. As a scholar, I merge womanist thought, African Traditional Religions, and archetypes of the Feminine Black Divine toward a praxis of

radical self-love and theo-ethical, inter-religious dialogue. I found George Floyd's sacred utterance to Larcenia Floyd to illuminate seeds toward a generative path to inter-religious dialogue, particularly through a theo-ethical interpretation of the Black Mother as Divine Love, Protection, and Justice.

Using a womanist hermeneutic, I interpret George's invocation—*Mama, Mama. I love you.*—to encompass very specific attributes of Divine Black Mama and point us toward Her particular theo-ethical paradigm.

She is fierce protection. A ubiquitous expression from mamas in the Black community is "*Get inside before the street lights come on!*" That is mama protecting her children from the real life monsters that hide in the dark. She remembers the laws of "sundown towns" that sanctioned the beating, arrest, and murder of Black people who were outside once the sun set. She can also go full "mama bear" to protect her young from predators, and the myriad systemic injustices and micro-aggressions Black children face daily. Mama's protection becomes the backbone of a child's social and emotional welfare.

She is instruction, formation, and wisdom. When we are young, she warns us against touching a hot stove or running into the street, and we are chastised when we don't obey. As we get older, her warnings turn to wisdom, for example, when she forbids us from certain places and people. Her lived experience has taught her how to trust her instinct and be vigilant. This shrewd intuitiveness is what she attempts to pass on to her children.

She is balance and reciprocity. She is constantly at work to keep the family together, forcing us to "talk it out" when there is discord. Those who remain silent in the face of injustice, or allow discursive hegemonic narratives to dominate dinner discussions, could invoke the theo-ethics of Divine Black Mama to challenge white supremacy within their own families.

Divine Black Mama births us daily into right relationship with ourselves, each other, and the physical earth. She sees and bears witness to injustice, recorded and unrecorded. She demands restoration. Her mere presence demands that we do right by the human family.

Divine Black Mama is religiously diasporic and called by many names. Ma'at, Mami Wata, Nana Buruku, Odu, Yemoja, Ma Kali, Black Sara, Oya,

Olokun, Wadjet, Auset, Aida Wedo, and Nut. She is the Black Madonna of Montserrat. She is Larcenia Floyd, existing as an African ancestor, watching over her son.

Worship of a Black Feminine Divine has been buried in religious discourse. Not because it is implausible, but because discursive narratives and perverted imagery of the Divine reveal Whiteness as God's primary attribute. If we embraced Divine Black Mama and interpret her theo-ethics within our own context as members of the human family, imagine the countless ways we might show up for ourselves and each other more justly.

As we enter this new season of scholarship and study amidst a global pandemic, a bizarre Presidential election, and a growing, searing comprehension of systemic evil, I would like to see the BJRT plumb even deeper wells of religious and spiritual experience. Theo-ethical narratives generated from primordial truths that shock and dislodge us from rigid silos into embracing the radical religious and spiritual diversity we bring to our scholarship and our theo-ethical praxis. Our location at the GTU provides us with unique opportunities to experience the colors, tastes, sounds, feels of the Divine from multiple locations. This season is a rare moment for us to be different with one another. Let us not squander it! Divine justice is at work in the world in a big way.

## **Bibliography**

CBS News. "Nikole Hannah-Jones on protests and the roots of racism in the U.S." Accessed September 20, 2020. <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/nikole-hannah-jones-1619-project-roots-of-racism-slavery/>.

Harris, Melanie. *EcoWomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017.

Some, Malidoma. *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community: The African Teachings of the Dagara*. New York: Penguin/Arkana, 1997.