

Destroyer and Preserver: The Significance of Religion in Marcus Gardley's Drama

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Abstract

The post-black playwright, Marcus Gardley has been concerned with the concept of African American identity as defined within the nexus of diverse socio-cultural elements. This study explores the role of religion as an integral and indispensable constituent of African American identity in three of Gardley's plays, namely, *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*, *The House That Will Not Stand*, and *A Wolf in Snake Skin Shoes*, while considering the relevant cultural and sociological studies on the role of religion in African American communities. Drawing upon the conception of identity in the framework of African American criticism, the focus of this paper is on Gardley's intricate portrayal of the function of the church and religious beliefs in shaping black identity. It is argued that Gardley's insightful and multilayered depiction of religion in his drama delineates a rather complex and paradoxical function where African American identity both benefits from, and bears the negative impacts of, religiosity. This study reveals that, in Gardley's plays, Christianity sometimes acts as a soothing balm to African Americans who have for long fought not only racial discrimination but also collective and individual traumas in various stages of their lives, as seen in the cases of Free, Maud Lynn and Miss SSippi. In some cases, however, a type of Christianity promoted by the black church is presented as an obstacle in the way of some African Americans' recognition of their true identity, as observed in the case of Gumper.

Keywords: Marcus Gardley, *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*, *The House That Will Not Stand*, *A Wolf in Snake Skin Shoes*, Religion, Christianity, Black Identity

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1. Introduction

In *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays*, Harry Elam and Douglas Jones argue that a paramount and “overriding preoccupation” of post-black plays and their aesthetics is “the problem of identity.” These plays, they maintain, strive to answer “the question of who we are, *now*,” and, in answering the question, “they respond to the ways in which not only new socio-cultural circumstances but legacies from the African American past shape African American identities in the present” (Elam and Jones 2012: xii).

Marcus Gardley is a contemporary post-Black African American playwright whose works particularly deal with the question of African American identity. Often adapting other famous literary works or myths, he tries to depict the contemporary issues of African American life in the light of past historical facts and fiction. In addition to skin color, which is a distinctive racial indicator, other characteristics, such as religious beliefs, certain linguistic features, and Afrocentrism, have served to indicate and emphasize the identity of Afro-Americans in Gardley’s works.

2. Objective and Scope of the Study

This paper attempts to provide a new reading of Marcus Gardley’s plays by focusing on religion as a defining African American identity marker in three of his plays: . . . *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*, *The House That Will Not Stand*, and *A Wolf in Snake Skin Shoes*. For this purpose, we will draw on several scholars who have studied the role of religious beliefs and the black church in the formation and maintenance of African American identity.

3. Significance of the Study

In *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, Ron Eyerman explains that “slavery, not as [an] institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance . . . grounded the identity-formation of a people” (2003: 1). It is due to the bitter historical fact of slavery that African Americans are still considered a marginalized minority in America, even though a large minority which has made much progress in acquiring equal rights, particularly in the last 60 years or so. When Eyerman takes the trauma of slavery as a cultural process that is “mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory” (1), he is partly referring to the artistic representations of that trauma as an ongoing issue that needs attention. Thus, the study of African American literature, especially those realistic works that focus on defining elements in the culture, identity, and lives of African American people, is of significant value to our knowledge of contemporary America. In this context, investigating the literature produced by the new generation of Afri-

can American writers can help update our understanding of the ways in which these writers still engage with the question of identity and its connections with cultural traditions and history.

4. Review of Literature

While Gardley's plays treated in this paper have been subject to several short reviews that mostly focus on their theatrical aspects and present no detailed or well-supported argument, there is only one academic article that studies Gardley's . . . *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi* in terms of the relationship between black identity and history. In "Reconstruction, Fugitive Intimacy, and Holding History," Soyica Colbert argues that, in the play, Gardley tries "to situate how slavery shapes black (sexual) embodiment," and disrupts "the division between human and non-human" and renders "identity as an unsettled mode of being rather than a fixed state" (2019: 510). In the Introduction to *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays*, Harry and Jones contend that, in *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*, "the world of the Civil War provides the setting in which Greek myth, talking trees, singing rivers, and a moonwalking Jesus combine to interrogate the politics of sex and the body" (2012: XXX). Robert Hurwitt, in his review of Gardley's play, contends that . . . *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi* "combines an intensely personal wrestle with the immediate legacy of slavery during the Civil War with a religious quest in a freewheeling ricochet of metaphors and a mashup of stereotypes" (2010). Chad Jones, on the other hand, claims that Gardley "weaves myth, folklore, American Civil War history, personal family history and musings on race in this country" (2010).

Michael Billington finds *The House That Will Not Stand* "a rich mix" in which "Gardley vividly captures the sense of a house not only divided against itself but also caught up in a war of different traditions" (2014). In the New York Times review of the above play, Ben Brantley argues that the house in the play is a metaphor for "the corrupt institution of slavery. Or rather slavery in many forms — cultural, familial and religious, in a world where worth is measured by skin tones" (2018).

In his review of *A Wolf in Snakeskin Shoes*, Billington wonders "whether the play was an assault on religion or simply on those who exploit it to pursue their own ends" (2015), implying the significant role of religious beliefs in the play. Another reviewer, Aleks Sierz, believes that religious faith is a "central occupation" in the play and argues that the play includes "themes of religious healing, 'curing' homosexuality, exploring roots, and the relationship between men and women" which make it "a spirited satire whose cartoon characters occasionally reveal unexpected depths" (2015).

5. Research Questions

In this study, we examine the role of religion in Gardley's plays and present an answer to the following questions: A) How does religious belief affect the behaviour and identity of the main characters in the plays? B) What is the role of the Black church in forming the identity of these characters?

6. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This article draws on a number of studies in the fields of sociology and social psychology that have investigated the concept of collective identity, particularly in the lives of African American people, for their varied connections to religion and the church. In this paper, we mostly draw on Vivian L. Vignoles and Hecht et al.'s conceptions of identity. Also, Elijah G. Ward, Deborah E. S. Frable, and Mattis and Greyman-Simpson provide us with the basic arguments about the relationship between identity and religion, as well as the influence of the Black church on African American identity and the role of that church in dealing with the black LGBT+ community. After providing some definitions and the results of studies on the role of religious beliefs and the black church in forging African American identity, we will present an analysis of Gardley's plays to see how he depicts these issues in the lives of their characters.

6.1. Religion as a Dominant Identity Marker

As a challenging and controversial concept, identity has been defined and redefined according to distinct functions and variants. As Vivian L. Vignoles puts it, identity refers to "how people answer the question, 'Who are you?'" which can be posed "explicitly or implicitly, at a personal or a collective level, to others or to oneself" (Vignoles 2012: 1). The concept of identity can also be defined as "a code for being" which "provides the means for understanding self, interaction, relationships, and society by defining the nature of self and social life" (Hecht et al. 2013: 231). Identity, in fact, refers to the process of "orienting the self toward particular cultural frameworks while defining, negotiating, and reconstructing aspects of the self via interaction with others" (46). These aspects or elements that shape people's identities are called identity markers. It is important to know that "identity development cannot be inspected without a thorough contextualization of the individual's life within the parameters of society and culture (Watzlawik 2012: 259). As Watzlawik asserts, there are different "facets" that shape "the structure of identity" such as culture, religion, and gender (253). She believes that "of all indicators for ethnic or cultural identities, religion, and gender role orientation" hold a remarkably immense significance (255).

Religion, as an influential factor in African American identity formation, has been investigated by a number of sociologists and cultural scholars. Exploring the link between "Religion and Identity," Steward Harrison Oppong examines the strength of the correlation between religiosity and identity formation in different demograph-

ic situations and periods and generally argues that, depending on the demographic group covered, the circumstances, and the period of time, religion is one of the key determinants of identity formation. Highlighting the significant impact of religion on the construction of identity, Oppong observes a “positive correlation” between religious commitment in general and achieving a true concept of social identity. He also states that religion expresses a “deep sense of unity,” and points out that the formation, intensity, and amount of the internalization of individuals’ religiosity depend on multiple factors such as personal choice, the period in which one lives, and the influence of one’s parents as well as that of the community to which one belongs (Oppong 2013: 15).

Studies reveal that religiosity and spirituality are of high significance in black communities. Statistics show that almost “eighty-nine percent of African American adults self-identify as religious; 78% attend religious services regularly; and 90% pray, meditate, or use religious materials” (Mattis and Grayman-Simpson 2013: 547). Despite the fact that Christianity was not the original religion of the enslaved Africans and was imposed upon them by the whites in power, it is now considered as one of their chief identity markers. “Negro is a very original being,” writes Zora Neale Hurston, explaining that while living and moving in a white society, the black individual “reinterpret[s]” everything that he touches for his own use. She believes that “he has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine, and most certainly the religion of his new country” (Hurston 2000: 37).

Reporting that the supporters of African American churches “contribute \$1 billion a year to their parishes, and total assets are believed to exceed \$10 billion,” Hecht et al. also argue that black churches are “a purveyor of the cultural and spiritual cornerstone of the community” (21). They add that African American churches are integral to the study of the “social reality” of the members of any Afro-American community (21). Religion and spirituality, therefore, are evidently dominant in many aspects of black lives and hold the power to highly affect their racial, cultural, and even sexual identity.

6.2. African American Church and Black Cultural Identity

Elijah G. Ward believes that within the United States, black churches have been holding an immensely instrumental and dominant role in African American culture and black society (Ward 2005: 495). He further writes that, for almost 250 years, the black church has been “the organizational and cultural matrix from which many black social institutions and forms of artistic expression emerged and have been sustained” (495). Daniel and Smitherman also affirm the sociocultural role of the church when they argue that “the traditional Black church becomes more than a church . . . It is a human phenomenon responding to social and economic upheavals” (28).

Likewise, Richard Wright contends that “it was through the portals of the church that the American Negro first entered the shrine of Western culture.” He further explains that “living under slave conditions of life, bereft of his African heritage, the Negroes’ struggle for religion on the plantations between 1820-60 assumed the form of a struggle for human rights.” He adds that their struggle proved to be of a “revolutionary” nature until religion started to function as therapeutic for all their pains. Emphasizing the significance of the church, he writes, “even today there are millions of American Negroes whose only sense of a whole universe” somehow depends on “the archaic morphology of Christian salvation” (Wright 1980: 47).

Affirming the contribution of the church to African American culture, Leroi Jones (mostly known as Baraka), in his work, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, refers to spirituals as the precursor of Gospel music. He also highlights the impact of spirituals on the rhythmic style of black conversation as well as on some musical genres such as rock and roll and blues.

6.3. Religion, Psychological Health, and Black Identity

The church can highly influence the psychological health and identity of African Americans. Since the very beginning of slavery in America, African Americans have endured extreme, horrific, and unspeakable experiences that have left lasting scars on their collective memory. These horrendous events include slavery, lynching, racial segregation, white supremacist laws, denial of civil rights, and inequalities in criminal justice, some of which continue to exist. Consequently, the psychological health, self-image, and mental well-being of African Americans have been negatively affected.

In this context, the black church has proved to be a highly efficient means of acquiring psychological health and identity. Hecht et al. point out that the black church experience “is more than a religious ceremony; it is a time of communing and relieving stress through emotional catharsis” (157). As an essentially constructive means of maintaining a healthy sense of identity, religious involvement has proved to be of great help in reducing the stress factors which negatively impact the healthy formation of identity.

In a like manner, Mattis and Grayman argue that African Americans whose “safety, well-being and life conditions” are affected and damaged by the “realities of racism and classism” have a tendency toward religiosity, spirituality, and otherworldly beliefs. They argue that most African Americans, when facing a health problem, tend to turn to the church ministers for help and solace. Emphasizing that “the relationship between religiosity and race appears to be dynamic rather than unidirectional,” they believe that “these tendencies may prevent feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness and may buffer against assaults on a personal sense of esteem and

efficacy” (550).

6.4. Black Churches and the Issues of Homosexuality and Hyper-masculinity

Sexuality and gender identity are highly significant in the shaping of the individual’s overall sense of identity, especially for LGBT+ communities. While, as Deborrah E. S. Frable notes, sexual/gender identity, in the domain of medicine, refers to the “individual’s psychological sense of being male or female” (Frable 1997: 147), it is sometimes considered as “a political statement and not just information about self-perception” (157). One of the most controversial and salient issues in the realm of sexual identity is homosexuality. Historical records show that homosexuality has never been welcomed or accepted by the majority of people, especially when religious ideologies started to propagate their moral codes. Frable, for instance, explains that, in the nineteenth century, it was believed that homosexual practices and behaviors shaped a specific, distorted sexual sense of identity and such identity was characterized as a “sickness” (150).

Mattis and Grayman assert that “Homophobia in the church may also negatively affect individuals’ efforts to seek emotional, social, or instrumental supports from religious leaders, coreligionists, and religious institutions as a whole.” They also believe that “homophobia may limit individuals’ ability to coherently integrate their sexual, racial, and spiritual identities (e.g., individuals may be unable to reconcile their identities as Black, gay, and Christian or Muslim with their understandings of God and of faith life)”. They finally assert that “although faith life appears to shape racial identity positively, the link between religiosity, mental health and other social identities (e.g., sexual identity) may be less positive” (550). As a spiritual ark, the black church has been mostly empowering and supporting African American communities for a long time. It has been influencing, whether directly or indirectly, the lives of both religious and nonreligious people. As Ward argues, what is striking about this prevalent eminence of the church is “the influence it wields indirectly in the lives of those blacks that are not churchgoers.” He adds that “even if as adults they no longer embrace the church or religious principles, many blacks have been profoundly influenced by the church ideology and imagery with which they were raised, and this continues to influence their later beliefs and practices” (495). In other words, African American LGBT+ individuals, whether religious or non-religious, are also affected by the religious ideologies inculcated in them.

The church, however, has very often taken a rather unsympathetic stance toward LGBT+ individuals. Angelique C. Harris’s “Review: Homosexuality and the Black Church” reveals that some pastors had to avoid the issue of homosexuality in their churches so that the members of the congregation would not be offended and leave the church (Harris 2008: 267). It also notes that African American LGBT

people who cannot find “spiritual confirmation and religious support” within the mainstream black churches, will find solace through practicing other religious beliefs such as Protestant Christianity, Buddhism, Haitian Voodoo, and Shamanism (268). In “We Wear the Mask: African American Contemporary Gay Male Identities,” Edward Brown refers to many notions such as race, family, and religion as major contributing factors in determining “the level of sexual identity acceptance or rejection by African American gay men” (Brown 2005: 36). Mattis and Grayman explain that those African American LGBT people who are members of religious and faith communities that welcome their identities will have fewer identity problems. “Those who remain in religious institutions that are hostile to LGBT identities, however, are often exposed to homophobic messages that can undermine their well-being and self-worth” (550).

It would be simplistic, however, to think that this issue is limited to the black church only. Affirming that “within the composite African American community, there is still public disdain for homosexuality,” Hecht et al. write that “by proclaiming a homosexual identity, one immediately distances oneself from the composite heterosexual community, which is why many homosexuals keep their sexuality secretive or ‘closeted’” (220). Hecht et al. explain that there are further consequences: “with social distance may come social penalties, such as community ostracism, violence, and discrimination” (220). Gregory B. Lewis contends that unsympathetic feelings toward homosexuality are much stronger in African American communities than in white communities and that “blacks disapprove of homosexuality more strongly than whites”, adding that “nearly three-quarters of blacks say that homosexual relations are always wrong, and over one-third say that AIDS might be God’s punishment for immoral sexual behavior” (Lewis 2003: 75).

Harris claims that black churches have been trying to preserve their power through sexual oppression. As she further explains with reference to Michel Foucault, “all forms of sexual oppression are based in power struggles; by oppressing the body and sexuality of another individual, control is enacted over her or him” (265). This could explain why some extreme homosexual behaviors are interpreted as acts of resistance against white dominance. Hecht et al. explain that “these legal, informal, and religious attempts to control African American gays and lesbians are, in a sense, asking them to assimilate into a heterosexual world as well as accept the largest identity negotiation imperative of their lives” (222). They also add that such enforced assimilation might lead them to disown an integral aspect of their identity. Consequently, “many African American gay men and women are in constant negotiation to define and redefine their sexual and cultural identities as they face ascribed identities that demean and threaten them” (222).

Ward refers to American black churches as “a significant source of the ho-

mophobia” and argues that this attitude “pervades black communities,” is “theologically-driven,” and is “reinforced by the anti-homosexual rhetoric of Black Nationalism” (493). In fact, he claims that the sense of homophobia also “supports a strong and exaggerated sense of masculinity within black communities,” and these attitudes together take “a significant but generally unexamined psychic and social toll on people’s lives” (495). Elsewhere, he explains that “church-related homophobia influences conceptions of what it is to be a black man, thereby influencing the behavior and lives of black males, both straight and gay,” and adds that “heterosexual men who might not normally express hypermasculinity may feel pressure to do so as a result of repeated, impassioned church-inspired homophobic messages.” For Ward, such hypermasculinity provides black men with opportunities for projecting male dominance,” venting the “extra frustrations” imposed by a racist society, boosting their “sense of identity in an uncertain social world” and “precluding questioning about one’s sexual orientation” (498). Thus, black gay men may face many cultural, religious, and racial obstacles on their path to a healthy and genuine self-image, and, incapable of negotiating their sexual identity, they sometimes resort to a fake hypermasculinity.

7. Discussion

Religion and Identity in the Theater of Marcus Gardley

Offering accurate representations of multiple black identity markers and their workings and relationships in *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*, *The House That Will Not Stand*, and *A Wolf in Snake Skin Shoes*, Gardley depicts an intricate and complicated image of the role of religion in African American communities which illustrates a multilayered image of black identity in relation to religious faith and the black church. As a remarkable instance of African American literature and a true product of African American culture, Gardley’s drama is infused with religious concerns and spiritual elements. Church-related images, actions, and conversations are employed throughout the plays to foreground the paramount presence of religion in the everyday life of African Americans. To unravel his representation of black religious identity, other related facets such as cultural, spiritual, and sexual aspects of identity will be explored here. As we will show, Gardley presents both positive and negative images of religion, attributing different functions to it in the lives of African American people.

Religion is particularly highlighted in *A Wolf in Snakeskin Shoes*, which opens in a “charismatic mega church” (Gardley 2015: 3). The play displays a combination of inspiring and disappointing functions of religion by contrasting the hypocrisy of the main character, Apostle Toof, with the innocence and naivety of other characters. The central character is a hypocritical priest who pretends to be trying to guide people

through his frequent religious advice and biblical references. Toof and other characters, especially those who are affected by his words, repeatedly quote the Bible and Jesus to achieve others' approval, explain themselves in their arguments, or persuade people to take a certain course of action. For instance, after Maxine accidentally hits Apostle Toof in the nose, the latter quotes the Bible to report his reaction to the blow to his wife in a way that invokes a Jesus-like character: "I wanted to fight him but I didn't because the Bible says turn thy other cheek" (Gardley 2014: 12). Through Lorreta's warning to Maxine, we learn that Toof has drawn on religious excuses to persuade her to engage in sex with him. Loretta warns Maxine that "This man has been playing you, girl. Not God. That's why you don't have on no dress. Jesus wants you to keep your clothes on; only man desires your flesh" (2014: 15). Also, when Toof tries to persuade his wife to forgive him for his infidelity, he again appropriates the Bible for the purpose: "The Bible says 'for better or for worse' and you took a vow!" (2014: 16). While he is not loyal to his spouse, he asks Loretta to remember their wedding vow and how the Bible advised them to stay together in the hard times.

In addition to frequent quotations from and references to the Bible, often a religious song is heard on the stage to indicate the characters' religious backgrounds. In most scenes, there is a choir singing a religious hymn to praise Jesus or to ask for help from God:

FIRST LADY AND CHOIR: I'm gonna let it shine/ Every day, every day, every day, every day/ I'm gonna let my little light shine./ On Monday: gave me the gift of love/ On Tuesday: peace came from above./ On Wednesday: told me to hide my face/ On Thursday: gave me a little more grace/ On Friday: told me to watch and pray/ On Saturday: gave me the words to say/ On Sunday: gave me the pilot light/ To let my little light shine. (2014: 3- 4)

These religious songs remind us that the action of the play happens in a context dominated by religious beliefs. In fact, for some of the characters, resorting to God for help in the face of hardships sounds thoroughly natural, and even the only solution.

In.... *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*, religion enters and acts in the story in no less important character than Jesus Christ himself, even though the story happens during the 19th century. The characters see him and talk to him. Often there is a reference to the church, too. Miss Ssippi, representing African American culture, is getting ready to go to church and is on her way there in the entire play. She puts on her "Sunday dress" (Gardley 2012: 362), "church hat" (376), and "church gloves" (390) and goes to church while her dress is covered in blood. Her songs often resemble a spiritual hymn:

MISS SSIPI: (*singing*) GONNA PUT ON MY WIDE ROBE/ DOWN BY THE RIVER SIDE/ DOWN BY THE RIVER SIDE./ DOWN BY THE

RIVER SIDE./ GONNA PUT ON MY WIDE ROBE/ DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE./ AND StUDY WAR NO MORE. (*Jesus* 362)

To create a spiritual and religious atmosphere, many songs in the play resemble church hymns, indicating the dominance and central role of Christianity in the everyday lives of the characters.

In *The House That Will Not Stand*, extreme religiosity is depicted through Maude Lynn's character, a devoted Christian who is obsessed with her religion and evaluates her own and others' actions only through a Christian lens. At one point, for instance, she explains to her sisters that their father, Lazare Albans, will suffer in hell because "The word of the Lord says *mon père* is going straight to hell for being an adulterer, a cheat, a curse, a liar, a drunk, a heretic and a sloth" and regrets that she could not save his soul (2014: 11). It seems that, rather than grieving over the death of her father, she mourns his lost soul. She is such a devoted Christian that the fact of being locked up by her sisters cannot bother her so much simply because she thinks it helps her to be a better Christian and a more Jesus-like figure. She says,

Go 'head, tie me up! This just how the Romans did Jesus. He tried to keep folks from the fiery pit but they didn't listen to Him either. So go ahead, tie me! It don't matter that I'm your sister: Jesus' people turned on Him too. It don't matter that I'm starving: Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights. It don't even matter that you're tying me so tight I can hardly breathe: Jesus bled to death! (2014: 29)

Affected by religious ideas she has learned, Maude Lynn doesn't mind physical or emotional damages that she might suffer as long as the pain makes her a better Christian. Indeed, it seems that identification with Jesus not only helps her tolerate the pain but also gives her a sense of spiritual satisfaction and achievement.

Maude Lynn constantly seeks refuge in the Bible in order to achieve comfort, especially after Lazare's death. Sometimes she quotes those parts of the Bible that promise help and salvation such as "Ask and it shall be given unto you; seek and you will find, knock and the door [and the door will be opened for you]" after which the door actually opens and she is rescued by Marie Josephine (2014: 35). Overwhelmed by the news of Agnès and Odette's risky plan, she seeks salvation in Jesus and the cross: "Jesus keep me near the cross" (2014: 22).

Free, in . . . *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*, enjoys more direct access to religious support as she is often accompanied by Jesus himself acting as her imaginary childhood friend. Jesus says to her, "I am strong. The strength of your life. A lamplight unto your feet" (2012: 371). Later she gives her "dolly" to Jesus and believes that if He holds it close, it won't cry (2012: 371). In fact, Jesus assures her not only through His words but also through His actions. For instance, when Free is frightened and Blanche doesn't agree to climb down the tree house with her and see

what is happening in the house, she says that Jesus will be by her side: “Fine, I’m goin’ down. By my lonesome. *Joosta moi. Moi and Jesus*. And I’ze just a *fee- yah*. Goin by herself. A brave lil girl. Bye, Blanche” (*Jesus* 370). Now that she has Jesus by her side, she feels brave. Jesus slides down to the field before her, reassuring her that he will be with her “Till the ends of the world” (2012: 371).

Organdy, too, finds religion healing and comforting. Even though he does not believe in God or any religion and is awaiting his death, he finds solace in Christianity after being preached by Toof. His faith grows so deep that, assuming the love of Jesus is enough, he stops taking medicine and asks God for a direct cure.

When Cheryl Kirk-Duggan informs us that “Black enslaved persons stolen from Africa brought with them a legacy of music, culture, politics, social organization, pedagogy, and ways of being and learning, which included religion, government, and social structures” (Kirk-Duggan 2014: 500), certain practices by Gardley’s characters become more readily understandable. As Ayanna Thompson puts it, “while the African-American Christian spiritual is frequently figured as the key to strength, forgiveness and uplift, Gardley’s play places Christian spirituality in a continuum with African and Haitian practices” (Thompson 2014: xxi). Here, religion’s role in the formation of African American identity is sometimes presented in connection with black music, art, and certain other cultural practices that draw on African cultural heritage and can be taken as instances of Afrocentrism.

In Gardley’s plays, religion is infused with distinct African cultural elements. *The House That Will Not Stand*, for instance, is replete with African practices and black spiritual notions. In this play, we see African spiritual folkways and practices such as Louisiana (New Orleans) voodoo carried out by Creole women. Beatrice narrates how she has cursed Lazare by whispering “a black magic song” (44). She also recites the Apostle’s Creed but also voodoo spells to resurrect Lazare’s body (39). Meanwhile, Makeda sings a song while blowing smoke over a rock and then sprinkling water over it. She asks African gods and spirits to help them: “Spirit of the Ifá/I call on you./Spirit of Pap’ Legba./Bless this house./Clear all obstacles/ In our path./ Will you?/Papa Legba/ bless this house” (39).

Moreover, Jesus is often illustrated as an African American man. Gardley describes Jesus as “black, [with] a warm beauty” who “wears sandals and a robe”. (348) He is the same character who plays The Great Tree, “a black god with terrible wooden limbs that arch from his back like wings, his hair is long and locked with coral shells” (2012: 356). In this way, it can be claimed that Jesus is represented not only as an African American but also as the continent of Africa, with all its ancient and long-standing cultural heritage. Africa, too, considers Jesus as a black man: “Jesus was black. He had hair like lamb’s wool” (2015: 34). Gardley also portrays a black Jesus in Demeter and Free’s conversation:

FREE: Jesus. He say hi.

DEMETER: Tell him I said hello. Where'd you find this Jesus anyway?

FREE: Don't know. Don't remember.

DEMETER: Well, what he look like?

FREE: Like Jesus. Like you . . . but he got magic.

DEMETER: Your Jesus Negro then. Your real momma musta give you that Jesus. (2012: 406)

Gardley's new version of Jesus is a black man with curly hair who wears sunglasses, does beatboxing (2012: 399) and moonwalks (401). Through creating an African Jesus and ascribing black cultural and spiritual images to Christianity, Gardley portrays an Africanized Christianity that helps create a special version of African American identity.

Sometimes, however, Gardley positions African religious beliefs against the European form of Christianity in order to accentuate the outstanding significance of African Americans' cultural roots and black identity. An example of this could be seen in the conversation between Africa and Apostle Toof regarding the behavior of God/gods in *Wolf*:

AFRICA: Yes. But I warn you: I have nineteen gods compared to your one.

APOSTLE TOOF: That may be so but mine is the one true God.

AFRICA: If that's true, isn't that the problem? Most religions respect other faiths but not yours. Your God is jealous and condemns and apparently yells.

APOSTLE TOOF: Actually men do that in His name but my Father is all love all the time. He's a DJ in the radio station in the sky that plays nature music 24/7 from heaven. He's deeply misunderstood.

AFRICA: Then why doesn't He come down from his cloud and make peace.

APOSTLE TOOF: Does the tree ask the leaves why they grow on its branches? Does the ocean ask the fish why it swims in its arms? Why does God need to come to you?

AFRICA: The gods of my grandmothers do. They are present and move through the earth proudly. They give me roots. If you want, I can feed you some. (41)

The "roots" that Africa mentions metaphorically invoke the cultural and historical heritage of African American identity. She praises her African religious practices and juxtaposes them with the European and American versions of Christianity. To her, African gods enjoy a tangible presence in the day-to-day lives of her community that seems to be lacking in the relationships between other Americans and their God.

While the above arguments suggest African Americans' positive and desirable connections with religion and the church, in some cases, Gardley tries to display the

negative impacts of Christianity on black lives and identity. Sometimes characters are represented as having lost their individuality or true identity to their religion and to have turned into the prisoners of their own religious minds. Maude Lynn and Gumper are two such characters. Isolating herself in her Christian world, Maude Lynn does not leave the house and stays in her religious zone with the Bible and Jesus all the time. As previously noted, even when she is literally tied up and locked up in her room, she does not object since she believes she can be a better Christian this way. Marie Josephine's advice also implies the mental imprisonment of Maude Lynn. Before leaving the house, she advises Maude Lynn in the following way:

This world got all kinds of chains, Maude Lynn. Be one thing when somebody is born in chains, be another when you get chains put on ya. But the saddest in all the world is when you put them chains on yourself. You done chained yourself to a cross that God done already died on, my baby. He don't need you to carry it for the rest of us. God needs you to be you. (2014: 56)

Mary's words here not only represent a criticism of Maude Lynne's treatment of herself but also indirectly criticize a naïvely harmful interpretation of Christianity and Christian people's connection with God. In a similar fashion, Dorita believes that "Gumper will be a prisoner of his own heart" (2015: 35) and, in his prayers, implores God to save Gumper and the whole family from Toof's plans. As indicated by the cases of Maud Lynn and Gumper, Gardley sometimes pictures the characters' religious views as a "chain" on them, depriving them of their freedom and a genuine sense of identity. Through the words of Mary Josephine and Dorita, Gardley censures a reading of Christianity that encourages people, especially African Americans, to lead a devastatingly passive life in the name of submission to God.

Gardley also denounces the way Americans abused Christianity to control people and take away their ancestral properties, as well as their rich identity. At the beginning of *A Wolf in Snakeskin Shoes*, Gardley quotes Desmond Tutu, who claimed that "when the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land" (2015: 1). The image of these European missionaries is adroitly presented through the character of Toof, who is a fraud and misuses his status as a priest, thus allowing Gardley to present Jesus/Christianity as a means of European/American abuse of African Americans. In the stage directions of the last act of the play, Gardley attributes a Jesus-like position to Toof when he writes, "the scene looks like the image of the Last Supper as the remaining house of Organdy inhabitants gather around a table and before a great feast. They stand frozen with Apostle Toof center – as Jesus. A bright light falls on him" (60). This representation of Toof or Christ is further stressed in the words of Peaches, who describes Toof as a fraud who

is only after the family's fortune:

PEACHES: [...] I'm not saying there's anything wrong with having faith. I'm callin out the man that administers it. I'm saying that Rev. Toof is a snake! Can't you hear the walls hissing, like he's listening [...] And the minute we turn our backs, he'll eat us all like a light snack with his tea. (2015: 34)

In fact, for Peaches, it is not the Christian faith, but the church's abuse of that faith that should be denounced. Peaches's words also suggest a parallelism between Toof's alleged intentions and the way Europeans exploited Africans, as described in Tutu's claim. Toof is compared to a snake both to imply his satanic and seductive nature and to represent him as a symbol of American/European exploiters of Africa. Just as the Europeans are described by Tutu (and, indeed, Gardley) as confiscating African territories in the name of Jesus Christ, Toof is described by Peaches as looking for an opportunity to devour the people and their fortunes "like a light snack with his tea".

Gardley's multilayered illustration of religion presents a Jesus who is portrayed in such a way as to deliver multiple meanings throughout the plays. He is a black man (Toof/ Jesus) who can sometimes soothe the pains of characters, whether as a source of comfort (e.g., to Maude Lynn/ Organdy) or as a companion or imaginary friend (e.g., to Free). Meanwhile, he is also depicted as a symbol of Christian missionaries who used their religion as a means of exploitation. Thus, Gardley renders religion in a way that evokes memories of the exploitations of blacks through an imposed ideology and past hardships of African Americans' history. Ironically, it is the same ideology that helped the enslaved Africans bear the pain of losing their land to preachers and of the brutality of slavery. By attributing African American features to Jesus, Gardley celebrates an Africanized Christianity while criticizing the whites' version of that religion as an imposition and a means of American exploitation of the blacks.

Gardley also highlights the peril of dissolving one's individuality and identity into an imposed religion. The characters that are referred to as the prisoners of their own minds, blinded by extreme religiosity, deny their true identity. For instance, as pointed out above, Gumper hides his real identity so that Jesus would love him, or Maude Lynn locks herself in her grief and accepts her fate passively so that she would suffer as Jesus did. However, eventually, both characters succeed to step out of their mental prisons. At the end of the story, Maude Lynn breaks the chains and leaves the falling house of Albans; "*With all the courage she can muster, Maude Lynn steps out of the house and exhales!*" (66 [stage direction]). She tells her mother that she wants to live: "Non. Non. I'm done with mourning the dead. I want to live!" (2014: 66). She no longer sacrifices her life for the Bible:

BEATRICE: Don't you dare take another step. The Bible says honor thy mother, which is the first commandment with promise!

MAUDE LYNN: Oui. But it also say that every man seek his own soul's salvation. (66)

The characters are thus encouraged to celebrate their authentic identity and reject the misinterpretations of the Christian faith. Here, as well as elsewhere, Gardley depicts religion as an ideology that can act as an obstacle in the way of finding one's identity and roots. Though religion can be soothing and helpful for African Americans, for some of Gardley's characters, it can also be a placebo given by Europeans to distract them from the real pain of all sorts of injustice. Within his plays, Gardley strongly criticizes Europeans' manipulation of Christianity which is best reflected through Toof's misuse of religion. His words in the final dialogue of the play bear witness to that: "Religion is story. What matters in this world is how you tell that story so that you can survive» (2015: 74). In other words, it is the narrative that creates and shapes the truths of religion.

Another concept that Gardley draws on to enrich his portrayal of African American religious identity is the issue of sexual identity. African Americans' sexual identity is highly influenced by Christian doctrines, and the African American LGBT community is also highly affected by black churches. That is why Gardley also deals with the sexual identity of African Americans in his works. Elam and Jones write that in . . . *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*, "the world of the Civil War provides the setting in which Greek myth, talking trees, singing rivers, and a moonwalking Jesus combine to interrogate the politics of sex and the body" (xxx). They further explain that "by disregarding and distorting sacrosanct narratives and images of Christianity and American history, Gardley pushes us to rethink the lessons and limitations of these institutions vis-à-vis our contemporary moment" (xxx). In his play, *A Wolf in Snakeskin Shoes*, too, the author discusses the undesirable impacts of Christianity on black gay men's identity.

Since homosexuality is often strongly rejected in African American communities, especially through religious institutions such as black churches, homosexual people often conceal their real sexuality. As Hecht et al. assert, "when openly gay-identified African American men and women choose to disclose, they tend to open up to a female family member first, such as a mother or sister, followed by brothers, fathers, other close relatives, and then the distant relatives" (221). These behaviors are particularly revealed through Gumper's character. The first one to whom Gumper reveals his gayness is his sister, Africa. He also explains that he has been concealing his true sexual identity since childhood: "I've realised something about myself that I can no longer hide. There's a secret I've been keeping inside since I was six" (Gardley 2015: 30).

When Organdy learns about Gumper's homosexuality, he cannot accept it. He is deeply influenced by both Christian ideologies and his own cultural beliefs. As an

African American, he supports a strong sense of masculinity, and as a (newly converted) Christian who is highly influenced by Apostle Toof's ideas, he rejects Gumper's real sexuality and castigates him: "Nonsense, I know my son, I know my blood. This boy was born to play golf at the country club. GUMPER?!" (Gardley 2015: 50). Later while Peaches and Africa support Gumper, Organdy asks him to be a man: "Boy, don't let these women get your mind stirred. Be a man" (40). He further considers Gumper's homosexuality as a sickness: "No. No, that's not right. Can't be. Not a piece of me. Not my blood. I don't have that shit in my blood. He must be sick!" (51) In fact, Gumper's sexual orientation is so despicable to Organdy that he tries to distance himself from Gumper and seems even ready to spurn their blood relationship. After Apostle Toof baptizes Gumper in the moonlight to "cleanse" (2015: 54) him so he can be his father's "pride and joy" (51) again, he tells Gumper that now God loves him and he can be a real man:

APOSTLE TOOF:[...] God loves you and he only condemns you because he condemns sin. Lift your hands. Tonight you become a man. I rebuke every demon, every spirit, every sprite, every fairy. I loosen from your heart every flower, every fruit, every Nancy, Pansy, every Mary. [...] I dispatch angels to feed you a carb, to catch you up on rugby, to uncross your legs, to make you sit through *Saving Private Ryan* and break things for no apparent reason. I charge you to bar crawl, to hunt and kill Bambi, to play golf, to be the manliest Organdy to ever please a woman. (55)

Toof's words here reflect the significance of typical male characteristics that are expected of men in African American communities in the same way that they are expected of Gumper by his father, Organdy. Thus, the way Gumper is treated by others is a faithful depiction of the way homosexuals are treated in African American communities, where, highly impacted by religious doctrines, many people treat gayness as a sickness that could and should be cured.

Gardley criticizes the exaggerated masculinity often idealized in African American communities. As in Toof's dialogue, a man can only be manly enough when he plays rugby, watches war movies, drinks profusely, hunts, and breaks things for no reason. After baptism, Gumper claims that he is no longer gay. He says, "I'm delivered. I feel it. I'm not chained anymore and will one day go to Heaven. I don't like mens no more" (Gardley 2015: 56). And, later on, he starts to display a sense of hypermasculinity through some aggressive and fierce behaviors. For instance, he is portrayed as a wolf who is howling along with other men in their excitement after watching a match. As Gardley writes, Gumper and other men act in a rather rough and aggressive manner; "[they] *jump on each other like animals*" (63 [stage direction]). Eventually Gumper in his excitement shouts: "MAN IS A BEAST!" (63).

In order to define hypermasculinity, Mosher and Sirkin draw on terms such as

“frivolous,” “impulsive,” “disliking structure,” “aggressive,” “hot-tempered,” “belligerent,” “rebellious,” “nonconforming,” and “disorganized” (1984: 162). Gumper’s aggressive and violent behaviors thus indicate the hypermasculinity which is often practiced by African American homosexual men. Although Gumper keeps behaving like ‘a man’, at the end of the play, we eventually learn that he has never felt straight and he was trying to win back his father’s love and respect. He actually used hypermasculinity as a mask to hide his real sexual orientation.

Through Gumper’s story, the African American definition of masculinity and the impacts of religiosity on the identity of individuals, even those who are not churchgoers, are highlighted. As previously noted, the European manipulation of religion is reflected through Apostle Toof’s misuse of Christianity. Gardley criticizes sexual oppression seemingly originating in Christianity as a means of maintaining authority and superiority over minority groups. Explaining Michel Foucault’s ideas, Harris writes, “all forms of sexual oppression are based in power struggles; by oppressing the body and sexuality of another individual, control is enacted over her or him” (265). Thus at the end of the play, Gumper’s words to Apostle Toof in defense of his real sexuality can be interpreted as an act of rejection of, and resistance against, the church’s domination: “I can’t believe I let you put your hands on me. Just for the record I never felt delivered – I only kept it silent. I’ve decided not only am I going to be a stewardess but I’m also going to be a pilot.” (Gardley 2015: 70). This is also a defense of his true identity.

8. Conclusion

The influential position of religious faith and black churches in constructing, maintaining, and reflecting African American identity is well depicted and affirmed in Gardley’s plays *The House That Will Not Stand*, *A Wolf in Snake Skin Shoes*, and ... *And Jesus moonwalks the Mississippi*. Gardley’s portrayal of religion as an African American identity indicator is complex and multilayered, serving to illustrate the paradoxical nature of religion. It is also a true reflection of the role of religiosity and spirituality in African American communities suggested by sociological studies of Afro-American culture. The positive and soothing effects of religiosity and spirituality, as well as their damage to African American identity, can both be seen in Gardley’s drama. Religion and spirituality, as promoted by the black church, are sometimes presented as a source of solace and comfort to African Americans. This is for instance, true of Free, Maude Lynn and Miss Ssippi.

On the other hand, the negative impacts of black churches on the development of sexual identity within homosexual black communities (especially black gay men) and the issue of hypermasculinity are also discernable in the plays. These negative effects can be particularly seen in the way Apostle Toof’s treatment of Gumper pushes

him towards a fake hypermasculinity that is ultimately rejected in favor of revealing his true sexual identity.

Our study of Gardley's selected plays also shows that, while disapproving and condemning European/American abuse of religion as a means of control and exploitation of Africans, Gardley presents a version of Christianity that seemingly helps Afro-Americans celebrate their ancestral culture and maintain a sense of their original identity. It can be observed that Gardley's treatment of religion in . . . *And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*, *The House That Will Not Stand*, and *A Wolf in Snake Skin Shoes* is sophisticated and multidimensional, presenting an aspect of Christianity that has served as a means of exploitation while depicting a positive dimension that is rooted, or is imagined as rooted, in African American original culture and which can work as a source of tranquility.

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