The Devout Griot, Emotional Keeper.

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THE DEVOUT GRIOT, EMOTIONAL KEEPER.

by

SHANEQUA GAY

Under the Direction of Pamela Longobardi

ABSTRACT

The Devout Griot, Emotional Keeper evaluates place, tradition, storytelling, and the experiences of African-American women to develop imaginative dialogues and alternative strategies for self-imaging by uprooting social proscriptions and challenging political norms. Within this installation, the paintings, performance, and monumental sculptural figures create an environment of ritual and memorial, depicting amalgamated new gods and mythical figures whose lives have been impacted by systemic inequalities, resulting in counter and re-imagined narratives that, at times, live within the duality of physical and spiritual worlds. This work also explores the historic and contemporary social concerns of hybrid cultures through the gaze of the African-American female progenitor and multimedia exploration to analyze how composite cultures have often been rendered invisible, their identities denied.

INDEX WORDS: African-American, Women, Media, Identity, Storytelling, Spirituality, Cultures, Epistemology, Hybrid
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by

SHANEQUA GAY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Fine Arts
in the College of the Arts
Georgia State University
2019
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2019
THE DEVOUT GRIOT, EMOTIONAL KEEPER.

by

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May 2019
DEDICATION

To my brother Jerome Cortez Gay, I know you are with me in spirit. To my Mother, Dr. Malinda Bell, for every single sacrifice, prayer, and word of encouragement. To my son, Yasir Shakur, my greatest co-creation.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my committee members for lending your creative intellect and wisdom throughout this thesis journey, I am forever grateful to you all.
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1 INTRODUCTION

In Search Of Agency, In Desperate Need Of Control. I began my practice by thinking about my personal history and experiences of feeling othered, disempowered, desiring to be seen beyond my race, beyond my gender, desiring to be empowered, to create safe spaces for myself, for my son, and for those I could not save. My first introductions to otherness began during adolescence; I grew up in a two-parent middle-class home in Riverdale, Georgia during the mid-nineteen eighties. My parents moved from Atlanta to College Park and then to Riverdale in search of better schools for my brother and I to attend. At the time, a white majority populated Riverdale. Ours was the second black family to move into the cul-de-sac and there were scarcely ten black families in the whole neighborhood. Our white neighbors across the street put their home up for sale the day after we moved in. My first day at my new school, I had the pleasure and excitement of running into a former classmate who had also transferred. Molly, a naturally blonde-haired, blue-eyed-Betty-Crocker’s-daughter-slash-nineteen-fifties-Home-and-Gardens-advertisement-looking-white girl. We smiled with joy seeing each other in the hall, exchanging polite waves and quickly engaging in third grade speak, common Southern girl courtesies of “hey” and “I like your dress” and whatnot. Mid-conversation, Betty Crocker’s daughter asked in her thick southern drawl, “So whaddaya think ‘bout the school?” “I like it so far. It’s (pause) different,” I replied. Not yet fully able to articulate the cause of the feeling of difference. Molly replied, cool as a cucumber, “Yeah, not as many n***** here, right?” and just as quickly as she came, she disappeared into the recess line with her class. Yes, that was it. There were not as many people at this school that looked like me. Not as many n*****. But wait, does that make me a n*****? Being in this environment always left me feeling othered, fantasizing about being something other than what I was, hued, gendered, classed, as the experience of being the “first,”
“one of,” or “the only” would continue to follow me into my classrooms, communities, and work places. I found myself continuously oscillating between embracing the desire for otherness and rehashing the experience of difference.

My father battled personal demons and went to war with them in our home. He was functionally illiterate, alcoholic, and later became drug addict. He was verbally, mentally, emotionally, and physically abusive to my mother, my brother and me. Growing up witnessing my Mother’s lack of agency, I created revisionist narratives of the truth, swallowed abuse, and tried to forget my problems at school (yet another unsafe space); I found and created pathways to cope. I created imaginary worlds in the safety of my bedroom. I learned to make up stories, skillfully lying about what went on in our household, and became a fantastical creative being, shaping things into okay-ness as my father and society taught me daily to silence myself: don’t be too loud, nor too abrasive; always be on your best behavior; only men, only whites, only the wealthy can be seen and heard. Keep quiet or, better yet, disappear.

I reflect on my personal odyssey, as it informs and is inseparable from my practice. While my experience of being othered as an African-American woman is by no means unique, numerous marginalized groups have felt the sting of being undesirable; I will continue to share my personal narrative, as autoethnography has influenced my choices concerning the execution of my thesis work The Devout Griot, Emotional Keeper. The Devout Griot, Emotional Keeper remarks on the injustices of the twenty-first century and the lack of full citizenship for hyphenated people in America. Through multidisciplinary engagement, this work seeks to examine and materialize the experiences of marginalized women of color through the lens of an African-American woman’s epistemological perspective. By creating a utopian escape that is

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formed through counter and re-imagined narratives, the work enables hyphenated humans to live within an autonomous duality of material and spiritual worlds as gods called *Devouts*.

I employ hybrids as a way of democratizing my subjects as amalgamations to help collapse pecking orders and create equity. Hybridity “is a doubleness that both brings together, fuses, but also maintains separation. Hybridity stands in opposition to the myth of purity and racial and cultural authenticity, of fixed and essentialist identity, embraces blending, combining, syncretism and encourages the composite, the impure, the heterogeneous and the eclectic.”² My constant intentional use of zoomorphism and amalgamations are a means to reveal commonalities in the human experience by creating a new Genesis and species, by reimagining gods.

1.1 From Margin To Center Can You Hear Me Now?

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein states, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”³ What we know is determined by our situation or circumstance, hence your situation and circumstance will condition what you believe to be truth, and that truth is based on what you have access to and the culture you grow up in, along with what you believe to be valuable according to your community.⁴ If we speak a different language, we would perceive a relatively different world. Marginalized groups are heard only if we frame our ideas in the tongue that is customary to and agreeable with the dominant group.⁵ This stipulation most often works against

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our ideas and seeks to advance the objectives of the authoritative group.⁶ In this exhibition, I place the African-American woman’s epistemology at the center; not only do I make room for our perspectives, but I also engage LGBTQA, Asian and White feminists, undocumented Latinx, along with so many of those who are othered, to examine our contrasts and comparisons. I do not speak as an adjudicator of what is true or false concerning the black community or black women; neither is monolithic, as the black Diaspora is a vast and diverse community. Instead I assert myself as part of this diverse community, with many of whom I share a similar language and world. Using “I,” “we,” and “our” as opposed to distancing myself with idioms such as “them” or “they.” This allows me to be both objective and subjective, scholar and kin. Let us first take a look at a few of the historically unfortunate experiences that we hyphenated humans have endured in America, which I have used as fodder in the development of The Devout Griot, Emotional Keeper.

2 HISTORY

…If you do not talk to them, you will not know them, And what you do not know you will fear. What one fears one destroys. – Chief Dan George⁷

“Race” is the witchcraft of our time. – M. F. Ashley Montagu⁸

Blackness: A Brief Historical, Scientifical Lesson On The Curiouser and Curioser Experiences Of People Of Color In Wonderland. In 1619 a Dutch ship took 20 African men and women to the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia. The captain and crew, steeped in European religious teachings regarding racial hierarchy, felt justified in their enslavement of humans of color. The illusion of race, while still very young, is one of humanity’s greatest tricks of witchcraft. “Racecraft,”9 a term coined by sociologist Karen Fields and historian Barbara Fields in their 2012 book Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life, is defined as: “the mental terrain and pervasive belief in race, topographical features that Americans regularly navigate, which originates not in nature but in human action and imagination; it can exist in no other way.”10 Witchcraft and Racecraft are conjured in the mind and then ritualized into a vivid truth. This re-imagining of reality is a sort of religion: it requires believers. In order to believe one must divide human beings based upon their hue, allowing this single, arbitrary criterion to imbue inherent meanings of character and class.11 In order to enforce this Eurocentric-agreement to enslave humans of color, most specifically Africa’s ascendants, pseudoscience, anthropology, and religion were used to vilify and dehumanize non-white persons. In order to keep non-white humans enslaved, slaves were denied education, stripped of their names, language, history, cultural expression, religion, and gods. In short: they were turned upside down and inside out and commodified for 300 years. Exactly what do you get when you erase all of a person’s humanity? What do they evolve into: possibly beasts or uncivilized half-human new beings (nubians)? Pulitzer Prize winning author Junot Diaz states, “if you want to make a human being into a

10 Ibid., 19.
11 Class is, of course, rooted in capitalism, yet another Ponzi scheme that rewards hierarchies. Amen.
monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves.” An excellent example of dehumanization at work is the Three-Fifths Compromise of 1787, which stated that all slaves of a particular state were to be counted as three-fifths of a white person. This partial humanity was of course only rewarded so that southern states could garner additional power and the government could tax the plantations more. A win, win for all *Oh Doodah day*. These collective memories and shared historic moments are essential to my work, as they have shaped our everyday realities within this twenty-first century post-racial imaginary.

*The Devout Griot, Emotional Keeper* seeks to explore an alternative universe of autonomy, one which uses the historical and contemporary social concerns of hybrid cultures as reference and reason, creating a new reality for hyphenated beings that have often been rendered invisible and had their identities denied.

### 3 HYPHENS AND HYBRIDS

They faced each other, the Negro and the African, over a gulf of 300 years an alienation too vast...too heavy and too double-edged ever to be trapped in speech. This alienation causes the Negro to recognize that he is a hybrid. Not a physical hybrid merely: in every aspect of his living he betrays the memory of the auction block and the impact of the happy ending. And white Americans he finds reflected...his tensions, his terrors, his tenderness... he cannot deny them, nor can they ever be divorced... in his need to establish himself in relation to his past he is most American, this depthless alienation from oneself and one’s people is the American experience.

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Hyph-Life: In the Beginning God Created Hybrids. Baldwin eloquently describes the identity crisis and inner struggle within African-Americans who live trapped between two worlds, a cultural paradox of being black in physicality and white in thought, “African without the memory and American without the privilege.”

As the sole black student amongst my classmates, fitting in was essential to my survival. I emulated them in every way, from the way I talked to the flipping of my hot-combed ponytail, right down to my love for Metallica, Poison, and Cyndi Lauper. Yet around my cousins, who resided in the “favelas,” I was ostracized for the enjoying the culture in which I was living. I was accused of being a “white girl,” “a token,” too black for the white kids, too white for the black kids.

Why not go back to Africa? As an adult, journeying to South Africa filled me with the romantic idea of returning home and getting back to my roots. I met many native South Africans who assumed, based upon my looks, that I was from the Xhosa tribe. They engaged me in conversation, but I could only respond with my tainted Western mind and tongue. The distant looks I received were familiar: I am not pure, I am not one of them, othered even in my homeland. Foiled again. No win wins for me. Doodah.

Although the United States is profoundly predicated on hybridism, from the founders to its freedoms, to the fusions of food and music and fetishizations, the American experience is all about synthesis. But synthesizing comes with codes of access.

Renowned author Toni Morrison states, “In this country American means White. Everybody else has to hyphenate.”

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oppositional experience of race, the feeling of being *othered* in the United States. This experience is not hypothetical nor based in opinion, there is a long history of laws, (i.e. the aforementioned Three-Fifths Compromise, also pig laws, Jim Crow, and the biased racialized criminal *injustice* system), policies, documents, photographs, works of art, and ciphers—whether verbalized or hidden—that transmit a very clear message to humans of color: *You are not wholly belonging full citizens of the United States.*

As visual minorities, African-Americans are always walking around in a structured universe that demands, through media, pseudoscience, religion, and unspoken codes, that we constantly deform ourselves. Through the bleaching of our skin, *Edit* the straitening of our hair, *Edit*, the Whitening of our diction and names, *Edit*. We do all this so that we conform to the dominant culture’s warped ideas about who and what we should/should not be, all the while denying ourselves, amputating ourselves and our identities, constantly editing to fit in. Filmmaker and scholar Minh-Ha Trinh eloquently describes the rollercoaster ride of the dichotomous gas-lighting that hyphenated cultures face:

From “forget who you are and forget me not” to “know who you are and copy not,” the point of view is the same: “Be like us.” The goal pursued is a hegemonic dis-ease. Don’t be us… Just be “like” and bear the chameleons’ fate, never infecting us but only yourself, spending your days, muting, putting on/taking off glasses, trying to please all and always at odds with myself who is no self at all. Yet, being accused of “ignoring one’s own culture” and “looking Whiter than
Snow White herself” …also means taking a trip to the promised land of White Alienation.\textsuperscript{16}

The amount self-mutilation that people of African-Ascent have committed to fit into white society’s (the only acceptable way that we can integrate), has been a form of suicide, to the point that we are unrecognizable in tongue or form; hybridized. And yet the inherent meanings that come with our ontology ensure that we are not full citizens.

4 ON BLACK WOMEN

*Where there is a woman there is magic.*\textsuperscript{17} The desire to see African-Ascendant women treated equally was born from observing my Mother, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, and friends endure abuse, and not always cherished by the men they allowed into their world. I was a witness to their brilliance, beauty, and dominance, the way they encouraged and delicately, lovingly nurtured one another. Yet the women in my family always seemed to be at the mercy of men: men who found their masculinity through belittling the women who desired them, who seized autonomy within the safety of their home, with children at their feet and women at their beck-and-call, away from a society that constantly sought new ways to oppress and minimize them. I was always perplexed by these oscillating experiences in which vibrant, stout matriarchs with hardy hands and light hearts coped with the lack in their life, took less for themselves yet created bounty in the world around them, like goddesses… But they were not in control. They were queens within kingdoms but lacked sovereignty. Through *The Devout Griot, Emotional Keeper,* I have sought answers to these questions through the ability to be in control and to find resolve.

\textsuperscript{16} Minh-Ha Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 52

\textsuperscript{17} Ntozake Shange, *sassafrass, cypress, and indigo* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), 3.
The delicacy of our emotional lives is collective, structural, and, most importantly, not fabricated by us. African-Ascendant women in America live in a house of myths, stereotypes, and markers that have created intrinsic meanings about who and what we are. We are forever typecast as the “angry black woman,” “the mule of America,” “oversexed,” “Welfare Queen,” the proverbial “gold-digging baby mama.” All these stereotypes can be classified into three categories: Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. Additionally, we will never meet the feminine standards of attractiveness as prescribed by Eurocentric Petrarchists: fair skin, chaste behavior, an air of unattainability—and with a high forehead, which connotes intelligence. Along with being clean and white, women have to physical and spiritually reflect the divine. African-Ascendant women, through no fault of our own, have protruding lips, flat pug noses, short foreheads, and zaftig, always-attainable bodies, all characteristics that run contrary to ideals of feminine (white) beauty. Contemporary media is often used to defame our very existence.

Exhibit A: Radio host Don Imus once referred to the Rutgers women’s basketball team as “jiggaboos” and “nappy-headed hoes.” Exhibit B: Satoshi Kanazawa published an article in [pseudo]Psychology Today titled “Why Are Black Women Less Physically Attractive Than Other Women?” African-Ascendant women in America reside in a house that was not built by us and that does not protect us, filled as it is with warped mirrors that cannot reflect the truth of who we are. The Declaration of Independence affirms its citizens the mutual right and responsibility to design a social contract that confers safety, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness. However, if African-Ascendant women are constantly characterized as a despised group through symbolic annihilation in the public sphere, it creates only a partial social contract for us as citizens.

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19 Ibid., 38.
Melissa Harris-Perry speaks to this distortion in her discussion of H.A. Witkins 1977 post-World War II cognitive psychology research on Field Dependence. This study looked at how individuals detected an upright position in a room. Subjects were placed in a “crooked chair” within a “crooked room” and then asked to align themselves vertically. While some managed to place themselves into an upright position regardless of the room’s distortion, others deemed themselves as upright even if they were tilted as much as 35 degrees, proclaiming that they were indeed straight. Harris-Perry’s theory asserts that this is the experience of African-Ascendant women in America. “When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion.”

African-Ascendant women don masks in order to accommodate these distortions and survive racial resentment, socio-economic tensions, and gender hierarchies. We have learned to lower our voices, edit our behaviors and attitudes; we uphold the politics of respectability. We have established cults of secrecy and dissemblance, sometimes even used deception to thwart naïve and negative criticism and to protect the piety of our interior lives.

The statistics that plague African-Ascendant women in America are yet another overwhelming tilt in the crooked room. There are so many amazing highs: we are the fastest growing group of entrepreneurs in America; over fifty percent of us pursue higher education, exceeding other groups in America; in 2016 we led the nation in voter turnout and represented over fifty-five percent of the U.S. House of Representatives. Then there’s Oprah and Michelle and Serena and Beyoncé (maybe), just to name a few of the positives. However, our negatives

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20 Ibid., 29.
21 Ibid., 30.
can be suffocating. African-Ascendant women in the United States are disproportionately affected by poverty and inadequate housing; such conditions cause many women to suffer “weathering,” a term that describes the physical and psychological consequences that come with the stigma of socioeconomic disadvantages. African-Ascendant women have the highest rates of HIV-AIDS and are at greater risk of death by heart disease, breast cancer, or diabetes than other groups of women. By the time black women have reached 18 years of age, nearly a third have been sexually assaulted, usually by a black man. African-Ascendant women in America are more likely to have a child that dies before the first birthday, are less likely to marry, and more likely to become divorced or widowed at an early age, leaving us with the burden of being single heads of households, all while earning 33-50% less than men. These statistics do not describe not the plight of all, but at various points in my life, I was counted among these numbers. As divorced single-mother head of household, I once lived well below the poverty line and suffered long bouts of unemployment. When I was finally called in for an interview, my favorite across the table question was always, “So, if your name is Shanequa why did you use Shane on your application?” The Whitening of my nomenclature yielded a better return; job applicants with ethnic-sounding names are fifty percent less likely to get a response.

My good diction, good credit, pristine resume, references, and educational accomplishments mean little when I carry the stigma of a black name. Yet another strike against the hyphenated assimilator; doodah doodah.

24 Perry, Sister Citizen, 46.
25 Ibid.
The systemic disease of devaluation is transmitted through our breasts and into our children. When asked in a 2005 interview how to prevent crime in America, former Secretary of Education William Bennett stated it would require “aborting all black babies.” This disgusting response to othered-hyphened-blackness depicts our young as predators even in the womb. Case in point: twelve-year old Tamir Rice was shot and killed by police officers for playing with a toy gun; seventeen-year old Jordan Davis was murdered for playing loud music; Trayvon Martin for walking with a hoodie; Renisha McBride for knocking on a door to ask for help. This list does not even mention the countless unreported men and women who are slain in low-income drug and gang-infested environments. These narratives hit close to home: between the years of 2008 to 2014 I lost five male family members, all under the age of 30, including my younger brother, who was killed in an unexplained car accident. The other four men died from senseless gun violence. As the mother of an African-Ascendant male, the fear that I have for his life is gut-wrenching and ensuring his safety borders on an obsession. Time, or the lack thereof, is always hovering over those housed in black bodies; borrowed, impossible, ontological time.

When we place women at the center of our thinking, we are going about the business of creating an historical and cultural matrix from which women may claim autonomy and independence over their own lives. For women of color, such autonomy cannot be achieved in conditions of racial oppression and cultural genocide. In short, “feminist,” in the modern sense, means the empowerment of women. For women of color, such an equality, such an empowerment cannot take

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place unless the communities in which they live can successfully establish their own racial and cultural integrity.

–Bettina Aptheker, American political activist

When our men die, leave, or are ensnared within the prison system we are shifted into the breadwinning 72\textsuperscript{nd} percentile\textsuperscript{29}, becoming the backbones and protectors of our households and communities. We are the first responders on the scene and carry all the emotional turmoil that comes with what is seen. We carry the weight. Trauma is a time traveler.\textsuperscript{30} The unhealed wounds of slavery and systemic oppression still haunt African-Ascendant communities. It is inscribed on our bodies, manifested through the genetic passage of PTSD, cultural fissures and cyclical poverty.

5 \hspace{1cm} \textbf{ON GOD}

\textit{I Put That On Everything.} Redemption requires deliverance, to be free from sin and slavery. Within a predominately white society, blackness can never be freed nor redeemed from its ontology\textsuperscript{31}, \textit{oh doo-dah day}. I lean heavily toward the ideologies of Dr. Joy James, Professor

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\textsuperscript{28} Quoted in Clenora Hudson-Weems, \textit{Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves} (Troy, MI: Bedford Publishers, 1994), 25

\textsuperscript{29} Sarah Jane Glynn, “Breadwinning Mothers Are Increasingly the U.S. Norm,” Center For American Progress, December 19, 2016, https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2016/12/19/295203/breadwinning-mothers-are-increasingly-the-u-s-norm/


\textsuperscript{31} Joas Costa Vargas and Joy James, \textit{Refusing Blackness as Victimization: Trayvon Martin and the Black Cyborgs} in George Yancy and Janine Jones, \textit{Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics} (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 194
of Humanities at Williams College who believes African-Ascendant people in America have been operating like cyborgs for the past three centuries. As the only door of opportunity for integration into this society, visual minorities must become either be infrahuman or superhuman; regular African-Americans need not apply. She bases this theory on the overly loving, ever forgiving requirements white American demands of its people of color; regardless of the endless assault and oppressions we endure, we must always forgive, be angelic, without sin, God-like. She also pulls this theory from W.E.B Dubois’ talented tenth terminology\textsuperscript{32}, which pushes the idea that best of the African-American community should step forward to represent and speak for us, fulfilling the \textit{magical negro} role like similar to President Obama, Beyoncé (\textit{maybe}), The Legend of Bagger Vance, John Coffey of \textit{The Green Mile}, and [___________] insert every other magical negro character’s name you’ve ever heard of here.

For many African-Ascendant women in America, Christianity and belief in God are necessary tools for survival. Faith is a resistance strategy. It is the weapon we use to navigate the crooked rooms.\textsuperscript{33} In order to cope with the dysfunction in our household, my mother became a radical devout Christian. To say that we attended church often would be an understatement; we attended church even when there wasn’t church. As an adult, I now understand that religion was an escape route for my mother, just as it is for the over two-thirds of African-American women who use it as a coping mechanism. This approach of coping-through-church is only moving from one house of oppression into another, as obstinate exploitation and extreme white patriarchy (even in the all black churches) are wielded over women on every Sabbath. “Monotheism is but

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 194.
Imperialism in religion. When God looks like the ruling class you know you’re fucked.”

This quote from Gloria Steinem references the research of Egyptologist James Henry Breasted who documented the gradual process through which Egyptians, over the course of three-thousand years, divorced God from women and nature and shifted the characteristics of God to men; hence, you see gods such as Amun-Ra appear as hybrids with the heads of animals and dressed in the fashion of women.

Reaching back to reach forward, I seek to flip the script of who God is for black women and where their citizenship is welcomed. The human race was birthed from Lucy, a 3.2 billion centuries old black woman from Ethiopia. The Devout Griot, Emotional Keeper, seeks to return God to the African-Ascendant woman, through her prayers to imagine deities that resemble her. While faith is a tool for survival, I believe faith in self is the most revolutionary act a woman of African descent could claim for herself.

6 NARRATIVE

African-American Women are the emotional keepers. The Devout Griots. It is Black women who, while the remainder of us have steered toward our own passions, have taken a part of their lives to record our true history. Only African-American Women, while still oppressed, have prevented Erasure, of every part of our identity. As such, only African-American Women, seeing, knowing and recording all, are fit to tell the American story, as it is. Only their version is balanced, unfiltered, and true.35 ~ Dr. Napoleon Wells

The African-Ascendant Woman As the Preeminent Storyteller. The African griots or griottes were well known for being poets, storytellers, historians, magicians, and most, specifically women. African-Ascendant women are the witnesses and historians of their

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35 Dr. Napolen Wells, email message to author, August 16, 2018.
communities; they, like all mothers and lovers, carry the joy of giving life along with the weight of loss; they are always burdened with the possibility of death hovering over the lives of their men and their children. As one progenitor of blackness who has lived the experiences of these beings, who better to tell these concealed and counter narratives than I? Who better to create a safe space, a paradise of agency and power for hyphenated women than I? Dr. Napoleon Wells, an African-American woman and visual storyteller, wrote this passage, to which I owe the namesake for my exhibition. Her vision empowers my methodology and validates my position as the preeminent Griot of community lore that oftentimes goes unheard or is altered to fit a specific narrative. Wells welcomes an endarkened feminist ideology, which places humans of hue and those gendered as women in the center as the preeminent storytellers of the African-American and the American experience.

Now that Afro-American artistic presence has been “discovered” actually to exist, now that serious scholarship has moved from silencing the witnesses and erasing their meaningful place in and contribution to American culture, it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves. We are not Isak Dinesen’s “aspects of nature,” nor Conrad’s unspeaking. We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact, “other.” We are choices. And to read imaginative literature by and about us is to

choose to examine centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare
these centers with the “raceless” one with which we are, all of us, most familiar.37

Similar to the literary giants Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker and
visual geniuses such as Bob Thompson, Kerry James Marshall, Kehinde Wiley and Kara Walker,
I choose to create a new narrative, a dimension for black women to live, to expand, to be a
fiction and a reality.

7 SPIRITUAL AND MATERIAL WORLD

Living in duplicitous worlds is not foreign to the human experience. We are one way in
our personal/private lives and completely different others in the public realm. The private life I
led as a child through my teen years made me into a kind of double agent. I learned to maneuver
various battlefields within my home and at school, developing my own masking as I matured. As
scholars we are trained to rely almost exclusively on rational thought, non-spiritual methods of
logical reasoning, and empirical demonstrations.38 The Devout Griot, Emotional Keeper allows
hyphenated women, women of hue and mystics to embrace their otherness; they are empowered
hybrid beings, goddesses who have the ability to wield transformation in other dimensions
through their bodies and tongues. Through prayer, song, and dance they intercede to bring peace
or to wage war on behalf of the women who have forgotten who they are, trapped in a world that
marginalizes them and leaves them economically weak and socially abandoned.

37 Toni Morrison, Unspeakeable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature, The Tanner
Lectures On Human Values, delivered at The University of Michigan. (October 7, 1988), 133.
38 Analouise Keating, I’m a citizen of the universe” Gloria Anzuldua’s Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social
Change (Denton, TX: Texas Woman’s University, March 2008), 54.
8 DEVOUT GRIOT. EMOTIONAL KEEPER

The Devouts are fictional chimera-like goddesses that live in a spiritual dimension called “youknowwherewecamefrommama,” which is a kind of utopian domain. These masked beings are colossal, with female bodices that are hued black and blue like water, they wear simple, unadorned white dresses to portray themselves as pure, sweet, honorable, and sublime. Their heads are a myriad of totem animals such as deer, raven, bull, and vulture. Each Devout can draw from their animal spirit the ability to heal and empower. The Devouts were created from the prayers of African-American women who desire intercessors for their plight; women whose sons are slaughtered, whose voices and pleas go unheard, whose beauty is neglected, and have forgotten that they themselves are divine. In this work, items associated with negative stereotypes of African-American culture such as fried chicken, watermelon, and Kool-Aid are used as ritual offerings, ensuring that a Devout will act on your behalf. The Devouts house characteristics of the Yoruba goddess Iyami Aje in that they are able to sing, dance, recite poems, create, restore and destroy. They are sustainers and takers of life, and operate as judge, jury, and executioner. For them time is circular, they are omnipotent operating in the past, the present, and the future, living in both the material and spiritual world.
Figure 1. Shanequa Gay, *Devout Griot, Emotional Keeper* (Installation Shot), 2019.
Figure 2. Shanequa Gay, *In Between States of Consciousness*, 2019, oil, acrylic, flashe on wood panel, 24 x 48.
Entering into the gallery space along the left wall there is a sequence of five paintings (Figure 1). *Intercessory Deities* (Figure 6) depicts Devouts holding offerings. *Healing Circle* (Figure 3) conjures a communal grief ritual. *Covering* (Figure 5) protects the next generation in the spiritual and material world. A stout Devout found standing in the ordinary world, depicted in *A Ditty* (Figure 4), along with the commanding profile of *In Between States of Consciousness*, (Figure 1) captures the feeling of duplicity and detachment.

In the painting *In Between States of Consciousness*, a solitary amalgamated Devout stands in profile as though she is being inspected, yet she defiantly refuses to honor the viewer with her gaze. The face is raven-like, rendered in various blues and geometrical shapes, with a symmetry similar to that of a mask made out of origami. She has stout body, painted in cerulean blue, and is legible as female through her clothing: veiled by a modest, just-below-the-knee white dress comparable to what an elder usher would wear while passing a collection plate during Sunday church service. She has the legs of an African gazelle, striped black and white like a Native American Hopi clown. The overall effect is disorienting: certain parts are familiar but others are strange, echoing my experience with the Xhosa people who engaged with me, believing that I was their kin, only to find out I wasn’t once they heard me speak. African in body but American in thought and patois.

This body of work alludes to various synergies of gender, race, culture, and bodily transformation, which come together to form the mythological creature known as the African-American. Pulling from a myriad of constructs and intertwining traditional tropes of European folklore with African, Native American and Japanese culture, a nod to my family’s confluence of ancestry, I leave the viewer to make sense of the pastiche by highlighting America’s hybrid society.
Figure 3. Shanequa Gay, *In Between States of Consciousness*, 2019, oil, acrylic, flashe on wood panel, 108 x 48.
Figure 4. Shanequa Gay, *A Ditty*, 2018, oil, acrylic, flashe on wood panel, 45 x 60.
Figure 5. Shanequa Gay, Covering, 2019, oil, acrylic, flashe on wood panel, 45 x 60.
Figure 6. Shanequa Gay, *Intercessory Deities*, 2018, oil, acrylic, flashe on wood panel, 45 x 36.
Hanging in the back of the gallery and draped along the walls are the *Devouts in Prose* (Figure 7), a series of twelve 30”x44” black and white images with a daguerreotype aesthetic printed on Somerset velvet paper. The subject’s fleshy corpulent bodies housed in simple white dresses to reflect purity, divinity, and honor like in *A Ditty* (Figure 9). These images fluctuate between family portraiture, as in *Prelapsarian Women* (Figure 10), and performance, as in *Lamentation* (Figure 8). These scenes appear both private and public. Sometimes the figures wear deer, raven, bull, or vulture masks, while other times they are uncovered and full of glory. Without frames or structures, these are free-standing.
Figure 8. Shanequa Gay, *Lamentation*, 2018, Limited edition black and white photograph on Somerset Velvet, 30 x 44.
Figure 9. Shanequa Gay, *A Ditty*, 2018, Limited edition black and white photograph on Somerset Velvet, 30 x 44.
Figure 10. Shanequa Gay, *Prelapsarian Women*, 2018, Limited edition black and white photograph on Somerset Velvet, 30 x 44.
Who We Are (Figure 11) is a three-minute video installation projected onto the wall in a small dark room in the gallery. As the video begins, my voice can be heard in the background singing the old hymnal “Glory, Glory Hallelujah.” I then begin to speak in prose, explaining the meaning and purpose of the Devouts. The Devouts appear on and off the screen sometimes individually, sometimes coupled, sometimes as a family unit. The video is distorted; its glitches and flickers, the images are three-dimensional stereoscopes. Some of the women walk ritualistically in healing circles; a spell is being cast; a spirit is being conjured. The goddesses claim the space and reverse the distortion of who they are. They see without being seen, they know and hear all, they speak without saying one word.

Figure 11. Shanequa Gay, Who We Are, 2018, Video installation stills, 3:08 minutes.
Four monumental Devout sculptural figures command the space with divine stature and sovereignty. Standing ten feet off the floor, they float like ghosts, their bodices draped with cobalt, phthalo blue. Ultramarine hair weave that is macraméed into various designs covers their breasts like an African bib necklace. Their heads are animal-like: geometrically-rendered forms of a raven, a vulture, a deer, and a bull, cloaked in varying hues of blue. *Devout Deer (Unfallen)* (Figure 12), is draped in a basket weave skirt with layers of patterned cotton fabric, hair weave, yarn, and recycled plastic bags. Black and white strips of fabric stretch out onto the floor like tentacles. She embodies layers of history, systems of inequality, and the magician’s abilities of African ascendant women to repurpose their pain into survival and to make something out of nothing.
Figure 13. Shanequa Gay, *Devout Deer (Unfallen)*, 2019, detail.
The additional three Devouts (Figure 14) wear long A-line skirts made of a toile-esque pattern of my own design. This pattern depicts two Devouts intertwined with kudzu vines and watermelon. One devout is holding a watermelon, the other holds the head of Dylan Roof, the American white supremacist who murdered nine people at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. The church stands in the background with a Church’s Chicken logo hovering over it; this is an homage, a reckoning, a righteous offering, a fashioned ceremony.

9 CONCLUSIONS

The Devouts are custodians, protectors, shamans, and Shivas. The inherent meaning of their black and blue hue is not one of defilement or class but rather one of divinity. Watermelon is sacred, chicken is holy, hairweave is a righteous adornment, and the hems of their garments cleanse the land of its sins. Walking through Devout Griot, Emotional Keeper, I feel like I am on holy ground and realize I am fabricating environments the way I did as child, only now I am creating ritual, community, and healing through new pathways for a nation of people to cope.

The foundations of most societies are built on belief systems and myths. As African-Americans we are a people named after two continents but without a true homeland, lacking our own god or clan to turn to we are without myth. Our early experiences here in America were wretched and dehumanizing, and over time have continued to be hybridized us into new beings. New beings demand new myths and new gods, ones formed by our own making. Devout Griot, Emotional Keeper is a body of work that creates agency and lore from the epistemology and spirit of black womanhood, specifically creating rituals that will sustain African-Ascendant women, the progenitors of this amalgamated race, we who are pushed to the furthest outskirts and fringes of this society.
REFERENCES


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpw6avn5NpY.


