CHAPTER 9

Post-Imperial Appropriation of Text, Tradition, and Ritual in the Pseudonymous Writings of Henri Gamache

Hugh R. Page, Jr.

Introduction

Five short monographs originally published in the 1940s, and purportedly authored by Henri Gamache: The Master Book of Candle Burning (1998); Mystery of the 8th, 9th, and 10th Books of Moses (1993); The Master Key to Occult Secrets (1983); Terrors of the Evil Eye Exposed (2010); and The Magic of Herbs Throughout the Ages (1942) have long been popular among practitioners of Black Diasporan conjure. One of the distinguishing traits of these works is that they democratize access to the numinous through the abrogation of power typically vested in institutional hierocracies. By making readily available biblical texts, Judeo-Christian hermeneutical traditions, and selected data on indigenous religious rituals from around the world, these books provide non-specialists with the practical knowledge and expertise to create personal liturgies for healing and canons for appropriating the Bible that resist hegemony and promote individual and communal self-empowerment. Interestingly, all appear to be, in fact, pseudonymous works. Such is a datum whose implications need fully to be explored in a treatment beyond the scope of the current study.

This essay will present an overview and selective reading of the Gamache corpus, with particular attention being given to its constitutive genres and

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1 An earlier version of this article was given in 2005 as a paper at the Annual Meetings of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). It was presented in one of the sessions sponsored by the African American Biblical Hermeneutics Section of SBL. The author expresses gratitude to the organizers of that session as well as to those whose queries and comments enabled subsequent expansion and improvement of that original essay.


3 Other works attributed to him, such as Doorway to Your Success and Your Key to Power, are listed in the prefatory section of The Master Key to Occult Secrets (1983) but difficult to locate.
engagement of the Bible. The history of reception (and interpretation) is an essential part of the field of Biblical Studies. Among those with a particular interest in how the Bible has been received and interpreted within the larger Africana milieu, more attention has been paid to ecclesial, political, and artistic loci of engagement than to those that are decidedly non-mainstream. Analysis of esoteric appropriations of the Bible in the Black Atlantic World is in its infancy. My own interest in this area grows out of a deepening appreciation of the extent to which within the Africana world—particularly in certain parts of West Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean—there may be said to exist a poetics of secrecy infusing daily life. According to such, one engages with others, makes community, and negotiates meaning by becoming well versed in one or more localized grammars, the cultural phonemes (sacred sounds) and morphemes (words of power) of which articulate a syntax for navigating a cosmic topography with seen and—most importantly—unseen dimensions. The language world and lexicon informing this poetics can be understood only in part through social scientific and humanistic inquiry. The veil concealing a number of its more important aspects can only be lifted through direct encounter with an ontological experience incapable of being fully described in scholarly terms. To know and understand, one must cease being a researcher and become—as it were—an initiate. I write, in a sense, as one traversing in both directions that disorienting threshold separating the academy and its etic taxonomies from the world of the Africana Diaspora in North America and its emic classifications of esoteric phenomena. I do so as one grafted onto that branch of women and men whose koine expresses this poetics of secrecy through a Blues aesthetic. My perspective, therefore, is that of scholar poet, musician, and devotee.

Gamache—The Author

At this point, it is perhaps most reasonable to assume, apud Yronwode (2013: 8), that Henri Gamache was the nom de guerre of either Joseph W. Kay, also known as Joseph Spitalnick (1889–1967), or an unnamed woman who served as amanuensis for Kay/Spitalnic. She notes that Kay was a Jewish jazz musician, independent publisher, and distributor of esoteric paraphernalia. However, the suggestion that a rather shadowy figure known only as Mr. Young is in fact the source for all of the Gamache works is also feasible (see Long 2001: 125; and

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4 See also Ironweed’s online profile (1995–2003).