CHAPTER 19

Pole Dancing For Jesus

*Negotiating Movement and Gender in Men’s Musical Praise*

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**Introduction**

Since 2011, “pole dancing for Jesus” has gained in popularity as a provocative expression of praise across racial and gender boundaries. Amidst media coverage of this trend, Jungle Cat’s performances to gospel music evoked especially passionate responses from viewers. His performance was controversial because he combined the symbolic meanings of the pole, with dance, and the pursuit of a deeper spiritual connection to God. However, viewers’ language about Jungle Cat’s performance was markedly different from the characterization of the Texas housewives who also praise pole danced. The public’s reception of his combination of these symbols and signifiers was related to their perceptions of his racialized and gendered body.

This essay examines the extent to which black men’s musical praise informs discourses about sexual ambiguities within gospel music performance. Drawing on an ethnomusicological analysis of a praise pole dancing performance by Jungle Cat and a series of correspondence with him, I contend that his performances reveal tensions that characterize Christian worship by men striving to join body and spirit. I do virtual ethnography of his worship practice via the Internet, through which I move beyond the local or denominational theology that shape black men’s worship experiences. The reception of Jungle Cat’s performance via the Internet illustrates what Barry Taylor calls an “entertainment theology,” which “highlights the evolution of theology from a didactic or studied approach to the question of God to a more global *communal conversation* about the sacred in general” (Taylor 2008, 19). Virtual exchanges are connected to notions of transcendence and spirituality because they enhance the personal nature of modern worship, providing ideal spaces of expression and moments of participation that are not determined by geography and real time. Undeniably, globalization accelerates the distribution through technology of gospel performances, products, and practices. It is a place where people are not physically present but are connected nonetheless. The virtual domain’s role in modern worship is a space in which black religious scholars must increasingly explore.

In posting his worship, Jungle Cat positions himself for assessment of the meaning of his performance. Many spectators struggle to decipher Jungle Cat’s YouTube videos, which feature a mix of gendered signifiers and body language
that comes across as sexually ambiguous. In addition to virtual ethnography Jungle Cat’s performance, I will examine a constellation of interpretations: the implications of his liturgical dance, constructions of masculinity, mysticism in Christian practice and the media’s reception of his worship.

**Virtual Ethnography**

As I viewed the opening credits of the YouTube video, it curiously read: “Jungle Cat, I Need You To Survive, Hezekiah Walker.” This is a popular gospel song by Bishop Hezekiah Walker, a leading choir director. The choir softly sings in unison, with whispery vocals, and in a slow tempo. After they sing the chorus once, Bishop Walker leads a call and response using the chorus. Then they modulate, as they repeat the “special” or vamp of the song until the end, when they return to the last couplet of the chorus. I noted the dancer’s stage name and braced for the possible irony of the performance. While the familiar slow melody of the song began playing in the background, the man with dreadlocks and a hat, wearing a grayish “wife beater,” jeans, and Timberlands, meanders to the pole that was erected in the center of what looked to be his dimly-lit living room. Jungle Cat’s dreadlocks sway from side to side, as he limberly mounted and swirled around it. His gestures are both upward on and outward from the pole. Throughout the performance, he progressively demonstrates his pole tricks facility to the playing music, as the following lyrics unfolded:

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I need you, you need me.
We’re all a part of God’s body.
Stand with me, agree with me.
We’re all a part of God’s body.

It is his will that every need be supplied.
You are important to me, I need you to survive. (2x)

I pray for you, you pray for me.
I love you, I need you to survive.
I won’t harm you with words from my mouth.
I love you, I need you to survive...
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Walker 2002

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