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Review: Flaming? The Peculiar Theopolitics of Fire and Desire in Black Male Gospel Performance

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Alisha Lola Jones

***Flaming?: The Peculiar Theopolitics
of Fire and Desire in Black Male
Gospel Performance***

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

336 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0190065416.

How does one take the abundant, multi-directional creativity of twenty-first-century African-American gospel music and sift it through the filter of gender without diminishing its lived experiential truths? Alisha Jones does this with rare scholarly grace, riding the turbulent wave of emic and etic perspectives on worship practice and spirituality, as well as gender. The result is a major new study of multiple subgenres of contemporary African-American gospel music, but even more crucially, a searingly honest study that opens substantial theological ground.

The numerous male artists included in Jones's study have achieved fame, some extending even to secular audiences: Donnie McClurkin, Patrick Dailey, B.Slade/Tonéx, and Ricky Dillard. Yet most of these men also carry a whispered infamy about their names, centering on their sexuality. Male vocalists, because of their vocal range, sensuality, and contrast to the hypermasculine figure of the preacher, are often perceived as queer. And therein lies the conundrum at the heart of *Flaming?*: in a tradition that persistently reiterates metaphors of being enflamed, that embraces embodiment in worship rather than eschewing it, that constantly calls forth ecstatic experience, why can't the flaming choir director feel accepted in the fullness of his queer being?

Jones addresses this question with a prismatic approach, incorporating case studies that range from men who claim to

have been "delivered" from homosexuality through prayer, to those who have come out to their fans and/or congregations, extending to heterosexual men in the Washington, D.C., Gospel Go-Go scene who operate outside of the church. Thus, *Flaming?* also makes a major contribution to understanding the range of Black masculinities in the twenty-first century. While each chapter is a self-contained unit, and examines a distinct take on male sexuality and gendered presentation, Jones takes an emphatic ethical stand against the "exploitation of gay male musicians' talents . . . in which believers feel entitled to presume queer men's competence in ushering them into 'meaningful' worship, while denouncing the queer sexual identity of the music-makers" (25). Apparently, queer liminality is a spiritual gift, but queer existence is not.

Jones's well-woven introduction, "Setting the Atmosphere," establishes how Pentecostal worship leaders seek to usher others into "a tangible encounter with God" (1). She understands this tangibility to be a form of mysticism (94), and cites Tonéx and out lesbian Bishop Yvette Flunder as claiming a "shamanic role within music ministry" because their queer positionality has given them "access to the supernatural" (183). But this logic is not acceptable within the sexual conservatism of many Black Pentecostal churches, leaders, and participants who scorn and condemn open same-sex love, casting it as sinful. This

dualistic split between mind and body has a long history in Christianity, one that has impinged on music, most famously in Augustine's *Confessions* when he worries about the wicked, sinful effect of loving the singing more than the words being sung. Jones presents a fascinating update of this in the words of Dré from the Gospel Go-Go genre, who will leaven his band's music with breaks or have the percussion drop out, so that the content of the lyrics can be repeated. "I know that the music in and of itself, that people can get lost in it...[because] we're a Christian go-go band, it's important that you catch what we're saying" (145).

Following Dwight Hopkins's work, Jones locates this mind/body split not in the essence of Christianity, but in specific theological attitudes from Euro- and Euro-American Christianity: the tendency to make dualism unrelievedly antagonistic, and the adoption of a puritanical prudishness about the body (31). Her chapter on gospel video dance artist Jungle Cat, "Pole Dancing for Jesus," erodes dualism in its every word, embracing instead "pluralism" and "ambiguity." Jungle Cat's erotic praise dancing exposes the enigma of Christian dualism by embodying "a theology of incarnation and indwelling of the body by an animating force" (107–08). With relevant biblical citations, Jones analogizes Jungle Cat's work to "a Davidic model of worship," "an undignified approach to dance that permits the Spirit to move upon the praiser's permeable heart and body. The dancer is to use all that is within him (2 Sam 6:14; Psalm 103:1), anytime and wherever, despite the disparaging gaze of other humans. . . . Davidic praise body language is communication solely intended for God's approval" (108).

This is brave theologizing, and Jones knows it. Her honesty in presenting the complexities of her own community, while maintaining scholarly currency and rigor, is genuine, and genuinely impressive. Her writing is not distanced, even as it remains scholarly. *Flaming?* contains many autobiographical glimpses, snapshots of her own musical pleasure, in the midst of an admirable command of numerous academic fields, from musicology to psychology. She integrates material from popular culture seamlessly with more traditional resources.

I came to the book with a strong grounding in queer theory, feminist musicology, and African-American religious history, but almost no experience with the Black Pentecostal church and its music in the present. What I encountered in *Flaming?* was thick description in the service of evolving theological insights. For those to become visible and audible, Jones tries to "make marginalized believers' words and actions easier to perceive and comprehend" (25). This ethical commitment to the marginalized simultaneously creates a pluralism that short-circuits the oversimplifications of dualism. While listening (cribbing!) to the artists she highlighted, the difficulty and the excitement of her intellectual task became clearer, illuminated by both her experience and her integrity.

This commitment comes with risks. Jones shares how she has "struggled to find the safe, sacred space to express in familiar language the aspects in which my perspectives theologically diverge from the community that called me into ministry. I am ordained by a community that upholds conservative beliefs about gender and sexuality to which I no longer fully subscribe" (25). For all of the joy

and spiritual ecstasy she has experienced in her faith community, what would that faith mean if she ignored her ethical responsibility toward the marginalized, if she refused to hear the oppressed? This added dimension lifts *Flaming?* out of the ordinary run of scholarly books and theological tomes. The question mark in the title is no mere adroit word play (8–9): it is a statement of searching, of open-ended dialogic questioning, of its author’s “transformation in . . . perspective and practice” (223).

Ultimately, this book asks its readers for this same honest seeking; this requires

shedding any puritanical attitudes, especially when prudishness falsely adopts the mask of moralism. If Pentecostal worship makes an experience of God tangible, that is no time to allow theology to become abstract. Let it be musical, let it be danced, let it be erotic, let it make audible how “vocal music making is a love language unlike any other” (205), especially when the beloved is the divine.

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