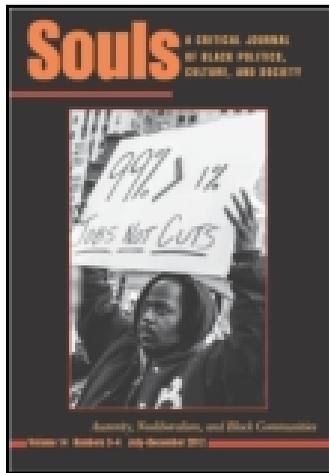


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Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usou20>

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Published online: 04 Sep 2014.

To cite this article: Rachel E. Harding (2014) The Lithic Imagination and the Tertia: The Longian Paradigm and Art in the Study of Afro-Atlantic Religion, *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 16:1-2, 99-109

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2014.935249>

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The Lithic Imagination and the Tertia

The Longian Paradigm and Art in the Study of Afro-Atlantic Religion

Rachel E. Harding

Scholar Charles Long offers a paradigm for exploring the meaning of African American religion. This article explores the applicability of Long's methodology to other Afro-Atlantic religious traditions, such as Brazilian Candomblé and Haitian Vodou, by means of an examination of two artistic/interpretive concepts—the lithic imagination and the tertia. Succinctly, the lithic imagination is that aspect of human consciousness that bears similarities to the natural form of the stone—which is to say, the creative will to resistance, especially as manifested in religious expression. The tertia, a more ephemeral and less easily defined idea, is the surplus of the encounter of the colonized and the colonizer. It is the “third thing,” the unacknowledged history of modernity, the distressed ancestral presences which are dynamic (if often occluded) forces necessary to a full reckoning of the religious history of the Blacks in the diaspora.

Keywords: African American religion, Afro-Atlantic religion, art, Candomblé, Charles H. Long, John Biggers, lithic imagination, modernity, Patrick Chamoiseau, tertia, Veve Clark, Vodou

Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion, is the major work of historian of religions Charles H. Long. The pioneering book is bracketed with a call. In the introduction and in the closing chapter, Long urges a broader conversation among scholars, writers, poets, and other artists toward the development of a more evocative set of tools for discernment of the meanings of religion in the modern world.¹

Long's openness to the discursive and methodological insights of literature and the arts is a vital characteristic of his scholarship. I am a student of Dr. Long, a historian of religion, and a poet; and I want to respond in all those capacities, in a small way, to the call. Given that people of African descent have often expressed our religious consciousness through dance, music, visual art, as well as oral storytelling and literature—it seems fitting to note that my own introduction to Dr. Long was in the context of just such an exploration of the ritual and symbolic power of African American theater.

I first met Charles Long before I knew who he was. I was studying at Brown University in the mid 1980s and he was a distinguished visitor in the "Playmaking from the African American Folk Experience" course offered by George Houston Bass. Bass, a philosopher, lauded playwright, and the executor of Langston Hughes' estate, had founded the Rites and Reason theater in 1970—which shortly thereafter became the research-to-performance arm of the newly organized Afro-American Studies Program at Brown. George Bass was consummately attentive to ritual and, in his too-brief lifetime, developed a grand corpus of plays whose vocabularies and meanings pulled from deep inside the collective cultures and histories of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora.

George Bass and Charles Long were, it seems to me reflecting now, (though I did not know it then), kindred souls in many ways. Both men were drawn to mathematics in the early years of their education and both were exceedingly innovative thinkers interested especially in what there is to learn about the human experience from the trials and creative impulses of Black people in the New World.

And frankly, both men reminded me of my mother—all three attuned to blackness as an essentially religious task; that is to say, the matter of how Blacks have managed to remain human in a fundamentally inhumane situation. All three carried subtle and thick mystic attentiveness to an African American indigenous wisdom about the world; and I, a curious, veil-attracted youngster, gravitated to and pushed from them as if they were some part of the *mysterium tremendum* itself.

In 2012, I was invited to reflect on the meaning of *Significations* for the study of African-derived religions, as part of an American Academy of Religion session in honor of Dr. Long's seminal text. The considerations that follow are essentially what I shared in that session.²

The Longian Paradigm

Chapter 11 of *Significations* suggests a way to approach the study of African American religion through awareness of the symbols and

creative forms that emerge from the historical experience of Black people in the United States. This approach, for reasons that I hope will become apparent in this article, is of fundamental value to understanding the religious expressions of other Afro-Atlantic communities as well. In fact, I suggest here that the Longian paradigm is both a guide to a foundational understanding of diasporan religion as well as a resonant element in the ongoing conversation among scholars and artists of the Black Atlantic about the religio-cultural meanings of our historical situation. I will examine a few components of Long's conceptual framework that I find particularly helpful given my penchant for art and poems and other ineffable things—in particular, his development of the concepts of “the lithic imagination” and “the tertia.” I will also indicate some ways in which these parts of Long's paradigm are echoed in (and by) the creative production of novelist Patrick Chamoiseau, literary scholar Vèvè Amasasa Clark, and painter John Biggers. None of the thoughts I offer here are definitive, but I trust they will add something of value to the growing toolbox of resources that we who study the diaspora are all developing for our collective task.

Long's paradigm starts from an understanding that religion (particularly in the lives of the oppressed) is the means by which human beings understand and “mash out a meaning” of the ultimate significance of their experience, their situation, in the world. His model recognizes three central elements: (1) the history and image of Africa; (2) the meaning of the involuntary presence of Blacks in the United States of America; and (3) the idea of God or the Divine as a resource for transformation and accompaniment not defined by the dominating society. The strength of the Longian model, and its applicability beyond the United States, evolves from its striking and astute simplicity joined with its recognition of signal factors of the historical and cultural experience of people of African descent in the Americas—factors that are almost universally shared in every other part of the diaspora created by the Atlantic slave trade.

In my own comparative explorations of African American, Afro-Brazilian, and Afro-Cuban religious histories I find that there are sufficient, significant, commonly held, deep-strata experiences of religious meaning related to Long's paradigm that they can (and do) serve as mnemonic devices for each other, helping to expand and deepen our impressions of the connection between specific ritual activities and the meaning of religion as *an-other* orientation, an alternative experience of blackness, of humanness, in the world. For example, I have described elsewhere that Long's conceptual outline makes it possible to recognize a shared orientation in the consecration and ritual feeding of *otanes* (sacred stones which are

the housing of the orisha in Cuban Lucumí/Santeria), in the *banhos de folhas* (“herbal ritual baths” of Brazilian Candomblé) and in the African American Spirituals tradition—all of which can be understood in terms of transformative power and communal sustenance, resistance and renewal.³

Alternative Strategies of Knowing: The Lithic Imagination and the Tertia

Let me focus my attention first on a challenge from Dr. Long’s writings. His critique of the methodologies and discourses of the language of modernity highlights the inherent problem of concealment. That is to say, scholarship and speech that is considered rational and objective, by its nature, obstructs the histories, insights, traumas and resiliences of those who have existed on the “underside of modernity,” as Long succinctly describes the positioning of people of African descent, people indigenous to the Americas, and others who have been the victims of a centuries-long encounter with colonialism and its progeny.⁴

In *Significations*, Long challenges his readers and colleagues to recognize and develop alternative discursive strategies—other ways of knowing and articulating what is known—such that the fullness of the religious experience of the colonized might be explored not only for its factual complexity and richness but also for what there is to be shared and learned about human ethics and sustaining a meaning of compassion in the world under extraordinary duress. The challenge to dig deep, within the symbolic and creative traditions of the religions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora, for ways to talk about human experience and human possibility consistent with the understandings and enthusiasms of the “primordial peripheral others” is, I believe, a centrally important task.⁵

Two alternative strategies Long introduces in his writing that relate to a range of Afro-Atlantic religions are the idea of “the lithic imagination” and the concept of “the tertia.” Citing French philosopher Gaston Bachelard as the inspiration for the first term, Long describes the lithic imagination as “the imaginary structure of consciousness that arises in relationship to the natural form of the stone and the manner in which the volitional character of human consciousness is related to this imaginary form.”⁶ This definition suggests the creative will to resistance so ubiquitous in the cultures and histories of people of African descent displaced in diaspora. It is, Long says, a religious consciousness developed in response to the “hardness of the world,” an imaginative intelligence that is also an “oppositional will.”

The link between the “hardness of Black life” and the “ecstasy of religious worship” noted in *Significations* is one with wide application in the diaspora. I recall a conversation some years ago with an Afro-Brazilian Candomblé priestess, Valnizia Pereira Oliveira, where the *iyalorixá* expressed precisely the same sentiment. Mãe Val, as the priestess is known, explained that the exhausting collective work involved in ritually maintaining present-day Candomblé communities is a connection to the unpaid, distressed labor of the enslaved ancestors of the participants. As I indicated in a previous essay, not only are the physical tasks similar, but the vulnerabilities of the economic, political, and social lives of many devotees echo the stresses of the lives of their forbearers. Candomblé is not an easy religion, Mãe Val insisted. But neither are the lives of its adherents. The priestess said, “It is the religion of slaves and everything about the slaves’ lives was hard. Even their religion was difficult, tiring. And imagine if it’s hard work for us now—for them, trying to cultivate the *orixás* in the slave quarters, in the hidden places in the forests, where they went to hold their ceremonies. But in compensation, after long days of backbreaking labor, they had their *orixás* and the joy of celebrating them. We know that joy.” Then, sweeping the large, clay-tiled room used for public ceremonies, Mãe Val added pensively, “We’ve only gotten free of the stocks, but we’re still in the slave quarters.”⁷

Even as fatigue is mitigated by the company of comrades and by the confidence of directing one’s efforts toward the well-being of the community and benefit of the *orixás*, the connection to the *senzala*, the slave quarters, and its legacy of labor remains for Candomblé devotees: as memory, as referent, but also as resource. The hardships undergone by earlier generations and those experienced in the present both gain meanings beyond distress in the ritual process. They become instead, somehow a guide, a support, and even a responsibility for those who are the current caretakers of the legacy of devotional, transformative labor.⁸

The concept of “lithic imagination” is especially apropos of Afro-Atlantic religious experience; symbolically, it calls to mind a fundamental meaning of resistance and a firm sustaining power in the culture and in the spirit of the people—whether in labor or in celebration. The Afro-Atlantic lithic imagination, it might be said, is that which insists on the affirmation of the humanity of Black people and uses a range of religious and creative expressions to represent that affirmation.

As a term, “lithic imagination” immediately reminds us of the sacred stones found in many religions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora, especially (though not exclusively) those of Yoruba origin. In Santería and Candomblé, for example, ritually consecrated rocks house,

represent and transmit the energy and blessing of the *orixás*, the natural, ancestral forces of the universe. The practice of sacralizing individual natural elements—such as stones or trees or a particular body of water—so that the divine energy therein is easily and fully accessible to devotees did not begin with New World Yoruba-based religions; still, it is useful to consider that these sacred representations of human–divine linkages were maintained and reconceptualized under “the hardness of life” in the Americas. Extraordinary powers of both restraint and resistance are embodied and symbolized in stone—powers that in many ways characterize the meaning of Afro-Atlantic religions in the modern world.

The “*tertia*” is that notion that Dr. Long sometimes calls “haints.” It is an ephemeral and mysterious quality of presence that is not so much the sum of the engagement of two other, distinct, more tangible things; rather it is their distillate; the hint they leave behind. The *tertia* is that third thing, the left over part, the extra, the surplus from the encounter of the colonizers and the colonized; that which is not talked about, the unacknowledged history, the spectral presences, the ancestors, the *orixás*, the *nkisis* . . . the haints.

For a study of Afro-Atlantic religions, the idea of the *tertia*—the accompanying spirits, whether supportive or bothersome, ancestral or divine (or both)—implies some recognition of this *third thing* that has come to exist in the context of modernity in the Americas. That which both anneals itself to blackness and that which accompanies it. What we carry. And what has carried us.

Patrick Chamoiseau and Vèvè Clark: Literature in the Paradigm

At the 2002 *Imagination of Matter* Conference at the University of Maine at Farmington, Charles Long led a discussion of Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau’s novel *Texaco*. Long looked especially at the symbolism at the heart of the story chronicling the history of the Caribbean island nation and the significance of the ancestral spirits, or “mentohs,” whose presence yet influences the collective consciousness of the people.⁹ In the novel, “mentohs” are the *tertia* of the relationship between the enslaved and the enslavers: those spirits in the land, in the air, existing still, all around us, whose names are written nowhere in the willfully silent discourses of official history and academe, but whose presence is a shudder in the world and an insistence that there is yet much more to be said about the way things are.

Literary scholar Vèvè Clark, talks similarly about “marasa consciousness” in the cultural production and ethos of the Afro-Atlantic world. *Marasa*, the term for the divine twins in Haitian Vodun,

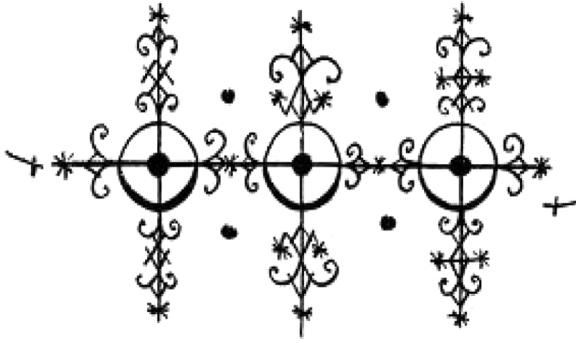


Figure 1. Vèvè (sacred script) for the *Marasa Trois*.

encompass, in their capacity as spiritual entities, a third element—the child born sequentially after them. The relationship between these three beings, the original twins and the *dossu* (male) or *dossa* (female) who follows—is understood in Vodou as the *marasa trois* (Figure 1).

“Marasa consciousness,” Clark writes, “invites us to imagine beyond the binary.” Her research and observances of Haitian folk culture and religion reveal that the tension between oppositions “leads to another norm of creativity—to interaction or deconstruction, as it were.”¹⁰

Long’s commentaries on the *mentohs* as the *tertia*, and Clark’s development of the idea of “marasa trois consciousness” join the notions of Edouard Glissant, Sylvia Wynter, Stephan Palmie, Muniz Sodré and the works of Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Lucille Clifton, and a host of other writers and artists who have understood the essential (if difficultly assessed) power of the *unacknowledged* in the meaning of African presence in the New World.

The *haints*, the *tertia*, may be the dishonored and distressed; but they are also the accompaniment, the intimacy of spirit, dreams, visions, the ancestral sources in new raiment—the indigenous divinities who, as Zora Neale Hurston said, are not gone but are now called by new names.¹¹

Another alternative strategy suggested by the Longian paradigm is what might be called “reciprocities of knowledge” in the interpretation of religious traditions from various points of the diaspora. These would include symbolic and methodological connections to the key terms of Charles Long’s conceptual outline.¹² In my experience, studying religious meanings and methodologies from one diasporic tradition can give valuable insight into others. In the introduction to *Significations*, Long writes that there is no language in the mainstream of Western culture for the way colonized peoples know themselves to be. Rather they, their histories, and their religious

understandings, have been classified and named in ways that serve dominating forces.¹³ The existence of intra-diasporan conversations about religious meanings may address this problem and help develop the critical consciousness “that recognizes the situation and is able to undercut the very structures of cultural languages that undergird the problematical situation itself.”¹⁴

There is certainly a way in which these traditions can talk to each other out of their shared understandings of the world, adding to the insights and deepening mutual explorations of what it has meant to sustain a human experience inside generations of assault. The strategy of employing “reciprocities of knowledge” across and among diasporic religious traditions is related to Veve Clark’s conception of “diaspora literacy”—just as the *tertia* is kin to what she calls “marasa consciousness.” For Clark, “diaspora literacy” is the capacity to understand texts “from indigenous, cultural perspectives beyond the field of Western or westernized signification.”¹⁵ While she was writing primarily about literary texts, they are, like the Afro-Atlantic religions of our discussion, grounded in folk tradition, the occluded histories of modernity, vernacular languages, and a recognition that the *tertia* is central to the fullest possible apprehension of the lives of people of African descent. Furthermore, the acknowledgement of shared symbols, histories and meanings across diasporic cultures is an important tool in the larger interpretive project of Afro-Atlantic religious history. “Reciprocities of knowledge” and “diaspora literacy” are ways to explore religious meanings that avoid “the methodologies of pathology” so often reflexively signified on Black experience.

John Biggers: Painting the Paradigm

Finally, I want to share a few brief reflections on the work of painter and muralist John Biggers as a visual example, as it were, of the Longian paradigm and its application across diasporan traditions. We see, in many of Biggers’ paintings, the image and reality of Africa (African social ethics, gender relations, mythic traditions, and sculptural and fabric art are key influences in Biggers’ work); the involuntary presence of Blacks in America (this is reflected in the emphasis on the distressed labor of African Americans but also in the transformation of that labor into symbols of survival and freedom-seeking); and God/the Divine as a resource of affirmation and critique not derivative from enslavers. We also see in Biggers, with tremendous clarity, the lithic imagination—that oppositional consciousness, the will to the creation of *an-other* meaning of blackness—in references

to the spirituals in the titles of his paintings, in physical gestures and stances, in transformed meanings of iron pots and washboards, and in the incorporation of West and North African mythic understandings of the world. Finally, there is the *tertia* in Biggers' art—the hints and the haunts that are the spiritual accompaniment of the individuals and communities he represents.

Climbing Higher Mountains (1986) and *How I Got Over* (1987), for example, demonstrate major elements of the symbolic language of Biggers' artwork. The checkerboard patterns of quilts and the progressively abstracted triangles of shotgun houses are examples of "sacred geometries" Biggers recognized and reclaimed from southern African American lifeways.¹⁶ The artist consistently used lace-like, diaphanous cloth (reminiscent both of quilts and of West African fabric patterns) to indicate the covering and emanation of spirit; while railroads are markers of liminality and the search for freedom in the context of Black life. In these two paintings, as in many of Biggers' other works from the last decades of his life, key figures appear with their backs to the viewer—visually signifying a stance that does not need or depend on outside validation; in the Longian sense, *an-other orientation* to meaning in the world.

John Biggers' iconographic tools are simultaneously of West Africa, the African American South, the Caribbean and Black communities in Latin America. His work is lithic in the sense that it is concurrently "oppositional" and decidedly non-confrontational. As he explained in an interview conducted the year before he died, Biggers' intention as an artist was not to do open battle with racism, rather his images, especially his paintings of Africa and the Africanness in Black Americans, present "something America doesn't offer" (again, *an-other orientation*, as it were).¹⁷ For the attentive scholar, even a cursory examination of the art reflects reciprocities of knowledge that allow Biggers' paintings to communicate meanings of blackness, meanings of the human, shared across geographies and histories in the Americas. In Biggers' artwork, religious sensibilities from Black communities outside of the United States stir the underwaters of African American cultural and religious memory. Biggers used his travel and study in West Africa (especially his study of the social and ritual roles of women) combined with his experiences of the mystic wisdom and practical creativity of his mother, aunts and older sisters, to suggest ways of understanding the often obscured alchemical power of the feminine in African American life.

If concealment has been the methodology of modernity regarding the religious experience of people of African descent in the diaspora, the discursive and methodological strategies that emerge from the

religions of the Afro-Atlantic world are based in reciprocity and accompaniment. Whether in stones and songs, novels, veves, or on canvases, the lithic imagination and the third thing, the *tertia*, abound in the hermeneutics of Black religion in the New World. They are essential tools and ones we, as scholars, as artists, as teachers, will do well to embrace.

Perhaps we can take a lesson on the importance of the ineffable from Rudolfo Anaya, author of the classic novel of Chicano spirituality, *Bless Me Ultima*, who explained that the spectral presence of the curandera of his story appeared to him in his writing room one night as he struggled for the words that would eventually become the book.¹⁸ Ultima, still then something like an ancestral memory, not yet a character, spoke from invisibility to Anaya—“You’ll never get it right, until you put me in it.”¹⁹

Notes

1. Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 1999).

2. The 2012 AAR session was a project of the *Art/s of Interpretation* working group, coordinated by Jennifer Reid and David Carrasco.

3. Rachel Elizabeth Harding, *You Got a Right to the Tree of Life: African American Spirituals and Religions of the Diaspora*, “Sweet Chariot: The Story of the Spirituals.” Last modified 2005. <http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Religion/>.

4. The term comes also from philosopher Enrique Dussel’s *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor and the Philosophy of Liberation* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), where it is used to similar effect.

5. Long, *Significations*, 201.

6. Long, *Significations*, 192.

7. Rachel E. Harding, “É a Senzala: Slavery, Women and Embodied Knowledge in Afro-Brazilian Candomblé,” in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power and Performance*, ed. R. Marie Griffith and Barbara D. Savage (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 14.

8. *Ibid.*, 15.

9. Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

10. Vève Clark, “Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness,” *Theatre Survey* 50 (2009): 9–18.

11. Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1983), 103.

12. I see these diasporic resonances to Long’s framework particularly in the ways other Blacks in the Americas, beyond the United States, have also used the imagery and institutions “at hand” to give voice and meaning to their experiences as enslaved and oppressed people. (In *Significations*, Long notes that African Americans used Christianity and Biblical imagery “because it was at hand,” 193). One thinks immediately of the role of *cofradías/cabildos* in Cuba and *irmandades* in Brazil as institutions respected in the broader society that were available and politic choices for Africans and their descendants (re)creating religious meaning on hostile ground. Votive foods—such as okra, corn, black-eyed peas, and yams are another place where alternative ritual meanings were emplaced within “what was at hand.”

13. Long, *Significations*, 5.

14. Long, *Significations*, 6.

15. Clark, “Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness,” 10–11.

16. *John Biggers: Painting for the People*, Veterans of Hope Project Pamphlet Series 3, No. 1 (Denver, CO: The Veterans of Hope Project, 2010).

17. *Ibid.*

18. Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me Ultima* (Berkeley, CA: Tonatiuh International, 1972).

19. *The Big Read: A Conversation with Rudolfo Anaya* (film), dir. Lawrence Bridges, National Endowment for the Arts, 2009.

About the Author

Rachel E. Harding is Assistant Professor of Indigenous Spiritual Traditions in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado Denver. A native of Georgia, and a writer, historian, and poet, Rachel is a specialist in religions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora and studies the relationship between religion, creativity, and social justice activism in cross-cultural perspective. She is a Cave Canem Fellow and holds an MFA in creative writing from Brown University and a PhD in history from the University of Colorado Boulder. Dr. Harding is author of *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Indiana University Press, 2000) as well as numerous poems and essays. Rachel is completing a second book, *Remnants* (forthcoming from Duke University Press), that is a meditation on her mother's life and combines her own and her mother's writings on the role of compassion and spirituality in African American activism.