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The Kongo cosmogram: A theory in African-American literature

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**THE KONGO COSMOGRAM: A THEORY IN
AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE**

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

**IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES**

BY

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DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

**STAYTON, COREY C. B.A. XAVIER UNIVERSITY, 1994
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KONGO COSMOGRAM: A THEORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

Advisor: Professor Daniel Black

Thesis dated May, 1997

This study examines the use of Kongo cosmology as a theory of reading African-American literature. By analyzing the philosophical modes and belief systems of the Bakongo people, a general view of their cosmos is constructed and establishes the Kongo cosmogram used as the basis of this study.

The community, crossroads, elders, and circularity of life all prove to be crucial elements in the Kongo cosmogram. These elements all have respective roles in the operation of the Kongo cosmogram as a literary theory.

As the focus shifts from Africa to America, a study of how the Kongo cosmogram is disrupted by the Maafa and reconstructed in America via plantation existence is necessary to establish the history and function of the cosmogram in America.

Finally, the Kongo cosmogram is applied as a literary theory, using Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" and James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain. These texts manifest the elements of the Kongo cosmogram and demonstrate its applicability as a literary theory.

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INTRODUCTION

The Kongo civilization of Central Africa exemplifies a society rich in history, traditions, and culture. Its people, known as the Bakongo people, take great pride in their history and homeland. The Bakongo people are so unique that scholars have given them special recognition. As Robert Farris Thompson points out in Flash of the Spirit, "Spelling Kongo with a *K* instead of a *C*, Africanists distinguish Kongo civilization and the Bakongo people from the colonial entity called the Belgian Congo (now Zaire) and present day People's Republic of Congo Brazzaville".¹ As Europeans invaded Africa, the term *Kongo* broadened to include those African people in and around the Kongo area (Angola, Ghana, etc.), brought from the west coast and Central Africa to the New World.

Various aspects of Kongo culture miraculously survived the Middle Passage and surface in America. In the dialect of African-Americans, certain words have their roots in Kongo languages. The word '*funky*' which is similar in appearance and meaning to the Kongo word "*Lu-fuki*",² which means to praise persons for the integrity of their art, suggests a relationship between the Bakongo people and African-Americans. The dance of enslaved Africans observed by Vicenti Rossi and reported in Cosas de Negros, also

reveals a connection between Kongo civilization and African-American culture:

There is something there, in the middle of the circle of black men, something that they alone see, feel, and comprehend ... the voice of native soil, a flag unfurled in harmonic syllables. There is something there, in the middle of the dancing ring of black men and it is the motherland! Fleeting seconds of liberty have evoked it, and, once bought into being it fortifies their broken spirits... they have, forgetting themselves, relived the Kongo nation in one of its typical expressions... in sudden homage, with an expanded power of observation they dance around the vision.³

Today, a park in New Orleans, Louisiana, Kongo Square, serves as a reminder of the centered space upon which enslaved Africans were allowed to commune and celebrate life in their own modes of expression.

The Bakongo people tell the story of how a great chief crossed the Great River using magical power and sweeping up the droppings of elephants, and established the first capitol known as Mbanza

Kongo. Mbanza Kongo is located on the top of a hill. This space would prove to be the central point of Kongo society spiritually as well as physically. Mbanza Kongo is viewed as sacred ground, a place where justice and righteousness prevail. The Bakongo people view their capitol as a central point where all the powers of the universe-- the living, the dead, the children, and the elders--are present. Mbanza Kongo thus gives a brief depiction of the Bakongo people's perception of the universe. The symbolic representation of Kongo cosmology is called "Tendwa Nza Kongo",⁴ and from this point forward it shall be referred to as the "Kongo cosmogram". Considering the notion of centeredness and a balance of the powers of the universe, Bakongo people's view of the universe, referred to as "Kongo cosmology," is crucial to the understanding of Kongo rituals and practices and certain African-American traditions as well. This research will focus on the use of the Kongo cosmogram as an African-American literary theory.

The Kongo cosmogram,⁵ as observed in Bakongo society, provides a unique model of religious and social values which have paved the way for the creation of this theory and the very foundation of many African-American traditions. The reification of the cosmogram upon the earth's surface, through African funeral

processions, ceremonial dance, and many other cultural expressions makes it accessible and able to be examined. The ritualized cosmology of the Bakongo people will serve, so to speak, as DNA of this theory of African-American literature which also yields an in-depth look into the African and African-American cultural perspective of the universe (see Fig. 1.). Graphically, the Kongo cosmogram looks like this:

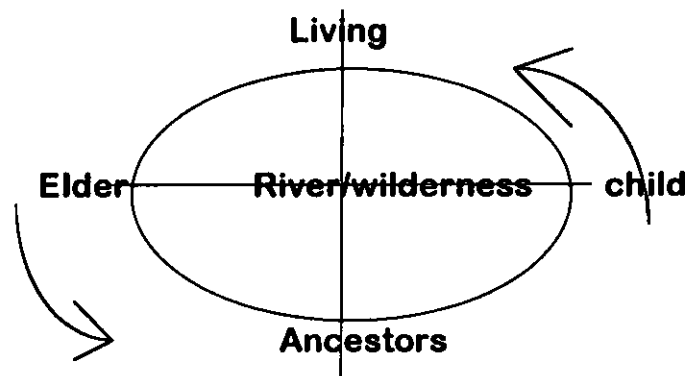


Fig. 1. Kongo Cosmogram

The embodiment of Bakongo cosmology is a chalked circle on the ground with vertical and horizontal lines intersecting through the middle of the circle and passing through to the circumference of the circle. The fact that Kongo cosmology is represented as a circle is not surprising, considering that one of the earliest symbols used by many Africans was the circle. Africans commune, dance, and

perform many rituals in a circle. The circle represents the cycle of the sun, the cycle of life.⁶

The horizontal line which stretches from the farthest right point of the circle to the farthest left point symbolizes a wide river or deep forest. This horizontal line divides the circle into two hemispheres--the world of the living and the world of the dead. More specifically, the top half of the circle represents the world of the living and the bottom half represents the world of the dead.

The vertical line, which stretches from the circle's highest point to its lowest point, traces the path across the two worlds of the living and the dead. A relationship is established between the above and the below and how they operate together. In Bakongo culture, it is believed that the dead assist the living. If a couple were having trouble producing offspring, for example, they might ask their ancestors for assistance.

The highest point of the circle represents North, the Adult, maleness, noon, or the point of one's strength on earth. Respectively, the lowest point of the circle represents South, femaleness, midnight, the ancestors, or the point of a person's otherworldly or ancestral strength.⁷ The farthest right point represents the child or infant who has just come from the world of

the dead. As the circle is read counter-clockwise, the far left of the circle represents the elders who will soon be going on their journey across the river (horizontal line) to the land of the dead.

The Kongo cosmogram represents an abundance of images which are spiritual in nature. As Robert Farris Thompson points out in Four Moments of the Sun:

Bodies were sometimes laid out in state in an open yard "on a textile bier," as bare chested mourner danced to the rhythm of the drums, in a broken counter-clockwise circle their feet imprinting a circle on the earth cloth attached to and trailing from the waste deepening the circle. Following the direction of the sun in the Southern Hemisphere, the mourners moved around the body of the deceased in a counter-clockwise direction. If the deceased lived a good life, death, a mere crossing over the threshold into another world was a precondition for being carried back into the mainstream of the living, in the name and body of grandchildren of succeeding generations.⁸

The energies of life which are centered by the form of the circle in the cosmogram demonstrate the circular/cyclical nature of life as seen by the Kongo people.⁹ The cosmogram paradigm regards the forces of life and death as complementary and deserving of celebration. The spirit of the ancestors (the dead) and the spirits of the living are connected, and it is the responsibility of the living to ensure that the dead are given honor, praise, and constant recognition. The world of the living includes those physically living on earth, some of whom have special access to the world of the dead as medicine men and mystics. The two worlds are as mountains mirrored in a pool of water, thus forming one world pointing upward; symbolizing the world of the living and its reflection pointing downward symbolizing the world of the dead (see Fig. 2.).

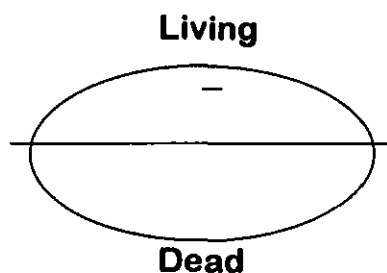


Fig. 2. Divided Worlds

Robert Farris Thompson gives a detailed account of one use of the Kongo cosmogram in Kongo society: "A newly elected king would

make a circular tour of his domain, symbolically passing through the world of the living and the dead, thereby acquiring mystical insight".¹⁰ The world of the dead, *Lunga*, as Thompson calls it, is the space in which spirits reside after crossing over from the physical world of the living.

Communication between the two worlds is a constant, as they are reciprocals and create the everlasting cycle of the human soul. In fact, ancestors are said to guide, direct, or even disrupt the affairs of the living. As Thompson discusses, children who die at an early age are not given elaborate funerals, fearing that the child's spirit may enjoy the attention and cause the parents to endure a series of infant deaths. Babies are viewed as visitors who have just come from the land of the ancestors and may go back at any time.

Spirits which are not buried correctly are said to be at unrest and may haunt those responsible for the burial until they are buried properly. The grave is the home of the deceased spirit and is taken very seriously. At the funerals of some chiefs, it is reported that their favorite servants were buried alive with the deceased.¹¹ The dead possess powers beyond those of the living and can perform extraordinary tasks such as spirit possession and the detection of evil forces such as witches. Children are said to have a certain

clairvoyance because they have just come from the land of the dead and are still attuned to the otherworldly powers of the dead. Elders are also said to regain the powers of the other world as they near physical death.

The circular nature of the cosmogram informs the Bakongo man and woman that one day they, too, will become one of the ancestors and their children and children's children will give honor unto them as the ancestors who came into the world and yielded life to them.

The intersection of the vertical line and the horizontal line create a cross in the middle of the circle which adds another dimension to the complex reading of the cosmogram. The "crossroads," as Robert Farris Thompson calls it, symbolizes the crossing of paths and is the space where worldly and other-worldly powers converge and are centered. It is the space where life and death, male and female, child and elder are brought together as one powerful force. According to Thompson, the crossroads is a space of both conflict and resolution from which one could experience the world of the living and the land of the dead simultaneously:

Members of the Lemba society of healers had
initiates stand on a cross chalked on the ground, a

move about with the confidence of a seer
empowered with insights from both worlds, both
halves of the cosmogram.¹²

The crossroads is that centered space around which the circle revolves. It is the point where the forces of life, death, and God are found. To stand at the crossroads is to invoke the judgment of the ancestors and God. The upright Bakongo soul looks forward to revisiting the land of the living as a grandchild and continuing the cycle of life. In this sense, the crossroads become a very powerful space of validation for the priests and healers. To stand at the crossroads means that one has withstood the wrath and power of God and, depending on the path of one's life, will either be given life through praise and celebration from future generations or given death through future generations not praising and remembering one's life on earth.

One value of the cosmogram theory is in its ability to demonstrate the complex and intricate way African mysticism and spiritual realms are constructed and how they have impacted African-American life. Another value of this theory is demonstrating how this force manifests itself specifically in African-American literary works. The Kongo cosmogram evidences the importance of

the community as the mode through which one establishes a relationship with God, the ancestors, and the world of those living. These three entities are crucial to the understanding of the Kongo cosmogram and appear to be the forces which guide Bakongo culture. They are also the foundation of what Bakongo people perceive as community. Likewise, these principles have guided African-American spirituality. Old Negro Spirituals such as "Wade in the Water", for example, speak to the practice of baptism--a ritual wherein the living gather to introduce an individual to God by submerging the person under water. It is at the crossroads where many Africans believe one will witness the powers of God and emerge from the waters spiritually renewed.

The circle of life, also symbolized through the four moments or stages of the sun, affirms the indestructibility of the soul (see Fig. 3.). In Religion and Society in Central Africa, MacGaffey presents an accurate description of Bakongo cosmology:

At the rising and setting of the sun the dead exchange day and night. The setting of the sun signifies man's death and its rising his rebirth, or the continuity of his life. Bakongo believe and hold it true that man's life has no end, that it

constitutes a cycle, and death is merely a transition in the process of change.¹³

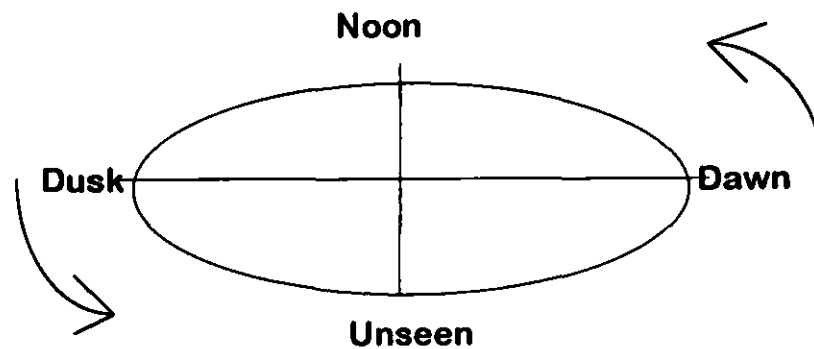


Fig. 3. The Circle of Life

As one righteous soul goes under to the world of the dead, it is believed that the soul will return to the land of the living, possibly, as a grandchild. This Bakongo view of the universe creates the context from which this literary theory is formed.

I. "The Circle of Life"

To comprehend fully how the Kongo cosmogram is constructed and survives the test of time, it is necessary to examine its underlying principles which seem to manifest themselves in many African cultures. An examination at this level requires the abandoning of stereotypical preconceived notions of African thought and religion as well as the temptation to judge African religious forms and content on the basis of Western religious forms and content. After all, African and European religions are part of two distinct ways of life which should be comprehended on the basis of their own criteria. This study of the principles which seem to bind some African religions and philosophies will establish the initial context from which the Kongo Cosmogram emerges and reveals the universal values and morals which have generated a cosmology which many Africans ascribe to regardless of religious sect or geographical location. From this examination then, one should derive a somewhat generalized African view of the universe, and the age old values and morals which have produced such an intricate cosmological view of the universe symbolized largely, but not exclusively, by the Kongo cosmogram.

Most Africans hold true that the universe is created by God, who has in turn created and nurtured human existence, providing

food, shelter, and all the other necessities required for human existence. God is viewed as having many different roles and titles. God is the Creator, the Protector, the Father, and the Ruler of the universe. In Introduction to African Religion, John Mbiti describes how some Africans perceive God: "The point in both images is that God is the Parent and people are his children. In some places he is even called the Great Ancestor, the Elder, the Grandfather, meaning that it is from him that all people and all things originated".¹⁴

In the creation of the universe, God is believed to have created the heavens and the earth which are connected through human beings. People embody both the heavenly (spirit) and the earthly (body) in human form. People are the beneficiaries of all things. Both the heavenly and the earthly powers of the universe are used for the advancement of people. People must live in harmony with the elements they wish to use. Therefore, if spiritual or earthly elements are disturbed or unduly disrupted, it is humans who will suffer the most.¹⁵

African cultural research also confirms that many Africans believe there is a cyclical nature to spirits, and that the origin of spirits is with God in heaven. Then the spirit is given a physical form on earth, which could be human. And when its physical body dies, the spirit joins with the Creator to repeat the cycle over again. This

ideology suggests that people never truly die. Death is only a crossing over to the other world where one is reborn again.

These are the major components of what might be generalized as West African cosmology.¹⁶ God, man, and the spirits demonstrate the order and origin of the universe. These basic philosophical views of the universe set the stage for the rituals and ceremonies observed in African religions. God, man, and spirits all play their respective roles in making sense of the world. Each entity answers the ancient questions of why we are here, what we are to do here, and which of those things cannot be explained. In essence, God answers why we are here; human's accountability for earth answers what we are to do here, and spirits explain those things which otherwise cannot be explained. To combine these beliefs and practices, one becomes a witness to African religion and philosophies in their earliest form.

Now that a common African view of the universe has been established, it is necessary to examine how it is facilitated in the culture of the Bakongo people. The cycle of life can also be observed in the four day week to which the Bakongo people are accustomed. The four days of the week are Nkandu, Konzo, Nkengu, and Nsona.¹⁷ Nkandu and Konzo are seen as the beginning and are

regarded as good gardening days. Wyatt MacGaffey relates the four day week to the Kongo cosmogram:

Nsona and Nkandu, days corresponding to the upward movement were regarded as good for planting and in some areas prescribed for burials too... Nkengo and Nsona would correspond, metaphorically to 'the other world.' Nkandu and Konzo, the this-worldly days, are said to have the power to burn people; that is they were appropriate for public execution which presumably dispatches criminals to the other world.¹⁸

The very name of the four day week attests to the influence of the cosmogram. The name is *Malungi* which comes from *lungi* meaning to complete, to encircle. For the Bakongo people, this pattern represents the cycle of life as seen through their eyes. Life is a cycle with no beginning or ending, only different forms from which life emerges and submerges, transforms and reorganizes its energies.

Community is also a crucial factor in the livelihood of Bakongo people. Religious beliefs support a communal existence rather than an individual one. Therefore, it does not matter if an individual

accepts all the beliefs. Rituals and ceremonies are practiced by the community, and although an individual has the right not to participate, so to do so is to cut oneself off from one's cultural heritage. Community is such an integral part of Bakongo society that are very few religious spaces that are not constructed with the community in mind. Kongo cosmology is based on the cultural value of an inclusive community. This cultural value may be observed through the placement and design of Bakongo living quarters.¹⁹ The homes are often erected in the shape of circles which encourage the value of community and respect for one another. The architectural designs of Kongo homes are also large cylinder type huts that allow large gatherings of people. In this wise, the circle is an instrumental part in the establishment of community. The circle is the space from which all can be seen and heard, and encourages people to participate in its cyclical pattern. The circle symbolizes an inclusive bond to which any given point on the circle is given value, not by its chronological order, but by its worth to the circle as a whole.

In Bakongo culture, the circle is used as the symbol describing the continuity of the universe. Often times, African people perform rituals, dance, song, and worship in the form of a circle. The continuity of the circle also lends itself to the re-enacted rituals pertaining to death and rebirth. In the African view of the universe,

God is what keeps the circle intact and never-ending. As a result, the circle reveals the never-ending cycle of the human spirit. The Bakongo people observe the circle as a giver and sustainer of life and death. The two forces of life and death are connected; there cannot be life without death or a day without a night. The counter-clockwise motion of the dance symbolizes the life cycle of the sun as it rises in the East and sets in the West. The circle represents this and more. The circle, geometrically speaking, has no point of origin. This fact supports the claim by some historians that Bakongo people told very few stories concerning the creation of life and how things came into existence. This suggests that the Bakongo people believe that life is never-ending and will continue so long as God is its producer. The circle is seen as an inclusive bond in which one actively participates as one strives to acquaint oneself with the powers of God, the ancestors, and the living to achieve a balance with the powers of the universe.

In summation, this information suggests that Bakongo people have a deeply religious view of the universe which involves God, man, and spirits. These entities come together to form the very roots of Kongo cosmology and demonstrate the origin and function of the universe as seen by Bakongo people. The community reveals itself as a necessary and vital component of Bakongo culture. The circle

yields form to the universe and represents how it is perceived from the Bakongo African perspective. The circle demonstrates the completeness about the African view of the universe. It is from this context that the Kongo cosmogram emerges. God, man, spirits, community, and the circle all give birth to what is known to the Bakongo people as Tendwa Nza Kongo, or the Kongo Cosmogram.

The Kongo cosmogram demonstrates the unifying effects of the circle as an inclusive, unbroken bond of human existence. The circle invokes the four stages of life and people's gender potential to magnify spirituality. The center of the circle, the crossroads, is seen as a crucial point from where the righteous are tested and the waters troubled. Decisions must be made that will ultimately affect the whole of the circle of life.

By briefly examining the Maafa²⁰ (the Middle Passage) and the effects of plantation existence on the people who once possessed such a cosmology, this research will demonstrate the presence of the Kongo cosmogram in the African-American cultural experience. This study will also point out the major changes the cosmogram has undergone as a result of its transference from Africa to America.

In the midst of the European slave trade, the Kongo cosmogram suffered an enormous blow to its structure and spiritual foundation. Europeans expressed contempt for African life and

beliefs as Africans were abducted from their homelands and put aboard slave ships. Africans were not allowed to practice many of their indigenous beliefs.²¹ These facts show how controlling Europeans had to be to keep Africans from using all of their physical and spiritual resources to rebel against their oppressors.

One major factor which affected the circle deeply was the disruption of communication between ancestors in the sacred ground of home and those surviving in a strange land. The Maafa interfered with the communication to and from the world of the dead (see Fig. 4.). The sons and daughters of Africa understood that their prayers and moans of sorrow would perhaps go unheard by the ancestors as they sailed farther and farther away from their homeland. This alone disrupted the cycle of life Africans had come to know and believe in. During the Middle Passage the slave captors also denied Africans a proper burial and funeral ceremony. Some Africans believed that if they jumped from the slave ship to their physical death, their spirit would go home and they would be able to help those in bondage. Whenever possible, their captors deterred this hope, however, by retrieving and mutilating the dead bodies of those who jumped overboard.²² This deed conveyed the message that, even in death, the captors still had control over their persons.

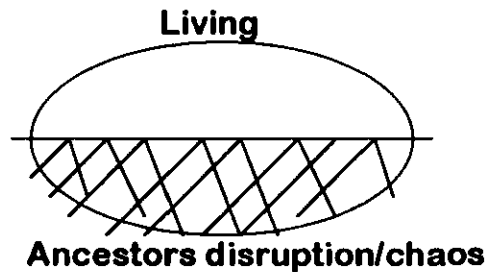


Fig. 4. Disrupted Kongo Cosmogram

Those ancestors who were murdered and jettisoned overboard were silenced. Their voices and spirits were lost in a watery grave. What would now become of the cycle of life? What would happen to those elderly men and women whose time it was to lay their burdens down and, as we shall see, travel across the great river to the other side where their mother and mother's mother should be waiting? The waters which were traditionally seen as points of transformation between the worlds of the living and the dead seemed to be sacrificing enslaved Africans on a pale horse of unspeakable horrors. It would seem that the waters were against them, washing their land, language, culture, and circle away as they moved out across the watery wilderness. In The Life of Olaudah Equiano, Equiano describes his experience as he realizes he is a prisoner aboard a slave ship:

I now saw myself deprived of all chance of
returning to my native country, or even the least
glimpse of home, or gaining the shore... And I even

wished for my former slavery in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightening by my ignorance of what I was to undergo.²³

The journey across the Atlantic Ocean left the Kongo cosmogram with only the upper half of the ring somewhat intact; those who survived to America often described themselves as motherless children. Africans were taken with shackles on their hands and feet. They were bought and sold away from their families at a price and devalued to the status of chattel. It would seem that all had been lost for these children of Africa, but instead of abandoning their old ways and traditions in the midst of chaos, they secretly and silently fought to keep the traditions and culture which helped them "*get over.*"

One of the major cultural realities that survived to the Americas is that of the Kongo cosmogram. It is understood that people of the Kongo region are, for the most part, responsible for the meaning and preservation of the cosmogram. The reason why the cosmogram is so widespread among diasporic Africans is because many African regions such as Nigeria, Dahomey, Togo, and Ghana have one variation or another of the cosmogram. This type of

widespread symbolism allowed the resurfacing of the cosmogram circle in African-American culture.

The most noted way the Kongo cosmogram has been identified in North America is through the ring shouts of enslaved Africans. Sterling Stuckey's Slave Culture describes the ritual:

Wherever in Africa the counter-clockwise dance ceremony was performed it is called the ring shout in North America. The dancing and singing were directed to the ancestors and god, the tempo and revolution of the circle quickening during the course of movement. The ring in which Africans danced and sang is the key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America.²⁴

Perhaps the ring shout is one of the methods used to restore the severed circle and reunite the world of the living with the dead in America. Enslaved Africans would sometimes steal away to some secluded clearing in the forest to sing and dance in a counter-clockwise motion, invoking God and the spirits of the dead. For the enslaved African, the ring shouts served the purpose of reuniting the people with God and their ancestors. Simon Brown, an ex-slave,

relates to Sterling Stuckey the feelings Africans in America felt when engaged in a ring shout:

But, oh, my, when my people would get together to 'Wishop'(Worship) God, the Spirit would "move in the meeting!" The folk' would sing an' pray an 'testify,' and' clap they han's, jus' as if God was there in the midst with them. He wasn't way off, up in the sky: He was a-seein' everybody an' a-listen' to ever' word an' a-promisin' to 'let His love come down.' My people would be so burden' down with they trials an' tribulation an' broken hearts, that I seen them break down an' cry like babies.... Yes sir, there was no pretendin' in those prayer-meetin's. There was a livin' faith in a jus' God who would one day answer the cries of his poor black chillen an' deliver them from the enemies. But they never say a word to they white folks 'bout this kine of faith.²⁵

The ring shouts served to connect displaced Africans with the spirit world. This dance was a radical attempt to "make a way out of no

way". Said differently, it was an African way of restoring an African community to its natural, circular form.

The impact of Christianity upon African traditions and rituals in the Americas, especially the cosmogram, is most peculiar. It is peculiar in the sense that Christianity agreed to a large extent with the basic beliefs of African cosmology. As African religious practices were outlawed, however, Africans-Americans began to use Christianity as a camouflage of sorts. Christianity was used often as an external shield which thwarted any suspicions the slave owner might have had as to the religious routine of the slave. Often Africans were able to disguise their belief system because it overlapped the values and practices of Euro-Christianity. Both practices argue for the death and resurrection of the soul and the commitment to leading a good life. The role of water in both Christianity and African cosmologies is also a similarity. Water is used as a symbol of the renewing of the spirit.

The African-American ritual of baptism uses the sign of the cross and a body of living water (running water) for the purpose of introducing one to God, by which one will be spiritually revived.²⁸ The preacher and candidate for baptism, along with followers, would go down to the river. The preacher would spear his staff made like a cross into the river proclaiming the water holy. Africans held true

that water was the doorway between the world of the living and the dead as represented by the horizontal line of the cosmogram. The waters contain great spirits and the power of God, which is life. Stuckey gives an account of the importance of the cross in baptism:

The staff-cross enabled the deacon, as it did the Bakongo king, to traverse the watery barrier- the horizontal portion of the cross...to mediate between the world of the living and the world the dead.

When the deacon brandishes his staff, it was as if the sun in its orbit was suddenly mirrored, revealing the fullness of Bakongo religion. And since those who lived a good life might experience rebirth in generations of grandchildren the cycle of death and rebirth could hardly have been more suggestive than through the staff-cross-- a symbol of communal renewal.²⁷

Baptisms in the enslaved community demonstrated to the baptized that there is a community or circle to which one belongs. As in traditional African societies, to be submerged in water meant that one had witnessed the powers of the other world and was able to serve the good of the community. The cross in African cosmology

did not symbolize the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. However, the cross did represent the continuous cycle of life; it represented the crossing of paths of the world of the living and the dead.

It would be safe to say that slave religion was kept, for the most part, from white slave owners. Enslaved Africans would have very secret meetings usually in some deep forest where they could perform rituals such as the ring shouts. In the middle of the wilderness Africans were once again dancing, praying, and singing in the tradition of the circle.²⁸

One of the chief practices used to ensure the secrecy of the meeting was a large kettle turned upside in the center of the meeting place.²⁹ Some say it was to catch the voices and sounds of the meeting, so the slave owners would not hear them. Secrecy was such a priority that even African children knew never to tell a white person anything concerning what was done at such gatherings, apart from the slave owner's own knowledge. The secrecy of such rituals is what allowed the circle to be healed and somewhat restored. The transference of the cosmogram to the Americas forced its reconstruction to take into consideration the malicious acts of rape and the cruel deaths that were suffered by those considered to be ancestors. The bottom portion of the circle

illustrates the fragments in the ancestral world which have made it more difficult to communicate with the ancestors (see Fig. 4.).

It is from the religious practices of the enslaved African that Kongo cosmology and the cosmogram re-emerge. The two major themes which have survived to the Americas and are identified by the cosmogram are community, transmitted by the circle pattern, and the process of change or transformation, symbolized by the cross/crossroads, which also serve as a space of centeredness of energies (life, death, God, etc..).

The community evidences itself as a major value in African life. Activities performed in a circle such as dancing, singing, and worshipping are African communal tools which shape socialization skills and outlook on life. Everyone plays a part and has space in which to contribute to the whole. The cosmogram's four stages of life show a commitment to the respect of the whole community, which includes the world of the dead.

We have focused on the crossroads, the community, the elders, and the circularity of life in Kongo cosmology as represented by the Kongo cosmogram; these elements of the model will now be used to create a theory of reading African-American literature. More specifically, via Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" and Baldwin's Go Tell it on the Mountain, the aforementioned themes will be examined

thoroughly and will demonstrate how Kongo cosmology functions as a theory of reading African-American literature. For the sake of this study, this theory is limited to the themes mentioned above, but in no way does this study attempt to limit the possibilities of the Kongo cosmogram.

II. "A Raisin in the Sun"

Now that the Kongo cosmogram has been defined and established as representing a cosmology that has survived the enslavement process, the Kongo cosmogram will be presented as a theory of reading African-American literature.

There are no particularly odd reasons why "A Raisin in the Sun" was chosen. Put simply, Hansberry's work yields a simple and complete application of the cosmogram theory. The components of the cosmogram boldly identify themselves in the text. More specifically, "A Raisin in the Sun" yields components found fundamental to the Kongo cosmogram, which allows a simple and easy-to-grasp application of the theory. This chapter will discuss themes and forms of Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" and how they relate to and establish the validity of the Kongo cosmogram as an African-American literary theory.

One particular theme which deserves attention is the theme of centeredness. Hansberry questions the centered space her character Walter Lee so desperately wants to be a part of. The centered space parallels the crossroads of Kongo cosmology, in that it is that space from which power and life are created. Hansberry's use of themes such as community and social identity raises some significant questions concerning black consciousness as well as

illustrate the circular nature of community observed in the cosmogram.

Written in 1958 and first performed in 1959, "A Raisin in the Sun" enjoyed national appeal, touching the hearts of all, as it transcended racial barriers and went on to win the New York Critics Circle Award for the 1958-59 season.³⁰ At this Hansberry was pleased and honored, but in an introduction to the 1988 publication of "A Raisin in the Sun", Robert Nemiroff suggests that Hansberry realized the tragic injustice done to her work in exchange for the acquisition of awards and fame: "When Hansberry read the review-delighted by the accolades, grateful for the recognition, but also deeply troubled, she decided to put back many of the materials excised".³¹ Perhaps Hansberry believed that the omission of some of the scenes cut from the original production catered to a more mainstream white audience. Her decision to revive the omitted scenes which exclusively deal with the African-American community perhaps reveal a slight conflict of centeredness within the author. Centeredness, in reference to the Kongo cosmogram, refers to a space of validation, where one is judged by God, the ancestors, and the community. For Hansberry, the original play, which received critical acclaim, was decentered and taken out of an African-

American context to appeal to a larger mainstream audience and community.

When Hansberry decided to bring back those scenes, which were earlier omitted, she was attempting to bring the play back to the center of the African-American community. Hansberry, strangely enough, finds herself at the crossroads, trying to make the best decision for herself and the community. The question she faces is for which community does "A Raisin in the Sun" become the center? If it becomes the center of the larger community (white), the scenes which emphasize black consciousness would be omitted and the possibility of recognition and fame are more attainable although at the expense of the African-American community the play claims to depict. In producing an uncut version of the play, her vision of African-American life is not compromised and affirms the community from which the play originates. The uncut version of the play, then, forces me to question whether the play would have ever made it to Broadway, or even been produced for that matter, if it were not for its mass appeal.

The play centers around the Younger family, whose name suggests a new beginning for black families. This family demonstrates the problems of centeredness facing African-Americans and their values and morals in a larger more dominant

culture. Just as Hansberry was struggling with which community to place at the center of her play, the Younger family struggles with whose values will be the measuring stick by which they live. In "A Raisin in the Sun", Walter Lee, like many black men in America, sees economic empowerment as the key to breaking the chains of racism and poverty. Walter's mother questions whether money has taken the place of freedom in life. Walter Lee replies, "No- it was always money, Mama, we just didn't know it".³² The pronoun 'we' may be taken to refer not just to the Younger family, but to Black people in general. Walter Lee's views conflict with those of his mother, who believes freedom for all is the only way truly to live life. Later in the play, this conflict proves to be a crucial dilemma Walter Lee must overcome.

The ideas espoused by Walter Lee are not only his own, but an entire generation's--a generation which, like the white men he imitates, associates power and success with aggression and impatience. Unlike her son's generation, Lena Younger's generation is somewhat passive and patient. Walter Lee believes he is entitled to a piece of the American Dream and has taken on some of America's self-absorbed values in order to accomplish such. Beneatha, his sister, likewise has her heart set on going to school to "make 'something' of herself". Both Walter Lee's and Beneatha's

dreams are big and full of hope and success. And, at the same time, those dreams are shortsighted because the two are so caught up in their own aspirations that they forget (or choose to ignore) the importance of those who have come before them, upon whose shoulders they stand. When Beneatha declares that she does not believe in God, she displays contempt for her mother and her mother's generation-- those who base their lives on Christian principles. Beneatha's comment disturbs the cycle of life in the sense that the morals and values of the older generation are being re-evaluated by the younger generation.

Lena Younger is meant to represent the older generation--one who possesses knowledge and wisdom that the younger generation does not possess. She is the keeper of traditions and the elder giving advice, hoping the young do not make the same mistakes her generation made. However, Lena Younger functions out of a time when surviving racism was the best many Blacks--especially middle class blacks--could hope for. As a result, her dreams suffer and are limited by the very real ills of racism. She does not ask for much. Her dream is a second class version of the American Dream. This conflict of generations also becomes crucial. Walter Lee must choose whose values are correct for him and his family--those of the American Dream or those of his mother.

Another conflict which creates a crossroads is the new black male consciousness which attacks black women. Walter Lee attacks black women for their seeming lack of support of black men: "That is just what is wrong with the colored women in this world. [They] don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody, like they can do something" (34). After years of the dominant myth that black women have been treated better by white racism than black men, the play suggests that black men feel resentment toward black women for not staying in their place and letting the men be men. This conflict between men and women also displays the disruption sustained by the cosmogram in its transference from Africa to America. In Bakongo cosmology, men and women, although represented as opposites, work in harmony for the sake of the community. Needless to say, that harmony seriously deteriorates in America as the evils of racism strive to destroy Black male/ female unions.

Black women like Ruth demonstrate the plight of many black women trying to be good wives in the eyes of their husbands while simultaneously retaining their dignity and pride. In the middle of the crossroads, Walter Lee is faced with the decision either to choose a path that will lead to a just and righteous future for him and his family or choose a path leading to its destruction. In the end, he sees that

the three women in his life have always helped him bear the burdens of living in a racist system and are now prepared to be powerful allies in the struggle against racism. At the moment Walter Lee announces his decision to place dignity before money, he discusses his pride in his wife and mother and in the fact that his sister is going to be a doctor.

The Younger Family is centered in a space where the American Dream of success and money conflict with pride and dignity, where a new generation challenges the older generation's ideas and beliefs. Walter's ideal of wanting to be the sole provider for his family for example conflicts with the image of black women being the "real" heads of the household. Walter continuously blames the black women in his life for not making him feel like a man. These conflicts present themselves as crossroads which the Younger family must face and overcome.

Walter Lee Younger epitomizes the conflict of centeredness facing African-Americans. Throughout the play, he compares his existence with that of the "White man". Walter Lee's constant obsession with what the "White man" is doing suggests that his view of self and value of self does not come from the center of his own community but from without:

...When I'm downtown and I pass them cool, quiet-looking restaurants where them white boys are sitting back and talking 'bout things...sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars... sometimes I see guys don't look much older than me (76).

He has not modeled himself after his father, whose death and sacrifice assumed a meaning of hard work and very little to show for it. To Walter, his father worked very hard and received very little in return for his labor. Clearly, Walter Lee makes the dominant culture's values his center and measures himself accordingly. Walter Lee's troubles seem to lie partly in his denial of the importance of his community/circle and in his inability to focus on family in the traditional way of his mother. Walter's critique of African-American women supporting African-American men is an example, "We one group of men tied to a race of women with small minds" (35). Walter clearly ignores the contributions of the African-American women in his circle/community. In the beginning of the play, Walter Lee is only able to realize his own wants and dreams: "Do you know what that money means to me?... Mama-mama I want so many things" (73). His dream of owning a liquor store and making lots of money confirms his investment in the capitalistic dream of

America where money is essential and dictates one's status, worth, and value.

Ultimately, Walter Lee Younger constitutes a "Crossroads character". The crossroads, as in Kongo cosmology, is represented in "A Raisin in the Sun" by centeredness of the power of the living and the dead, the young and the old. The crossroads, then, is a space of conflict and resolution, problems and problem solving, death and resurrection. As Walter Lee stands at the crossroads, he is refusing the aid of the communal circle to help him deal with the problems of life he and so many other African-Americans face everyday. Essentially, Walter Lee values American individualistic values rather than the traditional community values his mother has tried to instill in him. Walter Lee, like so many of his peers, adopts the values of the larger mainstream society. This leads him temporarily to failure, as he disregards the values of his community by spending the insurance money without consulting anyone. The dominant community's values become Walter Lee's center. Walter Lee, in effect, is displaced in a world where some of the morals and values of that world conflict with those taught to him by his mother and community. His decisions are made without the advice of the community/circle which produced him and leads to the loss of the insurance money. "A Raisin in the Sun" signifies upon Kongo

cosmology and American culture by demonstrating what can happen when one of African descent tries to live by Euro-American values and cultural aesthetics with no regard for the values and context of one's own cultural circle.

Hansberry also demonstrates the new attitude many African-Americans of the 50's had as a result of integration. Walter Lee and Beneatha symbolize the evolution of a new black consciousness which rejects many of the traditions of African-Americans. In the dialogue between Ruth and Mama, Ruth relates the decenteredness present in both Walter Lee and Beneatha Ruth says, "You got good children, Lena. They just a little off sometimes--but they're good"(52). Mama tries to figure out what broke up the circle, keeping her and her children at odds:

No-there's something come down between me
and them that don't let us understand each
other and I don't know what it is. One done
almost lost his mind thinking 'bout money all
the time and the other done commence to talk
about things I can't seem to understand in no form
or fashion. What is it that's changing, Ruth?
(52).

Although Mama is referring to Walter Lee and Beneatha, in a larger context, she suggests that there once was a time when young and old understood and respected their roles according to a circular nature of life. It seems that something has disrupted and lured the young away from the circle, disallowing the values and traditions of the old to be reborn in the new generations. The Younger family brings to light, then, the conflict between old traditions and the ideologies of the new generation of African-Americans, influenced by a non-circular European cosmology.

The community portrayed in "A Raisin in the Sun" also functions much like a Kongo community. The Community in "A Raisin in the Sun" consists of Ruth, Lena, Walter Sr., Beneatha, Walter Lee and Travis. As a community, they function as the context or backdrop from which all situations in the play are set in motion. They serve as the circle which gives the crossroads meaning. Each individual contributes something to the whole of the community in some form or fashion. Travis serves as the child, Walter Lee's future, reminding Walter Lee that he must do better for the sake of his son. Travis represent the concept of hope. Ruth Younger serves as the adult companion whom Walter confides in. Lena is seen as the elder guiding her son through the wilderness of life to manhood. Walter Sr. assumes the role of ancestor, the one who Walter Lee

must honor and respect. Beneatha serves, more or less, as a critic of Walter Lee's faults.

Walter Lee's decision to invest the insurance money in a liquor store adversely affects his family, the community. Because his decision was not in the best interest of his community, the people or the circle cannot move forward or grow. Beneatha's education will be further delayed and their hopes of moving up the social ladder are, once again, deferred.

Walter Lee, in the beginning of the play, acts like a child who wants everybody's attention. He constantly begs for his family to listen to him and the things he wants. But by the end of the play, he realizes that his family has dreams and aspirations and that they are as important as he is. He finally begins to assume the role of an adult as he defines for Mr. Lindner the type of people he comes from and explains the aspirations of his own community: "...we come from a people who had a lot of pride...my sister over there is going to be a doctor- and we are very proud"(148). Walter Lee is ultimately being tested again at the crossroads. This time the point of the crossroads is contextualized within the circle of his community. With the guidance of Travis, Ruth, Beneatha, his mother, and father, Walter makes the decision to refuse Mr. Lindner's payoff to keep the Younger's from moving into his neighborhood: "...We come from a

very proud people who had a lot of pride. I--mean we are very proud people. And we have decided to move into our house because my -- father--he earned it brick by brick”(pg. 148).

The transformation that occurs in Walter Lee Younger is not instant. There is a wilderness or river which Walter Lee must cross in order to make the right decisions involving Mr. Lindner's money; “Well- I laid on my back today... and figured it out. Life just like it is. Who gets and who don't get. Mama you know it's all divided up between the takers and the 'taken.' I figured it out finally” (141). What Walter Lee is figuring out or struggling with is which path will lead to the advancement of his family. He only realizes that the path he is on to sell out his family's pride and dignity in exchange for money is wrong only when Lena demands that Travis stay and watch him take the money. This forces Walter to realize that his actions affect the new generation coming after him, and that he has a responsibility to teach the values of right and wrong to those who come after him, just as they were taught to him. Walter Lee, as a man at this point, is able to see the hope and vision of the living through his son, Travis, who will continue the cycle of life: “This is my son, and he makes the sixth generation of our family in this country. And we have all thought about your offer” (148).

Walter Lee also recognizes the wisdom of his elders and the tradition and strength of the ancestors. He learns that his pride in himself and his pride in his family are inseparable-- that anything harming one also harms the other. In the end, he decides to place dignity before money. Walter Lee takes his place in the African-American circle of life.

It is important to say a word about Lena's role as community elder. She is the bridge between the world of the living and the world of the dead. She keeps the memory of Walter Sr. alive and real for her family: "Honey, Big Walter would come in here some nights back then and slump down on that couch there and just look at the rug, and look at me and look at the rug and then back at me-- and I'd know he was down then ... really down"(45).

Lena Younger, elder of the house, serves as Walter Lee's guide. She represents the old way of doing things. She is the keeper of traditions. She is the link between the past and the future and transmits the traditions of the community to the next generation. Her wisdom and compassion provide the context in which Walter Lee attains true manhood. She displays her circle of love and compassion for her son saying:

Have you cried for that boy today? I don't mean for yourself and for the family cause we lost the money.

I mean for him; what he been through and what it does to him, child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most; when they done good and made things easy for everybody?...that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe hisself 'cause the world done whipped him so. When you start measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is (145).

Lena sees the confusion in Walter Lee as money begins to take the place of the values of community represented by the circle of life. All of Walter's emphasis on money leads his mother, his elder, who is trying to help him through the wilderness, to say, "So it's life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life-now it's money. I guess the world really do change" (74). Lena recognizes the decentered values Walter Lee strives to attain and attempts to reemphasize the values African centered thought champions. Lena goes on to invoke the memories of the ancestors who came before and whose center was not money but a faith in everlasting life and a

will to live. She is constantly reminding Walter of his father and how he handled responsibility with his family and the community in mind.

As an elder, Lena seems more cognizant of God's laws, as she comes closer to crossing over to the world of the ancestors. She temporarily reprimands her daughter for not believing in God and refuses to invest the insurance money in a liquor store: "...Liquor, Honey-...well whether they drink it or not ain't none of my business. But whether I go into business selling it to 'em is, and I don't want that on my ledger this late in life"(42). Lena appears willing to accept less in this life in order to assure herself reaping more in the next.

The circularity of life represents the different stages of life and how they connect to form a life cycle. Travis represents the continuation of the life cycle started by Walter Sr. and those who came before him. The circularity of life plays a definitive role in "A Raisin in the Sun". Just as Bakongo people believe a righteous soul may return to the world of the living as a child, Walter Lee is the continuation of Walter Sr. as Lena's statement suggests, "Big Walter sure did love his children. Always wanted them to have something, be something"(45). Because Walter Lee wants to "be something," he readily accepts the American values which hold that owning one's business is a primary path to economic success. However, he later

learns that the first step toward "being something" is defining himself within the context of his past and his people.

As in the cosmology of the Kongo, ancestors in "A Raisin in the Sun" are a key component in the configuration of the cosmogram. Although Walter Lee's father is dead, he always seems to be involved in the family's affairs. The insurance money left after his death creates opportunity and at the same time chaos for the Younger family. The economic situation demonstrates the father's presence and the placement of the Younger's at the crossroads, as they must decide whose values will prevail-- those of the ancestors or integrated values which have emerged in America. Lena reminds Walter of his father who has passed on to the next life. Ultimately, she is trying to teach her son how to be a man according to the ways and traditions of her ancestors and take the place of his father in the circle:

I'm waiting to hear how you be your father's son. Be the man he was .. your wife say she going to destroy your child. And I'm waiting to see you stand up and look like your daddy and say we done give up one baby to poverty and that we ain't going to give up nary another one...I'm waiting (75).

Lena Younger attempts to restore her family to the way life was before so much emphasis was put on money. She demonstrates that she recognizes the connection between life and death and understands that the cycle of life bonds a community. She also recognizes clearly that life is the most precious gift.

The crossroads, the community, the elders, and the circularity of life are all present in "A Raisin in the Sun". These combined components stand as proof that Kongo cosmology (and African cosmology in general) has found its way into the African-American community. The resulting literary theory begs African-American scholars to look closer at the African diasporic connections to assure that we evaluate our literature via our own cultural standards.

III. "Go Tell it on the Mountain"

James Baldwin's first novel, Go tell it in the Mountain, yields very interesting finds when sifted through the Kongo cosmogram. The individual decisions the young protagonist must make in the presence of his own community reveal the presence of Kongo cosmogram structure in Harlem in the 1950's. Baldwin's structural approach in each chapter also validates the use of the Kongo cosmogram as a theory of reading African-American literature.

Baldwin's Go tell it on the Mountain was chosen not only because its elements reflect the principles of the Kongo cosmogram, but also because Baldwin's complex style relates to the complexity of the Kongo cosmogram. He creates circles within circles and critiques the African-American religious tradition. Just as in "A Raisin in the Sun," the community, elders, crossroads, and the circularity of life will serve as the primary themes and structures which evidence the complexity of the Kongo cosmogram. The novel evokes the themes and functions of the Kongo cosmogram all at once: the community, the elders, the crossroads, and the circular cycle of life. All of these motifs are found within Go Tell it on the Mountain and make the novel more spiritually comparable to the cosmogram of the Bakongo people.

The title of the novel, taken from the old Negro spiritual, "Go Tell it in on the Mountain", suggests the coming of a savior.³³ A closer analysis reveals that the title holds a multiplicity of biblical allusions, consisting of more than just the good news that Jesus Christ is born. The mountain represents the human situation which all must climb and overcome for the purpose of self realization.³⁴ In this sense, the mountain is at once a barrier and a path way leading to a higher level of consciousness. The protagonist, John, must climb his mountain and overcome his stepfather and the religious hypocrisy his stepfather represents to understand better his own identity and proclaim it to the world. John must come through the wilderness of confusion and into his own manhood and sense of self in order to break away from the restrictive church. As literary scholar Shirley Allen argues, "It is a shout of faith in ultimate victory while the struggle and suffering are still going on".³⁵ This rite of passage conveyed by the title relates perfectly to the ideological construct of the Kongo cosmogram.

The setting of the black church also establishes the Kongo cosmogram, as Baldwin cleverly portrays the church as both a house of safety and fear. Through Gabriel, Elizabeth, and Florence, Baldwin establishes the church as a house of safety for them. They all come to the church to be safe or "Saved" from their past deeds

and present thoughts. To John, however, the church is a place of fear:

The darkness and silence of the church pressed on him, cold as judgment, and the voices crying from the windows might have been crying from another world. John moved forward, hearing his feet crack against the sagging wood, to where the golden cross on the red field of the alter cloth glowed like smothered fire, and switched on one weak light.³⁶

John's fear of the church stems from his mean religious stepfather and the church's stance against sin. When Elisha and Ella Mae are scorned for seeing too much of each other, the church demonstrates its rigid views on sexuality. Later the church informs John that he must choose between the black church and the acceptance of his whole self.

The church becomes the space in which safety and fear both reside. Through the church, one enjoys fellowship, the spiritual food and water of life, and the protection that the church as a haven offers to whoever comes to it.³⁷ The church is the place of the crossroads in the novel. The church is the focal space from which

most of the novel is told. The prayers of the Saints and John's transformation are witnessed inside the church. The church is Black America's sacred ground upon which the cosmogram is formed.³⁸ Just as in Bakongo society where these spaces possess powers of both life and death, The Temple of the Fire Baptized is recognized as such.

The church and the Grimes family serve as the community surrounding the pubescent John Grimes as he makes the difficult journey from childhood to manhood. In the midst of a mean step father and a faith which does not allow one to explore one's full humanity, John must cross the river to self-actualization. Baldwin demonstrates the duty of the community to guide the traveler through to the other side by having the characters tell their individual stories of how they "got over". It is the community's responsibility to testify for the sake of the individual at the crossroads so the individual has guidance and direction along the way.

A closer analysis reveals that the central chapters of the novel are structured as a testimonial service. In the traditional testimonial service, people testify to God's power and how it has touched their lives. From their public testimony, the hope is that a non-believer undergoes a spiritual metamorphosis and is brought through the

wilderness closer to God. In Go Tell it on the Mountain, Three characters give a testimony. But what makes these testimonies different is that they are unspoken testimonies. Each character has a story to tell but does not tell it to the others. The way the reader gets to know each character is through the introspection of each narrator. None of their stories are publicly spoken at church, but a transformation still occurs in John Grimes' life. The presence of the community without their spoken testimony emphasizes the community's role as witness to John's transformation. Baldwin therefore suggests that the advice and testimony of the community are not as necessary for one's transformation as is the community's role of witnessing that transformation. If the testimonies had been publicly spoken, John's transformation perhaps would have been easier. But these testimonies are unspoken, and John is still transformed. Even John is more concerned with the community's witnessing of his transformation on the threshing floor than advice or guidance given to him along the way: "No matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me. No matter what anybody says, you remember--please remember I was saved. I was there" (220).

Baldwin demonstrates through the testimonial characters Gabriel, Florence, and Elizabeth how they came to the crossroads

and chose the church as a reaction and not an act coming from within themselves. All three characters come to the church out of fear. Baldwin creates cosmograms in the lives of Gabriel, Florence, and Elizabeth which ultimately support the larger cosmogram wherein John Grimes stands at the center and at the crossroads. As a result, Gabriel, Florence, and Elizabeth all at one time or another are crossroads characters.

The space where Gabriel is "Saved" parallels the description of the crossroads in Kongo cosmology. The crossroads is that space where paths are chosen and the forces of life and death are uneasily identified by the individual at the crossroads. It is that space in which the individual stands alone before the powers of the universe and is judged and assessed:

He [Gabriel] faced the lone tree, beneath the naked eye of Heaven. Then, in a moment, there was silence, only silence, everywhere- the very birds had ceased to sing, and no dogs barked, and no rooster crowed for a day. And he felt that this silence was God's judgment; that all creation had been still before the just and awful wrath of God...Yes, he was in that valley where his

mother told him he would find himself , where
there was no human help, no hand outstretched
to protect or save. Here nothing prevailed save
the mercy of God- here the battle was fought
between God and the Devil, between
death and everlasting life (96-97).

It is Gabriel's reaction to hell which brings him closer to the community of the church. And because it is a reaction as opposed to an action, no change or transformation occurs in Gabriel's life. He is still the same self-absorbed person he is after he comes to the church that he was before. In all of his efforts to overcome temptation, he fails because his coming to the church is not a sincere act from his heart. Even at the end of the novel Gabriel is still never spiritually renewed. He chooses to live the lie he has created and therefore never truly understands the spiritual forces which allow transformation in life.

In this cosmogram, Gabriel stands at the crossroads, making an insincere commitment to the church and God. According to Gabriel's testimony, he has fallen so low and realizes he needs all the help he can get. He does not come to the church/community because he loves it, but because he is afraid of Hell. He does not

want to burn for eternity, and his mother, who represents the elders' and ancestral past, makes the possibility of going to Hell real for him:

And through all this his mother's eyes were on him; her hand like fiery tongs, gripped the lukewarm ember of his heart; and caused him to feel, at the thought of death, another, cold terror. To go down to the grave unwashed, unforgiven, was to go down into the pit forever, where terrors awaited him greater than any the earth, for all her age and groaning had ever borne. He would be cut off from the living forever. Where he had been would be silence only, rock, stubble, and no seed; for him, forever, and for his, no hope of glory (94-95).

As an elder, the mother serves to remind the living of the spiritual realm which, as a result, keeps the two worlds of the living and the dead functioning as one. Ultimately, the son's insincere commitment to the community leads to his demise as a respectable "Christian" and endangers his community rather than helps it. Gabriel, then, is a

crossroads character who makes the wrong decisions, and, as a result, his child, Roy, is cursed to make the same mistakes he does.

Just as Gabriel's mother curses him, Gabriel curses Roy. Gabriel's mother is abusive and hot tempered; "Now she, who had been impatient once, and violent, who had cursed and shouted and contended like a man, moved into silence, contending only, and with the last measure of strength, with God" (93). As she comes full circle to meet God, the only way she thinks she can achieve salvation is through her seed, Gabriel. She therefore, as elder, places Gabriel at the crossroads, praying that he makes the right decisions which will directly affect her place in the after world. This passing on of character traits demonstrates the circularity of life as witnessed through the Kongo cosmogram. Roy like Gabriel, is violently rebellious and shows no signs of being spiritually renewed: "You ain't got but one child that's liable to go out and break his neck, and that's Roy... and I recollect, if you don't, you [Gabriel] being brought home many a time more dead than alive" (47). Gabriel's seed is cursed. In the circularity of life, Roy turns out to follow in his father's evil footsteps. Consequently, Gabriel despises his adopted son, Johnny; he feels mocked by God because only Johnny shows any signs of possible religious sensitivity and spirituality. Ultimately

Johnny's potential strength to become spiritually superior is what troubles Gabriel the most.³⁹

Gabriel and his mother demonstrate what happens when one comes to the crossroads and is not true to oneself and has ill will toward the community. As they come to the crossroads seeking everlasting life, their lives are cursed through the lives of their children.

Florence, Gabriel's sister, also comes to the church as a reaction to the tragic episodes which have occurred in her life. Florence comes to the church because she is dying and knows she does not have long to live. She has seen the way her brother has lived and knows she does not want to end up like him. But she, like her brother, has not come to the church out of her love for God; she also comes to the church out of fear. Her severed relationship with Frank, her lover, leaves the church and God as her only alternatives:

Now had she been wrong to fight so hard. Now she was an old woman, and all alone, and she was going to die. And she had nothing to show for her battles. It had all come to this: she was on her face before the altar, crying to God for mercy (88).

Florence, unlike her brother Gabriel, realizes that it is going to take more than going to church on Sunday to achieve salvation. She at least understands that change must come from within. She says, "Folks can change their ways as much as they want to. But I don't care how many times you change your ways, what's in you is in you, and its got to come out"(180). Florence willingly admits that she has not changed, yet she does change because she confronts Gabriel and plans to expose him, not so that she looks good in the eyes of the Lord, but for the sake of John and Elizabeth. It is the first selfless act she commits in the entire novel that possibly unlocks the door to her salvation. Florence, as a crossroads character, realizes she is an individual who is a part of a larger community and that at her point of judgment she must choose her path with the community in mind. Her decision at the crossroads leads her to expose Gabriel as a false prophet, a wolf masquerading in sheep's clothing:

I'm going to tell you something, Gabriel, I know you thinking at the bottom of you heart that if you just make her [Elizabeth], her and her bastard boy [John], pay enough for her sin, your son [Roy] won't have to pay for yours. But I ain't going to let you do that. You

done made enough folks pay for sin, it's time
you started paying (214).

Florence does this for the advancement of those who come after her,
to keep the circle of life moving.

Elizabeth, John's mother, is coming to church for the wrong
reasons and later regrets her decision to lead the life of a preacher's
wife. Elizabeth's closer walk with God comes out of her reaction to
her husband's death and her separation from her father. In the
beginning of Elizabeth's testimony, she is strong and does not fear
anyone, not even the church with its fire and brimstone atmosphere.
But after she goes through being separated from her father and
losing her lover Richard, she begins to wonder if God is trying to get
her attention.

So long as he [Richard] was there, the rejoicing of
Heaven could have meant nothing to her-that being
forced to choose between Richard and God, she
could only, even with weeping, have turned away
from God. And this was why God had taken him
from her (157).

Elizabeth feels that the loss of Richard and her father are God's
ways of bringing her closer to Him. She despises Him for taking

Richard away. In her love-hate relationship with God and the church, she sees Gabriel as her way into the Lord's house: "His voice made her feel that she was not all together cast down, that God might raise her in honor; his eyes had made her know that she could be again-this time in honor-a woman"(185). However, what she sees as her path to salvation quickly turns to her road to Hell. Put simply, she begins to feel that Gabriel is her punishment: "Now she [Elizabeth] was merely marking time, as it were, and preparing herself against the moment when her husband's anger would turn full force, against her" (44). Because she loved Richard more than the church, she feels she will never know what it feels like to love another except God. She fears the church, as she stands at the crossroads proclaiming her love for Richard and John, accepting God's judgment upon her and her son.

John is a constant reminder to Elizabeth of the love she once shared with Richard, and at the same time, perhaps the reason she cannot leave Gabriel. Who else will take care of her and her son? The church becomes her place of imprisonment rather than her place of salvation and freedom. Elizabeth's advances to the church are not acts of love from within her, but prompted by the forces surrounding her. She is not in the Lord's house because she wants to be there, but because she feels she has no alternative:

There was a stiffness in him [John] that would be hard to break, but that nevertheless, would one day surely be broken. As hers [Elizabeth's] had been, and Richard's-- there was no escape for any one. God was everywhere, terrible, the living God: and so high, the song said, you couldn't get over Him; so low you couldn't get under Him; so wide you couldn't get around Him; but must come in at the door. and she, she knew today that door: a living, wrathful gate. She knew through what fires the soul must crawl,... (174).

Gabriel's, Florence's, and Elizabeth's testimonies demonstrate how they each reacted to the Christian paradigm and how each, at one time or another, are crossroads characters who, for the purpose of witnessing John's conversion, become the people who surround him and make up his community or circle.

On the surface, it would seem that they all, with the exception of Florence, have embraced the Christian model whole heartedly and live accordingly. But as their stories unfold, readers begin to see that they have some resentment about the concepts of religion. Gabriel intends to live the lie of being a man of God whole-heartedly

because that is what he so desperately desires, but for all the wrong reasons. His mother's will to have Gabriel come to the house of the Lord only seems to further portray his religious metamorphosis and commitment as insincere and forced. Florence comes to the church as a reaction to the possibility of her death, but later empowers herself by destroying the Christian model that dares one to question the Lord's anointed and she is the only character who performs the act of confronting Gabriel without any prompting or provocation. Florence acts. Elizabeth is powerless. The Christian ideals have made her bitter and withdrawn. She used to have a life, a love. All she has now is the God who took all that away from her. As the cycle/ circle of life moves on, she can only pray that when her son stands at the crossroads, he will be saved from the pain and isolation known to many as God's wrath.

These are their testimonies; their lives laid out so that one may be touched and changed forever by what has been said and done. However, these testimonies are silent, unheard, and unspoken. None of the characters ever speaks to each other of the deeds and suffering they have endured. They never openly admit their sins and resentments of the Christian model they publicly say they would die for. The fact that the testimonies are unheard show the reluctance

of the community, with the exception of Elisha, to help those such as John, presently at the crossroads.

In his transformation from boyhood to manhood, these testimonies could have helped John. As he struggles in the wilderness, battling between religious paradigms and an unloving stepfather, John must climb his mountain. Somehow, John must make it to the other side of the wilderness where knowledge is free flowing and the powers of the living and dead are unlocked. The very beginning of the novel foretells John's assumed destiny: "Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father" (11). It would seem at first that John is to be a preacher like Gabriel, but we learn later that Gabriel is John's stepfather. John's real father was killed. This information suggests that the circularity of life is at work. John is pushed to follow in Gabriel's footsteps as a preacher because of the seeming father-son relation. As John comes out of the wilderness he is given a new name which hints that he relinquishes the name of his stepfather, for a name given from heaven. John is essentially reborn and given a new life.

John's struggle with an unloving stepfather and his religion leads him on a quest for self-identity. He arrives at the crossroads in the last chapter entitled "The Threshing Floor". In the barrage of

prophetic biblical images, John must choose a way out of his confusion and despair: "...In his turning the center of the whole earth shifted, making of space a sheer void and a mockery of order, and balance, and time. Nothing remained: all was swallowed up in chaos" (194). At the crossroads, the visions John has are the centers of his fear and his strength. He fears his father awaiting in the darkness, but possesses the strength and power of the everlasting light of the Lord. In the end, John Grimes comes through the wilderness overcoming his mean stepfather, strengthening his relationship with the Lord, and realizing he is a man. The community around him rejoices as John is given a new name written in heaven.

Of all the characters in the novel, John is the only character who braves the crossroads and is spiritually renewed. Baldwin emphasizes John as the son of God and not the son of Gabriel.⁴⁰ John comes to the crossroads and overcomes his fears and realizes that he now has a story to tell and it must be told for the sake of the next individual at the crossroads and the sake of the community: "...In the silence something died in John, and something came alive. It came to him that he must testify: his tongue only could bear witness to the wonders he had seen" (207). It is John's duty indeed to "Go tell it on the Mountain."

IV. Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to show Kongo cosmology as a productive African-American literary theory. Both "A Raisin in the Sun" and Go tell it on the Mountain reveal the cycle of life in which an individual must make the best decisions with community in mind. The children, who have just come from the spirit world, still possess some spirit powers. As they reach adulthood, they gain physical strength and are more bound by the earth. As they grow older and are considered elders, they gain insight enough to comprehend their own weaknesses and struggles, thereby coming full circle to the underworld. This theory shows the importance of community to the African-American and how it has had to endure the economic and religious changes of another kind. This theory also proves that the misunderstood ring shouts and rituals viewed as barbaric by some, were intricate religious practices which brought one face to face with the powers of the universe at a point called the crossroads. These literary works by Hansberry and Baldwin exemplify the use of the crossroads in comprehending African-American literature and the black community. Furthermore, The Kongo cosmogram theory highlights the pattern of rituals in the African-American community. Baldwin's treatment of John's passing through the ritual of being saved on the threshing floor emphasizes the role of spiritual rebirth

of the human soul. Even Walter Lee Younger must go through darkness and despair to come to the conclusion that his family cannot be bought or sold for any amount of money. Both Walter Lee and John stand at the crossroads facing expectations of others who have already come before them. But as the elders in each work heed their protagonists, there is no one to help them make the ultimate decisions at the crossroads. Those decisions are made from within. Perhaps this is the reason why John overcomes his fear of his stepfather and establishes a relationship with God. For it is John's desire to love his community, including his stepfather, which activates his transformation, suggesting that true change comes from within. To stand at the crossroads and choose to live a lie as Gabriel and Elizabeth do only makes their lives a living Hell.

The Kongo cosmogram ultimately centers around the principle of truth. As practiced by the Bakongo people, only the just and good-hearted can stand at the crossroads and not be brought down by the powers of the universe, just as these African-American literary characters demonstrate that the righteous will prevail in the end.

This theory brings together the rituals, traditions, and religious views of a people before they knew the sting of the white master's whip or the effect of his noose. This theory originates purely from an

African mode of thought, which has, over space and time, been able to be observed as African-American culture and later transformed into a theory of reading African-American literature.

Notes

¹ Robert Farris Thompson, Flash of the Spirit (New York: Random House, 1983) 104.

² Thompson, Flash 104.

³ Vicente Rossi, Cosas De Negros (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1980) 283.

⁴ Thompson, Flash 108.

⁵ The word cosmogram is derived from 'cosmology', which is the study of the universe that includes geography and astronomy, as well as all other realms of reality, including the totality of phenomena in time and space.

⁶ Chavis Butler, Africa: Religions and Culture (Pittsburgh: Dorance Publishing Co., 1994) 124-126.

⁷ Wyatt MacGaffey, Custom and Government in the Lower Congo (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970) 115.

⁸ Thompson, Four Moments of the Sun (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1984) 54.

⁹ Thompson, Flash 109.

¹⁰ Thompson, Flash 106.

¹¹ Thompson, Flash 107.

¹² Thompson, Flash 109-110.

¹³ MacGaffey, Custom and Government 43-44.

¹⁴ John Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1991) 53.

¹⁵ Mbiti, African Religion 45.

¹⁶ John Miller Chernoff, African Rhythm and Sensibility (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985) 88-93.

- ¹⁷ MacGaffey, Custom and Government 50.
- ¹⁸ MacGaffey, Custom and Government 51.
- ¹⁹ Richard Hull, African Cities and Towns (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976) 74.
- ²⁰ Daniel P. Manix and Malcolm Cowely, Black Cargoes (New York: Viking Press, 1962) 131.
- ²¹ Vincent Harding, There is a River (San Diego, New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1981) 18-21.
- ²² Manix and Cowely, Black Cargoes 145.
- ²³ Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African (London: 1814) 33.
- ²⁴ Sterling Stuckey, Slave Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 12.
- ²⁵ Olaudah Equiano, Life of Olaudah Equiano 33.
- ²⁶ Authur C. Jones, Wade in the Water (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993) 171.
- ²⁷ MacGaffey, Custom and Government 35.
- ²⁸ Algert J. Rabouteau, Slave Religion (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 58-59.
- ²⁹ Cummings Hopkins, Cut Loose your Stammering Tongue (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991) 34-40
- ³⁰ Robert Nemiroff, Introduction, "A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry. New York: Signet 1988. ix-xx.
- ³¹ Robert Nemiroff, Intro. "Raisin" xv.

³² Lorraine Hansberry, "A Raisin in the Sun" (1958; New York: Signet, 1985) 74. All subsequent page references to this text will be enclosed in parenthesis.

³³ Michael Charles Carol, "Music as a Medium for Maturation in Three African-American Novels" The Explicator August 1992: 53.

³⁴ "Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain" CLA Journal December 1993: 37.

³⁵ Shirley Allen, "Religious Symbolism and Psychic Reality in Baldwin's Go Tell it on the Mountain," Critical Essays on James Baldwin, ed. Fred I. Stanley and Nancy V. Burt (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988) 12.

³⁶ James Baldwin, Go Tell it on the Mountain (1952; New York: Dell Publishing, 1981) 49. All subsequent page references to this text will be enclosed in parenthesis.

³⁷ Nagueyalti Warren, "The Substance of Things Hoped for: Faith in Go Tell It on the Mountain and Just Above my Head," Obsidian II: Black Literature Review Spring-Summer 1992: 19-32.

³⁸ Heather Joy Mayne, "Biblical Paradigms in Four Twentieth Century African-American novels," D.A.I. March 1992: 52.

³⁹ Virginia Newsome, "Gabriel's Spaces in Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain" Mawa Review December 1990: 35-39

⁴⁰ Sondra A. O'Neale, "Critical Essays on American Literature: Fathers, Gods, and Religion: Perceptions of Christianity and Ethnic Faith in James Baldwin," Critical Essays on James Baldwin. (Boston: Hall Press, 1988) 104-110.

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