

**GOSPEL MIME: ANOINTED MINISTRY, AFROCENTRISM, AND GENDER IN  
BLACK GOSPEL PERFORMANCE**

by

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The art form of Gospel Mime is a unique praise and worship practice within the African American Church community that combines popular gospel music with the theatrical medium of miming. One of the most recent forms of praise song and dance to emerge in Black congregations nation-wide, Gospel Mime was formally introduced into worship services in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the early 1990s. Whereas traditional gospel performances are structured around live vocal and instrumental performances, Gospel Mime blends non-verbal communication with pre-recorded gospel music. As a ministry, Gospel Mime expands the line of liturgical song and dance, which has been an important part of Black Christian worship services since the 1970s, and has sparked debate about the role of dance and the body in worship practices. This thesis seeks to historicize Black gospel performance within the framework of an African American music continuum in order to locate Gospel Mime as a nationally mediated and popularized circuit of Black expressive culture that produces meaning—both celebrated and contested—about race, religion, and gender.

By investigating the history, social meanings, and embodied practices of Gospel Mime as an innovative outlet for creative spiritual expression rooted in traditional gospel practice, this thesis analyzes Gospel Mime as a set of aesthetic values and practices that articulate African American identities through sound and gesture. Based on research conducted during 2015 and

2016 with Bethlehem Baptist Church, in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, along with a self-identified “rogue” Gospel Mime who no longer performs in the church, this thesis serves to investigate two contrasting styles, or paradigms, of Gospel Mime: the mainstream style of anointed ministry, as it is understood and popularized within the Black church, and an alternative style that reinterprets the practice and actively acknowledges mainstream Gospel Mime as patriarchal and monolithic. By examining the performative and pedagogical ways in which the art form of Gospel Mime reappropriates entertainment outside of the African American music continuum and infuses it with innovative religious and spiritual expression, this thesis serves to highlight the social significance of Gospel Mime in the Black community.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE.....</b>	<b>IX</b>
<b>1.0 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 OBJECTIVES OF STUDY.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.2.1 Music and practice theory.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.2.2 Music and performativity.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.3 METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1.3.1 Black music research .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>1.3.2 Positionality .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>1.3.3 Ethnographic fieldwork .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>2.0 CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN BLACK GOSPEL MUSIC .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>2.1 BLACK MUSIC CONTINUUM .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>2.1.1 African American Christian church and the folk spiritual .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>2.1.2 Gospel’s First Period (1900-1929) .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>2.1.3 Gospel’s Second Period (1930-1945) .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>2.1.4 Gospel’s Third Period (1946-1969).....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>2.1.5 Gospel music industry .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>2.2 GOSPEL MIME .....</b>	<b>32</b>

2.2.1	Pittsburgh origins .....	32
2.2.2	National mediation and convergence .....	37
2.2.3	Aesthetic rationale and reception .....	41
3.0	ETHNOGRAPHY .....	47
3.1	BETHLEHEM BAPTIST CHURCH .....	47
3.1.1	McKeesport, Pennsylvania.....	48
3.1.2	Building structure .....	49
3.1.3	Worship service structure .....	51
3.1.4	New Image Mime Ministry .....	52
3.1.5	Choreography.....	55
3.1.6	Anointing .....	58
3.2	HOTEP THE ARTIST .....	63
3.2.1	Afrocentric interpretation.....	64
3.2.2	Miming to secular pop music.....	69
3.2.3	Feminist interpretation.....	70
3.2.4	Gendered division of labor .....	73
3.2.5	Androgyny .....	76
4.0	CONCLUSION.....	79
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	83

**LIST OF FIGURES**

All images reproduced with permission

Figure 1. Karl and Keith Edmonds (K&K Mime Ministry) ..... 33

Figure 2. Bethlehem Baptist Church in McKeesport, Pennsylvania ..... 50

Figure 3. Basement of Bethlehem Baptist Church..... 54

Figure 4. Gospel mimes performing at Bethlehem Baptist Church..... 59

Figure 5. Member of New Image Mime Ministry experience affective intensity ..... 61

Figure 6. Hotep the Artist ..... 64



## PREFACE

First and foremost, I must thank my advisor, Dr. Andrew Weintraub, for his close guidance throughout this research and writing process. Without his help this thesis work would not have been completed and synthesized as such. I also want to thank Dr. Shalini Ayyagari for offering me invaluable advice when preparing to present a shorter version of this ethnography for the 2016 Society for Ethnomusicology conference. Additional thanks go to Dr. Adriana Helbig for serving on my thesis committee and to Dr. Robbie Behrs for helping me to initially craft my thoughts on Gospel Mime for a paper in his Voice Studies seminar. Finally, I must thank Dr. Zachary Furness for being a formidable partner, and for consistently offering his time and energy to edit, question, and challenge my thoughts even when he did not have the time to do so.

I am beyond grateful to the participants of this thesis, who shared their memories, talents, and ideas with me for over a year. This thesis would not be possible without the close collaboration of my main interlocutor, Hotep the Artist, who continually evolves the practice of Gospel Mime before my eyes. I also want to thank Dr. James Johnson for “keeping it in the pocket,” and the singers of University of Pittsburgh’s Gospel Choir for allowing my voice to join theirs and make some truly beautiful music. This thesis would also not be possible without Kimberly Brownfield-Perkins, a former maintenance worker, who invited me to visit her church and observe its inner workings. Kimberly Brownfield-Perkins’ contribution to this thesis goes beyond her invitation to church, beginning in the halls and elevators of the Music Building at

The University of Pittsburgh. It was in these common, non-academic spaces that I learned about a deeply treasured and local performance practice, to which myself and the entirety of the Music Department were blind. This experience allowed me to witness and appreciate the limitations of even the most advanced graduate seminar for its ability to advance new knowledge about musical practices, opening my eyes up to the reality that although we learn and teach about World Music in the classrooms of academia, new musical practices often exist in our own environment by and through the people who are outside of those classrooms.

Finally, it is with deep respect and admiration that I thank the congregation of Bethlehem Baptist Church, in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, to whom this thesis is most indebted to. I am honored and humbled to have navigated such a sacred and joyous space, surrounded by warm, talented, and insightful individuals.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The art form of Gospel Mime is a unique praise and worship practice within the African American Church community that combines popular gospel music with the theatrical medium of miming.<sup>1</sup> One of the most recent forms of praise song and dance to emerge in Black congregations nation-wide, Gospel Mime was formally introduced into worship services in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the early 1990s. Gospel mimes adorn white gloves and paint their faces in the white makeup that has defined the secular tradition of miming, with black paint highlighting their eyebrows. Leading practitioners of this art form typically wear a flowing black robe, or vestment, primarily associated with the Christian religion, while backup and younger performers wear black pants and black shirts that cover the entire body.

Gospel Mime is a practice that articulates African American identities through sound and gesture, and is utilized as a means for spiritual ministry, religious or otherwise. As a ministry Gospel Mime expands the line of liturgical song and dance, which has been an important part of Black Christian worship services since the 1970s, and has sparked debate about the role of dance and the body in worship practices.

The art form of mime has typically been associated with white French performers and street art, such as Marcel Marceau, who was most well-known for his stage character, Bip the

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<sup>1</sup> Praise and worship is a broad term for Christian contemporary music used in worship, which is stylistically similar to African American popular music (Jones 2015: xi).

Clown (“Marcel Marceau”). But in recent years, the Black church has taken up the art form, reinterpreting mime and combining it with a Christian message. As churches seek to attract and engage more young people, especially in impoverished neighborhoods prone to violent crime, Gospel Mime ministry provides an innovative outlet for creative spiritual expression rooted in traditional gospel practice.

Historian Jerma Jackson defines gospel performance as a “discursive practice that vacillates between expressions of exuberance and demonstrations of restraint” (Jackson 2004: 64). Gospel Mime similarly links “rhythm with sacred content” (ibid), albeit in ways that deviate from the norms of the gospel practice outlined by Jackson. Whereas traditional gospel performances are structured around live vocal and instrumental performances, Gospel Mime blends non-verbal communication with pre-recorded gospel music. The rhythm, within this configuration, is articulated primarily through the bodies of the mimes, who punctuate the melodies of songs through expressive silent gestures that are both inspired by and distanced from the physical “language” of French pantomime. Simply put, to minister mime is to interpret gospel music using non-verbal methods. Non-verbal communication is not privileged over the music, rather the two are co-dependent, engendering each other through rhythmic and affective intensity.

## **1.1 OBJECTIVES OF STUDY**

This thesis examines the history, social meanings, and embodied practices of Gospel Mime based on research conducted during 2015 and 2016. Using my experiences with Bethlehem Baptist Church, in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, along with a self-identified “rogue” Gospel Mime

who no longer performs in the church, this thesis serves to investigate two contrasting styles, or paradigms, of Gospel Mime: the mainstream style of anointed ministry, as it is understood and popularized within the Black church, and an alternative style that reinterprets the practice and actively acknowledges mainstream Gospel Mime as patriarchal and monolithic.<sup>2</sup> The act of anointing—a powerful feeling of spiritual presence contained within a body—differs depending on denomination. In Catholicism, anointing can be bestowed by a person of power, such as a Bishop or priest, and involves specific materials and contact with the body, such as oil and hands. However, in the case of Bethlehem Baptist Church, or other non-denominational Christian congregations, the bestower can be the Holy Spirit, unmediated by other people. Alisha Lola Jones defines anointing as “a type of performative competence where the performer is perceived as responding to and reflecting interactions with the divine; e.g., ‘I felt the Spirit. He is anointed!’” (Jones 2015: vi). Gospel Mime only functions within the traditional ministry paradigm through the belief that it is an anointed practice, authorized by the Holy Spirit, and embodied through its practitioners.

I address the following questions: How do the values and aesthetics of Gospel Mime exist within the continuum of African American musical practice? How does Gospel Mime embody affect? How did Gospel Mime transform itself from a local vernacular practice to a national popular culture? How does Gospel mime function as a pedagogical tool? In what ways, does Gospel Mime challenge gender roles and the division of labor within the Black church?

My aim is not only to represent Gospel Mime within the historiography of gospel performance, but rather to uncover it as a collective site of affect. By affect, I am referring to an incubated space for emotional intensity, where the individual can resonate in the collective social

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<sup>2</sup> There may, in fact, be numerous paradigms of Gospel Mime, but these are the two models that Gospel Mime interlocutors consistently put into dialogue with each other throughout my research in Pittsburgh.

body. This aim reflects what Gayle Wald has referred to as “a shift in humanities scholarship toward the felt dimensions of cultural production and reception and the emotional saturation of the political imagination” (Wald 2015: 8). Affect works in humanities that have shaped my thinking by privileging emotion as a fundamental role in political activism, include Iton (2008), Gould (2009), and Muñoz (2009).

Through the lens of embodied affect, I aim to examine Gospel Mime as a performative act.<sup>3</sup> Gospel Mime is articulated as a performative act through the anointed/anointing<sup>4</sup>—a powerful feeling of spiritual presence contained within a body—and the energy/vibrations of Afrocentric feminist performance—a vernacular internalization of mutual positive feeling that has roots in the Black Power and Black Arts movements. A close examination of the ways in which Gospel Mime is performed inside and outside of “black space” (Anderson 2015) this thesis interprets Gospel Mime as Gayle Wald interprets historical Black music events: “as not only seen and heard but *felt*” (Wald 2015: 691).

Once my theoretical framework and methodology is laid out, I will historicize Black gospel performance within the framework of an African American music continuum before locating Gospel Mime as an innovative outlet for creative spiritual expression. After the transition of Gospel Mime from a local vernacular practice to a national phenomenon is

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<sup>3</sup> The term “performative” is largely understood to come from speech act theory of the 1950s (Austin 1962), which coined the phrase “performative utterances” for something that functioned beyond mere description or reportage within language and communications; Jacques Derrida (1992); and Judith Butler (1988, 1993, 1997, 1999). Butler offers a political interpretation of Derrida’s use of the performative utterance and applies it to reading gender as a performative text. Butler originally took her cue on how to read performativity of gender from Derrida’s reading of Kafka’s “Before the Law” (1992), which posits the force attached to the law for which one waits. This authoritative meaning is attributed to Butler’s notion of whether individuals labor under a similar authoritative expectation concerning gender. While I am not engaging with Butler directly, my turn toward the performative in analyzing Gospel Mime is indebted to Butler’s understanding that “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler 1999: xi).

<sup>4</sup> The terms anointed and anointing are used interchangeably by those who participated in my research, as well as throughout my primary and secondary sources.

established, I will address the more unique and controversial aesthetic values and practices of the Gospel Mime body as it is understood through the rationale and reception of the white makeup. Moving into my comparative ethnography, I will position these distinctly different sites of affect where Gospel Mime is performed and made meaningful, and put them in dialogue with each other that both reinforces and challenges the sacred/secular binary inherent in Black gospel performance. Finally, I offer a third stream of analysis that examines the inherently subversive qualities of Gospel Mime Ministry within the framework of gendered division of labor within the Black church structure. Through this dialogic analysis I show how the art form of Gospel Mime acts as a constitutive circuit of Black expressive culture that produces meaning—both celebrated and contested—about race, religion, and gender.

## **1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **1.2.1 Music and practice theory**

During the 1960s, a post-structuralist form of analysis emerged from France as a reaction against the structuralist notion of culture as a system of rules that govern behavior. Culture, in this perspective, underwent a seismic shift from being thought of as a productive to a reproductive social order, and privileging the body and voice in an active role of agency. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" (1977) has long been a central way to analyze how social structure becomes embodied within human practice. The concept of "habitus" represents an important formulation of the principles of "practice theory" (Bourdieu 1977; Turino 1990; Ramsey 2003; Sakakeeny 2013; Mahon 2014), a theory of how social beings, with their diverse motives and intentions,

construct and transform the world in which they live. Practice theory, therefore, relies on a fundamental dialectic between social structure and human agency.

This interplay allows scholars to navigate the gap between individual free will and the determinism of structure, to examine the internalization of a social order in the human body, which then resonates with other individuals to create a collective social body. Ethnomusicologists, and those scholars studying music-cultures, have found practice theory especially helpful in studying the intersections of music, race, and power. Musicologist Guthrie P. Ramsey applies practice theory through two kinds of analysis. The first “considers the ways in which historical subjects, cultural categories, and various aspects of subjectivity are shaped by structure or ‘the system,’” while the second “tries to identify how real people in real time resist or engage a given system” (Ramsey 2003: 35). Both kinds of analysis seek to understand what types of identities are made available or are reimagined within cultural and historical discourses. Ethnomusicologist Matt Sakakeeny approaches the study of brass band musicians in New Orleans through the framework of practice theory:

Brass band musicians are agents in the public sphere who utilize voices and instruments as technologies for producing subjectivity, identity, and culture. Their musical practices are forms of social action, and when evaluated as such they offer insight into agency as the exercise of, or against, power (2013: 6).

Using practice theory, Sakakeeny allows the actions of the performers/musicians he is observing to reconceive his study as about subjectivity, “in the contemporary anthropological sense as individuals as subjects and agents of power” (ibid: 7), who exist within and construct and transform the world in which they live. Similarly, cultural anthropologist Maureen Mahon suggests that by using practice theory to examine the construction and performance of race and gender in music “we can reveal people's potential to change their worlds, while remaining mindful of the political interests and structural patterns that shape the ways social relations and



social categories are constructed, reproduced, and sustained" (Mahon 2014: 329). This poststructuralist theory of action sees power as culturally and symbolically created, and constantly re-legitimized through an interplay of agency and structure.

Practice theory allows one to consider how the Black church and the system of Christian values, norms and roles in which it is structured upon, becomes internalized into the social order of the human body through the art form of Gospel Mime. More importantly, practice theory helps us to leave behind the more essentialist connections made between "the people" and the musical practice or, in this case, African American identity and Black musical styles, which tend to place too much emphasis on the idea of a homogeneous racial experience, to "represent a romantic view of group identity" (Ramsey 2003: 35). Hence, the need for comparative ethnography is crucial to this thesis, which, as of Nov. 2016, is the only scholarly inquiry of its kind.

I argue that Gospel Mime should be understood as a set of empirical practices, what I am calling experiential labor, that function in a way which may be perceived as unconventional. I use labor as a term of convenience to make a point about Gospel Mime's ability to expand, embolden and empower a non-traditional site of affect. Gospel Mime is not untraditional in its aesthetic values and practices, but rather is untraditional in the effect its aesthetic values and practices have and re-ordering and re-valuing the gendered division of labor in gospel performance. Voices and bodies have long been participating in Black church in ways that are in line with Gospel Mime ministry, however Gospel Mime becomes a form of labor in the sense that it disrupts the way we typically perceive the roles of masculine and feminine in gospel performance (which I will discuss in section 3.2.4 and 3.2.5).

In rooting my theoretical foundation in the concept of “habitus,” suggesting that legitimacy and power are produced and reproduced by a culture in ways that seem natural or normative, I hope to expand the critique of experiential labor that goes into Gospel Mime as a collective site of affect and an embodied performative act, while thinking of labor in ways that go beyond class. This commitment to thinking about differentiation through non-economic symbolic components is crucial to my comparative analysis, which engages with individuals who have all come from a similar socio-economic background, but who internalize the social order of the Black church on the body in very different ways. Therefore, analyzing the mainstream Gospel Mime art form as it functions through anointed youth ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church (and as a national popular practice), and analyzing the work of Hotep the Artist, who offers points of contention with the mainstream anointed paradigm, provides this thesis with an entrance into the social world of Gospel Mime as it occurs between two “fields” (Bourdieu 1977)<sup>5</sup>: the sacred space of Christian worship as it is enacted in Black church, and the secular space of Afrocentric feminist performance

### **1.2.2 Music and performativity**

By advancing a reading of Gospel Mime as a performative action, I am engaging with a recent turn in ethnomusicological analysis, which seeks to examine the vernacular potential of a community to engender powerful associations of shared history, suffering, and celebrations of survival through performative media, such as music, dance, and poetry. I am especially indebted

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<sup>5</sup> The concept of “field” is used to help explain the differential power that people experience in structured social spaces which have their own rules and schemes of domination. Furthermore, the concept of field is used in opposition to analyzing societies solely in terms of classes (Bourdieu 1977).

to David A. McDonald's work on Israel/Palestine which looks at the "performative capacities of violence to generate culture, to structure bodies and bodily practices, and to refashion conceptions of self and other," and argues that such an approach has "only recently been the subject of ethnomusicological research" (McDonald 2009: 59). Just as McDonald aims to examine violent sentiment, I aim to examine religious sentiment, specifically Black Christian moral and cultural values, as it is focused and reframed into performative gesture.<sup>6</sup>

By understanding the performative as a fundamental means of cultural survival and the articulation of distinct identities, I use this lens to examine the activity of, stories about, and reactions to Gospel Mime as performative representations of experiences unique to ethnic/racial identity. I argue for a reading of Gospel Mime as a constitutive site for Black performativity as McDonald argues for a reading of violence as a constitutive site for Palestinian performativity:

Palestinian artists have generated immense repertoires of performative media, narrating individual and communal histories of dispossession and displacement. Such performances are a fundamental means of cultural survival, a way to wrestle with the unstable dialectics of history, politics, and the body in exile (ibid: 69).

While the two communities come from very different geocultural locations, I find engaging parallels between the two subjugated communities in how they embody affect through performative media while negotiating segregated spaces. Furthermore, Gospel Mime has been cited by the Black church as an effective way to engage youth, especially young men, who are at high risk of being criminalized, and/or victims of violence due to economic and spatial disparity.<sup>7</sup> Hotep the Artist directly engages with the "performative capabilities of violence"

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this thesis I will use the terms performative action, performative media, performative representations, performative sociality, performative space, performative means, and performative virtuosity; all of which are indebted to David A. McDonald's framework of analysis which examines violence as performance in Israel/Palestine (2009).

<sup>7</sup> See Duck (2015) and Anderson (1999).

(ibid: 59) by focusing on the sexual violence that female bodies are subjected to through sexual harassment in public spaces.

Black cultural expression in this thesis is made and remade in performative space(s). When addressing the construction of performative space, McDonald states how “[m]usic and dance performances embody alternative aesthetic spaces—*vernacular landscapes*—where Palestinian history, truth, and agency may be actualized in collective movement, thought, and action” (emphasis mine, ibid: 79). In this study of Gospel Mime, I understand performative space as any platform, regardless of size or audience, whether it be a national TV show or church basement, which allows churchgoers to mediate their dis/continuity to race, religion, and gender through performative means—a means of transcending suppression through bodily inscription.

### 1.3 METHODOLOGY

This thesis relies primarily on the research methods of ethnographic fieldwork and comparative analysis. The primary site for my ethnography is Bethlehem Baptist Church, in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. I visited Bethlehem Baptist five times over the course of five months. I went on the third Sunday of each month, which was the designated week for the Gospel Mime ministry, New Image Mime, to perform. I formally introduced myself to members of the congregation on the first Sunday, which consisted of me standing up during the welcome ceremony for new and visiting members, and participated in the worship service by actively listening to sermons and singing along with the congregation. I took field notes during the service, video recorded New Image Mime’s performance, and often took audio recordings of both the Pastor’s “Preached Word” as well as the sounds of the congregation itself – especially the vocalities produced

during moments of intense, affective expression, such as speaking in tongues.<sup>8</sup> I interviewed the choreographer and director of New Image Mime ministry, Miss Pat Grayson, the first Sunday I attended Bethlehem Baptist and informally spoke with members of the congregation about Gospel Mime.

I then put this fieldwork into dialogue with the art work of Hotep the Artist, who performs at various open mic nights, community art spaces, and classroom workshops throughout Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I spent over a year informally communicating with Hotep between February 2015 and Nov. 2016, and recorded formal interviews. Together, we also created a lesson plan for Gospel Mime workshops that were held in my four recitation sections of Introduction to World Music at The University of Pittsburgh. The workshops began with me giving a brief lecture on the history of Gospel Mime and then moved into partnered pantomime exercises led by Hotep, who instructed both the class and myself. Each workshop ended with Hotep giving a Gospel Mime performance. In the Spring of 2015 I also participated in University of Pittsburgh's Gospel Choir, under the direction of Dr. James Johnson (affectionately known as Dr. J),<sup>9</sup> which I took as an opportunity to learn the repertoire and performance practice of gospel through participation and to informally communicate with members of the choir, as well as the director, Dr. J, about the popularity of Gospel Mime in and around Pittsburgh.

Due to the growing nature of Gospel Mime, this thesis also relies on research from the online community of Gospel Mime, where interactions about the art form (including affirmation, critique, and even condemnation) are technologically mediated. These digitally mediated

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<sup>8</sup> Speaking in tongues is a vernacular pattern of worship that comes through intense and ecstatic religious experience, manifesting itself in the production of vocables, which are typically accompanied by erratic bodily movement.

<sup>9</sup> Dr. J is an adjunct professor at The University of Pittsburgh and is the founder, along with his wife, Pamela Johnson, of the Afro American Music Institute in Homewood, Pennsylvania. The Afro American Music Institute is an artistic activist site of pedagogy which began in 1982 and provides African American music classes across multiple genres to community members ranging in age from pre-kindergarten to senior citizens.

interactions are in dialogue with my fieldwork and represent the national community and culture of Gospel Mime in a way which my localized ethnography could not have accounted for. This type of research has been referred to as online ethnography, cyber-ethnography, and virtual ethnography, and offers itself as a research method that adapts traditional ethnographic methods—observing the interactions between individuals who are co-located in the same space—to the study of communities and cultures constructed through online-mediated social interaction. Whether online ethnography can or should be used as a primary research method for scholars is subject to debate, but as a secondary research method, online ethnography has supported (and contradicted) many of my theoretical claims in ways that have been undeniably helpful, as well as mediating communication amongst practitioners outside of Pittsburgh.<sup>10</sup>

In the following section, I will (1) situate myself within the field of Black Music Research and the historiography of gospel performance; (2) locate and acknowledge my positionality; and move on to my methodological framework of (3) ethnographic fieldwork.

### **1.3.1 Black music research**

In *African American Music: An Introduction* (2006), Portia K. Maultsby and Mellonee Burnim’s expansive survey of major African American musical genres, both sacred and secular, from slavery to the present, two leading ethnomusicologists of Black music explain in the “Intellectual History” section how the national outburst in the 1960s that followed the Civil Rights Movement introduced African American studies into the academy. In return, this “led to the formulation of new theoretical models of analysis” (Maultsby and Burnim 2006: 19). For example, research in

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the potentiality and limitations of online/cyber/virtual ethnography, see Clifford (1997). For more on the ethnographic effects of the Internet on music communities specifically, see Lysloff (2003).

the era of Black Studies engaged directly with the perspectives of African Americans themselves.

In 1971 musicologist Eileen Southern published a groundbreaking, comprehensive historical narrative, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, tracing the roots of Black music from its West African origins through the advent of twentieth-century forms. Southern's work established the emergence of Black music scholarship which privileged the profound and pervasive African American voice,<sup>11</sup> and defined the nuances of African American music and culture.

Guthrie P. Ramsey contends that Black music research, especially in its early formation, was “not comfortably analyzed with the tools designed for Western art music” (2003: 19) because of the “black-folk-vernacular” that generates the continuum of Black musical practice. By continuum I mean the sounds, movements, performers and performances, that continue to advance the aesthetic values and practices of Black musical expression, dating back to the music of West Africa (which I will discuss in section 2.1):

Because of its association with the black-folk-vernacular constellation of ideas, black music has been easily ‘Othered’—that is, it has readily been slotted into the ‘exotic’ category of human cultural production that has been the traditional focus of anthropological discourse (ibid: 19).

Another reason that Black music research tends to exist outside the usual disciplinary distinctions is its association with the politics of the 1960s Black Power movement, and the initiation of Afrocentrism in the scholarly realm. Afrocentrism in the scholarly realm is

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed account of how Eileen Southern provided the space for the “intellectual exploration and institution building” of Black music research, see Ramsey (2008).

"grounded in the historical context of the African American freedom and anti-colonial movements between 1955 and the mid 1970s" (Anderson 2012: 760).<sup>12</sup>

The field of Black music studies dates to the 1960s and has consistently produced scholarship that both expands the black musical imagination and the intellectual territories of the discipline (Ramsey 2008). Amiri Baraka's seminal text, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1964), places Black popular music within the context of American social history and offers a political economy view of Black American life as both artifact and entertainment; Mellonee Burnim's work on gospel music (1980, 1982, 1985, 2006), as well as Portia K. Maultsby's work on gospel music (1975, 1990, 1992, 2006), provides a uniquely ethnomusicological perspective on the study of gospel—one that embraces the socio-cultural content and technical analysis of African American music, as well as the economic forces that drive the production of African American music in the popular music industry; Paul Gilroy (1987) offers a Cultural Studies approach to explore the diasporic relationships among race, class, and nation, in order to see how the intertwined discourses of music and politics both destabilize and re-stabilize the meaning of "blackness" within the dominant social structure; Ramsey (2003) explores Black music as being shaped by ethnography, cultural memory and identity, practice theory, history and the role of authorial voice in scholarship in order to better understand Black music as shaped by communities through the shifting time and change of generations and genres; and finally, Carby (1990), Davis (1998), Kernodle (2006), Mahon (2014), and Keyes (2013) supply a crucial engagement with Black feminist thought which navigates the intersection of race, gender, sexuality and genre in music and culture industry formations. I consider myself highly privileged to engage with a long line of scholars who have

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<sup>12</sup> For more on how the success of an Afrocentric perspective in the scholarly realm invites Black music scholarship to move beyond the standard approaches of musicology and ethnomusicology, see Floyd (2002).



specialized in African American music and, specifically, who have challenged earlier approaches to such cultural analysis that sees African American music “as a monolithic and pathological Black experience” (Maultsby and Burnim 2006: 20).

Black music scholarship has laid a fertile foundation for the study of gospel as both a sacred and traditional music practice (Williams-Jones 1975; Raboteau 1978; Burnim 1980, 1985, 2006; Floyd 1995; Jackson 1995; Johnson 2014; Jones 2015) and well as a crossover musical genre that influenced the development of rock 'n' roll (Guralnick 1987; Kernodle 1990; Ward 1998; Wald 2007). In 1980, Mellonee Burnim surveyed the scholarly work conducted on Gospel Music, and reached the unfortunate conclusion that the “existence of this genre has generated but little scholarly knowledge underscoring its historical development and its conceptual framework” (1980: 68). Since then, there has been a vast increase in work on gospel music, both in quantity and scope, however, there is currently no scholarly research that either documents or engages with Gospel Mime. My research attempts to historicize and advance the continuum of African American musical practice to include Gospel Mime.

The idea of African American music as a continuum stems from the spirit of the 1960s, in which the Africanism debate (Nketia 1973; Wilson 1974; Levine 1977; Stuckey 1987; Maultsby 1990 and 1992) was central in the construction of Black music research. Such integrated approaches to African American music “viewed culture as a dynamic process of *continuity and change*, one that permitted the conceptual transfer of musical values, ideas, and behaviors through the process of syncretism and reinterpretation” (emphasis mine, Maultsby and Burnim 2006: 24). Olly Wilson (1974) analyzes the links between African American music and West African Music and contends that the common musical characteristics amongst the two are so

profound that it creates a “West African musical sphere united by a commonality of shared conceptual approaches to music making” (1974: 21).

Amiri Baraka refers to this continuum as the “changing same” (1968) in Black music, which deals with the total political economy of music. Baraka argues that new sounds in the Black community are fueled by newly developed forms of Black consciousness and radicalism (1968: 192), which go on to engender each advancing generation. In this sense, the continuum of African-American music resonates between the traditional and the innovative, between a mode of cultural survival and a mode of cultural celebration.

Lawrence Levine (1977) advances a study of a Black musical continuum by placing music in a holistic frame that embraces dance, art, language, drama, and religion. Levine specifically assesses the “continuity and change” of gospel music within the dual context of acculturation and reinterpretation:

There is a ‘continuity of consciousness’ that flows through various aspects of African American culture, and this continuity is evident in gospel music. Yet for almost one hundred years, African American gospel practitioners have reacted creatively to a multitude of new conditions in their lives. Thus, the resultant development of dynamic styles of performance illustrates both *continuity and change*, since many of the aesthetic values and musical practices intrinsic to gospel music represent a definite link with the traditional past” (emphasis mine, 1977: 174).

Since Gospel Mime was first conceived of approximately twenty-five years ago it has become a highly popular and accepted form of gospel performance that evokes a “definite link with a traditional past” (ibid) amongst its practitioners and viewers. Gospel mime is, however, untraditional amongst gospel historiographies, which tend to cap the final gospel era or period with the advent of Hip Hop or Rap Gospel in the 1990s. In this sense, I draw heavily on Alisha Lola Jones's research which follows and investigates the “peculiarity within gospel identities”

(Jones 2015: 28).<sup>13</sup> Jones' sense of inclusivity through "peculiarity" is essential for this thesis to traverse between the sacred space of the Black church and the politicized space of the Afrocentric feminist performance of Hotep the Artist.

### **1.3.2 Positionality**

I refrain from positively locating myself on either side of the classic "insider"/"outsider" (Nettl 1964; Burnim 1985) divide which has historically been used in anthropology and ethnomusicology when defining the position of an ethnographer in the context of fieldwork. While I fully acknowledge my privileged position as a white academic researching Gospel Mime within the "Black space" of the African American church, I am drawn to the opening that lies between these poles of ethnography. It is this visceral space between my position as an "insider" or "outsider," articulated most affectively through singing and storytelling, where I connected the most with participants. I am particularly indebted to Elijah Anderson's (2015) ideas on the public negotiation of "white space" and "black space." Anderson asserts that "white space" varies in kind, but its most visible and distinctive feature is the "overwhelming presence of white people and the absence of black people" (ibid: 13). "Black space," on the other hand, grew out of the "non-negotiable, caste-like place . . . established during slavery and shaped by a history of state-sanctioned racial segregation" (ibid: 11). Central to these segregated communities, or places, which made up "black space," were "[t]he institutions [black people] built, particularly the black church, [which] inspired a rich black cultural tradition" (ibid: 11).

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<sup>13</sup> Jones uses the term "peculiarity" to reference its biblical usage in referring to those who are spiritually "set apart" or "sanctified" for God's purposes, while also using the term to index gender and sexual difference (2015: xxi).

During my fieldwork at Bethlehem Baptist Church, which I was authorized to conduct by the Preacher's permission, I was never acknowledged or questioned by churchgoers/worshippers for taking notes or video tapping. Both note taking and video recording were commonplace activities during worship service. While most individuals taking notes were doing so in their Bible, and those taping the mime ministry were parents who had children performing, neither of these two ethnographic activities distinguished me from other members of the congregation. Mellonee Burnim refers to this inconspicuous role of the music researcher in a Black church setting in her article "Culture Bearer and Tradition Bearer: An Ethnomusicologist's Research on Gospel Music" (1985), explaining how her use of recording equipment was deemed acceptable when it was "executed with dignity and respect for the worship" (1985: 436). She goes on to express how her racial identity as an African American and her performance capabilities on the piano, which were requested by one of the participants—"Mrs. Thorp, the prevailing spiritual and organizational backbone of the church"—allowed her to be viewed as an "insider" on two accounts (ibid: 436).

While my racial identity did not allow me to be viewed as an "insider," it was certainly not grounds for being seen as an "outsider." Bethlehem Baptist's congregation is overwhelmingly African American but there were a few white churchgoers during my visits. As with my participation in the University of Pittsburgh's Gospel Choir, in which I was the only white member, it was my lack of religious affiliation and devotion, rather than visible racial/ethnic markers, that implicitly positioned me as an "outsider." Simply put, I was a "non-believer" who was engaging, questioning, and participating with a group of "believers."

However, I refrain from using the "outsider" label in this research mainly because the issue of my religious devotion simply did not come up in any conversations I had with

"believers." It is almost impossible to know someone's religious beliefs, or disbeliefs, through mere contact; and for that reason, I was not seen as religious "outsider" at Bethlehem Baptist or in the Gospel Choir. I was, however, prepared at all times to answer whatever questions I might be asked about my religious affiliation or faith practices, but that moment never came. Rather, we talked, sang, laughed and even cried through the affective intensity that saturated the atmosphere. This experience made feeling and "the unspoken" (Jones 2015: 193-225) central to my research.<sup>14</sup> I will never know how my research would have been affected differently if I had been asked: "Are you a believer?" While I can only speculate about the outcome, I instead find value in the absence of that question—the absence of the demand to know, and the presence of the demand to feel.

What I was asked, however, in both Gospel Choir and before being invited to Bethlehem Baptist was some variation of, "Can you sing?" Dr. J had invited me to join Gospel Choir after hearing me play around with some 12-bar blues vocals, a comical in-class activity he made all his students participate in when he taught African American Music in the US at University of Pittsburgh. When I arrived to rehearsal to join the intimate group of eight individuals, a week after everyone else had met, I was looked at for a long period before an undergraduate student abruptly said: "I'm sorry. Can we hear you sing?"<sup>15</sup> Similarly, when I began talking to Kimberly Brownfield-Perkins (affectionately known as Miss Kim), the woman who would invite me to Bethlehem Baptist Church, and introduce me to the mime ministry director, she inquired about

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<sup>14</sup> Alisha Lola Jones refers to the "unspoken" in gospel performance in two ways, a gestural and rhetorical art of silence, especially in contested spaces and situations, where participants use gesture and silence to communicate something they may not be apparent to all the other participants; as well as those issues which are unutterable in public, typically because they are deemed inappropriate. I understand how the "unspoken" was performed in my ethnography through the first definition (2015: xiv).

<sup>15</sup> Alexis Primus (Gospel Choir member), personal communication, Spring 2015.

my singing ability.<sup>16</sup> In both instances, I hesitantly sang one of the few gospel songs I know in its entirety, entitled “His Eye Is On the Sparrow;” and in both instances, this satisfied the listener(s) and provided me with a certain amount of “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu) I could use to navigate the sacred spaces where gospel was being performed.<sup>17</sup>

### 1.3.3 Ethnographic fieldwork

Ronald Radano, an Americanist with special interest in the history of Black music, and ethnomusicologist Phillip Bohlman began their edited volume *Music and the Racial Imagination* (2000) by stating, “[w]e seek to engage music’s place within history, within politics, within the realm of ideas, all toward *giving some semblance of voice to those silenced by racism and prejudice*” (emphasis mine, 2000: xiii). I do not approach Black music research with the aim of “giving voice” to those who have been reportedly “silenced” by racism and racist institutions. This is absolutely not to say I do not recognize the historical violence that has gone into the marginalization and suppression of ‘Othered’ voices and bodies. On the contrary, my main mode of inquiry as an interdisciplinary ethnomusicologist is to locate the spaces of disparity in which the interplay of power causes voices and bodies to be considered and theorized as “silenced,” unintelligible, and/or taken for granted.

While “giving voice” to those who are perceived as not having has been a primary (and worthy) function of ethnography, I hope to complicate the idea that privileged individuals (i.e. researchers) allow individuals (i.e. informants) to “speak” through cultural production of

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<sup>16</sup> Kimberly Perkins-Brown, personal communication, Spring 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Capital is a very important concept, and one which Bourdieu extends beyond the notion of material assets to include economic, social, or cultural capital. Capital explains how individuals know various social codes, how to behave, and what works in various social contexts, or “fields.” All of these forms of capital are transformed into “symbolic capital” which the individual then takes with them when entering a “field.”

scholarship. This “crisis of ethnographic representation” has been addressed by ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino (1990), who highlights the dialogic nature of such a power dynamic and prescribes how practice theory may be used to position ourselves as researchers in a more holistic approach:

Practice theory is a response to these issues underpinning the current 'crisis of ethnographic representation.' The dialectic between practice and structures in our own work resembles the same dialectic in the daily lives of dominated people who have to deal with constraints imposed by the ever-expanding control systems of imperialism (1990: 409).

Therefore, I do not propose to “give” voice to, but rather to carve out discursive space for, those voices to resonate. Here, I am taking a direct cue from Emily Lordi who prioritizes her critical methodology with a search for resonance. As opposed to approaching a study of Black cultural expression through a search of influence, a study in search of resonance allows the embodied affect of Black cultural expression to be “resounded” into the collective social body (2013: 6). Furthermore, the search for resonance turns away from treating entire genres (like the blues, or gospel) as “metaphors for culturally specific values like community,” and instead, focuses on the accounts of individual performers in order to “read the nuances of vocal and textual practice” that standard approaches often miss (ibid: 8). This move is especially important for my analysis of Hotep the Artist, who is somewhat of an anomaly in the world of Gospel Mime and who represents moral and cultural values that largely exist outside of the Black church, while utilizing the same aesthetic values and practices.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Lordi’s search for resonance between iconic Black women singers and African American literature (2013) is indebted to Houston Baker’s (1984) notion of “inventive attention.” To bring an “inventive attention to bear” on a musical genre and lived cultural practice—such as the blues or gospel—is to understand that the “driving force” of its existence avoids simple dualities and “achieves its effects as a fluid and multivalent network” (1984: 9) only when the analytical work of the researcher translates the “infinite changes” within a genre and lived cultural practice, and converges those “changes” with its “driving force” (Baker 1984: 9).

Cultural anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner advocates a practice-centered approach to ethnographic research that is both anchored in rich details of and attentive to the dynamics of power and history. Critical of the way in which the term “resistance” was being used in the 1990s/2000s, Ortner pushes ethnographers to attend to "the ambivalences and ambiguities of resistance itself" (2006: 62) and to recognize the complexity of resistance. Beginning with a claim of "ethnographic refusal" (1995), Ortner asserts that the ethnographer must take a stance which is first and foremost a commitment to what Geertz has called “thickness” (1973). To produce a “thick description” is to produce understanding through “richness, texture, and detail, rather than parsimony, refinement, and . . . elegance,” and ethnographic refusal is a “refusal of thickness” (Ortner 1995: 174). This “refusal” ultimately limits the study of the political to the relationship between subordinate groups and those who hold power over them, and does not recognize the power conflicts among subalterns, or those who are socially and politically outside of the hegemonic power structure. Ortner’s notion of “ethnographic refusal” is especially useful when analyzing the conflict amongst members of the Black church who have differing opinions and interpretations on Gospel Mime, especially when it comes to the aesthetic practices. Ortner’s notion of “ethnographic refusal” is also useful for analyzing the performance of Hotep the Artist as she negotiates the cultural and moral authority of the Black church.

Guthrie P. Ramsey summons Ortner’s claim of “ethnographic refusal” as a means of producing a clarion call to ethnographers to pay more attention to the “private” spaces of blackness, performed outside of the public discourses upon which scholarship usually relies on to access and represent Black ethnicity. This emphasis on “private” and “public” spaces of blackness (Ramsey 2003: 25) is especially important to my fieldwork on Gospel Mime. On the one hand, Gospel Mime performances (both inside and outside of the Black church paradigm)



exist within “public” spaces (e.g. the bar, the TV show, the church) that are typically accessed by scholars to represent Black ethnicity. On the other, Gospel Mime exists within the “private” spaces of blackness because its practice occurs outside of the public discourse on Black gospel performance which scholarship often relies on to represent Black ethnicity.

This type of critical ethnography works to “replace monolithic depictions of Black culture with diverse ones” (ibid: 23) by embracing the full spectrum of racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized life. This approach is in line with the groundbreaking work by Alisha Lola Jones (2015) on the performative mechanisms of masculinity and sexual ambiguity among Black men in gospel music circles, which challenges the monolithic perceptions of masculine modes of worship. By building an understanding of Gospel Mime through critical ethnography gathered throughout one overarching case study which interacts and overlaps between practices, ideologies, and communities, this thesis is indebted to the work of Jones (2015), who incorporates ethnography of sacred and secular performance intersections “to consider the practices in which the peculiar expressions of identity are policed in Black male gospel music performance” (Jones 2015: 29). For Jones, there is a direct link between “peculiar” identities and the frameworks of respectability which discipline the (male) body. In fact, Jones asserts that music ministry (i.e. gospel performance) can not only act as “a means to get in the presence of God,” but also as a means to “escape social conflict surrounding . . . identity” (ibid: 94). It is this interplay between frameworks of bodily respectability and bodily inscription where my analysis on the division of labor in gospel (mime) performance is located (which I will discuss in section 3.2.4).

## **2.0 CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN BLACK GOSPEL MUSIC**

### **2.1 BLACK MUSIC CONTINUUM**

“The factors involved in making gospel music what it is are numerous and complex, and only by considering all of them can we begin to approach satisfactory explanations of its changing nature ... [I]t might be more profitable for researchers to undertake more comparisons involving cultural, societal, and historical processes that influenced the development of gospel music rather than to consider musical structures alone” (Jackson 1995: 185).

Regardless of how one chooses to classify Gospel music, the conceptual and structural link between the folk spiritual and contemporary Gospel music rests within the sociocultural processes that have shaped and continue to shape the gospel music tradition. Through these processes certain aesthetic values and practices have come to define the gospel music tradition and, for many, offers absolute evidence of the existence of a continuum in African American music (Baraka 1968; Williams-Jones 1975: 373; Wilson 1983: 3; Jackson 1995: 185; Floyd 1995; Ramsey 2003: 19; Keyes 2013: 44; Wald 2011: 691; Nielson 2013: 178). Black creative expression is shaped and reshaped through a performative virtuosity, building a repertoire of performative representations that resonate the present performance with a conceptual link to the past. Because the continuum of Black music depends on the aesthetic values and practices that are historically linked to a “traditional past” (Levine 1977: 174), it is imperative to consider the dual and constitutive nature of such a continuum as a continuum of musical practice, as well as a “race-time continuum” (Nielson 1997: 178). Therefore, the continuum of Black music is best

understood at the confluence of three modes of thought: musical, historical, and performative (that is, to say strategic).

In this section I will (1) historicize the structure of the African American Christian Church as a disciplining and emancipatory social force; and (2) historicize gospel music performance as it exists and shifts on a continuum of Black music practice.

### **2.1.1 African American Christian church and the folk spiritual**

Samuel L. Floyd's seminal work, *The Power of Black Music* (1995), begins by historicizing how enslaved West Africans brought their religiously ritualized musical practices— "Dance, Drum, and Song" (1995: 38)—with them to their new captive land of North America. The most common ritual that utilized this musical ternary was the ring dance, or ring shout. A symbol of community, solidarity, and cleansing, the ring shout was widely and frequently performed in most parts of Africa, and is identified by the way in which it incorporates highly stylized dance as participants move in a counterclockwise circle (Nketia 1974; Gordon 1981; Stuckey 1987). While the ring shout and other distinctly West African forms of musical religious ritual were technically prohibited through "black codes," and other laws prohibiting the assembly of Blacks outside the presence of whites, as well as laws against loud noise and instrumentation (Floyd 1995: 38), slaves nonetheless risked their lives through innovative performative means to "engage in autonomous Christian worship" (Burnim 2006: 53). Through this courageous performative virtuosity, West African music-making practices, such as call-and-response and textual improvisation, found an outlet in Christianity (Raboteau 1978), with the folk spiritual as its cornerstone (Floyd 1995: 40).

The folk spiritual, which emerges from the conditions produced by Christianized slavery in North America, represents a syncretic musical, cultural, and political formulation between West African musical practices and Christian religious practices. Burnim defines the folk spiritual, often referred to as the Negro spiritual, as the “earliest form of indigenous a cappella religious music created by African Americans during slavery” (Burnim 2006: 52). The structure and performance style of the folk spiritual derives from the history of participatory West African musical practices such as call and response, dancing/shouting, hand-clapping, foot-stomping – a combination of rhythmic textures that accompany layered voices, strengthened and evolved throughout the nineteenth century. Burnim charts the growth of the number of slaves converted to Christianity, which she asserts is a necessity for the creation of the folk spiritual, as a century long indoctrination before arriving at the earliest form of Black religious music during the Great Awakening (1740-1800) (ibid: 52).

While the permissibility of Christian religious practices were being used as a tool to pacify and indoctrinate slave communities, it was simultaneously functioning as a space of performative sociality for African slaves in their early transformation from Africans to African Americans, who “made the Christian religion their own; through spirituals, they affirmed their traditional worldview (modified by the realities of slavery and the myths and rituals of Christian religion)” (Floyd 1995: 41). In this sense, Christianity acted as their primary system of expression for cultural memory, identity, and liberation, as well as the participatory process that indoctrinated them (Lovell 1986; Cone 1992).<sup>19</sup> Mellonee Burnim speaks to the nature of this dialectic as it concerns the creation of the folk spiritual:

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed account on the creation of the Black church in relation to the converting efforts of Christianity after the mid-eighteenth century, see Burnim (1980: 54-61).

When introduced to Christianity, African slaves reinterpreted their religious instruction through an African cultural lens. From a sociocultural perspective, the development of the spiritual can actually be considered as an overt act of resistance to the subjugation imposed by Europeans (2006: 53).

If the spiritual symbolizes resistance and Black cultural identity then we can similarly view the Black church as an institution that has in many ways been reappropriated as a Black controlled institution that reflects the attitudes, values and lifestyles of the Black community (Williams-Jones 1975).

### **2.1.2 Gospel's First Period (1900-1929)**

The spirituals survived and were transformed in the Reconstruction period after slavery was abolished (1865-77). Angela Davis explains that while "slave religious practices were inseparable from other aspects of the everyday life of a slave—work, family, sabotage, escape [...] Post-slavery religion gradually lost some of this fluidity and came to be dependent on the church" (1998: 5). Around the turn of the century, many Black congregations still worshipped without instrumental accompaniment, singing in a capella folk fashion. While some congregations had a tambourine or guitar, pianos were rare at this time, and church choirs were nonexistent (Jackson 1975: 63). By the time the spiritual developed into to what is now understood as Gospel's First Period (1900-1929), a contemporary sacred music—gospel—began to reflect the shift from rural to urban, agricultural to industrial, overtly racist to covertly sanctioned racism, that Blacks experienced throughout the Great Migration (Burnim 2006: 66).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This tripartite division of gospel history that I am describing comes from Joyce Marie Jackson (1995) and is organized through three specific shifts in the sociocultural processes that Black communities experienced at the turn of the twentieth century.

Often romantically historicized as a mass movement for jobs and opportunity, the Great Migration has also been seen as a refugee crisis (Equal Justice Initiative) spawned by Blacks fleeing an insurmountable amount of racist terrorism doled out by whites after the Civil War, a period that Amiri Baraka rightly refers to as the “confusing” and “chaotic time of Reconstruction,” (1964: 50). New to the urban enclaves of the North, African Americans united through their strongest form of cultural practice, religious music, and set up small, urban places of worship within Black neighborhoods known as “storefront” churches (Williams-Jones: 375). It was within these storefront churches that the physical behavior of the southern folk spiritual became the foundation for the new gospel style, and began to merge with the coming insurrection of blues and jazz.

### **2.1.3 Gospel’s Second Period (1930-1945)**

Gospel’s Second Period (1930-1945), considered to be a transitional period due to the demise of the Harlem Renaissance and the 1929 Depression, ushered in poverty and dispossession on a scale that was unprecedented since the abolition of slavery (Jackson 1975). The musical response that resulted from that socio-economic downfall was closely linked to another burgeoning Black expressive genre, the blues. In fact, it was Thomas A. Dorsey, a well-known blues pianist, who wrote and accompanied some of the major traditional gospel compositions that were performed by gospel groups and quartets, which were formed during this time (Johnson 2004: 2).

Angela Davis is keen to point out another crucial transitional practice within Gospel’s Second Period—the rise of the blues, ushered in by Classic Blues women,<sup>21</sup> who dominated the

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<sup>21</sup> For additional information on women in the Classic Blues tradition, see Jackson (2005).

genre and created a new salient binary opposition that was articulated at the intersection of religious and musical expression: sacred/secular (1998: 90). The sacred was performed in the authoritative structure of church and the secular was performed in “jook joints, circuses, and traveling shows” (ibid: 6). Davis goes on further to explain how the prominence of the blues as a secular genre in the everyday lives of Black people reflects and helps to shape a “new black consciousness,” which interprets “religion as the not-secular, and the *secular as largely sexual*” (emphasis mine, ibid: 6). This correlation of the *secular* to the *sexual* is due in large part to the “strong physical and sensuous presence” (Carby 1990: 241) of the Classic Blues women, and “the way they defied . . . the social mores and cultural structures defining gender and sexuality” (Brazier 2004: 4-5). The overwhelming success of Classic Blues recordings by Black women—Mamie Smith, Ida Cox, Chippie Hill, Sarah Martin, Clara Smith, Trixie Smith, Victoria Spivey, Sippie Wallace, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, and the most famous of all, Bessie Smith, “Empress of the Blues” (Garofalo 2006: 395)—both created an oppositional binary of secular/sacred, and played a serious role in setting the stage for gospel music’s mainstream crossover success that would eventually give way to the gospel music industry in the late 1960s, effectively closing out the three period tripartite of contemporary gospel music.

#### **2.1.4 Gospel’s Third Period (1946-1969)**

Gospel’s Third Period is marked by the surfacing of a predominate Black middle class community during and after World War II, which resulted in serious alterations in the economic and social organization of Black cultural identity (Jackson 1975). Moreover, this period was crucial in establishing the “big business” market of gospel music that led to contemporary, or popular gospel music performance.

By the end of the 1940s, numerous independent record companies, under the segregated label of Race Records,<sup>22</sup> as well as radio, served as an outlet for the promotion of gospel music. Through these media and technological outlets, gospel music became a widely successful musical genre, and a sustainable way of economic livelihood. In the 1950s, larger choirs within the Black church community began to flourish with the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, led by charismatic preachers and singers such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahalia Jackson. This demand for unifying and uplifting Black musical expression to function as the soundtrack to the Civil Rights Movement resulted in the circulation of more published music, and the proliferation of the contemporary Black gospel choir as an unwavering and dynamic cultural institution. By the late 1960s the gospel music industry was transformed with the release of the single "Oh Happy Day," recorded in 1969 by the 46-member Church of God in Christ (COGIC) Northern California State Youth Choir, under the direction of Betty Watson and Edwin Hawkins ("Gospel Music Industry" 2006: 417), reflecting the era's incorporation of the secular style of soul music. The song soon became a cross-over hit on radio stations and "earned a listing on Billboard's pop charts, reaching the top five, and in time sold an unprecedented one million copies" (Kernodle 2006: 91).

Gospel music from earlier periods had strongly influenced the stylistic approaches that had come to define the sound of 1960s soul music (Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, and Aretha Franklin being the most notable),<sup>23</sup> however "Oh Happy Day" was unique in the way in which it diverged from \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>22</sup> "Race Records" was an early music industry category for recordings by African American performers in the 1920s, which lasted up until the late 1930s. By the early 1920s, the national music industry had emerged as a viable source for the production of American musical expression and had developed successful and segregated models for selling music to the American public. "Race records," or "race music," grew into a significant and highly successful segment of the market. However, as Burnim and Maultsby (2006) point out, "race" records that were prized as authentic African American folk "were *selective* portraits of traditional performance in Black communities" (emphasis in original, 2006: 114). For more on "race records," see Miller (2010).

<sup>23</sup> See Guralnick (1986).



the gospel-soul crossover. This hit song, while influenced by soul and aligned with Black Power style through its young ensemble—who adorned jean bell bottoms and natural afro hairstyles on the cover of their albums—was strictly gospel in the sense that it was not marketed as secular, ushering in a new era of contemporary pop gospel music. It was the song's use of electric bass and piano to revamp the classic hymn that appealed to mainstream audiences and solidified the contemporary sound of popular gospel. Just as traditional gospel music underwent dynamic shifts in its sound and social structure, contemporary (or pop) gospel also ideologically shape-shifted through the post-soul era, impacting its appeal and popularity, production quality, and performance style. This propelled gospel music into uncharted mainstream territory, so that by 1994 it had registered as the sixth most popular form of music, beating out jazz and classical, in terms of revenue, and by 1995, it had grown to a multimillion dollar industry (Rhea 1998: 94).

### **2.1.5 Gospel music industry**

The modern-day gospel music industry was undeniably set into motion by the crossover success of “Oh Happy Day,” which received airplay in five different markets, defying industry boundaries generally imposed on genre and race during that time, and eventually reaching 1.5 million in sales (Garofalo 2006: 419). While the contemporary era in gospel music was realized in 1969, it would not be until 1993 before a gospel release of comparable success would hit the charts. Unlike the unsolicited surge of popularity that “Oh Happy Day” received from radio in 1969, Kirk Franklin’s 1993 album *Kirk Franklin and the Family* had a professional network behind him:

Unlike Hawkins, who had no record contract, promoter, or manager, the album *Kirk Franklin and the Family* was one of the first products of the Black, female-

owned GospoCentric label, formed in 1993, the same year as Franklin's debut (Borzillo 1995: 22).

Kirk Franklin, a giant in the gospel music industry, was “carefully and strategically marketed to maximize airplay and availability of the album in the mainstream” (“The Gospel Music Industry” 2006: 419), exemplifying the strategic success of the newly organized gospel music industry.

## **2.2 GOSPEL MIME**

The “continuity and change” (Levine 1977; Burnim and Maultsby 2006) that is historicized within gospel music largely ends with the advent of Hip Hop or Rap Gospel in the 1990s (Norfleet 2006; Ramsey 2003; Jackson 1995). However, to continue this trend would be to ignore one of the largest and most popular forms of liturgical song and dance to have swept the country in the last twenty-five years. In this section I will (1) historicize the practice of Gospel Mime as it began in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; (2) locate the mediatized mobility that Gospel Mime underwent in order to become a national popular art form; and (3) interrogate how the aesthetic values and practices of Gospel Mime celebrate or contest the continuum of Black music practice.

### **2.2.1 Pittsburgh origins**

The emergence of Gospel Mime as a form of worship and ministry has its historical roots in the city of Pittsburgh. At the center of this history are twin brothers, Karl and Keith Edmonds, commonly known as K & K Mime Ministry. Revered throughout the nation as the founders of

Gospel Mime, as well as being considered the most famous and skilled practitioners of the art form, K&K Mime popularized the new form of ministry throughout Pittsburgh churches starting in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Growing up in one of Pittsburgh's poorest and most criminalized neighborhoods, Homewood (the same neighborhood as Dr. J's Afro American Music Institute, mentioned earlier), Karl and Keith used their talents and their love of gospel music to impact their local community, spread the gospel across the country, and eventually travel with their ministry throughout the world.<sup>24</sup>



**Figure 1. Karl and Keith Edmonds (K&K Mime Ministry)**

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<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that while I have come across Gospel Mime ministries in other areas of the African diaspora, such as Jamaica and Ghana, to date my research only focuses on practices within the United States. It is my understanding that it is important to understand the origins of Gospel Mime before looking at diasporic practices.

It is worth noting that there is another Pittsburgh origin story of how Gospel Mime began in Pittsburgh. I first heard of this alternative origin story when I began to ask members of the Gospel Choir at University of Pittsburgh whether K&K Mime was considered to be the first practitioners of this art form. (It was during these informal conversations at rehearsals that I fully realized the high level of familiarity with Gospel Mime among those who grew up in the Black church in and around Pittsburgh.) Overhearing my inquiry, the director of the choir, Dr. J, explained to me that “Mrs. Donna Ilioch—she started Gospel Mime even before K&K.”<sup>25</sup> Having to move on with rehearsal in preparation for our Spring concert, I brought my inquiry to Hotep the Artist. Hotep was familiar with Donna Ilioch and briefly went on to explain Mrs. Ilioch’s “vision,” later directing me to the website of Mrs. Ilioch’s church. It was here, through this online narrative, where the account of the origin story was laid out before me:

Mrs. Donna Darwin Ilioch, a born-again Christian of Pittsburgh, PA, was lying on her bed one evening meditating upon a talent she could do for parent’s night at the Temple Christian Academy. While listening to a gospel tape by Larnell Harris and praying, she saw a vision of a person doing creative movements to a gospel song with a white painted face, flowing black clothing loosely fitting and white gloves. She also saw a spotlight shining upon the person.

This was the vision for the mime ministry; but not the same as Marcel Marceau, the founder of Miming. Instead, the Lord showed her a mixture of sign language and mime. It was similar to a Hawaiian dance, telling a story with your hands. It was acting out words to songs giving the visual effect. We have been traditionally preached to and sung to so much, until she saw a need for a different way of communicating the gospel through miming.

After viewing Mrs. Ilioch’s performances during the year of 1982 at Christian Temple Church in Pittsburgh, Rev. John T. Davidson, Jr., who was the Youth Director of Christian Temple Church at the time, caught the miming ministry as a tool of ministry for the members of his youth church. With the assistance of Marie Jones, Tracey Williams and Dorian Thomas, Rev. Davidson developed a mime ministry, which they later called Creative Expression.

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<sup>25</sup> Dr. James Johnson (Gospel Choir Director), personal communication, Spring 2016.

It should be noted that the existing mime ministries, today, in the black churches in the Greater Pittsburgh community, came from the above beginnings (“How Christian Miming Began”).

While far less common, this story has been cited by my collaborators throughout Pittsburgh, as well as a few online forums, as an authoritative origin story. By including this story in the history of Gospel Mime as part of a local Pittsburgh “vernacular landscape” (McDonald 2009: 79), I hope to call attention to the subjectivity and voice that comes from research which aims to disaggregate proliferating vernacular histories from elite industry, such as the gospel music industry. By offering such a story, I am taking a direct cue from Steven Feld’s work in Ghana (2012) which privileges stories as inherently analytic:

[Stories] analyze by their narrative selection, juxtaposition, and sequence of lexical elements and vocalic performance. Stories create analytic gestures by their need to recall and thereby ponder, wonder, and search out layers of intersubjective significance in events, acts, and scenes. Stitching stories together is also a *sense-making activity*, one that signals a clear analytic awareness of the fluidity and gaps in public and private discourses (emphasis mine, 2012: 8).

Mrs. Donna Ilioch’s “vision” helps to make sense of the unique Pittsburgh roots of Gospel Mime, while complicating K&K’s unchallenged role as the founders of the art form. Furthermore, this story of the divine’s presence is especially important when considering how Gospel Mime came to be authorized and legitimized as an anointed practice in the Black church, a deeply affective ritual act (which I will discuss in section 3.1).

Musicologist Tammy L. Kernodle explains the popularity and impact of K&K Mime in a digital booklet offered as a “Cultural Resource” for The African American Lectionary, a collaborative project of the African American church and American Baptist College of Nashville:

[K&K] have been showcased by such gospel luminaries as Dr. Bobby Jones, Kirk Franklin, and Donnie McClurkin, and are now identified as the ‘Godfathers of Gospel Mime.’ The ministry of the Edmonds brothers has provided the

blueprint for numerous gospel mimes (“Worship and Arts Sunday [Formerly known as Choir Anniversary Sunday] Cultural Resources (“Worship and Arts Sunday [Formerly known as Choir Anniversary Sunday] Cultural Resources”).

By being labeled as the “Godfathers of Gospel Mime,” Karl and Keith Edmonds are joining a long lineage of Black performers who are given privileged positions of leadership in the Black community. Paul Gilroy gives the example of “Soul Brother No. 1” James Brown and “The First Lady” Aretha Franklin, who were effectively elected through public opinion and revered within the Black community. This tradition spans the twentieth-century with artists such as Charles Tindley, the Father of Modern Gospel; Bessie Smith, the Empress of the Blues; and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the Godmother of Rock ‘n’ Roll (Gilroy 1987: 359).

Now a Pastor at Love Fellowship Church of Pittsburgh in Turtle Creek, Pennsylvania, Karl Edmonds spoke with me about the journey that he and his brother took from being church kids in Homewood to becoming the “Godfathers of Gospel Mime.” As the story goes, K&K’s mother often asked her two young sons to silently act out the stories from scripture as she read the Bible. In previously published interviews, as well as my own, Karl and Keith describe the boredom they felt as children in merely acting out the words of scripture, prompting them to act out songs from their favorite gospel musicians. After they received such a positive reaction from their first performance at Seventh Day Adventist Church, the two twin brothers began visiting Pittsburgh churches in the area and performing their new form of praise and worship. Once they built a repertoire, they began to travel to churches outside of the state to share Gospel Mime for those who had never seen it:

Our Mom would drive us from Pittsburgh to Alabama, from Alabama to Houston, she was actually our driver, our tour manager at that time. We didn’t have contracts, we [weren’t] getting paid. People would put us up, people would feed us [...] But it was our opportunity [for] really getting this thing out (Karl Edmonds, personal communication, 28 Nov. 2016).

The brothers traveled extensively throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, rapidly building a network for Gospel Mime that extended back to the Pittsburgh region. Then one night they received an invitation from a promoter to open for musician Kirk Franklin (alluded to in section 2.1.5) at a Pittsburgh gospel show. They took this opportunity to mime one of Franklin song's, "A Letter from My Friend" (1993). This performance set in motion a series of events that would eventually transform their local art form into a national popular practice:

So, we go to the concert, we go to the stage [...] And we do "A Letter from My Friend," and the audience is going crazy. So, we get off stage and we go in the back, and lo and behold, walking behind the stage was Kirk Franklin and the Family all in tears. They actually watched our whole performance through the front door and they came in the back and they just cried . . . They were amazed. So, Kirk Franklin . . . said I'm doing something in Dallas and I want to bring you guys out there to open up for it (Karl Edmonds, personal communication, 28 Nov. 2016).

Two weeks later the brothers were flown to Dallas, Texas for a Martin Luther King Day celebration performance. After that performance, Franklin called gospel luminary Dr. Bobby Jones and told him about the brothers and their new form of ministry. They were invited onto *Bobby Jones Gospel* on BET (Black Entertainment Television) in 1996.

### **2.2.2 National mediation and convergence**

In a BET interview from 2005, Karl and Keith Edmonds explained how their local form of praise and worship was given a national platform:

Keith: And then God put us in front of Dr. Bobby Jones in Miami. That was the first time...

Karl: That's how we were *really* exposed.

Keith: Yeah, that's how we were really exposed—through television, through BET, through the gospel industry. And once that was exposed everybody was like 'let's start a mime group! Let's be like K&K! Let's do this, let's do that!'

And that's all fine and dandy, and I encourage people if that's in you, and that's what you were instructed to do by God, then...

Karl: Do it, by all means.

Keith: Do it. We encourage you to do it. Because, you know, we're not going to be miming all our lives. We'll be in ministry but we won't be miming all our lives [...] Pretty soon we'll be passing it on.

Karl: To the next generation (“K&K Mime B.E.T Interview Done in 2005”).

After becoming established in and around the Pittsburgh area in the 1990s, through church tours and workshops, the latter half of the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century saw Gospel Mime emerge as a viable form of worship and ministry— “through television, through BET, through the gospel industry” (ibid)—with K&K Mime at the forefront. They have made several appearances on The Word Network, the largest African American religious network in the world, and their fame rose to new heights when they appeared on BET as guests on the *Bobby Jones Gospel* show (alluded to earlier in the BET interview) and *Teen Summit*, a BET youth talk show. Hotep the Artist, who grew up seeing K&K when they would visit her church, Covenant Church of Pittsburgh, recalls the local transmission of Gospel Mime before K&K appeared on BET:

Black folk did this by word of mouth and media stages on BET and such. But it was a church to church workshop spreading. There were no famous mimes on mainstream media, white or black, until K&K went on gospel concert tours (Hotep the Artist, personal communication, 27 Oct. 2016).

K&K's appearance on BET advanced the popularity and inclusion of Gospel Mime performance within national gospel concert tours. The performative sociality of Gospel Mime began to reach far beyond the “church to church workshop spreading” (ibid) within Pittsburgh, and mobilized local “alternative aesthetic spaces” from their Pittsburgh roots to a “performative citation of power [...] firmly embedded into everyday existence” (McDonald 2009: 74).



I am using Gayle Wald's approach to studying Black music television to analyze K&K Mime's extraordinary impact on the Black church on a national level. Just as Wald investigates the "affective compact" of the Black Power TV show *Soul!* as a "pursuit of intimacy and connection with viewers, despite the distancing, cold mediation of television (Wald 2015: 20), I am interpreting K&K's early televised performances as the initial intimate connection stimulated Black churchgoers emotional interest toward Gospel Mime as a form of praise and worship. The inscription of gospel bodies in such a new and innovative way allows for viewers to reinvent their own conception of what constitutes Black religious expression, carving out an untapped performative space for Black identities to exist outside of stereotypical readings of gospel. At the crux of K&K's appearance on TV is the concept of communal Black experience, which binds viewers together through the unified involvement of watching television: "Most of the Black churches watched the show [*Bobby Jones Gospel*]. That was a traditional thing for them to do. Wake up, watch Bobby Jones, [and] go to church" (Karl Edmonds, phone interview, 28 Nov. 2016). This synchronous experience expanded the community of Gospel Mime and opened the door for convergences on a national scale.

In 1997, K&K were invited on the "Tour of Life," a four-month-long fifty-nine city road show featuring Kirk Franklin and the Family, Fred Hammond and Radicals for Christ, Yolonda Adams, Sister Cantaloupe, among others. Selling out the 6,000-seat Universal City Amphitheatre in Los Angeles, California, the tour, organized by GospoCentric Records, the same company that put Kirk Franklin on the map in 1993 and reinvented the gospel music industry, was a huge success, launching the type of Gospel Mime ministry represented by K&K further into mainstream popularity ("An Award Winning Climax for 'the Tour of Life'").

By 2012, K&K were honored as the first Gospel Superfest Trendsetter Award recipients. 2012 also coincided with the first ever “Gathering of the Mimes” event, a two-day Gospel Mime workshop that served an estimated 250 mime students, culminating with a 1,000-attendee concert at Chapel LIFE Church in Detroit, Michigan. Minister of Mime James C. Hayes, one of its leading organizers, said this about the first national Gospel Mime conference: "I've been Gospel miming since 1998. It's taking Gospel music and bringing it to life through [...] dramatic expression. It's something crazy; it's something special" (Burns 2012). Similar convergences began to take place throughout the nation, the most notable being the “Mime4Life” Conference in Chicago, Illinois, which began in 2013 and has continued every year since. Organized by Felicia Harmon Brown of Born To Praise Ministries from Faith Movers Church in Tindley Park, Illinois, the 2016 “Mime4Life” conference included nine different classes on mime technique, how to apply makeup, marketing and branding a ministry, team building exercises, panel discussions and Q&A sessions. One of “Mime4Life’s” most important functions is distinguishing Gospel Mime from the other forms of mime, with which Gospel Mime shares surface characteristics with, mainly the white makeup and the silent expression:

There's a difference between street mime and gospel mime [...] We [gospel mimes] specifically dance to gospel music and worship Christ. Street mime is more for entertainment. We mime to music, so our main goal is to depict the song through facial expressions and movement (Vince 2013).

With large-scale conferences and workshops becoming a defining feature in the world of Gospel Mime, the second decade of the twenty-first century is seeing the mainstream popular domain of mime ministries become increasingly more mobile throughout the nation, creating localized cells of gospel sub-cultural performance dominated by the younger generation.

### 2.2.3 Aesthetic rationale and reception

No matter what regional differences may divide the congregations that practice Gospel Mime, the physical aesthetics and the anointed authorization of its ministry are consistent threads that run through the art form. The aesthetics and authorization provide an agreed upon knowledge, creating a collective “system of dispositions” (Bourdieu) that allows Black Christian expression to be embodied through a seemingly secular art form. In our phone interview, Karl Edmonds explained how he and his brother came to adorn themselves in full mime makeup while performing to recorded gospel music:

Our Mom always said it’s a form of pantomime [...] What you’re doing is acting it out, you’re basically mimes. So, because she said *that*, we said, well, ok, let’s really try to do the whole mime thing. So, we started practicing one song, a very popular song called “In Return” by [Bebe and] CeCe Winans. We said, let’s learn it and actually do what she wants us to do, act out the words. [Instead of] her reading the Bible, let’s act out a song. So, we did it and we looked up mime, and mime consisted of wearing white gloves and makeup (Karl Edmonds, personal communication, 28 Nov. 2016).

I asked Karl to elaborate on what he meant by looking up mime:

We went online and searched miming . . . And was like, oh this is neat—this is different [...] Just different kinds of performers that they had way before our time [...] They’d actually act it out and they’d have music behind it [...] But we looked it up and found mime and that’s how we came up with that idea. We just put a different flavor to it and that’s gospel (Karl Edmonds, personal communication, 28 Nov. 2016).

From this historical account it is clear that the Edmonds brothers used aesthetic practices outside of the church to enhance the practice of their original scripture enactments, creating a uniquely hybridized form of mime. Forms of hybridity have always shaped Black religious expression in the United States. Beginning with the syncretism that characterized the Christian ring shout during the days of slavery (as alluded to in section 2.1.1), up to the latest form of

bricolage that combines recorded gospel music, the theatrical medium of miming, and liturgical dance, hybridity has always been cited as an essential part of African American culture:

Thomas Dorsey's mix of blues and gospel during the 1940s; Edwin Hawkins' . . . pop-gospel of the late 1960s; and the Winanses' smooth-soul gospel of the 1980s were all seen as hybrid—and quite controversial—expressions in their day (Ramsey 2003: 191).

Gospel Mime, in this respect, is no different in how it wields rhetorical power through stylistic juxtapositions. Nor is it different in how it evokes controversy. While K&K admit to having looked up the art form of mime on the internet, Hotep the Artist (who will be discussed in section 3.2) was taught through her church that the white face symbolized purity from sin: “I was taught at Covenant Church of Pittsburgh, and that's where we learned what the white was for. It was for purity. Washed white as snow. Lamb's wool” (Hotep the Artist, personal communication, 1 May 2016).

The most common interpretation I heard about the aesthetics of Gospel Mime followed a more religiously essential rationale, such as Hotep the Artist's experience at Covenant Church of Pittsburgh. Rather than paying homage to mime theatre, Hotep the Artist grew up learning about the white makeup of Gospel Mime through a strictly spiritual rationale of purity and cleansing. I followed up by asking Karl whether they subscribed to the belief that the white makeup symbolized purity:

If you want to look at it from a spiritual standpoint, yes, that's true. But if you're looking [at it] from a history of gospel miming . . . No. Historically the white paint was put on the face to show the expressions of the face, that was it. It wasn't . . . Deep like that. A lot of people, they take it and say, ‘Oh, this is a spiritual thing.’ The paint is just a tool to help the facial expressions stand out (Karl Edmonds, personal communication, 28 Nov. 2016).

While this statement does not apply to all Gospel Mime ministry's aesthetic rationale, it does support my understanding of Gospel Mime as a malleable field of interpretation which

varies in meaning, much in the same way that denominations vary in their interpretation of Christian beliefs and practices. For example, not all churches accept mime as a form of praise. Some of the more Protestant fundamentalist congregations, where dance has long been seen as secular, ban it outright (East 2011).

Rather than observing the visual technique of making your face white to better see every wrinkle and muscle in the facial expression, as Karl alluded to, the most common Christian-centric signification for the white face rests in the false oppositional binary of whiteness and blackness. Although this is not the aesthetic rationale I received from Karl, one of the beloved “Godfathers of Gospel Mime,” that does not keep it from being a frequently cited reason throughout much of the Gospel Mime community. Twenty-six-year-old Delvin Jackson, of Anointed Brothers Mime Ministry rationalizes the white makeup as such: “We paint our faces white to block out everything so people can no longer see us. It’s to show that God has cleansed us and has made us whiter than snow” (Mckeiver 2008).<sup>26</sup>

Gospel Mime is its transformation from a local sub-genre of gospel performance to a nationally popular practice that became extremely meaningful and embraced by the Black community in such a short amount of time. Furthermore, this type of nationally mobilized occurrence is not necessarily typical in the conservative space of the church which has very specific traditions and symbols. However, Gospel Mime’s popularity emerged because of its symbolic resonance with people on a visceral level—sitting at the nexus of performance, music, and religious expression within the Black church. While Gospel Mime fits into the continuum of Black musical practice, practitioners and audiences of the art form imbued it with their own

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<sup>26</sup> To unpack this loaded statement, and consider what it means for African Americans to *not be seen* in the U.S., what it means for people in the U.S. not to see blackness, and to be the color of snow, is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is my hope that by addressing these ideologically contextualized statements about the racial performativity of Gospel Mime, others will analyze the severity of this interpretation.

meaning, bringing new symbols and imagery into the gospel fray. The same way in which these new symbols and imagery resonated with people through a positive way, they also resonated with people through a negative, suspicious, or uncomfortable experience; an experience which spoke to the anxieties of minstrelsy and blackface.<sup>27</sup>

Without identifying any explicit or implicit connection to the ideological function of blackface, there is a clear semiotic connection between the look of Gospel Mime's white face and gloves as the inverse of blackface. People's uncomfortable reactions to this semiotic inversion when witnessing Gospel Mime, perhaps for the first time, stems from a long tradition of minstrelsy and blackface in American popular culture—an extremely damaging and complex symbol of racialized cultural expropriation (Lott 1993).<sup>28</sup> Karl Edmonds recounts the problematic reception they had during the art form's inception in the late 1980s and early 1990s:

We even had a problem doing Gospel Mime in other churches traveling. Everybody didn't agree with it. Thank God we had a lot more positive [reactions] but a lot of people didn't like it. 'Why they got to wear the white paint? Why they got to wear white and black? Is that a racial statement?' Then a lot of Deacons didn't like us . . . *Because they were all older* . . . [But] thank God a lot of the people that loved it outweighed a lot of those that didn't like it (emphasis mine, Karl Edmonds, personal communication, 28 Nov. 2016).

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<sup>27</sup> It is not my aim to historicize blackface minstrelsy, or deny that the interpretation and performance of blackface minstrelsy has a complex history, my aim is rather to call attention to the ways that blackface acts as a potent symbol that lingers in the memory of American popular culture in ways which have serious racist connotations. For a thorough discussion on the complexities of blackface minstrelsy as performance practice and marketable commodity, see Lott (1993) and Sotiropoulos (2008). For a thorough discussion on how blackface minstrelsy performed by ethnic white immigrants was one of the processes by which white immigrants expressed an emotional sense of self that they had lost in the process of assimilating to whiteness in the early part of the twentieth century, see Rogin (1996); Roediger (1991); and Lipsitz (1998).

<sup>28</sup> Eric Lott's seminal work on minstrelsy and blackface (1993) begins with his theorization of a "love vs. theft" paradigm. While national memory has produced a tidy narrative of American blackface as a racist marker of performance, worn only to cover up Caucasian identity to stereotypically imitate African Americans for entertainment—all of which is fundamentally true—it has largely failed to expand on the motifs for blackface which are not as easily theorized through overtly racist practices. Lott states that "[c]ultural expropriation is the minstrel show's central fact" (Lott 1993: 19), however it is a fact that needs explaining. That explanation comes through the "love vs. theft" paradigm, which asserts that minstrelsy involved a real love of African American culture and bodies.

In the late 1980s/early 1990s, “older” Deacons like those described by Edmonds would have had a clear memory of blackface as a racist symbol of performance, hence, feeling discomfort and disapproval for the art form. Karl’s comment speaks to something deep in the Black cultural psyche where any image of blackface minstrelsy, even the inversion of it, is disturbing to them. Not because they consider Gospel Mime’s as being in “blackface,” or “whiteface,” but rather because the mimicry of blackface as a symbol still carries significant weight in American popular culture. For these “older” Deacons who opposed Gospel Mime at the time of its inception, it was not the belief that the semiotic inversion of the white face signified black people “dressing up” as white people, but rather enacted a painful reminder of the performative lineage of minstrelsy. Furthermore, it can be easily understood how traditional Black churchgoers of an older generation would be opposed to bringing that type of powerful symbol, one which carries such serious baggage, into their most sacred place, the Black church, which uses music and religion for purposes of dignity of community and offers evidence of a conceptual link to the past.

While I have not encountered anyone at Bethlehem Baptist Church who disapproves of Gospel Mime because of its aesthetics, years later, the correlation that people can see between the white face of Gospel Mime and the blackface of minstrelsy still evokes visceral reactions, such as the following:

The faces look like I am looking into the eyes of a crazy person. I am serious it seems like a state of craziness. Whitefaced seems too close to “blackface” actors of long ago. My ancestors suffered from that whole era of blackfaced (Sistergirl).

I’ve got to get some answers on another dance that is now becoming popular in black churches. That is the tendency to have black people performing as “mimes” in whiteface. Can anyone besides me see the hypocrisy in our getting made over white people in blackface, then put the exact opposite in our churches as an acceptable form of entertainment? (Jones 2012).

While none of my collaborators have expressed such a view about the nature of the art form, what would make individuals identify Gospel Mime as the “opposite” of blackface comes from a very convoluted and sordid history; it is a performance history that speaks to the worst of the American popular musical lineage.

When considering Gospel Mime’s place in gospel performance historiography, one must consider how these aesthetic values and practices will be theorized into the Black music continuum, which is anchored in the initial transference of music and dance from the folk spirituals to the contemporary period of gospel. By and large, Gospel Mime is a practice that is widely embraced and celebrated by the Black church, and enthusiastically spread as the Gospel. Bethlehem Baptist Church is no exception and is one of thousands of churches where Gospel Mime ministry is embodied as praise and worship.



### 3.0 ETHNOGRAPHY

#### 3.1 BETHLEHEM BAPTIST CHURCH

The first time I witnessed Gospel Mime in a Black church was on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015 at Bethlehem Baptist Church in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. I had been invited by a woman who used to work in the Music Building at the University of Pittsburgh, Miss Kim, after I shared my new knowledge of Gospel Mime with her.<sup>29</sup> I had known Miss Kim was an avid churchgoer (she would often play me videos of her church choir on her phone when I would see her in the elevator or hallway) and thought perhaps she had heard of what I then considered to be an obscure art form. To my surprise, Miss Kim reacted with great enthusiasm and a matter-of-factness when she proclaimed: “Oh, yeah! We have a Gospel Mime ministry at my church—they’re wonderful!”<sup>30</sup> A few weeks later I found myself sitting in a pew inside Bethlehem Baptist Church, in the working-class neighborhood of McKeesport, during their “Praise and Worship” service.

The streets of McKeesport are empty, displaying remnants of store front businesses and local restaurants that are now housed by broken windows and small piles of garbage. While the

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<sup>29</sup> Addressing these older black women in my research as ‘Miss’ is a form of respect that I have found to be prominent in the Black church community. While typically used to address an unmarried woman, calling a woman Miss Pam, or Miss Kim, or Miss Annabelle, does not denote her marital status but rather her status as an adored member in the community.

<sup>30</sup> Kimberly Brown-Perkins, personal communication, Spring 2015.

streets resembled a ghost town, there was a rejoicing community inside the walls of Bethlehem Baptist. The “Praise and Worship” service commenced with everyone standing, swaying and singing along to “Let It Rise,” a contemporary gospel song made popular by musician and Pastor William Murphy. The popular gospel tune was accompanied by the church band, an inter-generational trio which consisted of a drummer, bass player, and keyboardist. Although I had never heard this song before, its pop-oriented structure quickly registered in my mind, and soon placed itself in my voice; I was compelled to stand up and join the congregation.

After stumbling through the lyrics, I finally latched on to the catchy melody and began to feel comfortable holding the notes out at the ends of verses. Never having experienced “Black church” before, I soon gained the confidence through the affective intensity of the moment to sing out, clap, and move my body like the rest of the people in the pews. Towards the end of the song, Miss Annabelle, the elderly woman sitting next to me, grabbed my arm and said: “I *hear* you, baby! You have a beautiful voice! What church do you sing at?” I explained to Miss Annabelle that I do not sing at any church and that I was, in fact, “here to see the Gospel Mimes.”

### **3.1.1 McKeesport, Pennsylvania**

McKeesport, Pennsylvania is a Rust Belt city in Allegheny County that sits at the confluence of the Monongahela and Youghiogheny rivers (two of Pittsburgh’s famous three rivers). McKeesport was incorporated as a borough in 1842 soon after coal mining began in that region. While the first steel mill opened in 1851, it was the creation of The National Tube Company in 1872 (later becoming part of U.S. Steel) that attracted people to the city: “They came to McKeesport by railroad, steamboat, and wagons. According to the U.S. Census Bureau at the

time, McKeesport was the fastest growing municipality in the nation” (“History”). This growth continued through the mid-twentieth century, peaking in the 1940s.

After World War II, the city’s prosperity ebbed and flowed until the early 1980s when National Tube and a host of U.S. Steel plants were closed throughout Monongahela Valley (which locals abbreviate to “Mon Valley”). Following the collapse of the steel industry and a steady decline in the local population, and about 18.1% of families and 23.0% of the population below the poverty line, including 35.9% of those under age eighteen, McKeesport is now most commonly associated with high rates of unemployment (23% overall and 35% for minors) and crime (“2010 Census Redistricting Data”).

### **3.1.2 Building structure**

Bethlehem Baptist Church is located at 716 Walnut street, in the heart of what used to be a bustling downtown area. The Walnut street location is the second building that the church has been housed in throughout its over 120-year history. The building is one of the tallest in sight, with little elaboration on its light brown brick besides a large gold cross in the center of the building above the front doors. A church sign is planted in the front of the building on a small patch of grass that offers a message from Pastor Earlene Coleman. While there are several woman Reverends and Deaconesses, Earlene Coleman is the first woman Pastor to be appointed in the church.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The difference between a Pastor and Reverend is that the former is a minister of religion employed by the church, whereas the latter is a minister with an honorific title.



**Figure 2. Bethlehem Baptist Church in McKeesport, Pennsylvania**

The interior of the church is a large open space with high ceilings and a balcony that overlooks the ground level. Narrow stained glass windows line both sides of the church, which were slightly cracked to let air in during the Spring and Summer months in which I was in attendance. The congregation is organized by several rows of pews that are split down the middle by a center aisle. The pews are made of dark wood and a rusted red fabric which lines the interior. In front of the center aisle, raised by two steps, is the pulpit from which Pastor Earlene Coleman, and the other Reverends, Deacons, and Deaconesses, address the congregation.<sup>32</sup> A

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<sup>32</sup> Within the framework of this thesis, the pulpit has two constitutive meanings. The first is the literal structure of religious hierarchy in the form of a raised platform from which the Preacher, Pastor, or Deacon/Deaconess delivers a

step up from the pulpit sits several large chairs made from the same dark wood and rusted red material as the pews. Each worship service I witnessed included at least four other leaders of the church—Reverends, Deacons, Deaconesses—who supplement Pastor Earlene Coleman’s “Preached Word” with various calls to worship, prayers, and responsive readings.<sup>33</sup> These other individuals, with their hierarchical position in the congregation, sit on the chairs behind the pulpit. Behind those chairs, separated by a three-foot divider, is another four rows of pews which seat the Combined Choir, where Miss Kim was seated.

### **3.1.3 Worship service structure**

A typical Worship Service begins at 9:30am on Sunday and lasts until around 2:00 pm. Service begins with “Praise and Worship,” activated by live music being played from the church band situated on the ground level to the right of the pulpit. A “Call to Worship” is then offered through the reciting of a selected scripture, typically from the Book of Psalms. After the “Call to Worship,” the Combined Choir sings a “Selection,” and a “Prayer of Invocation” is offered by Deacon Cecil Johnson, which is then followed by a “Responsive Reading” from his wife, Deaconess Ruby Johnson. Another “Selection” is sung by the choir and then the “Women of

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sermon. The other is a symbolic structure of hierarchy within the church which separates the preacher, pastor, or deacon/deaconess from the congregation through religious teaching. The pulpit in this latter sense, becomes a crucial part of one’s social and moral world which they carry with them as a disciplining reminder of the teachings of church.

<sup>33</sup>A Deacon is a non-ordained role created in the early days of the Christian church for the primarily function of ministering to the physical needs of the congregation. A Deaconess is a term applied to women who occupy the same non-ordained role of the Deacon, although their role is often equated with counseling or mentoring young women in the church. There is a general consensus regarding the Black Baptist Church’s understanding of the character of the Deaconess, which is directly interpreted from the Bible. In the passage Timothy 3:11 the word women is interpreted by Baptists to mean “wives” of male deacons. Traditionally, the Deaconess is the female wife of her husband who is a Deacon. This is the case at Bethlehem Baptist with Deaconess Ruby Johnson, whose husband is Deacon Cecil Johnson, as well as the rest of the Deaconess Ministry (“Church Policy and Polity” 2016).

Worship” are welcomed to the front of the congregation. “Women of Worship” is a dance ministry that exemplifies the classic type of liturgical song and dance which began to take place in the Black church in the 1970s. An all-female ministry comprised of adult woman, the Women of Worship wear a uniform dress of long length with long sleeves, making sure not to show any skin. They often use props such as flags and flowing fabric. I have seen the liturgical dance ministry both use individual flags made of gold shiny fabric attached to a stick, as well as long pieces of gold shiny fabric that are manipulated by several of the dancers. After “Women of Worship” conclude their offering, it is New Image Mime’s turn to offer the anointing to the congregation every third Sunday of the month.

#### **3.1.4 New Image Mime Ministry**

New Image Mime represents the traditional style of Gospel Mime in the sense that it functions as a youth ministry, with prepared choreography taught by a church elder, and is performed to recorded popular gospel music during Worship Service. I understand the work of ministry in a communally pedagogical sense, in that it tends to the needs of its congregation and teaches, or preaches, the Word of God. While mime is enjoyed by all age groups, Gospel Mime is overwhelmingly performed by church youth who range in age from five to sixteen at Bethlehem Baptist. When I asked Karl Edmonds if he thinks Gospel Mime’s popularity can be credited to a younger generation of performers embracing it, he said “Yes. And a lot of the older generation are realizing, ‘Well, kids really like it! And its keeping them off the street! And it’s keeping them busy! And it’s keeping them *in* the church! It’s keeping them involved!’” (Karl Edmonds, personal communication, 28 Nov. 2016).

Christian youth tend to create their own mime ministries with a church elder, or someone in a position of hierarchy, who serves as a choreographer. Mime ministries name themselves just as a performance troupe would, crafting a creative play on words, often using alliteration, which typically combines Christian terms and performance terms to create a metaphor.<sup>34</sup> They meet once a week to read scripture, decide which songs express the message of scripture, and embody the creative silent expression which is thought to signify the song's message. As a ministry, mime offers a pedagogical service, functioning much in the same way as bible study. In fact, most of the youth in New Image Mime meet for youth Bible study on Wednesdays at 7:00 pm with Miss Pat Grayson, their choreographer and director. Often the scripture or message taught in Bible study is then alluded to during New Image Mime Ministry's rehearsal on Sunday evenings. Because it takes at least a few weeks to choreograph, rehearse and perfect a Gospel Mime performance, most ministries perform once a month, which is the case with New Image Mime ministry, which performs every third Sunday of the month.

The elder choreographer and director of New Image Mime is Miss Pat Grayson. After the first service at Bethlehem Baptist, I made my way down to the basement of the church, which was buzzing with members of the congregation who were interacting around food that had been set out, as well as various free services for the community. These free services were set up in small rooms throughout the basement, which I noticed as I walked by looking for Miss Pam. In one room, I noticed a station offering free haircuts; another station offering free blood pressure testing. The basement is essentially one large room with low ceilings and a carpeted floor, with

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<sup>34</sup> Some examples of mime ministries that I've encountered through social media, including YouTube videos and Facebook groups, as well as online forums and blogs for the Gospel Mime community, include: Radical Anointed Praise Mime from True Bethel Baptist Church in Buffalo, New York; Purpose Mime Ministry from Rockford First Church in Rockford, Illinois; Expressions of Praise Mime from Faith Ministries Center Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Triplicity Mime from Divine Faith Church in Jonesboro, Georgia; and Mime'Ful Prodigy from Gates Of Heaven Church of God in Christ in Suffolk, Virginia.

a few smaller rooms attached. A small kitchen is off to the side and is equipped with a stove top, oven, sinks, refrigerator and cupboards. There are two maroon banners hanging from the wall with gold inscriptions on them; one has the image of a crown with the word “Hope,” and the other has an image of a cross with the word “Joy.” Two or three long folding tables covered with plastic table cloths and decorated with fake flowers in vases are used to place the food and beverages on, which are prepared, served, and cleaned up by the women of the congregation, most of them quite young.



**Figure 3. Basement of Bethlehem Baptist Church**

Stacks of grey folding chairs with BBC (Bethlehem Baptist Church) stamped on the back line the wall. The basement has a unique feeling of a warm, domestic space, largely dominated by women. Finally, a small raised platform, approximately six inches off the ground, acts as New Image Mime’s rehearsal space.



After my initial exploration of the basement, I finally found Miss Pat in small room with a few of the younger mimes; she was helping to take their white make up off with baby wipes, the most effective way to remove the white makeup. I introduced myself—she had been expecting me from Miss Kim—and explained my research interest in Gospel Mime ministry. Miss Pat was very excited that I was there on that particular day and explained to me how proud she was of that seventh-grade girl who led the performance: “You came on a good day, the Lord was really present today!”<sup>35</sup> Miss Pat went on to explain to me how she’s been involved with Gospel Mimes for over twenty-five years, ever since she first saw K&K Mime at her church. It is Miss Pat who decides what message the youth of New Image Mime will communicate, and through what song their embodied affect will be activated. In order to successfully do this, she must first choose a passage from scripture, extrapolate a larger message to teach to the children, find a popular gospel song whose lyrics speak to that message, and link the movement to the sacred content.

### **3.1.5 Choreography**

The choreography often comes from a common stock of gestures and movements that have been collectively understood to signify certain words. This is exemplified throughout New Image Mimes performances, when they open their arms to a crucifix pose every time the name “Jesus” is sung in a song, or cross the arms over the chest every time the word “love” is sung, or enter and begin the performance in a prayer’s pose with hands pressed together in front of their chest to represent humility (refer to Figure 4). Connecting the gesture and facial expression to the

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Pat Grayson, Bethlehem Baptist Church, McKeesport, PA, April 19, 2015.

lyrics in the song, which serve as a sort of script, is essential to accomplish the anointing that is desired for mime ministry. Lyrics that signify pain or anguish are coupled with expressions that contort the face; the eyes are often tightly closed and the mouth is tense. Lyrics which represent a narrative of struggle are paired with a variation of gestures that often involve clenched fists beating the ground, or beating the top of their head. Grabbing the stomach with clenched fists and bending over in what looks to be pain are also common gestures for lyrics of anguish. Lyrics that signify joy and revelation are coupled with facial expressions that are wide eyed, stretching the facial muscles to full capacity, and opening the mouth in an exclamation of liveliness.

The most celebratory moments in Gospel Mime parallel the more climactic moments of the song being mimed to. Each performance I saw at Bethlehem Baptist featured a new soloist mime whose movements were paired to the solo vocalist on the audio recording. The lead soloist mime always stands front and center, directly at the head of the aisle in the middle of the pews. When the recorded vocalist in the song reaches a moment of climax, often resulting in a long melismatic riff, the lead Gospel Mime will mime that vocalization by framing his/her mouth with open palmed hands (to mimic a megaphone of sorts) and wave the hands back and forth as the singer slides between notes. Similarly, when a solo vocalist in the audio recording shrieks or screams as to ornament the song, the Gospel Mime may jump up, or raise a hand in the air and contort the face as to mimic a screaming expression. This act of punctuating the singing voice with gestural rhythm is at the core of Gospel Mime's aesthetic practice and is the very bodily inscription that creates the anointing amongst its practitioners, and within the congregation who are witnessing it. Using the form of body movement to accentuate the voice has long been a tradition within the Black church. The voice in Gospel Mime exists solely through pre-recorded

gospel music, which then goes on to cultivate a live voice of reception, or praise, from the connection between the ministry and the audience.

The way in which Gospel Mime offers a pre-recorded and highly choreographed performance differs from the more improvisatory and inclusive nature of gospel participation, which is perhaps the most fundamental characteristic of the Black music continuum. Derived from West Africa, the cultural mores of a large, communal population governed group singing and dancing at a musical and ritual event. This transferred to slave populations in the US, creating a performative space where African slaves could regain a sense of communal belonging and group identity, which was forcibly removed from them throughout the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: “These principles require the participation of group members who are present. Individuals become involved either by singing, dancing/shouting, hand-clapping, foot-stomping, or some combination of these rhythmic textures, which also provide the accompaniment for the layered voices” (Williams-Jones 1975: 374). The line between musical ministry and congregation, or performer and audience, is almost non-existent within traditional practices of the Black church, symbolically reforming the performative space which is most consistently identified, and historically linked to, a safe institution in which Black bodies and voices are in control of their own forms of destiny and determination. In fact, the only times during the services at Bethlehem Baptist where the congregation was completely silent was before New Image Mime Ministry began; and the only time the congregation was not singing along to the music was during New Image Mime Ministry’s performance Gospel Mime ministry. In this sense, Gospel Mime becomes a specialized form of labor that is performed equally amongst young men and women, and in effect, requires new participatory practices and values. Therefore, Gospel Mime can be observed as a new form of the "presentational experiential structure" (Johnson 2014: 12), which

visibly and audibly reworks the typical participatory nature of gospel performance. Johnson (2014) expounds on the specialized roles found in the division of labor inherent within gospel performance and argues that these intensifying “experiential structures” (ibid) forged new authoritative and normative labor for experiencing the sacred.

### **3.1.6 Anointing**

According to Miss Pat, and the majority of mime ministries throughout the country, Gospel Mime does not and cannot exist without the presence of God’s message. For Miss Pat, the body of a Gospel Mime is merely the carrier for the Christian knowledge that comes with the Word of God—a channel, or circuit, of the Gospel. When I asked Miss Pat how she understood the connection between the Gospel Mime body and the word of God, she explained: “Jesus’ love is the connection. They would not be able to mime if it wasn’t for God’s message coming through [...] They [the children] act as a channel for the word of God” (Pat Grayson, personal communication, Bethlehem Baptist Church, 19 April 2016). The firm belief in the children being “channel[s] for the word of God” (ibid) was exemplified on my very first visit. Deaconess Ruby Johnson announced from the pulpit, “we will now be blessed with New Image Mime.” At that moment, a collective hush of excitement fell over the congregation; many moved into the aisles to get a better view, taking out their phones and cameras to record the performance. Twenty-four young churchgoers proceeded to walk up the center aisle with their hands pressed together in a prayer pose. This would be the way New Image Mime would always enter the church. When I asked Miss Pat why they entered this way, she explained, “because [the congregation] had these moments alone in their prayer time. They’ve had these moments with Jesus, a moment with God,

and so, we are reenacting that” (Pat Grayson, personal communication, Bethlehem Baptist Church, April 19<sup>th</sup> 2016).



**Figure 4. Gospel mimes performing at Bethlehem Baptist Church**

By entering in prayers pose, New Image Mime is simultaneously offering a symbol of humility to the congregation and adhering to a classic pantomime performance technique of becoming the human who once was.<sup>36</sup> In this case, New Image Mime is becoming the human who was once praying.

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<sup>36</sup> Classic pantomime performance operates under the framework of non-verbal communication, in order to materialize inaudible expressiveness not as an impairment, or disability, but rather for its abilities. The mime inaudibly cultivates attention using many techniques, although there are three that form the basis of all other practices in pantomime: (1) *Push/Pull*. This technique is related to conscious nature, personified in the subject, who has specific desires. Questions that go into this technique include, what does the subject want? How does he/she get it? The answer is by attracting some objects (pull) and repelling others (push); (2) *Still Point*. This technique reflects inanimate nature. The concept of a 'point' signifies the most highly reduced model of material substance.

The leader of the mime ministry that week was a seventh-grade girl who acted as the soloist in the song “Something Happens” (2005) by popular gospel artist Kurt Carr. As the song reached its climax everyone around me, who had been completely silent and still with anticipation only moments before, were now moved into vocality and physicality, either raising their hand(s) with their palm(s) raised up, hugging themselves, shaking their heads and rocking back and forth, swiping the air with their hands, standing up and sitting back down, walking up and down the aisle, all while uttering sounds and phrases of support (“Yes,” “Alright,” “Yes, Jesus,” “Come on,” “Go ahead,” and “Thank you, Jesus” were the most common). During this particular performance, several women from the pews walked to the front of the pulpit to come to the aid of the seventh-grade lead soloist mime, who was so affected by the performance that by the end of the song she was on the ground, crying, unable to stand on her own—she was receiving the “anointing,” her body being consumed by the Holy Spirit, “a channel for the Word of God,” as Miss Pat explained. Once the hysterical girl was able to stand and physically calm her body, the women who attended to her went back to their pews, slowly shaking their heads and hands in approval of the experience, and the twenty-four young people who made up New Image Mime exited as they entered.

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The abstraction of still point reflects the possibility of identification of our body with stationary objects around us. For example, if a performer leaves his hand fixed in space while his body twists around it, he creates the impression that his hand is placed on something static, dead, immobile; (3) *Wave*. This technique is an impulse of the first urge to come out of stillness. Impulse is by nature both visual and reflexive, and starts in some affected spot of the body and unfolds, creating a ‘wave’ of energy shifts in time and space (Iliev, Dabova, and Chemers 2014: 17).



**Figure 5. Member of New Image Mime Ministry experience affective intensity**

This was indeed a common reaction from the congregation. Each performance I saw of New Image Mime culminated in glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, the affectively saturated practice of using divinely inspired vocables to communicate with God. Speaking in tongues would typically start by one person, usually a leader in the congregation, and always a woman, who became so overwhelmed by the anointing of New Image Mime that her voice and body were altered from its natural state. By the time the applause died down and New Image Mime exited the church floor, you could hear and see the ecstatic worship reach its height. Ecstatic worship, in which congregants express themselves under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and are moved to “scream, fall to the ground, run, cry, or dance” (Raboteau 1978: 220-2) has been a commonplace characteristic in Black religious expression in the United States, dating back to the

first syncretic practices during the days of slavery, and was especially characteristic of the ring shout: “In the dancing ring, participants also mime and interpret the rhythms of drummers for entertainment and mime the dramatic actions of storytellers” (Floyd 1995: 21).

The first time I witnessed this, Deaconess Ruby Johnson began to flail her body around the chair behind the pulpit, vocalizing incoherent sounds (at least to me) in a much lower register than her previous speaking voice. The same older women who came to the aid of the lead soloist mime, also came to the aid of the Deaconess, creating a barricade around her as to make sure she would not injure herself in her divinely inspired moment. Once the first instance of this was established, typically three or four other women would also begin to speak in tongues from the pews. As the divine utterance from the selected few who received the anointing from the Gospel Mime performance increased in volume and intensity—through heavy breathing, moaning, low guttural sounds, vocables and the occasional screaming outburst of “Jesus!” “Hallelujah!” “Thank you!” “Praise God!”—the rest of the congregation created a wall of hushed noise surrounding and supporting the affected individuals. Once the entire congregation was experiencing the same anointed moment, the church keyboardist would come in with a light melody played over top the din of praise as if to ease the congregation out of the emotionally saturated moment. It was during this transition that Pastor Earlene Coleman took over the remainder of the worship service. The fact that this level of intensity occurred only after the Gospel Mime performances is an accreditation to the performative act’s important organizing quality within Bethlehem Baptist’ worship service, as well as its ability to interpret the Gospel in highly affective and effective ways. It is also a sign that Gospel Mime has been deeply embedded into African American religious practice as a new type of labor for experiencing the sacred, and is not simply a form of Christian entertainment, as some of its critics have argued.



### 3.2 HOTEPI THE ARTIST

The way in which I came to learn of Gospel Mime was far removed from the traditional anointed paradigm of ministry. Two months prior to my experience at Bethlehem Baptist, I attended an open stage night at a local bar, The Blue Moon. A long-time staple in the LGBTQ+ community, The Blue Moon offers a safe and creative space where one can socialize, drink, sing karaoke, and experience their many live shows that incorporate the performance of gender. On this particular night, a young African-American woman took to the stage and introduced herself as Hotep the Artist.

Adorned in a colorful head wrap and several long necklaces, her confidence on stage was unrivaled by all others who participated in the open mic as she performed several free-style poems about her struggles with self-love and relationships. At the end of her performance she casually mentioned to the crowd that there was something she wanted to share with us, something that she “hasn’t done in a long time.” She then announced to the patrons that she was a “Gospel Mime” and was compelled to share this art form with the crowd. There has been a lot of experimental performances on this stage, but miming has never been one of them. She took a moment to transition into her silent expression, after having just vocalized her spoken word poetry, and then handed her iPod over to the person working the sound system. The Beyoncé song “Count Down” (2011) came on and Hotep began to interpret its lyrics through non-verbal communication, mixing classic pantomime technique with straight ahead dance in order to express the excitement and eroticism of waiting for a lover, which the song is about. After her performance I approached her and asked if she would elaborate on this art form I had never heard of or witnessed. Hotep enthusiastically reported on the prominence of Gospel Mime in Pittsburgh, and around the country, and agreed to meet with me for an interview a few days later.



**Figure 6. Hotep the Artist**

### **3.2.1 Afrocentric interpretation**

The daughter of two pastors, Hotep grew up in the Black church community, and attended the Covenant Church of Pittsburgh in Wilkinsburg, another intensely poor and criminalized neighborhood of Pittsburgh (in close vicinity to Homewood). It was at Covenant Church of Pittsburgh where she first witnessed K&K Mime at the age of eight or nine. It was not until she was fifteen that she began miming herself, under the ministry direction of a woman named Tanya

Grate. Back then, she went by the name Anointed Child of Expression and had a boyfriend who was a Christian rap artist: “We would write Christian flows and go to these youth groups, and then instead of rap with him I would mime” (Hotep, personal communication, 26 April 2016). Hotep’s high school experience in church was consumed by her involvement in mime ministry and her romantic connection to her boyfriend. This experience quickly changed when she found out she was pregnant:

After one of my mime performances a prophet told me, and my boyfriend, that we were going to be pregnant. I’m like, are you serious? I ain’t gonna be pregnant—I’m sixteen, going on seventeen! (Pause) Had me a baby and married my husband at the time, my senior year. After miming, how can you go on in church with a big belly? You’re a mime! Mimes don’t get their swerve on. Ain’t no swerving, you a mime. You are (claps hands) called, you are (claps hands) anointed, you are (claps hands) sanctified, you are holy . . . (Hotep, personal communication, 22 Feb. 2015).

Hotep stayed in the church for a few more years, desperately trying to exist as Anointed Child of Expression, now with her own child by her side. Feeling the pressure from her family, friends, and congregation to live a sinless life, coupled with her evolving consciousness regarding art, performance, and spirituality, Hotep decided to leave the church she had grown up in to pursue a new “afrocentric sense of self” (Hotep, in person interview, February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016).

No longer Anointed Child of Expression, she now went by Hotep the Artist. An Egyptian word that roughly translates to “peace,” the name Hotep gains its signifying power in Afrocentric circles as it is understood to derive from Imhotep, the second king of Egypt’s third dynasty (“Imhotep”). When introducing herself to my World Music class during one of our Gospel Mime workshops, she described her name as such:

Hotep is the ancient Egyptian word for peace. You might imagine how the church would think of that . . . Because Imhotep was the builder, first architect, builder, creator of the Djoser pyramids – first surgeon, first poet, first philosopher. Imhotep. We owe a lot to Imhotep (“In-Class Workshop”).

In recent decades, the word Hotep has been used and popularized by Black Americans to signify a specific type of socially conscious, Afrocentric Black male. The notion of someone being a Hotep, or someone who is “Hotepping” (the common vernacular slang for an individual engaging in, and preaching socially conscious Afrocentric beliefs and behavior), has recently been met with critique within Black feminist circles. The idea of a “Hotep,” or someone “Hotepping,” is now commonly understood by many female artists as “pseudo-scientific . . . culture that, to many of us, is riddled with ignorance, hypocrisy, and misogyny” (White 2016).<sup>37</sup> By identifying herself with a king who has not only been male gendered throughout history, religion, and philosophy, but who is now associated with a specific type of twenty-first century young conscious Black man, Hotep the Artist is automatically positioning herself as both Afrocentric and feminist.<sup>38</sup>

When I first sat down with Hotep a few days after the Blue Moon performance, she warned me that she was “rogue.” Not only was she considered “rogue” because she did not mime in church anymore (due to the judgment she received from the community about her use of Gospel Mime techniques to express things other than “the word of God”), I soon realized her knowledge and passion for secular mime theatre—citing Marcel Marceau as one her “ancestral heroes”<sup>39</sup>—also separated her from her Gospel Mime contemporaries. Before leaving the church, Hotep was considered to be one of the most skilled Gospel Mimes in Pittsburgh. She even went on a mini national tour with K&K Mime in high school after winning a local

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<sup>37</sup> A recent and explicit example of this understanding of Hotep, within the realm of Black feminist performance, is exemplified in the 2016 music video and single “Hoteps Hotepping” by New York City native RadhaMUSprime feat. Isa Starr (White 2016).

<sup>38</sup> I want to thank Dr. Alisha Lola Jones for bringing up the issue of irony and performance that this name signifies during a Q&A session at the EMP Pop Conference in Seattle, Washington, where I presented a paper entitled “Gospel Mime: Cultivating Voice of Praise Through Embodied Service” on April 16, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Informal conversation with Hotep the Artist, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Spring 2015.

competition. She explained to me her previous interpretation and identification with the embodied affect of Gospel Mime when she was miming under the authorization of the anointing:

I was miming, and performing at youth groups, and I went under the name Anointed Child of Expression. Because whenever I did these solo acts, I was just, I was just, filled up. What they called anointed, they called the holy spirit. *Now I call that energy* but, like, there is this . . . There is a feeling of the anointing on you and when you do it it's like, whoa, you just did something perfect, like God and Jesus. This is the traditional accepted kind of way of giving the perfection that is through a higher power at church (Hotep, personal communication, 22 Feb. 2015).

Throughout my conversations with Hotep I have noticed her commitment to reinterpret her former Christian-centric logic of Gospel Mime into her current Afrocentric sense of self. When Hotep says, “what they called anointed, they called the holy spirit . . . Now I call that energy,” she is acknowledging the embodied affect that she still carries with her as a gospel mime, although within a different Afrocentric “field” (Bourdieu). Hotep’s labeling of energy resonates with Gayle Wald’s idea of “vibrations,” a common vernacular term used in the Black Power and Black Arts movements, to indicate an “affective atmosphere” of solidarity and community—“resonating within the body of the collective and constituting the collective as a resonant social body” (Wald 2011: 23). By using the Afrocentric terminology of vibrations, similar in its universalist meaning to Hotep’s use of “energy,” which she used quite often throughout our conversations, a certain parallel between the sacred and the secular, a common site of contestation in Black gospel performance, is being navigated.

Anointing has different meanings depending upon contexts, and I spent a significant amount of time attempting to understand what it meant to be “anointed,” or to experience “the anointing.” There is, however, a common thread of association: an undeniable feeling, a connection between the self and a larger entity that is saturated with emotional intensity. This common thread traverses the sacred/secular binary, allowing Hotep to effortlessly transfer what

she had previously identified as “anointing” (during her time as a gospel mime in church), to “energy”—another unspeakable feeling. Therefore, I am drawing a parallel between the sacred theory of anointing and the secular theory of vibrations/energy as two unspeakable “affective intensities” (Wald 2016: 16), resonating within the social body as it exists between two “fields”: The Black church and the politicized space of Afrocentricity.

Hotep can be understood as “rogue” in the sense that she is an anomaly in the world of Gospel Mime. She is also “rogue” in the sense that she calls attention to the fact that the church is appropriating mime—a form of entertainment commonly associated with secular street art. Throughout all my research, Hotep is the only participant who first and foremost acknowledges the practice of non-verbal communication through mime as the foundation of the Gospel Mime art form:

In non-verbal communication, when it comes to mime, it is a message—always—I think that’s the biggest part about it, that it is a message, um, it delivers a message, and the audiences are what changes. So being able to advance the art form from just the specific gospel setting is able to expand people’s thinking and connect dots (Hotep, personal communication, 2 Nov. 2016).

While Karl Edmonds admitted to being inspired by secular mime aesthetic on the Internet, the non-verbal communication that comes through the choreography is only ever alluded to as the will of God, or simply, the “anointing.” In this sense, Hotep is reappropriating that which has already been appropriated, in order to show that there are ways to repurpose Gospel Mime for a different set of politics and ideals—namely, a set of politically and sexually empowered ideals that are in service to young Black women.

Hotep often alluded to the Christian-centric symbolism for the white face, which was one of her first contentions with Gospel Mime. Unlike Karl Edmonds, she was indoctrinated with the spiritual belief that white symbolized purity. Uncomfortable with the racialization inherent in the

“white is right” rationale of Gospel Mime, she set out to explore African cultures that also utilized face painting in ritual ceremonies. She explained to me:

I don't need a reason for the white paint, that comes from the mime tradition. You paint your face white so you can better see the expressions on your face. But everyone in church was trying to create these white is right stories of purity and sin that I wasn't buying. If I needed a cultural connection, or lineage, to draw from, I would relate more to the Yoruba tribe in Nigeria who used white clay from the Earth to paint their faces and bodies during rituals (Hotep, personal communication, 22 Feb. 2016).

### **3.2.2 Miming to secular pop music**

The biggest division between Hotep and the church stems from her use of secular pop music. Rather than this division being drawn from the sound structure of the music, it is drawn from the message with which the song communicates. As Karl Edmonds explained earlier, Kirk Franklin is popular amongst gospel audiences because of his innovative use of the current generation's sound (e.g. hip hop). This type of gospel genre innovation follows the highly successful line of hybridized gospel music which has continually incorporated the secular sounds of each successive generation. In fact, it is often only the lyrics which separate popular gospel music from its secular pop counterpart.

If I know what the lyrics mean I can interpret them with my non-verbal [communication], with my facial expression, and with my body. If I already know the script—something about the script—so in gospel mime it seems like there's definitely a script. There are these lyrics that tell us what the message is (Hotep, personal communication, 27 Oct. 2016).

I have seen Hotep perform a variety of pop songs with an affirming and empowering message geared toward young Black women and the common experiences they may face. Outkast, “Toilet Tissa” (2000), is about a teenage girl contemplating suicide; Jill Scott, “The Thickness” (2001), is about young women struggling with body issues and the way men

approach them. Hotep realized that while the messages in the music she was now miming to would reach new audiences, it would also not be considered ministering under the anointing anymore. While Karl Edmond used the word “perform” and “minister” interchangeably, explaining to me that “[i]t’s a performance but at the same time it’s ministry, we all know that” (Karl Edmonds, personal communication, 28 Nov. 2016), the authority to minister quickly evades the performance depending on song choice. I asked Karl what must happen in order for Gospel Mime to be accepted and authorized by the church as a form of ministry and he responded:

Well, first, it has to be a gospel song. You can’t go in there trying to mime to a Michael Jackson song (laughs). I’ve seen it, trust me . . . And you can see the difference. We’re in church, we’re in this type of atmosphere, and we want to be ministered to. This song that K&K did, it ministered, and then behind us comes a Michael Jackson song and people are sitting there with their jaws dropped. A lot of people they try to do what’s popular opposed to what God [is] calling them to do. When we did our songs, it was because God called us to do those songs (Karl Edmonds, personal communication, 28 Nov. 2016).

Adhering to a “new Afrocentric sense of self,” Hotep also performs songs which she is called to. Her calling, however, comes from critical pedagogy focused on community activism and feminist interpretation.

### **3.2.3 Feminist interpretation**

One of Hotep’s most memorable performances took place in a performance art space in the North Side of Pittsburgh called The New Bohemian. The space was housed in a 115-year-old former church, which the venue operator, a local tattoo artist, graphic designer, and musician who goes by the name Bill Earl, leased from its owner. The New Bohemian closed shortly after Hotep performed (in August of 2015), but during its run “the New Bohemian [had] been home to



everything from monthly square dances to experimental theater, monthly meetings of a humanist church group, and a rock-music summer camp for kids” (O’Driscoll 2015).

Adorned in all black civilian clothes and the traditional mime makeup, Hotep mimed to the Lil’ Wayne song “How to Love” (2011). Employing much of the same pantomime techniques as she would in church, and adding secular (i.e. sexualized) gestures (Davis 1998), Hotep embodied the experience of a young woman who does not yet know how to love due to continual disrespect and mistreatment from men, a narrative which Hotep said she personally related to. Hotep played with the dynamic between traditional pantomime gestures and the more popular movements which symbolize her female sexuality, just as she had at the Blue Moon bar, displaying the struggle between her politics of feminist empowerment and the judgment she receives from those politics. In one moment, Hotep gestured using traditional pantomime technique, stepping into two separate boxes of space as Lil’ Wayne melodiously rapped the lyrics: *“Mm for a second you were here, now you over there,”* then switched into her secular pantomime gestures, placing her hands on her knees, bending over and swerving her backside as Lil’ Wayne growled out the next line: *“It’s hard not to stare, the way you moving your body, like you never had a love.”* Just as Lil’ Wayne repeated the line *“how to love,”* Hotep snapped back into traditional pantomime technique, straightened her body, placed her hand over her mouth, and indicated with her facial expression she was shocked by what her body just did—shocked by how it moved. She shakes her head in disapproval and wags her finger, stepping back into the invisible box of respectable space. By performing recorded pop songs, and the message which they potentially symbolize, Hotep is enacting her own systems of meaning that are intelligible to herself, and to the community with which she feels affinity.

For Hotep, the gospel is the knowledge and power of one's self, and therefore, can be performed in any space, for any audience, and for any purpose. She has shared memories about using mime as a performative protest within her community, and as a means of solidarity:

I've gone to a protest in Oakland [PA] where somebody could not be here because their life had been taken due to violence and I went as a mime, and I put my make up on the bus, in the window of the night, and I just went outside. And I didn't say anything to anyone, because, in my head I didn't care about explaining anything to anybody else! But it was for all the people who could not be there, who would like to stand in silence, and, um, it was like my dedication to silence for them. And I realized how many songs in our life have been tugging at this idea of oneness and unity and equality and injustices and, if I jump into the memories of those songs, maybe I can resurrect some ideas of . . . some ideas of freedom (Hotep, personal communication, 1 May 2016).<sup>40</sup>

Hotep has also reminisced with me about moments when she experienced sexual harassment in public, and instead of audibly responding to voice her disinterest and disapproval, she would tap into Gospel Mime to repel the unwelcomed attention. She adamantly explained to me how this tactic of expression was the only tactic that has ever successfully worked against street harassment, prompting her to consider how the art form of Gospel Mime may have a strong pedagogical responsibility to bodies outside of church, especially the bodies of young Black women. Hotep explained this practice of non-verbal self-defense to the students in one of our World Music Workshops, exemplifying how an unknown man physically approached her at a bar, placing his hand on the small of her back. Hotep proceeded to mime her reaction and then explain how that moment affected her:

For the first time I did not verbally react, I non-verbally told him to step back. No words exchanged, not a one . . . Normally I would, (claps hands) 'Hey!' (Stomps foot) 'Boom!' I got that fire . . . I got 20,000 words for you. But I didn't. And I realized that non-verbal [communication] really does have a way of

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<sup>40</sup> Through online investigation, I have only come across one other instance where miming in the Black community has been used as a form of performative protest. Piccolo Robinson of Detroit performed as a mime at a Trayvon Martin rally at Hart Plaza in March of 2012 (Warikoo 2012: 1E).

speaking to us ... And I've been able to teach young women about their bodies in ways that helps protect them on a conscious level" (Hotep, In-Class Workshop, University of Pittsburgh, 27 Oct. 2016).

Hotep utilizes the techniques of Gospel Mime can create a "physical and psychological space where young girls can know their bodies inside and out, and not have to rely on speech to protect themselves" (Hotep, in person interview, Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup> 2016). Here, Hotep has a direct aim to invert the historical and philosophical narrative of silencing Black women's voices. Hotep's voice and body is offered as a reflection of the oppressed female, a conduit for those who may see and hear themselves in her performance. Her performative virtuosity is made meaningful through her personal symbolism, enabling her silently expressed voice to cut through patriarchal oral tradition and speech mechanisms, which in her view have "let us [Black women] down" (Hotep, personal communication, 2 Nov. 2016).

### **3.2.4 Gendered division of labor**

While Hotep challenges the patriarchal systems of bodily inscription through overt tactics of Afrocentric feminist labor, there is also a slow and implicit reworking of the gendered division of labor in gospel performance coming from *within* the ministry of Gospel Mime itself. When contemplating the gendered division of labor within spaces of Black church, Alisha Lola Jones contends that it is common knowledge throughout Black congregations that certain performance spaces are labeled as feminine and masculine:

I have also observed that there are spaces in churches that are imagined to be for feminine and masculine participation. The pulpit and music pit for instrumentalist are perceived as the masculine or hetero-performative domains. The congregation and the choir loft are fashioned as the feminine or queer domains (Jones 2015: 20).

This specific type of division speaks to the larger issue which Gospel Mime must be contextualized within, which is the cultural anxieties that have been generated around the supposed "feminization" of churches (Jones 2015). This perceived "feminization" is understood as a causal effect from the absence of men in church *outside* of the charismatic leadership positions, such as Pastors and Preachers.<sup>41</sup> Not only is the congregant space in Black church understood as a feminine domain, but those men who participate in church performance are often seen as exhibiting effeminate behavior (Pitt 2010), especially when they "demonstrate commitment to [...] vocal music or even dance ministry participation" (Jones 2015: 195).

Amongst all the domains within Black church, music and dance ministry, at least during the contemporary pop gospel period ushered in by Kirk Franklin in the early 1990s, is considered to be the most feminine. Serving as a "platform for the art of musical and gestural rhetorics" (ibid: 196), the ministry space of and for music and dance has historically been dominated by woman, within both church performance and the gospel music industry, along with the few men who are perceived to be feminized as a result of their participation. Even Kirk Franklin, one of the most popular and successful gospel performers in the modern era, was ridiculed as a "sissy," "church boy" and "choir boy" growing up singing in the choir (ibid: 227). Jones goes on to suggest that, perhaps, "those derisive terms have influenced Franklin's signature vocal style that is more of a talking lead soloist, which registers to gospel listeners as masculine vocality" (ibid:

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<sup>41</sup> Similar to how women shaped the blues genre during Gospel's Second Period by being transitional professional bodies in the music industry (Davis 1998; Miller 2010; Burnim and Maultsby 2006), Tammy L. Kernodle explains how women historically dominated the gospel genre during the same period. It was the female voice and body that gave male gospel producers and composers, who are now synonymous with the popularity and progression of the genre, such as Thomas A. Dorsey, their signature sound. Singers like Mahalia Jackson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and Clara Ward spread the gospel beyond the sacred boundaries of Black churches, effectively popularizing it on concert stages and in nightclubs during the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1990s/2000s, female gospel artists such as Yolanda Adams, CeCe Winans, and Tamela Mann continued to (re)define the sound and image of mainstream pop gospel (Kernodle 2006: 90).

195). This type of spoken-singing, reminiscent of the masculine domain preaching, is typical of popular male gospel performers, and represents the speech-song continuum in African and African American music (Olly 1974).

Through the lens of social anxiety due to the perceived “feminization” of Black church, the below statement from a Sunday Arts Worship booklet can be interpreted as a reflexive response that attempts to masculinize Gospel Mime:

It should also be noted that the incorporation of mime in worship services has also challenged the gendered aspects of *who dances in what way* in the church, as males dominate this genre and females dominate most of the other genres (emphasis mine, “Worship and Arts Sunday [Formerly known as Choir Anniversary Sunday] Cultural Resources”).

Besides K&K Mime being considered the “Godfathers of Gospel Mime,” I have not found any substantial evidence that supports this claim of male “dominance” over the genre. I broached this subject with Karl Edmonds, asking him whether he agreed with the booklet’s assertion that Gospel Mime was a genre dominated by men:

I disagree . . . Simply because it’s—to me, right now—it’s pretty much equal, *now*. The women dominated that years ago, but with us traveling now it’s really equal. If you go on the internet and look up gospel mimes on YouTube, you’ll see a lot of fellas! (Karl Edmonds, personal communication, 28 Nov. 2016).

Indeed, New Image Mime, along with the majority of mime ministries that I have researched throughout the online Gospel Mime community are, in fact, composed of both young men and women. While I have come across all-male mime ministries, I have also come across all-female mime ministries. Even the most cursory articles and images accessible to someone searching Gospel Mime via Google, yields results that show an equal balance of young men and women, refuting the proposal that Gospel Mime is dominated by men. Therefore, this statement of dominance feeds into the perceived anxiety about the “feminization” of Black church and the

need to carve out a more “masculine” praise practice that aligns with traditionally acceptable notions of male performativity. This is evident in the language used in the above quote. By specifying not only “who dances,” but also “in what way” they dance, the statement highlights the professed masculinity of mime movement and style as opposed to traditional liturgical dance, a genre which has undoubtedly been dominated by women. Karl went on to address this issue of appropriate movement for men in praise and worship:

Remember, liturgical dance existed way before Gospel Mime and when liturgical dance was going on—I remember our Mom used to make us try to do liturgical dance and ballet and put on *tights* and all this stuff; we just weren’t for that (laughs)—But liturgical dance, you only saw women doing it (Karl Edmonds, personal communication, 28 Nov. 2016).

By democratizing liturgical song and dance, both male and female participants become beholden to a conceivably less gendered form of performative sociality within worship, especially when compared to the heteronormative analysis of church participation that exists within its gendered division of labor.

### **3.2.5 Androgyny**

Through my conversations with Hotep I have come to realize the emancipatory nature of Gospel Mime that lies in its androgynous aesthetic values and practices, creating a gender-neutral and physically uniform template (e.g. white panted face and unisex attire) that masks culturally gendered features. This androgynous aspect of mime decentralizes the more conventional and conservative labor divisions within gospel performance and praise, and carves out a more fluid and inviting space for both men and women, especially young men and women in their more formative years.

Gospel Mime's uniform template disrupts the gender-appropriate bodily inscriptions that have been attached to both Black congregations and American popular culture at large. As mentioned previously, the male body in Black church is typically accepted and expected to sound and move in either the role of preacher, or instrumentalist, while the female body is typically accepted and expected to sound and move as an ecstatic worshipper, a choir member, and/or a participant in embodied liturgical ministry. Gospel Mime pushes back from this division of accepted and expected gender-specific performance in the way in which it offers a dual opportunity for experiential labor. Gospel Mime brings young men into a fold of gospel performance that relies exhaustively on the body and choreography, as opposed to hierarchical charismatic movement, as well as bringing young men and women together in a space that is void of any traditional interpretation of gendered bodies and voices. This latter point offers an especially unique opportunity for young women whose physical attributes are often equated with internalized notions of weakness and inferiority. Gospel Mime ministry, then, should be credited as a gender-neutral form of praise and worship which equalizes much of the division of labor within Black church performance.

In thinking of the emancipatory potential within the androgynous aspects of Gospel Mime Ministry, I am once again drawn to Jones (2015) work on gender and gospel performance, where she specifically unpacks the "vocal androgyny" (Jones: 51) of male countertenors in the construction of male church identity. While Jones uses "vocal androgyny"—or, "[...] the interpretive processes through which vocal and timbral qualities attributed to one gender are matched with a body of the opposite gender" (ibid)—to discuss the socio-cultural anxieties that congregations feel through gendered listening and interpretations, I am using androgyny to describe the physically uniform template of the ministry and its ability to provide more inclusive

spaces for young men and women. It is my sense that because the androgyny of Gospel Mime is not explicit (that is, the ministry is offering a gender-neutral appearance as opposed to looking, or sounding in the case of Jones' countertenors, like men or women) it allows the opportunity to open up new safe spaces of experiential labor without creating anxiety and/or hostility. With Gospel Mime androgyny, there is no meaning that the congregation must "struggle to decipher" (ibid) and no "cognitive dissonance" (ibid) for those to consider; a mime is not identified by its gender but rather for its ability to communicate non-verbally. And in that safe space, young men and women in the ministry are offered a chance to interpret, interact, rehearse, perform, and ultimately, communicate, without the internalized notions of feminine inferiority and masculine superiority—and the congregation is offered a chance to witness.

While I have not come across androgyny as an explicit reason for Gospel Mime's sweeping popularity throughout the nation,<sup>42</sup> especially by youth ministries that represent the "next generation," as K&K describe it, I sense that the unifying experiential labor, the decentralization of hierarchical power, and the erasure of gendered performativity within Gospel Mime's aesthetic values and practices are contributing factors to its heightened popularity amongst young churchgoers. By not having a visible or audible marker of gender, through the absence of live voice, the masking of facial features, and the removal of civilian or church-appropriate clothing—all three of which are culturally constructed to represent masculine or feminine identities—Gospel Mime ministries present themselves as a non-gendered body in service to the Word of God. In this sense, Gospel Mime ministry breaks ground by performing androgynous, peculiar identities within an otherwise heteronormative Christian context.

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<sup>42</sup> Hotep the Artist has, however, expressed her positive relationship to the androgynous aspects of Gospel Mime.



#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

The blueprint laid out by K&K Mime offers a template for youth ministry. The knowledge that is gathered, transmitted, and received functions through the Word of God, and is internalized, understood, and felt by the congregation as the anointing. The stock of popular songs that Gospel Mime performances are in dialogue with are derived from a pre-approved gospel music industry, whose popular artists symbolize the appropriate performance of mainstream Christian worship and success. The intent to perform is grounded in the mobility of the message; a sacred pedagogy that is inviting to young members of the congregation, especially young men who may want to participate in music and dance ministry without the fear of being “feminized.” The context, function, repertoire and intent of performance easily figures Gospel Mime into the “continuity of consciousness,” (Levine: 1977) that envelopes musical and dance practitioners in the Black church and engenders a “continuum” in Black music.

Hotep the Artist pushes this continuity toward Afrocentric and feminist spaces. However, the context, function, repertoire and intent of performance are more similar to mime ministry than they are different. Hotep’s performance exists within a universal definition of church, a belief that a truly righteous lesson, or awareness, can deliver you at any place and at any time. The knowledge that she labors in functions as a consciousness building tool for those interested in escaping sexually and racially confined constructs, embodying affect in a way that resonates with communally shared notions of vibrations and/or energy. The stock of songs that she uses to

choreograph her non-verbal communication are derived from a music industry whose popular artists represent the quality of mainstream Black popular music and success. Her intent to perform is mobilized through an educational lens; a practice-centered pedagogy specifically designed to empower the voices and bodies of young Black women who are navigating a secular world.

Through a dialogic interplay between two fields, or two sites of affect, where Gospel Mime is performed and made meaningful, this thesis shows how the aesthetic values and practices of Gospel Mime as an art form can be interpreted differently between practitioners and congregations, as well as those viewing Gospel Mime from an “insider” and “outsider” perspective. I do not wish to erase the complexities of Gospel Mime by creating an oppositional binary between the two styles of Gospel Mime ministry and Gospel Mime performance art, but rather hope to highlight the importance of how a similar aesthetic practice can articulate different sets of meanings or values; and how a new art form can provide a discursive space for alternative methods of interpretation. Furthermore, this research has interpreted a third stream of analysis, arising outside of the competing paradigms of sacred and secular, which identifies an underlying challenge to the traditional gender roles and division of labor within the Black church performance.

Ethnomusicologist K.A. Gourlay posits that “[p]erhaps the most difficult task in a dialectical approach is to discover the questions we do not ask, not because we consider them irrelevant, but because the constraints on our learning process preclude their formulation” (1978: 28). I am quite sure there are questions I have not asked, as well as issues that need further interrogation and analysis. However, it is my hope that through this thesis, more scholars will begin to see Gospel Mime as part of the rich continuum of Black music practices and engage in

further research. Research that pays special attention to the androgynous and democratizing aspects of Gospel Mime, and its progressive effect on the gendered divisions of labor within Black church performance practices, is especially warranted.

By examining two distinct paradigms of Gospel Mime, one that functions in the mainstream as a highly popularized form of anointed ministry for Christian worship, and the other that functions as a reflexive Afrocentric feminist response to that popular paradigm, I have begun to understand the social significance of Gospel Mime as not only a performative act of praise and worship, but also as a pedagogical tool. Whether that pedagogy involves preaching the word of God within church ministry, or it is expanded to other contested and politicized spaces, Gospel Mime offers an opportunity for new experiential labor to exist alongside popular music, blending the performative media of music and dance with non-verbal communication, and hence enhancing the medium of gospel performance. For K & K Mime, Miss Pat Grayson, and the New Image Mime ministry, that experiential labor is activated by the praise of and love for God; and for Hotep the Artist that labor is activated by the praise of and love for the self.

The art form of Gospel Mime has had a dynamic national trajectory that resonates with people in multiple registers. This visceral resonance acts as a constitutive circuit of Black expressive culture that produces meaning—both celebrated and contested—about race, religion, and gender. Above all, Gospel Mime continues to provide a conceptual link to the past while offering a performative future, in which the Black church reappropriates entertainment outside of the Black music continuum and infuses it with innovative religious expression. Including Gospel Mime into the dynamic discourse of gospel research will not only expand the historiography of Black music and politics more broadly, but will also expand the notion of a Black music continuum as being both rooted in a common stock of utterances, gestures, and participation, while also being

absorbed and made malleable by a performative virtuosity that reinterprets and reshapes aesthetic values and practices.

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