



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Seductive Spirits in Feminist Spaces: Demons and their Otherwise Possibilities*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/223435/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Robertson, M. orcid.org/0000-0002-2861-152X (2025) *Seductive Spirits in Feminist Spaces: Demons and their Otherwise Possibilities*. *Journal of Africana Religions*, 13 (1). pp. 121-128. ISSN: 2165-5405

<https://doi.org/10.5325/jafrirel.13.1.0121>

© 2025 The Pennsylvania State University. This is an author produced version of an article published in *Journal of Africana Religions*. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

***Seductive Spirits* in Feminist Spaces: Demons and their Otherwise Possibilities**

Megan Robertson

University of Leeds

M.A.Robertson@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

Nathanael Homewood's *Seductive Spirits* recontextualizes and theorizes demons within deliverance Pentecostal worldmaking. By engaging Homewood's work in dialogue with African feminist concerns, I argue that *Seductive Spirits* rejects colonial and secularized feminist frameworks of the metaphorical spectral. By instead acknowledging ghosts, demons and ancestors as merciful and material, I suggest that Homewood's work provokes further creative and decolonial possibilities for African feminists.

Keywords: African feminism, demons, haunting, ghosts, Pentecostalism

Introduction

In April 2024, I attended the Duke Feminist Theory Workshop where the first speaker, Professor Grace Hong, presented a paper titled "Ghosts as Kin, Haunting as Care." This topic intrigued me, especially as I was in the middle of reading Nathanael Homewood's *Seductive Spirits*¹ in preparation for this roundtable. Recently, I have also been mulling over the use of the spectral in theatre productions by black, queer South African artists for my current research project. Consequently, I find myself surrounded by spirits, demons, ancestors, and ghosts, and the questions they raise.

In this essay, I use questions posed to a group of Africanists at the feminist theory workshop, as a structure for exploring feminist concerns about African spirituality, sexuality, and colonialism. While *Seductive Spirits* might not be considered overtly feminist, I believe Homewood makes a feminist contribution by moving beyond the common focus of many studies on sexuality and Pentecostalism in Africa, which aim to identify instances of positive sexuality within Pentecostal practice and discourse. Instead, Homewood re-contextualizes,

theorizes, and situates demons (and sex with demons) ontologically within deliverance Pentecostal worldmaking, offering potential avenues for engaging with the spectral in feminist ways.

Feminist Questions about the Spectral

First, let's return to the workshop where Hong's talk reflected on her encounters with ghosts – the invisibilized presence of those expelled by colonizing histories – in the documentary *Many Moons*.² Drawing on Tuck and Ree's "A Glossary of Haunting,"³ which cautions against the extractive practices of historical recovery and archival research, Hong champions methodologies rooted in kinship, care, and relationality to approach historical work. She aims to "look for these ghosts, in order to look after them."⁴ After the talk, a senior African feminist addressed a small group of 'Africanist' scholars, whom I had been introduced to and who had gathered at the front of the room, and asked, "Why did none of you Africanists say anything? So, what about spirits and ancestors?"

The 'so what' in her statement implied that Hong was saying nothing new to Africans who should be well acquainted with communing with spirits and ancestors. Simultaneously, however, there seemed to be dismissal implicated in her statement – recognition of spirits and ancestors is so familiar to Africans that hauntings and spirits also seemed relatively unimportant in this room of feminists. I was silenced by the accusation, which suggested that as an African, I was obligated to publicly call out Hong for the irrelevance of her invocation of haunting. Since then, I have pondered why, in this proudly feminist space, it was so important that we (Africans) had or had not said anything about the spectral. Another colleague responded, "Yeah, what about the *actual* ancestors, how do we study them?" There appeared to be discomfort among this spontaneously congregated cohort, not with the spirits themselves, but with the failure to acknowledge it as something real rather than merely a useful metaphor. They wanted something – *more*.⁵

Engaging with *Seductive Spirits* has been helpful in recognizing that there is something more to demons found in African deliverance Pentecostalism – or what Ashon Crawley, as cited by Homewood, refers to as "Otherwise possibilities."⁶ In my contribution to this roundtable, I reflect on what these Otherwise possibilities might mean for feminist thinking around African Christianity and sexuality.

Engaging with *Seductive Spirits* and the Question of ‘So What?’

Feminist scholars have found the invocation of ghosts through ‘haunting’ helpful in marking out ways to create social worlds that push back against modernity and coloniality. For example, Avery Gordon conceptualizes *Ghostly Matters* as “matters made marginal through violences of modernity.”⁷ For Gordon, haunting is how “abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security).”⁸ Tuck and Ree⁹, offer ‘haunting’ as a theoretical reflection on colonial violences and the impossibility of justice and resolution in the face of the continued haunting of the impacts of those violence. Homewood makes a similar argument, he writes, “Modernity/coloniality haunts.”¹⁰ To answer the ‘so what?’ then, for Homewood the spectral and more specifically, sex with demons, disrupts colonial orders of “religion, bodies, and sexuality, pneumoeroticism.”¹¹

These decolonial sexual worldings are not only sought out by Homewood in theory, but are actively pursued by Pentecostals.¹² The ‘so what?’ is not just that they provide decolonial possibilities, but that these decolonial worldings are desired and pursued – decoloniality wants to stay with the spirits, not vanquish them. As Tuck and Ree argue, this is very different from the haunting in Western feminist studies, in which haunting is something to be eradicated.¹³ Instead, Homewood introduces the idea of ‘tarrying’ – whereby Pentecostals actively seek out and spend time with demons, over and over again. For Homewood, tarrying describes how Pentecostals stay with their demons and in various forms of sexualities.¹⁴

Tarrying with demons demonstrates possibilities for decoloniality outside of normative frameworks of social justice and reconciliation. Tarrying offers what Tuck and Ree define as mercy, rather than social justice – or what Homewood conceptualizes as salvation. Social justice “may want to put things to rest, may believe in the repair in reparations, may consider itself an architect or a destination, in peace. Mercy is not any of that. Mercy is just a reprieve; mercy does not resolve or absolve. Mercy is a sort of power granted over another. Mercy can be merciless.”¹⁵ Moving beyond searching for social justice and salvation offers something more argues Homewood, “That is to say, in its sensuous eroticism, in the historico- embodied movements, sex with spirits perceives the wound of modernity/coloniality and rejects its concomitant rhetoric of salvation. Instead of salvation, new worlds are found in that which

modernity/coloniality defines as evil and demonic.”¹⁶ For Homewood, the idea of mercy is found in deliverance, which I argue is offered by demons to both Pentecostals and feminists. The mercy of deliverance acknowledges the crimes of colonization as demonic, and instead of ‘putting them to rest’, acknowledges the crime and offers reprieve by reconstructing new sexual worlds.

What about the Actual Ancestors?

A colleague's question about the actual ancestors hinted at the need for something beyond metaphor in feminist invocations of spirits and haunting. Throughout the conference, I had conversations with people of colour about Hong's paper and they continuously invoked Toni Morrison's claim that “Invisible things are not necessarily not-there.”¹⁷ For scholars such as Hong and Gordon, the demonic/spirits/ghosts represent that which is not there – “something which doesn't quite exist, but is not completely being able to be destroyed.”¹⁸ Haunting represents the absence of something lost. In *Seductive Spirits* however, Homewood seems to tap into what *is* there through his sensorial schema of the demon. Homewood sees possibilities beyond haunting as metaphor and explores “the Pentecostal demonic cosmos as reshaping haunting so that sex is no longer defined by the limited terms of modernity/coloniality.”¹⁹ Instead of using the spectral as a means to think about modernity/coloniality, Homewood advocates for ‘thinking with’ the Pentecostal demonic cosmos. He explains: “to think with Pentecostalism is to think otherwise sensually in the celebration of black bodies.”²⁰

Seductive Spirits reminds us continuously that what is experienced is real. The senses analyzed throughout the book, namely, touch, choreosonicity, metakinesis, and demonologues, remind us that what his interlocutors experience is indeed real and embodied. Homewood clarifies with his participants what this means, “What do you mean by real?” They answer, “Real means that they live and are affecting people.”²¹ Within a climate where “the decolonial project rarely gets beyond the conceptual or metaphorical level,”²² Homewood provides an epistemological and methodological interruption which goes beyond this. I imagine that behind my colleague's question about actual ancestors, was also one about decolonization, ‘What about actual decolonization?’ Homewood allows us feminists to think through decolonization, not as metaphor but as material, epistemological, and methodological

which he maps out in the conclusion by demonstrating that sex with demons is: extravagant, unproductive, not hierarchically ordered, entropic, not salvific, and is sensuous.²³

Why Did None of You Africanists say anything?

Reading this subtitle now, I read it not as a reprimand, but as a plea. ‘Why didn’t you Africanists tell us about ghosts, spirits, demons and ancestors? What is it you know that we don’t?’ There has been a larger silence around studying ancestors, ghosts and spirits in religious studies. Musa Dube points out that most African women theologians have worked largely within a colonial framework where “Oppressed African women can be liberated from the oppressive [African Indigenous Religions’] rituals and beliefs by the church and the gospel of Christ.”²⁴ This is because colonial frameworks continue to shape our educational institutions, marginalizing indigenous religions in curriculum and research in African institutions. Despite recent calls for decolonization in higher education globally, colonial assumptions prevent us from speaking about demons, ancestors, and ghosts.

There is an element of risk in undoing these colonial assumptions by discussing the spectral. Homewood recognizes these risks which include reconstructing Africans within a schema of traditionalism and non-rationalization – reinforcing the monstrous overtly sexualized African subject. Yet, he argues convincingly that there is a risk in saying nothing:

There is a far greater risk in simply acceding to the modern/colonial definition of rationality which will never allow for the flourishing of Africa, Africans, or African sexuality. The interplay between the signified demonizations of domination and the countersignifying decolonial demons demonstrates the falsity of modern/colonial universality and its enduring power.²⁵

Homewood’s approach to ‘saying something’ acknowledges the risk of perpetuating ideas of Africans as hypersexualized, but also explores how sex with demons subverts Western ideas of ‘decent’ sex. Drawing on Marcella Althaus-Reid’s earlier work on indecenting²⁶, Homewood writes, “Decency — or the modern/colonial order of religion, bodies, and sexuality — is stifling and oppressive and would immediately silence the experiences of sex with demons.”²⁷ By ‘saying something’ about demons, Homewood also finds examples of women’s agency. It is harrowing to read some of the stories of women who are physically, emotionally and sexually assaulted in deliverance in *Seductive Spirits*. While some scholars

have found possibilities of agency and even feminist/womanist liberation within African Pentecostalism²⁸, this context is still framed by the overwhelming exploitation of women.²⁹ While *Seductive Spirits* could have done more to frame women's narratives within this context, the possibilities of feminist refusal and survival are evident and demonstrated to be deeply embodied in the book. This is most obvious in Kifah and Morowa's deliverance experiences when they refuse to become docile in their "commitment to move without ceasing".³⁰ In Homewood's analysis these acts of movement subvert the normative deliverance performance. For Homewood these acts of refusal provide an Otherwise possibility which subverts "hetero-hell" –

That otherwise possibility, that pure zone of eros, is not the hetero-hell of churchly docility. That otherwise possibility is a refusal of the lack of options the church offered, a rejection of limited definitions, movements, and desires. That otherwise possibility is sexuality in all of its possibility, pain, and splendor.³¹

Conclusion: What does *Seductive Spirits* offer feminists?

Homewood's work makes a significant contribution to the discourse on decoloniality and knowledge production by exploring how demons and African Pentecostalism have Othered black and African people while offering ways to reconstitute that Other. His approach resonates with and offers much to black and African feminists' arguments about knowledge and knowing. His study highlights some of the contradictions that have been inherent in using colonial and secular frameworks in speaking about the spectral in secularized feminist spaces. Most notably by 'saying something' about the sexual and decolonial possibilities of studying ancestors, demons, spirits, and haunting as merciful and material, Homewood offers us a different way of thinking about the world.

¹ Nathanael Homewood, *Seductive Spirits: Deliverance, Demons, and Sexual Worldmaking in Ghanaian Pentecostalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024).

² Many Moons is a documentary film by Chisato Uyeki Hughes that looks into Charlie Moon, the only person allegedly permitted to remain during Humboldt County's 1885 expulsion of all "Chinamen". See <https://caamfest.com/2023/movies/many-moons/>.

-
- ³ Eve Tuck and C. Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), 639 – 658.
- ⁴ Grace Hong, "Ghosts as kin, haunting as care." Accessed May 16, 2024.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbMNCbaxQ2o&t=2157s>
- ⁵ Homewood (2024, 29) and Avery Gordon (1997, 194) use the idea of "something more" to reference the stretched decolonial possibilities of what ghosts and demons offer in terms of studying and theorising social life.
- ⁶ Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 2, cited in Homewood, *Seductive Spirits*, 12.
- ⁷ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
- ⁸ Gordon, *Ghostly matters*, xvi.
- ⁹ Tuck and Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting"; See also Aimee van Wagenen, "An epistemology of haunting: A review essay," *Critical Sociology* 30, no. 2 (2004): 287 – 298.
- ¹⁰ Homewood, *Seductive Spirits*, 75.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Homewood, *Seductive Spirits*, 212.
- ¹³ Tuck and Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," 646.
- ¹⁴ Homewood, *Seductive Spirits*, 17; 123; 212.
- ¹⁵ Tuck and Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," 648 - 649.
- ¹⁶ Homewood, *Seductive Spirits*, 209.
- ¹⁷ Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28, no. 1 (1989): 11 – 12.
- ¹⁸ Hong, "Ghosts as kin, haunting as care."
- ¹⁹ Homewood, *Seductive Spirits*, 75.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Homewood, *Seductive Spirits*, 161.
- ²² Tuck and Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," 647.
- ²³ See the conclusion chapter in *Seductive Spirits* for a full discussion.
- ²⁴ Musa Dube, "Postcolonial feminist perspectives on African religions," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions, First Edition*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (West Sussex, Blackwell Publishing, 2012): 130.
- ²⁵ Homewood, *Seductive Spirits*, 224.
- ²⁶ Marcella Althaus Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000).
- ²⁷ Homewood, *Seductive Spirits*, 73.
- ²⁸ For example, Musa Dube, "Between the spirit and the word: Reading the gendered African Pentecostal Bible," *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 1 – 7; Damaris Parsitau, "Soft tongue, powerful voice, huge influence: The dynamics of gender, soft power, and political influence in faith Evangelistic Ministries in Kenya," in *Pentecostalism and Politics in Africa: African Histories and Modernities*, ed. Adeshina Afolayan, Olajumoke Jacob-Haliso, and Toyin Falola (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 159 – 180.
- ²⁹ For example, Rekopantswe Mate, "Wombs as God's laboratories: Pentecostal discourses of femininity in Zimbabwe," *Africa* 72, no. 4 (2002): 549 – 568; Tumi Mampane, "Wo/Men's God-given power: Male headship versus female agency in Pentecostal sermons," in *Christological Paradigm Shifts in Prophetic Pentecostalism in South Africa*, ed. Mookgo Solomon Kgatle, Marius Nel, Collium Banda (London: Routledge, 2021): 79 – 100.
- ³⁰ Homewood, *Seductive Spirits*, 146.
- ³¹ Homewood, *Seductive Spirits*, 146.