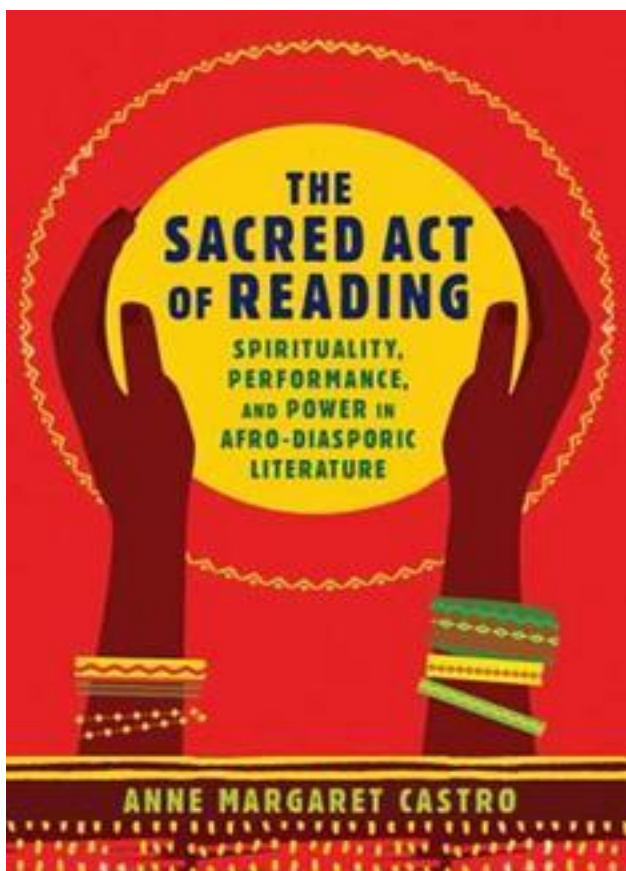


**Castro, Anne Margaret. *The Sacred Act of Reading: Spirituality, Performance, and Power in Afro-Diasporic Literature*. University of Virginia Press, 2020.**

**Adrián Emmanuel Hernández Acosta**  
Brown University



*The Sacred Act of Reading: Spirituality, Performance, and Power in Afro-Diasporic Literature* by Anne Margaret Castro proposes “performative textual hermeneutics” to describe and analyze embodied performance in the composition and mediation of Afro-diasporic literature that draws on religious practice. It contributes to scholarship on Afro-diasporic literature in English by focusing on religious practices therein as a key to literary interpretation. Enabled by the historical connection between ritual studies and performance studies (e.g., Victor Turner) and in extension of African American studies’ emphasis on the expressive aspects of sermons by considering performance as part of interpretation, Castro’s study “reads embodied performances of spirituality within discursive texts” in a way that uses the same “multisensory and embodiment-focused” sensibility in the performances themselves as her own “methodology of reading” (2). Through a performance-inflected analysis of religious practices in Afro-diasporic literature—from preaching to mediumship, zombification, and prophecy—Castro seeks to “challenge the primacy of Western assumptions regarding

the aesthetic and intellectual value of non-European, and specifically Afro-diasporic works” (192). Castro persuasively argues that the Afro-diasporic literature she analyzes teaches us how to read embodied performances of religious practice therein not as fascinating cultural accoutrement but as themselves a mode of interpretation—that is, performative textual hermeneutics.

Using the term “Afro-diasporic” to mean “African-influenced but distinctly American spiritual systems, creative archives, and epistemologies” (15), Castro brings together a set of twentieth-century Afro-diasporic literary texts from the United States, Colombia, Jamaica, Canada, and Saint Lucia that circulate among readers of English. While Castro’s previous research on Afro-diasporic writers Junot Díaz and Edwidge Danticat already

demonstrates an interest in aural recording and translation, her analysis of Afro-diasporic texts in the first two chapters of *The Sacred Act of Reading* takes this research interest further by illuminating how embodied performances of religious practice—preaching and mediumship—are themselves interpretive keys for understanding aural recording and translation as crucial mediations in and of those texts.

The first chapter, ““You Preached!,”” reads performances of sermons in three of Zora Neale Hurston’s texts from the 1930s—the one-act play *The Sermon in the Valley*, an ethnographic transcription titled “The Sermon,” and the 1934 novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*—and in the written and audiobook versions of Toni Morrison’s 1987 *Beloved*. Castro’s detailed analysis of Morrison’s own audiobook recording of Baby Suggs’s sermon confirms how Morrison draws on “the stylistic expectations for Black preaching,” and, in doing so, performs the connection between “orality, rhetorical performance, and the material needs of the body” that constitutes the very content of the character’s sermon” (60). The second chapter, “The Hermeneutics of Spirit Possession,” reads experiences of mediumship in the English translation of Black Colombian Manuel Zapata Olivella’s *Changó, The Biggest Badass* (originally published in Spanish in 1983) and in Jamaican Erna Brodber’s 1984 *Louisiana*. In this chapter, Castro’s incisive observations regarding the creative instability of translation in both Zapata Olivella’s Spanish-language novel and its English-language translation —most evident in her treatment of Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die” in both versions of the novel (72-73)— lead to a broader argument about how translation echoes the instability across time and space that the novel’s main character experiences as a medium. In other words, an embodied performance of religious practice in the text —in this case, the practice of mediumship— offers a mode of interpretation for the mediation of the text itself across languages.

Briefly, the third chapter, “The Spiritual Life of Power,” reads zombification in Erna Brodber’s 1988 *Myal* and Jamaican-born Canadian Nalo Hopkinson’s 1997 *Brown Girl in the Ring*. The fourth chapter, “Reading the Prophetic Stage,” reads prophecy in Jamaican Louis Marriott’s 1960 *Bedward: A Play in Two Acts* and Saint Lucian Derek Walcott’s 1967 *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. Taken together, these two chapters revisit a theme in the first two chapters—namely, the centrality of the body in interpretation and the creative instability that embodied interpretation yields—to highlight the collective dimension of performative textual hermeneutics. As Castro clarifies in these later chapters, “a performative textual hermeneutics...illuminates the integral role of human corporeality in political and economic processes...[that] require the discursive and material subjugation of select populations” (104) and “the act of collectively articulating the radical possibility of a seemingly impossible future...[c]hallenge[s] existing power structures and methods of substantiating authority and knowledge” (152). *The Sacred Act of Reading* actually performs this collective dimension by including a reading of Dominican performance artist Josefina Báez’s 2008 *Comrade, Bliss Ain’t Playing* and Ntozake Shange’s 1975 choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* in the introduction and epilogue. In other words, just as the introduction and epilogue formally flank the four body chapters of the book, so too the texts analyzed in the flanks join the Afro-diasporic literature analyzed in the body chapters like a chorus of voices that broadens the scope of Afro-diasporic literature to include writers from the Hispanophone insular Caribbean (i.e., Josefina Báez) and texts beyond novels and plays (i.e., Shange’s choreopoem).

Another noteworthy gesture in the epilogue is the framing of the main intervention of *The Sacred Act of Reading*—namely, to “provide several theoretical and methodological avenues for sustained, critical engagement with Afro-diasporic authors...[b]y approaching [their] written, literary works by means of a set of hermeneutical

practices rooted in religious and performance traditions” —as a “contribut[ion] to the decolonial project” (198). This is a noteworthy gesture because it raises a broader theoretical and methodological question: What exactly makes a project about the performance-inflected analysis of religious practice as mode of interpretation for literature decolonial?

That “Afro-diasporic authors have been using concepts such as spirituality to theorize the workings of sociopolitical power and to present alternative formulations of subjectivity and community” constitutes one reply (198). This reply is incisive and timely, especially when religious practices —particularly those sustained among African diaspora religions— have been overlooked in the study of literature on the assumption that they involve theories of textuality, materiality, subjectivity, and communities considered “outside the parameters of Western discourse” (198). As Castro asserts, “this book...deviates from standard English scholarship in the United States and Europe by appropriately valuing texts and practices of Afro-diasporic spirituality with the same kind of literary attention usually bestowed upon biblical hermeneutics” (11), itself a precursor to modes of literary interpretation. And yet, one of the generative problems for academic study that African diaspora religions present —from African American Protestantism to the Afro-Cuban Abakuá and Jamaican Obeah— is how religious practices sustained therein do not easily fit on either side of the Western/non-Western division.

In fact, the questioning of this division is one of the strengths of *The Sacred Act of Reading*. Castro’s nimble reading of religious practices that are legible across, say, Christianity, Spiritism, Santería, and Vodou rightly responds to the religious plurality in the texts themselves. Furthermore, each of the body chapters includes “Western” interlocutors, such as the American Jewish anthropologist Melville Herskovits (31), the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (70), and French theorists Michel Foucault and Maurice Blanchot (124, 152), alongside Black literary and religious studies scholars like Dianne Stewart (13), Brent Hayes Edwards (16), J. Lorand Matory (17), Hortense Spillers (25), Édouard Glissant (85), and Michael Dash (109). While Castro prioritizes the analyzed texts as containing their own interpretive keys —doubtless an important priority— might the chorus of voices in the citational range of *The Sacred Act of Reading* model another way of “contribut[ing] to a decolonial project” by questioning the very divisions between not only literature and religion, but also between Western and non-Western?

Considered in light of this set of theoretical and methodological questions, *The Sacred Act of Reading* offers a unique contribution not only to the study of Afro-diasporic literature and art that takes religious practice therein seriously, but also to the study of literature and religion more broadly. *The Sacred Act of Reading* is useful for undergraduate and graduate courses that examine Afro-diasporic literature, literary theory, and the relationship between literature and religion. Those interested in performance studies, the study of religion, anthropology, and critical theory will find this book accessible and stimulating as each of those fields is put into dialogue with English literary criticism. *The Sacred Act of Reading* and its performative textual hermeneutics is for all those who, in their love of reading, search for critical language to understand how we are moved by what is constantly on the move.