The Gift/Curse of “Second Sight”

Our struggle is the by-product of a deeper calculated systemic condition endemic to American domestic political apathy and a social denial which has poisoned the American psyche since the atomic devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Ours is not, nor has it ever been, a nation-specific discourse. Our struggle affects the entire planet and everyone on it. And I must see through to this. And so I have grown yet another eye, a primal orb density which provides me constant dual sight.

—Wanda Coleman (Primal Orb Density, 209)

In his 1903 publication called *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois articulates the pain of enduring racial oppression in terms of the affliction of “double-consciousness” that he also describes as the experience of “being born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American world” (Du Bois, 1961, 16). This latter description (“born with a veil,” “gifted with second sight”) is itself a veiled reference to being born with a “caul” (or gauzy film covering the eyes) in African American culture—sign of a peculiar shamanistic ability to see beyond the ordinary (Bambara, 310). Much as chapter 2 read European race discourse as a modality of modern witchcraft practice, this chapter will read this famous Du Boisian formula as a poignantly “African” reformulation of the peculiarities of American racialization and its “discontents” as a (modern or even postmodern) mode of shamanic struggle. If shamanism can be theorized as (among other things) a trope pointing to certain kinds of transgressive practices, the negotiation of situations of social contradiction and psychological trauma, in which techniques of ecstasy are solicited to force affliction to yield healing and vitality, then African American transformations of the experience of being made black in
America may be productively examined as a form of shamanic combat. In pursuing such a thesis, however, it is imperative to emphasize that no attempt to make oppression productive should ever be allowed to enervate struggles to eliminate the fact of oppression itself. Indeed, creative appropriation of the conditions of their own suffering exercised by the dominated or exploited is always a sign of warning to those benefiting from such domination/exploitation. What the content of that warning might be is the subject of what follows.

**Shamanism in the Sight of the Academy**

Academic attempts to formulate shamanism as a subject of study have found their classic text in Mircea Eliade’s articulation of shamanism as an “archaic technique of ecstasy,” outlined in his book by that subtitle. For Eliade, shamanism is indicative of a primordial “situation of the human being in the cosmos,” borne witness to by the dreams, hallucinations, and images of ascent (or descent) found the world over (Eliade, xiv). It is not a mere historical ideology of oriental origins but rather a phenomenon of the “boundary-line situations” of the species. It demands deciphering from a history of religions perspective, willing to ferret out the “deep meaning” of a “religious phenomenon” whose content is not exhausted in its historical realizations (Eliade, xv). It is part of the lifetime argument of Eliade with modernity that the dialectic of the sacred exhibits archetypal forces in hierophantic appearances that offer structural equivalences to each other across thousands of years of time and miles of space (Eliade, xvii). For him, the manifestation of the sacred in stone or tree is not less mysterious or more ahistorical than its appearance in a god. Indeed, any form, any history, is partial and limited, subject to degradation or inflation, succession or reversal (Eliade, xix). Shamanism, within such a broader argument, is a recurrent phenomenon on the religious horizon of the world, extant in combination with various other elements of particular traditions and cultures but visible as a primal ideology and technology of ecstasy (Eliade, 6).

Eliade delineates and explores the elements constitutive of shamanism in terms of an initiation (and subsequent practice) involving dismemberment of the candidate’s body, followed by renewal of the internal organs and viscera, insertion of magical substances into the candidate’s body, revelation of religious or shamanic secrets, ascent to the sky and dialogue with the gods or spirits, descent to the underworld to bring back the patient’s soul or to escort the dead, evocation and