

Sheneese Thompson, *Oshun, Lemonade and Intertextuality: Afro-Atlantic Religion in Black Cultural Production*, (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2025, 978-0813081106, 174pp.)

Reviewed by Chad Graham, Howard University

The proliferation of African and African Diasporic religious traditions in scholarship and in practice calls for a re-examination of the long-standing and often veiled use of said traditions in creative productions. In her debut monograph, Thompson brings an Africana and Literary Studies classroom to the written page as she facilitates a broadly conceived text-to-text conversation between Beyoncé's visual album, works of fiction centering Black women, and one of the most iconic African divinities —Oshun. And although Beyoncé's creative works are the most discussed, this book is not intellectualized fandom and devotion or an attempt to deify Beyoncé. By placing works which deploy Africana spiritual practices side-by-side, *Oshun, Lemonade & Intertextuality* thinks through the challenges of Black womanhood and potentiality for self-repossession.

In many respects, the *Introduction* does a lot of the work. This chapter positions Oshun as both the methodological/theoretical framework and (part of) the material to be studied. Here, with Oshun as the framework, Thompson foregrounds her analysis of the relevant signs, symbols and motifs; allowing her to hone in on precisely how and when the Sweet Mother shows up and shows out in the lives of her textual and visual children in the chapters that follow. And because narratives from the aforementioned spiritual traditions are as placed alongside the Black cultural productions, Oshun, vis-à-vis her devotion, is given voice to speak and not drowned out by the architects of Western systems of thought.

Although Thompson is a practitioner of Ifa's diasporic improvisation, who invariably shares wisdom or insights from her godmother Iya Gheri, she does not read Oshun or the presence of Orisha in her primary texts from an exclusively Lucumi perspective. Orisha are venerated in one form or another all over the world and, thus, this book encapsulates a global conversation, drawing on scholars and sources from Nigeria to Cuba to the United States. This is held to by her commitment to Yoruba orthography and bolstered by her engagement with the Yoruba language. *Oshun, Lemonade & Intertextuality* is not intended to be a guide to or explication of Òrìṣà Devotion. Given its form and format, the author's positionality in the professorate, and the

English language, this work is part of a larger conversation—not limited to, but—within academia. However, this accentuates Thompson’s decision to ground many of the concepts in the Yorùbá and the creolized Lucumi languages. Rather than import outside terms or ideas, this book demonstrates the capacity of Africana Ways of Knowing to explain themselves.

Influenced by the participatory nature of Africana spiritual traditions, this work is also in its own way the latest in a line of autoethnographies that center Africana spiritual traditions. Iya Gheri is as much an authority on Òṣé.túrá as Rowland Abiodun. Often, research consultants or scholars without portfolio like Iya Gheri assigned to the notes; but Thompson brings her contributions into the prose. Given the depth of their relationship and the degree to which Thompson likely consulted her throughout the stages of work’s development, not bringing Iya Gheri into conversation with Abimbola, Abiodun, Oyewumi, and others would mirror the exclusion that Oshun experienced in Odù Òṣ é.túrá, when the other 16 Irunmolé didn’t ask her to be involved in making the world habitable.

The work is not an exercise in folding Oshun, the divine feminine, or creative works about Black women into prevailing gender discourses. It does spotlight Oshun and her *daughters*, connecting Black female characters with similar experiences across

their narrative arcs, but it does not codify or essentialize their suffering. For example, in Chapter One “*When Life Gives You Lemons, Add Honey*,” Thompson exhibits how Beyonce, Nola Darling and Sassafras chose or were chosen by Oshun after some form of suffering and outlines how they underwent the healing process with support from Oshun and other Lucumi rituals. In each case, revenge would have been justified. Yet, even if achieved, it would not have accomplished the inner work that the characters needed to do. Engaging in self-reflection enabled their transformations to occur and their blessings to flow. Thompson’s analysis of Òṣé.túrá in Chapter Two, “*Don’t Hurt Yourself*,” intervenes into discourse on Gender in relation to Yorùbá culture and Orisha traditions. By arguing that the verse is about exclusion, which in this case a feminine being is experiencing, and not necessarily about the mistreatment of a woman at the hands of men, the chapter elucidates how transgressors and non-transgressors alike suffer as a result. The Irunmolé alone didn’t experience the consequences: the world did. And balance couldn’t be restored until they did right by Oshun.

This work is not a series of vignettes where Thompson proverbially shouts “Land ho!” at the sight of Oshun iconography. In the context of Literary and Pop Culture Studies and amidst the uptick in courses on Beyoncé, Cardi B, and other Black performing artists, this text urges us to ask “What theories, analytical frameworks, and methodologies are or will be employed to help audiences and studies grapple with the material?” In theory and in practice, Thompson’s approach is one that does not treat the artist, the material, or it’s mode of production as a phenomenon detached from a/the African experience, vertically (time) or horizontally (space). The African-rootedness of Oshun, Beyoncé, *Lemonade*, and the other creative works, regardless of where or how they manifest, are a given and need not be vindicated. Further and tantamount to how she situates the works and their characters, Thompson doesn’t rely on normative

assumptions or categories to draw meaning from them. Oshun is explicitly named in *She’s Gotta Have It* and *Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo*, and all-but identified in *Lemonade* and unveiled in “At the Bottom of the River” and *Daughters of the Dust*. Thompson analyzes the Yorùbá conceptualizations of beauty, honey, mirrors, yellow and gold, items of those colors, water and related symbols to account for the Yoruba divinity’s presence. Thompson brings Oshun’s lore to center stage to draw out the meaning of it all. As is referenced in the Odù Òdúndá Ìwòrì, Oshun might come to fight for people in harm’s way or be the river that leads them home. Pulling on the thread of water illustrates Oshun’s continuity amongst religious traditions and simultaneously demonstrates how water functions in African American productions.

With Oshun at the fore to wade through Black creative productions, *Oshun, Lemonade & Intertextuality* exemplifies the application of Africana Studies in Africana Religious Studies, Gender Studies, and Literary Studies, while remaining digestible for academic and non-academic audiences alike.