Unholy Ghosts in the Age of Spirit: Identity, Intersectionality, and the Theological Horizons of Black Progress

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Unholy Ghosts in the Age of Spirit: Identity, Intersectionality, and the Theological Horizons of Black Progress

A dissertation presented

by

Gerald Lamar Williams, Jr.

to

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Gerald Lamar Williams, Jr.

**Unholy Ghosts in the Age of Spirit:**
*Identity, Intersectionality, and the Theological Horizons of Black Progress*

*Abstract*

The dissertation offers, at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class, a constructive theological account of spirit in black Christianity. Although spirit is a pervasive trope in African-American religion, pneumatology is missing as theological *method* in black religious discourse in this “Age of Spirit.” In fact, spirit-talk has been used to pathologize some for the advancement of others, especially in the respectability politics of black racial uplift and the cis-heteronormativity of black charismatic Christianity. I am interested, therefore, in the discursive production of deviancy and the “demonic,” which is antithetical to spirit-talk.

Through consideration of the “rational spirit” of W.E.B. Du Bois, the “sanctified spirit” of Zora Neale Hurston, and the “mystical spirit” of Howard Thurman, I develop a pneumatology that establishes the empowerment of the marginalized as the *sine qua non*, the essential condition and consequence, of spirit-talk. In the dissertation, I trace the legacies of these public intellectuals on African-American Christianity, particularly on black and womanist theologies: the thesis rethinks the concepts of hope, courage, and vitality, using Du Bois, Hurston, and Thurman, respectively, as interlocutors.

In the end, I construct a theology of Spirit in black radical religion that resists, disturbs, and disrupts *dispositifs* of deviancy. By interpreting Jesus, the Spirit of God, as chief deviant and liberating power, I demonstrate that a progressive, queer pneumatology is possible.
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Preface

As an undergraduate I sat in the pews of Union United Methodist Church, and as a doctoral student I stood in its pulpit. At first, I worshipped as a member of the denomination’s first predominately African-American, LGBTQ-affirming, “reconciling congregation.”¹ Later, I pastored the people who nurtured my faith as a college student. To say that I was surprised when my bishop called would be an understatement. Never in a thousand years could I have dreamed this.

I experienced many joys and many challenges in ministry at Union—some anticipated, others completely unexpected. I knew that my first funeral would be difficult and my first baptism pure bliss. But I never imagined the heartache that I would experience as a parish pastor, while the denomination struggled over human sexuality.

What do you really say to a woman in her twilight years who does not fully love herself because of her sexuality? How do you help wipe away the tears of a young man who cries himself to sleep every night because he is in love with another man? When does a married same-gender couple start enjoying their holy matrimony, free from the judgment of family and church? These are among the questions that kept me up at night.

Still, so many times I saw relief in the eyes of men and women, old and young, who have finally found a black church that truly embraces them and their sexuality—fully, unconditionally. I witnessed sheer surprise when a woman introduces her wife to Union

¹ A “reconciling congregation” is a local United Methodist church that has decided officially to embrace LGBTQI persons with radical love and acceptance. “Reconciling Ministries Network believes that human sexuality is a good gift from God. RMN is committed to supporting the integration of healthy, loving expressions of sexuality and spirituality for everyone. We celebrate the sexuality and spirituality of same and opposite gender loving persons and pledge to provide resources that lead to a deeper understanding of God’s precious gift.” http://www.rmnetwork.org/newrmn/who-we-are/mission/ (accessed March 30, 2017).
and our members do not bat an eye. I have seen tears flow as LGBTQ folk find the spiritual home for which they searched for years. But I also felt the utter disappointment—and the confusion—of a gay couple that asked to be married in Union’s sanctuary.

I always imagined that being a pastor would mean extending God’s blessing to those who yearn for authentic relationship. “The Lord bless you and keep you” (Numbers 6:24). But the United Methodist Church told me to do otherwise.² It is a hard thing not to bless the same people I pray with, study the Bible with, break bread with, and fellowship with. Actually, it broke my heart. Because sexuality is not something to be debated. This "issue" has faces and stories, disappointments and agonies, hopes and prayers. As a pastor, ministry is more about people than policies.

Although the people of Union are not all of one mind, there is something that all of us have come to know: our DNA is made up of the double helix of biblical faith and social justice. Since the congregation’s beginnings in 1796, we have been abolitionists, desegregationists, women’s rights advocates, civil rights activists, anti-apartheid protestors, and economic equality seekers. All these issues are tied up in Christ’s invitation for us to be reconciled and to be set free. So as we struggle to find our way forward as a congregation, we have covenanted to stay at the table as we seek a table for all. We gather as broken vessels around a broken loaf as one people. Because too many people have been

hurt, we decided no longer to fight over the issue. We believe there is still a “more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31).

Traveling the road as Union’s pastor (and as a Ph.D. student) has been both challenging and complicated, and occasionally a walking contradiction. The painfully ironic thing is that I was appointed by the general superintendent to a “reconciling church” and then ordered by the denomination not to pastor all my people fairly. As a black man in the United States, I know that the “separate but equal” thing simply does not work.³

The biggest contradiction for me, though, was the denial of my own self. For years, I tried to keep separate the various constituents of my identity—pastor here, queer man over there. I struggled to keep these selves segregated, and managed to do so (or so I thought) for three-and-a-half years. Until a few days before Pentecost Sunday 2016, the sermon title “Waiting to Exhale” dropped into my spirit. As I outlined a message about Spirit-as-breathe-of-God, I realized that I was the one not breathing. I was suffocating for lack of honesty, pretending to be other than I am. And I could take it no longer. After powerful music and dance ministries, I stood before my people to speak my truth with voice trembling. In a dramatic prolegomenon I confessed:

For as long as I can remember I have known in my heart of hearts that I am different. Even as a child, I’ve known. But it was not safe to breathe...I was forced to hide my being and I have been suffocating inside...dying inside because I have failed to take in fresh air, today I choose a more excellent way. I’ve been waiting to exhale, but today I breathe again. [take a deep breath] Today, today I speak my truth...today I come out...today I am “called out”⁴...And today, I am proud to say that I am gay.

³The decision of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to pursue a legal end to segregation, which led to Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka that overturned Plessy v. Ferguson as unconstitutional, was taken at the annual meeting held at Union Methodist Episcopal Church (now Union United Methodist Church), June 20-25, 1950. http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/3-organized/turning-point.html (accessed July 6, 2016).

⁴“Called Out” is a movement of LGBTQI Clergy in the United Methodist Church to declare publically their sexual orientation, in opposition to denomination’s anti-gay posture and the potential punitive repercussions, which include de-frocking. http://www.rmnetwork.org/newrmn/calledout/ (accessed March 30, 2017).
And without skipping a beat (almost as if she had my manuscript), Miss Olivia blurted out in black church “call and response” fashion: “We already knew!”

With laughter and tears, my congregation came and embraced me in light of my “not-breaking-news.” I wept bitterly. (I don’t have a flattering crying face, I am told.) We sang, as my flock assured their shepherd that everything would be just fine. Then, I presided over the Lord’s Supper—my first communion—weeping through its entirety.

Two years prior, on Pentecost Sunday 2014 (and the day after my ordination), I had decided not to be a “Jim Crow” pastor. Contradicting the official United Methodist Church law, I committed to pastor all my people equally and to officiate same-sex weddings. I resolved myself to live out my ordination vow “to seek peace, justice, and freedom for all people.” A long time congregant shared with me: “Pastor, I know that extending marriage equality is the right thing to do. I was raised a certain way, and it is taking me longer to get where I need to be. But if someone is ‘good enough’ to serve here and tithe here, then that person should be married here too.” It took me a while longer, however, to learn how not to discriminate against myself.

One of Union’s favorite songs is the 1980 Commodores hit “Jesus Is Love.” Without fail, every time it is sung, the congregation is up swaying with uplifted hands. Before long, worshippers have joined in the refrain: “yeah, yeah, Jesus loves you... If you call Him, He will answer.” In many ways, this song reflects Union’s radical character. And it is the

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foundation of how I live as a pastor and scholar. Jesus, the liberating Spirit of God, is love. The people of Union showed me a unique grace. And they empowered me to write this small contribution to the ongoing pursuit of equality and justice.

My prayer is that there be more “Unions” out there. Like the song’s opening lyrics: “Father [Mother], help your children.” All of us. I hope the (black) church truly learns to live in liberation, or it will face obsolescence. The brilliant work of art, and 2017 Academy Award winning film, “Moonlight” is “writing on the wall” (Daniel 5:1-30). Although baptism and revelation figure prominently in this triadic coming of age story of a black gay male, there is no mention of the black church. If we do not get it right, this erasure will move from silver screen to real life.
Acknowledgements

Gratitude. This simple word signifies the profound sentiment in my heart. Still, there are not adequate words to express fully the heart of the matter. There are so many people who encouraged, inspired, prodded, and supported me during the doctoral program: To my advisor, David C. Lamberth, thank you for challenging me to always produce my best work. To Marla Frederick, Amy Hollywood, and Mayra Rivera Rivera, thank you for journeying with me throughout my program and serving on my comprehensive exams, prospectus, and dissertation committees.

The congregations of Union United Methodist Church (Boston, Massachusetts) and Glendale United Methodist Church (Everett, Massachusetts) walked with me as I developed in pastoral ministry, while still encouraging and supporting me to become a scholar. The people of Metropolitan Community United Methodist Church (Harlem, New York) nurtured me as a seminarian, and those of Metropolitan United Methodist Church (Buffalo, New York) first fostered me in the Christian faith.

I must also acknowledge by name: best friend, fellow doctoral student and pastor, Rev. Brandon Thomas Crowley; dearest companion, Robert Kelsey; faithful therapist Dr. Sandra Crump; besties Justice Reid, Anthony Long, Justin Alexander, Crystal Collier, Angela Nelson, Keia Cole, Dorothy Jones, Albert Ching, Jamie Lawrence, Mara Block, Kera Street, Nikia Robert, Victoria Gray, Rev. Laura Everett; Sharif Butler and Marchaun Morrison (with me comprising the three “messkateers”); my mentor the late Bishop Martin David McLee; the best sisters in the world, Shana and Samira; nephew Micah and twin nieces Zoey and Zaryah (your FaceTime chats encouraged me dearly); Aletha and Gerald Williams Sr. (mom and dad, thanks for love and life!). I must also express appreciation for all the folk who
questioned my sexuality and affirmed me, before I was able to claim it for myself. And yes, during long, lonely dissertation days—too devoid of human contact—I am grateful for my yorkie-chichauhua canine companions, Bentley and Hurston. (Sorry for being the snippy one.)

Finally, thank you to the Forum for Theological Education for invaluable collegial, mentoring, and financial support. Also, appreciation to the organizers of the “Sharing in Faith” umc.org forum for allowing me to contribute my “Jesus is Love” article, which appears as part of the Preface. I must also express gratitude to Melissa Wiginton of “Education Beyond the Walls” at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary for inviting me to present in the “Emerging Methodist Voices” conference and contributing “Spirit and the Power Within: Overcoming the Fear of Death” to Communitas, which appears in chapter five of the dissertation.

Words cannot express fully the depth of gratitude I have for those who have helped me along the way. Without them, I could not have completed this work; the mistakes, however, are mine.
I'm a ghost
I'm a flower
I'm the spirit
essence
Of a dream

- lady lee andrews
San Juan, Puerto Rico

They saw three men come out from the sepulchre, and two of them sustaining the other, and a cross following them...And they heard a voice out of the heavens, crying "Hast thou preached to them that sleep?", and from the cross there was heard the answer, "Yea."

– Gospel of Peter 10.39-42
Chapter 1. Ghost Stories

Theologians are militants, Christian intellectuals organically involved with the historical movement of the poor, their theology, their thinking, speaking, writing, and action all incorporated into the messianic struggle of ‘the ones who have survived the great period of trial.’ (Rev. 7:14)

– Leonardo Boff

Holy Spirit, the life that gives life:
you are the cause of all movement;
you are the breath of all creatures;
you are the salve that purifies our souls;
you are the ointment that heals our wounds;
you are the fire that warms our hearts;
you are the light that guides our feet.
Let all the world praise you. Amen.
– Hildegard of Bingen, A Prayer to the Holy Spirit

Metaphors and stories suggest how we should see and describe the world—that is, how we should ‘look-on’ ourselves, others, and the world—in ways that rules and principles taken in themselves do not.
– Stanley Hauerwas

Only the BLACK WOMAN can say “when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole...race enters with me.”
– Anna Julia Cooper, 1892

But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.
– Luke 24:21

Please allow me to tell you, dear Reader, a story. I do not mean an idle tale of fantasy and fiction, but rather an account in the Du Boisian sense. This rendering will be no fabrication used to compel or force one’s hand. I make no claim of completion, no grasp of some grand, eternal truth.¹ Instead this portrayal is a real act of imagination. Here I am more interested in careful, correlative analysis than I am in establishing causal imperatives. Still, the dissertation strives to respond to the command: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (1

Peter 3:15).² While far from being the last word, I hope for it to be a persuasive fresh start. I intend for it to be a suggestion that, in the ethical sense, how we speak affects how we ought to live.³

We live in the Age of Spirit, of Brea(d)th. Ours is a period of great possibility, turbulence, and uncertainty. Although “we have never been modern,” we are decidedly postmodern, post-Christian, postracial, post-secular, et cetera ad infinitum.⁴ To be sure, every epoch has its moments. And while the narcissistic anxiety about our own present is not unlike past times, certainly something new is afoot. Luce Irigaray, Harvey Cox, Phyllis Tickle, and others, rehearsing Joachim de Fiore, signal the zeitgeist.⁵ Whatever is happening—good, bad, and ugly—there is a great sea change. As we construct a new future, we have been deeply shaped by deconstruction, negative dialectics, and cultural criticism. At the very least, the relentless process of naming, with all its “post this” and “post that” labels, is a signpost. And spirit finds itself as a particularly useful concept in framing the dismantling of strong thought.

This is a story of the life of Spirit.⁶ In the pages that lie ahead, I will enflesh in words some contours of that grand signifier of vitality, freedom, and power. To be sure, spirit has

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² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references will come from the New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 1994).


⁶ I have in mind here the pragmatic poetics of George Santayana's five-volume The Life of Reason (1905-1906), although I do not imitate its philosophical breadth.
meant many things for many people across time and space, and variously connotes ruach, anima, pneuma, and Geist. Marginalized people, in particular, have turned to the [Holy] Spirit for com-fort and empowerment in the struggle for liberation. Still, it has been commented that spirit is but a thinly veiled “vague blur.” I seek to offer a robust narrative that discloses in plain speak the specter of spirit. In this thesis, I participate in the movement of pneumatology from the shadows of Christian theology into clearer view. Perhaps by dissolving some of its mystique, while yet respecting its mystery, there might be deeper engagement with/in spirit-talk and consequently a greater reliance on Spirit’s power in pursuit of a more ethical world.

When speaking of the (changing) landscape of African-American Christianity, spirit-talk particularly aids the discourse. From the time black churches emerged the spirit-concept has well functioned to describe them. “Spirit” is a concept that appears repeatedly


8 Laurence Stookey, This Day: A Wesleyan Way of Prayer (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 35.


10 One of the pivotal functions of the study of religion is its demythologizing function. See, for example, Rudolf Bultmann’s New Testament and Mythology (1941) and Mircea Eliade’s The Myth of Eternal Return (1954). See also, Gordon Kaufmann’s In the Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

11 In the dissertation, I use “spirit” discursively, “Spirit” theologically, and “Holy Spirit” doctrinally. Peter C. Hodgson writes, “Language is a corporate, worldly event, an event of communication, the characteristically human form of activity...The language of faith is irreducibly symbolic, imaginative, metaphorical, embedded in texts, stories, traditions; yet it is always pressing toward thoughts, concepts, doctrines...Theology is a language game, and the rules of the game are the proper use of terms and concept.” In Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 4-5. See also Paul Tillich’s distinction that “spirit” refers to the “personal-communal unity of life-power” (21-22) and “Spirit” as religious (22). Systematic Theology, Volume III (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963).
in historical, philosophical, religious, literary, sociological, and anthropological texts regarding African-American culture. In these discourses, spirit serves both as a descriptive trope for black identity and as a normative ideal for social progress. While spirit is neither the exclusive domain of black folk nor the only signifier for black identity and social progress, African-American Christianity has been strikingly known for its passionate, spirited worship.

To narrate this chronicle, I converse with accounts of black religion as witnessed through the eyes of W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and Howard Thurman. They have seen spirit and been haunted by ghosts. That is, their work resists the hegemonic devastation of black bodies. In the dissertation, I trace the legacies of these public intellectuals on African-American Christianity, particularly on black and womanist theologies. With them, we will examine spirit as a trope in black religion; the historical unfolding of spirit-talk at the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality; and the

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manner in which the formation of black identities coincides with the discursive production of “demonic” representations.14

One observes a tragic irony: the signification of progress vis-à-vis spirit for African Americans writ-large has done violence to black women, poor, and queer black people. Discursively, these class and sexual minorities become “unholy ghosts,” deviants of spirit if you will, whose lives are erased and expended, trampled under foot in the march forward.15

These lives, which do not seem to matter as much in the metanarrative of blackness, do not die easily, however—very much haunting the discourse and troubling the meaning and thrust of spirit. I will trace this presence. In the end, I seek to construct a theology of

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spirit in black radical religion that resists, disturbs, and disrupts these dispositifs\textsuperscript{16} of deviancy, which have been used to pathologize some for the advancement of others.\textsuperscript{17} This dissertation, then, is an intervention in constructive Christian theology, and it is, Beloved, a story to pass on.\textsuperscript{18}

1.1. Introduction: On Pathology and Pneumatology

Let us be clear, spirit is con-tested space. Not every spirit God inspires.\textsuperscript{19} By definition—that is, by description—spirit denotes ambiguity: it means many things in many places. It signifies agency: \textit{Spirit-wind blows where it chooses}. Spirit-talk discursively attempts to give shape to the space where spirit blows, and historically has caused an

\textsuperscript{16}“What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions - in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.” Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh,” in Power/Knowledge, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 194. Foucault later writes, “the purpose of the present study is in fact to show how deployments [dispositifs] of power are directly connected to the body,” Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley, 1978 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 151. See also Matti Peltonen, “From Discourse to ‘Dispositif‘: Michel Foucault’s Two Histories,” Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques 30:2 (Summer 2004), 205-219.

\textsuperscript{17}This pneumatological development depends upon a Foucauldian genealogical approach: “In a sense, genealogy returns to the three modalities of history that Nietzsche recognized in 1874. It returns to them in spite of the objections that Nietzsche raised in the name of the affirmative and creative powers of life. But they are metamorphosed: the veneration of monuments becomes parody; the respect for ancient continuities becomes systematic dissociation; the critique of the injustices of the past by a truth held by men in the present becomes the destruction of the man who maintains knowledge [connaissance] by the injustice proper to the will to knowledge.” Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: New Press, 1994), 367-368.

\textsuperscript{18}Cf. epilogue to Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning Beloved (New York: Plume, 1987), 274-275.

\textsuperscript{19}Christopher Morse in Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief (Harrisburg: Trinity International Press, 1994) identifies “Ten Cs” or “rubrics of accountability within which dogmatic assessments under the constraint of God’s Spirit and the mysteries of God’s coming are made...: continuity with apostolic tradition, congruence with scripture, consistency with worship, catholicity, consonance with experience, conformity with conscience, consequence, cruciality, coherence, comprehensiveness” (46).
enduring (filial) fight. *We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities in spiritual places.* Struggle in the spirit(ual) realm, however, is worth it. *
Where the spirit is, there is liberty.*\(^\text{20}\)

Since spirit is contested space, in the dissertation I interrogate two trouble areas pertaining to African-American religious thought: the paucity of pneumatological method and the mobilization of spirit-talk in order to constrain and exclude. In particular, I ask two fundamental questions: Why African-American theology tends to avoid pneumatology? And why do (some) black empowerment ethics exclude queer liberation, yet advocate racial, gender, and class equality?

To the first, despite the recurrence of the spirit-concept, there has been little discursive elaboration in African-American theology. In fact, the term has been deployed so commonly that its extensive philosophical and theological heritage—and future—has been obscured. Yes, there is broad appeal to spiritual things, but pneumatology does not appear prominently as *method* in African-American theological thought, especially in any formal way.\(^\text{21}\)

On the surface this claim will seem strange. But the mere mention of or attribution to spirit does not rise to the level of pneumatology; talking about spirit does not constitute spirit-talk. It has also been observed: “One can have a superabundance of references to the

\(^{20}\) The italicized sentences are scriptural: 1 John 4:1; John 3:8; Ephesians 6:12; 2 Corinthians 3:17.

\(^{21}\) See William Turner’s “Pneumatology: Contributions from African American Christian Thought to the Pentecostal Task” in *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture*, ed. Amos Yong and Estrela Y. Alexander (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 169-189. By contrast, pneumatology *does* appear as method, for example, in the Latin American liberation theologies of Leonardo Boff and Joseph Comblin; the feminist theology of Elizabeth Johnson; the ecotheologies of Sally McFague and Mark Wallace; the Reformed theologies of Jürgen Moltmann and Michael Welker; the Eastern Orthodox theology of John D. Zizioulas; and the Catholic theology of Yves Congar.
Spirit and still have a serious pneumatological deficit.”

Leonardo Boff plainly states, “That word [“spirit”] has become almost meaningless in today’s world, both in literature and in popular culture.”

If the dissertation is successful, I will have affirmed the Negro spiritual, “Everybody talking ‘bout heaven ain’t going there.” Through a nonlinear telling of the life of spirit in black cultural discourse, using Du Bois, Hurston, and Thurman and their legacies on black and womanist theologies as ‘representatives,’ I offer a constructive pneumatological next step. Through them I explore responses to the basic questions, what is this spirit, spiritual, and Spirit?

If black theology and the black church tradition are distinguished, however, then the difference between deliberative and embedded theology partially explains the tension. Spirit-talk’s marginalization in formal black religious thought may have legitimate reasons, for example: (a) Black theology has emphasized Christology, excavating the legacy of racism in white supremacy through the “cross as lynching tree.” (b) Womanist theology has affirmed the black female body, sidestepping body/soul separations of platonized


25 James Cone’s The Cross and the Lynching Tree (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011) makes plain in theological language the experience of brutalized black people under the gaze of Christianity’s most emblematic symbol. However emblematic, Cone and others demonstrate that the meaning of the cross has not been fully excavated in light of white supremacy.
Christianity, while advocating spirituality as lived, practiced faith.\textsuperscript{26} (c) Black quietism, spiritualization, and otherworldliness in black Christianity, especially in relation and response to American slavery, haunt the status of the Holy Spirit in empowerment-oriented theologies.\textsuperscript{27} (d) The legacy of Christomonism and the Trinitarian subsumption of the Holy Spirit in Western Christianity diminish the personhood of Spirit.\textsuperscript{28}

To the second overarching concern, although this spirited, black Christianity has a long commitment to liberation and justice, there is also a trajectory where spirit-talk has been disempowering. In the respectability politics \textsuperscript{29} of black racial uplift and heterocisnormativity of black charismatic Christianity, pathologies of identity emerge at the nexus of spirit.

A common model for post-Emancipation African-American progress called for


\textsuperscript{27} Roberts, \textit{Black Theology in Dialogue} 53-64. See also Benjamin Mays’s \textit{The Negro’s God: As Reflected in His Literature}, 1938 (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

\textsuperscript{28} Kärkkäinen 17. See also Eugene F. Rogers, \textit{After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Sources Outside the Modern West} (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005).

rejection of “the frenzy”—exuberant, ecstatic worship expressions. Later, when these features of the sanctified church are retrieved, along with a narrative that empowers women and poor folk, I will demonstrate that another pathology is produced—antigay heteronormativity. Theorizing racial uplift and theologizing sanctified faith has serious consequences: some iterations of black progress are predicated on the production of deviancy, denigration, and marginalization. Thus the advancement of ‘all’ seems to require the repression of some. This discourse, I argue, contra-dicts the underlying insights of Christian pneumatology, spirit-talk.

One of the most prolific voices concerning African-American culture and identity, towering American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, famously speaks of the “souls of black folk.” He introduces his essay “Of the Meaning of Progress” by quoting Friedrich Schiller: “Deine Geister sende aus!”30 Later in The Souls of Black Folk, however, Du Bois pathologizes black religion and the charismatic works of the Holy Spirit, saying, “A sort of suppressed terror hung in the air [of the southern revival] and seemed to seize us,--a pythian madness, a demoniac possession, that lent terrible reality to song and word.”31 On the one hand, Geist inspires black social progress, and on the other hand, charisma restrains it. Religion that prioritizes the life of the mind was the only acceptable form for Du Bois. The expressive and embodied Christianity of southern revivals belonged to a primitive, impoverished past

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31 Ibid., 90.
that had to be rejected. Du Bois claimed that charismatic religion *qua* otherworldly Christianity impedes the social progress of black folk.\(^\text{32}\)

Contra Du Bois, groundbreaking novelist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston praises southern black religion, which in her research includes Christianity, voodoo, folk religion, and other syncretic religion. For her, the expressiveness of charismatic religion is not to be shunned, but rather highlighted. In many ways, Hurston tells an-other story of African-American life that diverges from prevailing “New Negro” portrayals of her time. Hurston goes about this work anthropologically, and concludes: “The Saints, or the Sanctified Church is a revitalizing element in Negro music and religion.”\(^\text{33}\) Exuberant faith animates the body.

Contemporary Christian ethicist Cheryl Sanders notably has turned to Hurston in her argument to reclaim the value of black charismatic worship in African-American religious history. In so doing Sanders counteracts the tendency to correlate charismatic religion with impoverished African Americans. As an ethical intervention, Sanders contests the caricature that the “sanctified church” is backward and the judgment that black social progress depends upon the abandonment of charismatic Christianity.\(^\text{34}\) Following Hurston,


\(^{33}\) Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church: The Folklore Writing of Zora Neale Hurston* (Berkeley: Turtle Island Foundation), 105.

\(^{34}\) Sanders defines: "The Sanctified church is an African American Christian reform movement that seeks to bring its standards of worship, personal morality, and social concern into conformity with a biblical hermeneutic
Sanders argues that present-day sanctified churches have much to teach mainline black Christianity: “The egalitarian doctrine of the Holy Spirit” leads Sanders to foreground class difference and champion those on the margins.35

Sanders’s advocacy, however, does not extend to all those on the margins of black churches. While Sanders attends to race, class, and gender diversity, her depiction of charismatic spirit remains rigidly heteronormative. In fact, she attributes her illiberal view to the sanctified church itself, justifying its heterosexist exclusion on strict biblical and confessional grounds.36 Sanders’s position remains one of the most prominent formal articulations of the “embedded theology” of the sanctified church and many black churches in general. The descriptive project functions as a defense of “sanctified” religion and, at the same time, a normative assault on queer identities, which quite literally have deadly consequences. The collusion of charisma and conservatism has actually funded a discourse of the demonic. Thus, as an ethical argument, it methodologically opposes itself.37

While observation of this contradiction is not novel, constructive response is lacking.

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of holiness and spiritual empowerment” [emphasis in original] and is comprised of Holiness, Pentecostal, and Apostolic churches (5).” Cheryl J. Sanders, Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

35 Ibid., 17.


37 William D. Hart charges that ultimately Sanders’s position is “incomprehensible” (204). “Sexual Orientation and the Language of Higher Law,” Sexual Orientation and Human Rights in American Religious Discourse. Hart’s intentionally uses polemical rhetoric in order to offset Sanders’s argument, which he claims is a confessional argument poorly veiled in allegedly value-neutral language. He goes on to indict: “the black church is a profoundly ambivalent and contradictory site” (Ibid 206).
I see great potential at this challenging nexus that extends liberating theo-ethical work; the dissertation intervenes in this contested space, celebrating both *charisma* and queer identity.\(^{38}\) Instead of avoiding and abandoning spirit-talk, because of its trappings, I want to leverage its power and potential, and incorporate Howard Thurman in this turn. With a backlash of biblical literalism and theological conservatism to the backdrop of secularity, which defines this spirited age, pneumatology has great promise. Because spirit invokes liberty and spirit-talk liberation, I strive to actualize this potential.

The dissertation offers, then, at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class, a constructive theological account of spirit in black Christianity. Through consideration of the “rational spirit” of W.E.B. Du Bois, the “sanctified spirit” of Zora Neale Hurston, and the “mystical spirit” of Howard Thurman, I develop a pneumatology that establishes the empowerment of the marginalized as the *sine qua non*, the essential condition and consequence, of spirit-talk.

**Sketching Spirit: Contouring the Dissertation**

Spirit is power unto life after death. I mean this in a queer,\(^{39}\) not otherworldly, sense: Spirit itself is that which resists—even death itself. Spirit is transgressive and


\(^{39}\) Theologically, “queer” suggests acting differently and eschatologically in view of an-other possible world. Marcella Althaus-Reid writes, “Queering theology, the theological task and God is all part of a coming out of the closet for Christianity which is no longer simply one option among others, nor is it sidetrack outside what has been regarded as the highroad of classical theology. Queering theology is the path of God’s own liberation, apart from ours, and as such it constitutes a critique to what Heterosexual Theology has done with God by cloesting the divine. In theology, as in love, this quest is a spiritual one, which requires continuing to the Other side of theology, and the Other side of God….Our task and our joy is to find or simply recognize God sitting amongst us, at any time, in any gay bar or in the home of a camp friend who decorates her living room
subversive. Spirit animates and ghosts come from the dead. It is the Spirit of the Resurrected One who asks: “Where, O death, is your victory?” (1 Corinthians 15:55). In the present chapter, I begin this “story of spirit” grounded in the African-American worship life of Boston’s historic Union United Methodist Church. In chapter two, I consider Du Bois in light of his appropriation by black theologians James Cone, Gayraud Wilmore, and Dwight Hopkins. In chapter three, I look at Hurston through the womanist eyes of Katie Cannon and Emile Townes. I will make correlative insights vis-a-vis Paul Tillich and Ronald Thiemann.

In chapter four, I offer a queer reading—theologizing differently and eschatologically in view of an-other possible world—premised on Hurston and further funded by her Harlem “Niggerati,” as well as Marcella Althaus-Reid and Roger Haight, which suggests the death of God gives Spirit. In the face of strong conservatism, I offer “weak” pneumatology.⁴⁰ In chapter five, I converse with Thurman, in view of Leonardo Boff, proposing an embodied hermeneutic of spirit that has material basis and consequence.

It is impossible to tell the story of the blackness in America without the concept of deviancy.⁴¹ The construction of the black body is a narrative of difference and (ab)normality. The religious history of blackness is no different. The disciplining of the

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black religious body politic during American slavery followed the same supremacist logic as the disciplining of the black body writ large. Because the African was deviant, so was his religion. The African’s religion was purged from open practice, only surviving in the hush arbors. Slave religion emerged as a product of the “new world”—smuggling in what African retentions it could incorporate under the panoptic gaze of master.\(^4^2\)

Here I am offering up a counter-narrative, not so much of the history but of the open future. I advocate a move from spiritual deviance to transgressive spirituality as a pathway forward. The dissertation points toward this new spiritual home by examining spirituals as a means of tracing “spirit.” I read Du Bois, Hurston, and Thurman dialectically and dialogically, always non-linearly. Still, their collective interest in potential-not-yet-realized constitutes a common core, and thus shapes the thesis. Du Bois’s “unhopeful hope,” Hurston’s “unshouted courage,” and Thurman’s “uncreated element” jointly speak to the overcoming of identity constructions that limit flourishing. In the end, the thesis rethinks the concepts of hope, courage, and vitality, using Du Bois, Hurston, and Thurman, respectively, as interlocutors. By interpreting Jesus, the Spirit of God, as chief deviant and liberating power, I will demonstrate that a progressive pneumatology is possible.

1.2. *Spirit of the Cross*

On Sundays at Union United Methodist Church in Boston’s South End, the service of divine worship is a grand celebration. A twelve-voice praise team initiates the fête, stoking the congregation’s collective fire. For fifteen minutes or so, accompanied by a seven-piece

jazz band, the gathered people make music together. Prayers mixed with preaching shape the worship, but song constitutes the unmistakable backbone of the people's praise. From the Commodores’ “Jesus is Love” to Crosby’s “Blessed Assurance” to Wilson’s “Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand,” gospel songs and spirituals stitch together a beautiful harmony.

Sunday is a “praise break.” No matter what happened during the week—and often because of what transpired in days past—people of every hue and shade; young, old, and in-between; cisgender, transgender, nonconforming; straight, gay, and queer; economically stable and struggling, come together in one place united for praise. It is sacred space that disrupts and disturbs the everyday. On Sunday, countercultural community is shaped. It is an intentional safe harbor where, if only for ninety minutes, the cares and concerns of a cruel world are held at bay, and a slice of heaven is realized here on earth. It is imagined, created, and constructed space, teeming and embossed with meaning. It is place.

Every Sunday is shaped by Easter, and the high holy day of the Christian year becomes the high holy day of the week. Sundays very much define what happens “between

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44 Jacqueline Nassy Brown in Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) describes: “Place is an axis of power in its own right. As a basis for the construction of difference, hierarchy, and identity, and as the basis of ideologies that rationalize economic inequalities and structure people’s material well-being and life chances, place is a vehicle of power...[and] must be understood first and foremost as an abstraction, not a set of physical properties just there for the eye to see. Like race and gender, place operates powerfully, though not exclusively, through the invocation and naturalization of matter...The very urge to make meaning out of the materiality of places—what they look like, feel like, and where they are, for example, and who occupies them, what social relations define them, and what processes unfold with them—is produced through an axis of power and subjectivity that we might call place” (8-9).
The spirit of resurrection permeates the atmosphere as life springs forth amidst death and dying. Assurance that “trouble don’t last always” and “greater is coming” creates a buzz in the air. Even during the solemnity of Lent with its intentional self-flagellation, Sunday stands against the season—as if in protest—and joy circumscribes the long walk to Calvary’s cross. Sabbaths are exempt from the 40-day sojourn toward the paschal triduum, and function liturgically as “mini-Easters.” Praise, dance, and rejoicing punctuate the fasting, meditation, and self-denial that await during the week. Sunday worship is spirited and alive, joyous and big, festive and triumphant.

That is, until the Sunday in 2016 after Philando Castile and Alton Sterling were gunned down during the same week, and horrific videos of their public executions went viral on social media. There was no grand celebration in worship that day. In the place where the Word dwells, we were speechless. Already we had sung so many times, “there is a balm in Gilead”: when just a month earlier, Union joined countless churches in remembering those mostly brown people who were executed at the Pulse gay club in Orlando; when terror struck down innocents in Paris; after Ferguson when a nation erupted in anger as we watched Michael Brown’s dead body lay in the streets for hours; during Advent, following Newtown, on the third Sunday intended for “joy.”

The congregation came that July 10th Sunday with hurt in their eyes, too many weeks of weariness worn on their bodies. Grown men cried and cried out why, asking how this keeps happening again and again. With so many strides forward over recent decades in civil rights for African Americans, it did not make sense that it felt like the 1950s. So that Sunday could not be the same. It was apparent to the worship planners that our all-too-

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45 Marla Frederick, 
usual way of grieving in worship would not suffice this time. Not after we witnessed the 
heinous retaliatory violence that took the lives of five police officers in Dallas. We could not 
utter a prayer, hold a moment of silence, raise a hymn of comfort, and then move on to 
business as usual.

The service itself had to be disrupted, and the songs of praise redirected to the 
triptych of prayer, protest, and peace. As the Union congregation joined with Max Roach to 
insist upon “Freedom Now!”, the music that burst forth from that place embodied the 
mourning, anger, and resolve of a people in pain.46 When crucifixion on the cross of 
injustice keeps being relived and reenacted again and again, our worship had to offer a 
discursive alternative that does not point to the cross but rather beyond it.

With black bodies lynched in the street, past and present, black churches historically 
have been places of both refuge and resistance. In a world of debilitating and demoralizing 
oppression, a world that calls into question one’s worth at every turn, religious spaces have 
offered salves of healing. Yet, when the lynching tree has become the cross, as James Cone 
so tragically puts it, and too many white churches still act as if black lives don’t matter, 
what is the real meaning of freedom now? And when this restorative ointment does not 
extend to all those living under the gaze of Pharaoh, what is the exclusionary value of the 
metalogic of liberation?

Although the genius of black church theology has been something like Beyoncé’s 
“lemonade” in reappropriating the destructive for construction 47—“what the devil 
intended for evil, God used for good” (Genesis 50:20)—the landscape had shifted

drastically. The historic “transvaluation of values” that has transformed the cross into an emblem of possibility is insufficient unless there is a substantial reordering of things.\textsuperscript{48}

That is, the cross must become emblematic, not of black resiliency in the face of suffering, but of a radical transformation itself. There must be real change.

Though African Americans have “come quite far by faith,”\textsuperscript{49} believing in the promise of progress and of a better tomorrow, the televised murder of scores of black people calls into stark relief the value of ‘black liberation’ and sociopolitical advancement.\textsuperscript{50} So on that Sunday, the Union congregation struggled to find theological language that held together the hope of redemption with the realities of the present. The Joshua generation searches for a new way of struggling with the promise when the so-called Promised Land is nowhere to be found. In other words, the present-day pain calls into question the doublespeak of the black church: the (un)intelligibility of redemption through a cross that is still brutalizing, still crucifying.

Because the reality is that black people are still being lynched with impunity. Although some have ascended to great heights, and others have been granted access to the best of America’s dreams, many still remain woefully shut out of the realized vision. Further still, the benefits of the passion of countless forebearers fail to fully protect the


\textsuperscript{49} Albert A. Goodson, “We’ve Come This Far By Faith” (1963), \textit{Songs of Zion} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 192.

\textsuperscript{50} Marcella Athaus-Reid writes in \textit{Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics} (New York: Routledge, 2000): “Twenty-five years of Liberation Theology in Latin America has not changed an iota of the sexual constructions of our machista society” (78). A similar comment can be made in the racial context of the United States.
privileged (think Henry Louis Gates). At the end of the day, no matter how well off one is, you are still just a nigga in a suit.  

Resurrecting the Cross and the Ghost in Eastertide

And so we begin again. This time we begin at the beginning, on the other side of the cross. Because Easter is where we always begin: worship that is the intersection of the spirit of life and ghost of death. This is not the place where one desires to start, but it is where one must. The crucifixion has already taken its place in the history of religion. Messianic triumph has failed to be realized within time and has given way to eschatological hope, reframing and refracting the gospel narration of a people’s story of faith. What was prophesied was not delivered as such. In the wake of Jesus’ public execution, his followers struggled to make sense, or at least make meaning, of what was hoped for in the light of what actually came to be. The only thing that is certain is that things are no longer the same. Because although someone or something lives, the Messiah has died. And Jesus’ disciples stood at the foot of the cross and watched his execution.


52 Jonathan Z. Smith, To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). He writes, “Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process for marking interest...place directs attention...From such a point of view, there is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational ones. Sacrality is, above all, a category of emplacement” (103-104).

Today, we can watch real-life manslaughter on Facebook Live, replayed on repeat on the nightly news. “How to Get Away with Murder” is not Thursday must-see TV. And no longer is the life of the account of the public execution borne solely by the collective memory, recorded decades later in gospel narrative. It is not left to the griots to tell the story of what happened. The recording itself constitutes the archive. Perhaps the revolution will not be televised, but its antecedents surely are.\textsuperscript{54} The “crucified God” and “Jesus, the crucified people,” collide, to borrow Song’s lyric.\textsuperscript{55}

But still there is no real song of redemption being sung—“How long will they kill our prophets while we stand around and look?” (Bob Marley)—because the messianic hope of liberation suffered by the movements for civil rights and black power has been shattered. And, in fact, we have not entered the Promised Land. Rather, we find ourselves right back in the wilderness. Our respectability has not saved us.

We, the people, awaited judgment for a long time. The secret tribunal known to us as the grand jury, scoured the so-called archives and considered the ‘evidence’ for weeks. Forensic analyses and eyewitness reports were supposed to tell us what happened to Michael Brown on August 9, 2014. So on November 24, 2014, that day of reckoning, we listened for a word from the county prosecutor’s press conference. Throughout the day black people anxiously, nervously even, checked media alerts on smartphones for the moment of the announcement. People of many statuses across the globe turned on televisions and watched on mobile devices. Finally, after several minutes of telling us the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{54} Gil Scott-Heron, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” (1970) on \textit{Small Talk at 125\textsuperscript{th} and Lenox} album (Flying Dutchman, 1971).

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story of the evidence that the grand jury allegedly considered, we are told that there is no

In a way, there was little surprise that there was no indictment. We have been down this road before: remember Rodney King? And now we are down the same road again differently: The governor issued a state of emergency and mobilized the National Guard. Preparations were made to contain rioters and outside agitators who gather to protest the charade of justice. Nevertheless, we clung to a small glimmer of hope that the past would not be our present, and our present will not be our future. Like those along the walking on the road to Emmaus, we had hoped that he [Barack Obama] would redeem us (Luke 24:21).

This bewilderment and grief has to be something unto what was experienced in Jerusalem post-Golgotha. When one witnesses hope dashed to the ground in plain sight, the feeling of practical powerlessness and paralyzed pain rise up from the grave. We are numb, the walking dead; possibility inseparable from paradise lost. Still walking, yes, and still uncertain about what the future holds. There is promise of coming power: “you will be my witnesses,” says the crucified one that is alive (Acts 1:8).

And this is Eastertide. Uncertainty is awash in the wake of the three-day event. The foundations have shifted and the world is no longer the same. If new life is springing forth from the tomb, it is not recognized as such. The Johannine and Luke-Acts record tells us that the disciples did not identify the resurrected Christ at first. (It was not until Jesus performed ordinary acts, such as calling Mary’s name in John 20:16 and sharing a meal in
Luke 24:26-49, that his followers perceived his identity.) So perhaps new life itself comes in a form that people did not expect?

In Easter there is a ghost. And it haunts us to roam and stalk the earth. It meets us along the road and in locked rooms that are full of fear. The specter is the ‘haint’ of the Spirit, which is the pretext to any con-text of the word made flesh. It is begotten, not made, and still comes into view more clearly when the One suffered death and was buried. And in the Ghost there always more than meets the eye. Because while the Ghost comes from the dead, Spirit animates and brings life. Spirit and Ghost are One, and yet not one and the same.

It is not altogether certain what meets us here/there in the place of fear. While they all witnessed the crucifixion, the disciples were not certain that resurrection happened at all. Jesus’ death occurs in a public display, and has historical veracity. We know that there was a man named Jesus who lived and died. But the resurrection of Jesus, according to the archive, is a whole other matter. Even the faith account in scripture acknowledges that, at least at first, the resurrection was a private event and not a public spectacle. If it occurred, it happens early in the morning with no witnesses. The testimony of the first ones at the tomb is under scrutiny in the record: it is not angels that were seen at the grave, but rather “visions of angels” (Luke 24:23).

Later, the risen One casts dispersions about his identity: “For a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39). But then again flesh and bones do not just vanish and appear at will either. Neither does the risen One deny that he is a ghost, and it is already known that he is Spirit and one with the Father, who is worshipped in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).
In Jerusalem where Jesus certainly was crucified, it is uncertain whether he is risen and it is also uncertain what manner of Christ is risen indeed. While there is no doubt that Jerusalem was a place of hope and paradise lost, the place where the followers are instructed to stay, presumably because it would have been logical to leave, it remains unclear what this place was supposed to become. Spectrality is where ambiguity encounters to uncertainty.

**The Easter Instability of Identity**

The identity of Jesus, if it were ever fixed, becomes even more unstable with the crucifixion. The gospel writer Luke does not attempt an airtight depiction. Instead of suggesting one highly refined and unalterable picture, the image that we receive in Luke's gospel is shifty. It is a story without an ending, to be continued in the Acts of the Apostles.

We approach identity, then, not as a set of fixed categories, but as a web of interlocking characteristics that serve an underlying purpose even if there is no underlying essence. When deployed in black cultural discourses, spirit is not sameness but a signifier and a source that unites in variability. This is Du Bois’s “gift of black folk,” whose love affair with spirit has placed spirit as an irreplaceable trope in black cultural discourse. Spirit-talk is an integral language in the discursive production of blackness and the disparate identities with which it intersects.

The agony of Eastertide is where this story of spirit starts. The new beginning that emerges from the cross is commencement, not culmination. For black Christianity, which stands at the center of black religion in the United States, the liberating Jesus as crucified

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Christ is its axial theme. In its lived religious expressions, embedded and deliberative theologies, simply there is no avoiding Jesus on the cross and the community that interprets itself through the specter of crucifixion. Whatever one says about the quintessence of struggle for the African-American religious experience, the trappings of ontological blackness,\(^{58}\) and the emergence of post-racialism, the history of black Christianity has been shaped inextricably by the narration of the life of Christ coming through the death of Jesus.

The cross figures prominently in African-American Christianity; broadly emblemmatic of the Christological tradition.\(^ {59}\) While pneumatology primarily concerns the thesis, any constructive theology that takes African-American Christian experiences seriously must engage with the cross. Christology, and not pneumatology, has been the native tongue of God-talk in the black church. Black liberation theology and black feminist theology have privileged the cross of Jesus in its ruminations on the divine. Although it takes issue with atonement, liberation, and redemption, womanist theology has centered the community of change agents that Jesus inspired. These diverging responses to black suffering have given rise to two different theological trajectories, each bearing much fruit in their own rights.

On the one hand, James Cone concludes in his insightful *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011):

> The lynching tree is a metaphor for white America’s crucifixion of black people. It is the window that best reveals the religious meaning of the cross in our land. In this


sense, black people are Christ figures, not because they wanted to suffer but because they had no choice. Just as Jesus had no choice in his journey to Calvary, so black people had no choice about being lynched. The evil forces of the Roman state and of white supremacy in America willed it. Yet, God took the evil of the cross and the lynching tree and transformed them both into the triumphant beauty of the divine. If America has the courage to confront the great sin and ongoing legacy of white supremacy with repentance and reparation there is hope “beyond tragedy.”

Pointing to this Niebuhrian hope, Cone locks his gaze upon the tragedy. While motivated by and for liberation, Cone spends the thrust and breadth of his theological writings indicting the need for liberation. He takes us to the cross (and the lynching tree) and struggles with crucifixion but stops short of resurrection. For Cone, one might say, liberation-work is deconstruction—or the destruction of the oppressive regimes by calling out its hypocrisy and internal inconsistencies. Dismantling the apparatuses literally used to undo black bodies has been the major project.

As a key figure in the black radical tradition, in Cone’s works the weight of forensic analysis is given to white supremacy and racism—and to pain and suffering—it causes for many black people. Theologically speaking the focus is the cross, and in Marxist language, the issue is class. Still, the shortcomings of black theology and black Marxism is that the majority of the energy is spent diagnosing the problem and interrogating the crisis: negative dialectics. It seems as if tragedy is all that there is. It’s almost as if the critical

60 Cone 166.

61 Cf. Jacques Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend (Prof. Izutsu)” in Derrida and Différence, ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Warwick: Parousia Press, 1985), 1-5. Derrida ‘translates’ “deconstruction” in contradistinction to Martin Heidegger’s (Destruktion / Abbau), saying, “Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even of modernity. It deconstructs itself. It can be deconstructed [Ça se deconstruit].”

description seemingly crowds out room for the constructive answer to Martin King’s important question, “where do we go from here?” The cross, in many ways, is both the starting and ending points, leaving very little room for discussion of the significance of resurrection in black Christianity.

On the other hand, though relatedly, in the womanist theology of Delores Williams, the pain of black existence is foregrounded. While not interested in the biblical crucifixion of Jesus or resurrection of Christ, Williams is very much concerned with the response to oppression. Her *Sisters in the Wilderness* vis-à-vis the biblical story of Hagar is a very useful meditation on sustenance and survival in the face of otherwise debilitating oppression. She rejects substitutionary atonement and redemptive suffering as viable options for African Americans under the foot debilitating domination and empire. Liberation, then, is not the end goal but rather a mitigated endurance in the midst of a less-than-just existence.

At the same time that Williams confronts the oppressive realities of black existence, however, elsewhere she envisions a freedom not-yet-realized that is still possible when she beckons a womanist pneumatology. She imagines, “Womanist theology could eventually speak of God in a well-developed theology of the spirit...Womanist theology has grounds for shaping a theology of spirit informed by black women’s political action.”

Perhaps, however, these approaches to black oppression—black and womanist theologies—are not mutually exclusive. And perhaps consideration of them paves the way beyond tragedy, without sidestepping the very real concerns of centuries of suffering

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endured by African Americans. And at the same time, there is no privileging of the cross, the grand signifier of oppression, as the only character in the grand narrative. Cone’s emphasis on the cross and Williams’s vision for a womanist pneumatology, considered together, suggests the path forward I trace herein.

For black and womanist theologies, if suffering is the con-text, then what is the text? That is to say, is there a story that is written and to be told about African-American experience that is not circumscribed and contained by the devastation of black bodies? It seems that intellectuals like Du Bois, Hurston, and Thurman allude to a blackness that transcends the oppressive materiality of an essentialized African-American experience. The theological depiction of this ‘black faith’ primarily concerns us here. Is there a Word beyond the word that de-centers suffering in light of and in hope of something more essential, more primordial? Might the cross mean more than crucifixion—and also more than the antecedent of resurrection? Might Jesus be more than the crucified one and the one who “got up from the grave with all power in His hands?” Is it possible to see its messiness—not all tragedy and not all triumph?

Maybe by starting on the other side of the cross mediates and minds the gap. This is where we find spirit and the ghost generated by the cross. Spirit, however spectral is hidden in plain sight, and stands on both sides of the cross—before and after it, preceding it and produced by it. Said differently, I do not want to write about the cross, which was, by all means, a brutal mechanism of public execution in the Roman Empire. But given its centrality in the lived faith of black churches and African-American religious thought, to avoid the cross is to render one’s intervention practically null and void. Instead, I write about the ha’nts of the cross.
Re-reading Again for the First Time

I develop a constructive pneumatology vis-à-vis the cross by re-reading, through the lenses of the biblical Luke-Acts and the non-canonical Gospel of Peter, the paschal triduum and the Easter season preceding Pentecost. In order to construct a fresh pneumatological intervention, we must begin before Pentecost, which has become all but the property of Pentecostals. Because we have moved so quickly to the outpouring, not dwelling in the ambiguity of Easter, I argue that we have missed how Spirit was already at work. Instead, here we should “tarry just a little while” and see that the death of Jesus on the cross produces in the resurrection a ghost, which repeats the incarnational death of God—an inspiration.

Moreover, a pneumatic theology of the cross is necessarily “intersectional.” Intersectionality signals the social interests and political objectives underlying this theological work. By choosing intersectionality as an intentional discursive and political modality, I place myself. Intersectionality contends that social phenomena, particularly social oppressions and their solutions, are related and interconnected. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge offer an expansive description:

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.65

Collins and Bilge describe intersectionality as “critical inquiry and critical praxis,” which is strikingly resonant of the relationship of orthopraxis and orthodoxy in liberation theology. Thought and action are inextricably linked in a politics that uniquely concerns itself with the enduring plight of the marginalized and oppressed.66

This critical work is the constructive theological task, and constructive theology is always intersectional. Constructive theology converses with the deep complexity of Christian tradition as it imagines a future with hope that transforms our present (complicated) reality. It strives toward both relevancy and intelligibility that makes a difference in the world in which we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) — not being a “noisy gong or a clanging symbol” (1 Corinthians 13:1). I appreciate the Workgroup on Constructive Theology’s formulation that theology is “Awake to the Moment.” The participants describe:

Theology that gets its own hands dirty with the real pain and the real joy of life in this very world, in this very time comes closer to expressing something meaningful about the God who became full and fleshly present in that real time and real place two thousand years ago, a place so much like our own, a place and a time as much in need of new pathways to healing as ours is now.67

Such is the aim of this dissertation: to step into an age-old conversation that speaks to the very real realities of today.

66 In their chapter “Getting the History Straight?”, Collins and Bilge locate the intersectionality’s origins in resistance movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and not in the 1990s when the term became popularized in the academy. They note that while Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (legal) work is pioneering, to start the narrative in 1991 with the publication of “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” constitutes an “erasure” of the collective contributions of black lesbian feminists of the Cohambee River Collective, as well as Native American, Chicana, and Asian American women. Collins and Bilge write, “Intersectionality seemingly didn’t exist until it was discovered by academics and named and legitimated within the academy” (Ibid., 85).

Spirit points to something powerful, potent, and often ineffable. Descriptively, spirit-talk encompasses a myriad of things and leans upon a myriad of sources, and not a particular system. It strives to be a systematic (i.e., constructive) theology in so far as it is coherent. Precisely because spirit-talk can participate in a number of contemporary conversations, from secularity to embodiment, I want to mobilize it for a pointed set of purposes, namely empowerment, in light of these broader contours. Overall, I will interpret spirit more as a signifier than as a source. I bring together its various articulations—spirit, Spirit, and Holy Spirit—in order to weave together heuristic (symbolic), philosophical, and doctrinal iterations in a coherent conversation.

Through the thesis, in some way I seek to “take back the word” by offering a biblically grounded affirming theology that does not seek to define spirit as if it can be contained. Rather, I desire to dance with “spirit” in such a way that enfleshes the movements at play when intellectuals deploy the term. I remain conversant with the tradition that has shaped me, while still seeking to broaden it. By reading scripture differently I hope to create a fissure in black Christian orthodoxy, while remaining intelligible to black churchgoers and faithful to theological critique.

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1.3. On Irony, Invisibility, and the Spirit of Black Folk

Spirit-talk provides an insightful language for discussing black religion, particularly African-American Christianity. Because Spirit is that which one cannot see, it functions well as a trope for apprehending a tradition cast to the margins of religious discourse. There remains a prevailing consensus among scholars of black religion that the African-American church has been a “nation within a nation,” which emerges from the union of that “invisible institution” and the institutional church. Hiddenness is an intrinsic, inherent property of black Christianity.

Trailblazing sociologist Edward Franklin Frazier writes, “The Negro Church with its own forms of religious worship was a world which the white man did not invade but only regarded with an attitude of condescending amusement.”71 Ironically, this hiddenness is actually masked in presence. Indeed this condescension emerges from ignorance of that which the white man willfully chose not to see. In many ways, this religion is very much seen, even commented upon—often shunned and distanced—but exceedingly unknown and misunderstood for what it actually is, thus demanding its thicker description.

The black church itself has been, and continues to be, a counterculture of resistance that been both a safe harbor from white supremacy and a site of limited agency. And these scholars are still writing the history of what has been birthed of this marriage. Take Raboteau’s Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South (1978), which comes on the scene more than a century after the demise of the peculiar institution of slavery, as paradigmatic example. Milton Sernett in African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness (1999) writes:

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We await, for example, something on the order of Albert J. Raboteau’s *Slave Religion* for other periods and issues. It is something of a scholarly embarrassment that detailed studies exist on minor traditions known as the Black Jews and Black Muslims, but no contemporary historian has published a comprehensive history of the National Baptist Convention, Inc. with its millions of members.72

Indeed Sernett reveals that one of the key roles of the black church is that of confronting this hiddenness. Emancipation does not bring—like so many things that it does not fully realize for African Americans—the unveiling and public revealing of the black church. Frazier’s new nation, then, carries inconspicuousness with it. Something might be visible although not perceptible.

The black church as black nation is neither the church nor the nation and only exercises restricted freedom. To wit, the black church is contained. It continues to operate emancipated under the panoptic gaze of whiteness, its partial movements mediated through a new form of invisibility that in fact it has not escaped. And this limited movement toward liberation reinscribes the norm. Michel Foucault is helpful here: “Disciplinary power...is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility.”73

Invisibility becomes doubled: not only present in antebellum slave religion, but also found in this new nation that carries with it the “memory of its past.”74 The invisibility of the black church, which is constantly being undone by scholars of black religion who seek to write into blackness into the archive, does not actually resolve: black religion remains

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not fully seen and certainly not fully understood. Much of the body of black religion
remains hidden, not yet fully excavated, and then trapped in a temporal distortion that
does not alter perceptions at the rate of acquisition of new knowledge.\textsuperscript{75}

Scholars of black religion, then, engage in a collective process of making the still-all-
too-invisible institution perceptible. Historian Barbara Dianne Savage concludes her study
of “the politics of black religion” by stating: “that the simplistic dichotomies that drive most
discussions about race, religion, and politics still have traction because African American
religion remains a subject of mystery, misunderstanding, and manipulation.”\textsuperscript{76} While
demonstrating that this web of unknowing has been constructed over time by a host of
commentators (African American and not) and out of many motivations (affirmative,
ambivalent, and accusatory toward black religion), Savage argues that, despite the rise of
post-denominationalism and secularism, religion remains a valuable form of cultural
currency for African Americans. As her title suggests, contours of faith forged by
generations of decades past continue to influence the contemporary political economy of
race.

Although these dichotomies persist, as Savage reveals in her analysis of Rev.
Jeremiah Wright and Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign, scholars of


black religion have been collectively committed to rendering “visible” African American religion in all of its complexity. Lincoln and Mamiya advance a dialectic devoid of “Hegelian synthesis or ultimate resolution”77 that would overturn earlier interpretive models that emphasize one pole or the other. For example, although E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Church in America* (1964) breaks ground with its sociological method, Lincoln and Mamiya argue that Frazier’s assimilation model that presents African-American Christianity as largely “anti-intellectual and authoritarian” is partial—in both senses of the word. A particular motive drives an incomplete conclusion.

Through their dialectical model, one observes both resistance and accommodation; otherworldly and this-worldly; and communal and privatistic aspects in the black church. Not long after the “Negro church” is recognized there is an (legitimate) undoing and calling into question of some of the very assumptions that define it, as the identity politics of blackness come into view. Questions of class, gender, and sexuality flood the scene alongside race in the development of the description of the so-called black church. There is great diversity in the voices that constitute the black church and black religion in the United States. Indeed there are a host of intersecting and intersectional concerns that are subsumed in this broad descriptive category.78

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Lincoln’s and Mamiya’s new paradigm builds upon trailblazing works like James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), which begins to develop a black theology of liberation that emerges out of black power nationalism, and Gayraud Wilmore’s *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (1973), which troubles conceptions of the passivity of African-American religion. The process of articulation, revision and re-articulation, suggests a dynamic unfolding of the religious history of blackness that is at least once being written and rewritten virtually at the same time. The pace at which this history comes into the present is both staggering and slow: the richness of the African American religious terrain has received so little attention, especially from non-black scholars, and when it finally comes into consideration the waters flow with great rapidity.

Sernett draws together a representative cross-section of primary sources that undermine the uniformity of black religious expressions and the conformity of their disparate aims. He introduces the collection by saying, “the study of African American religious history needs no special warrant. The story is self-authenticating, bearing its own witness to the travail and triumph of the human spirit.”\(^7\) It is in and for itself, to borrow Hegel’s formulation. In a manner of speaking (and, in contrast to Lincoln and Mamiya’s formulation), in telling this story, scholars of black religion are executing a phenomenology of spirit of black religion.

*Telling the (Sexual) Story of Spirit*

The intrinsic (and perhaps obvious) irony is that the once (and still) invisible “black

\(^7\) Sernett, *African American Religious History*, 1.
sacred cosmos” that is now only just being made evident is oft characterized as “spirited.”\textsuperscript{80} The metaphor is charged with meaning. At once this descriptor speaks to a hyper-perceptibility, manifest in embodied expressions, that carries with it spectrality. The affects and effects of spirit are witnessed and still yet not understood. There is an echo of a sound not yet heard. And it repeats.

In Mays’s and Nicholson’s \textit{The Negro’s Church}, the souls and spirit of black folk permeates its institution: “The authors believe that there is in the genius or the ‘soul’ of the Negro church something that gives it life and vitality, that makes it stand out significantly above its building, creeds, rituals and doctrines, something that makes it a unique institution.”\textsuperscript{81} They outline a series of characteristics that make the black church exceptional: ownership, egalitarianism, social concern, educational and entrepreneurial empowerment, racial transcendence, and independence. In their discussion of the “freedom to relax,” Mays and Nicholson do not attach the soul to a biological determinism. That is, they argue: “If in their church services Negroes show more emotion than members of some other racial groups, it can hardly be proved that they are by nature more expressive. The explanation lies in the environmental conditions under which they live.”\textsuperscript{82}

Lincoln and Mamiya ground their now classic analysis of \textit{The Black Church in the African American Experience} (1990) with a description that I quote in its entirety:

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\textsuperscript{81} Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicolson, \textit{The Negro’s Church}, 1933 (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 278.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid, 282.
For this examination of the black sacred cosmos, a deciphering of the frenzy [of W.E.B. Du Bois] is particularly important. Like most observers and visitors to black worship services, Du Bois was referring to the intense enthusiasm and the open display of emotions and feeling exhibited by the worshippers. Some worshipers ‘got the Spirit’ and were propelled to a paroxysm of shouting. While others ‘fell out’ and rolled on the floor in a shaking, trance-like state, possessed by the Holy Ghost. Some people stood in the pews and waved their hands over their heads, while others clapped their hands in time with the music. Even in the midst of the preaching, the worshippers carried on a dialogue with the preacher shouting approval and agreement with ejaculations like “Amen!” or “Preach it!” or “Tell it like it is!” At other times they encouraged the preacher to work harder to reach that precipitating point of cathartic climax by calling out, “Well?...” “Well?” The highlight of the service was to worship and glorify God by achieving the experience of mass catharsis; a purifying explosion of emotions that eclipses the harshness of reality for a season and leaves both the preacher and the congregation drained in a moment of spiritual ecstasy. Failure to achieve this experience often resulted in polite compliments of “good talk” or “good lecture,” and not the ultimate, “You preached today!” being offered the preacher. The Black Church was the first theater in the black community. Like the Greek theater its functional goal was catharsis, but beyond the Greeks, the Black Church was in search of transcendence, not a mere emptying of the emotions, but an enduring fellowship with God in which the formal worship service provided the occasion for particular periods of intimacy.

Lincoln’s and Mamiya’s description of the ‘theatrical’ form of black church worship begs the question: What is performed “in search of transcendence” beyond mere catharsis?

To be sure, the erotic overtones of the Spirit-induced frenzy—defined by ejaculation, climax, and hardening—cannot be lost on the audience. In this process of cathartic release that places the worshipper in communion with God, the interplay between the erotic and emotive suggests the inseparability of sex, sexuality, and spirituality. The gendered spaces of the pulpit and the pew (and often, these sexist spaces) place in stark relief who is free enough to dance, shout, and be possessed. Du Bois’s observations of

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pedestrian and proletariat features of the southern revival become a normative depiction of African-American worship, according to Lincoln and Mamiya.

The showing up of black religion on the world stage has been the task of black religious scholarship, from James Cone’s black liberation theology and his fiery indictment of Eurocentric theology’s erasure of the African-American experience to Charles Long’s interrogation of significations of the other in *Religionswissenschaft*.86 The writing and enactment of a new dramatic overture, with its new cast, script, and score, offers a much different insight into the lives of black people when they become subjects, and not objects, ‘capable’ of self-(re)presentation.

When the storyteller has lived the story from the inside out, three-dimensionality results; the flattened and obscured object begins to breathe. Paulla Ebron, in *Performing Africa* (2002), narrates:

> The literature on representation reminds us that we have learned to imagine regions through repetitive tropes...to speak of performance as a trope of representation requires of back-and-forth engagement between discursive analysis and attention to performance itself. Performance is a mode through which representation is enacted and negotiated...Performance brings representation to life.87

In using the status and vulnerability of Africa in global geopolitics and international development as a point of departure, Ebron makes the case that “The Africa” is performed in many ways, by those Africans and non-Africans alike, for altruistic and entrepreneurial purposes. In this complex relationship, there is no homogeneity and no simple dichotomies between victims and victors/oppressors, Africa and West, objects and subjects.


Rather, in the performance, roles, scenes, and stages change. Performance, vis-à-vis the persona of the *jali*, is a form of re-presentation in which the acted upon becomes the actor, thus complicating any perceived simplistic, dichotomized power dynamic. She uses *jaliya* (the art of story-telling, history-making) performed by *jali* as the central means of unraveling complex vertical and horizontal, temporal and spatial relationships. Jali are professionals who have a personal and social agenda to shape the history of The Gambia, and thus they become curators of tradition and commodifiers of cultures. At the same time, one might argue that they are exploited and participate in an increasingly international music industry; they exploit their power within and without the Gambian context.

The most prominent representation of spirit with respect to African Americans is, no doubt, Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, which represents a turning point in black letters.\(^8^8\) It becomes an archetype that heretofore defines the image of African Americans from within and without. *Souls* is an *apologia*; theologically speaking, “a defense of the hope within you” (1 Peter 4:13). It is a tactic to render visible the humanity that has been “hidden in plain sight,” the promise of which will cast in greater relief below.

Du Bois exposes to white audiences the inherent worth and value, the *imago dei*, that white oppression has obscured. Through this symbolic language Du Bois gives voices to the collective utterance of a people: I have a soul and I will be seen. The interplay between religion and race makes repeated reference to the trope of spirit. In a later work, Du Bois goes further: “How the fine sweet spirit of black folk, despite superstition and passion has breathed the soul of humility and forgiveness into the formalism and cant of

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American religion.” To claim soul is the counter the charge of soullessness and is spiritual warfare against powers and principalities in high places (Ephesians 6:12). It is like Audre Lorde’s writing of poetry: it is not a luxury, it is for survival.

In the same year of Souls’ publication, Du Bois joins with Mary Church Terrell and Kelly Miller in the concluding the Eighth Atlanta Conference:

We are passing through that critical period of religious evolution when the low moral and intellectual standard of the past and the curious custom of emotional fervor are no longer attracting the young and ought in justice to repel the intelligent and the good. At the same time religion of mere reason and morality will not alone supply the dynamic spiritual inspiration and sacrifice....No matter what destiny awaits the race, Religion is necessary either as a solvent or as a salve.

According to their findings, neither static religion nor emotional religion will contribute to the uplift of the race. Du Bois points acutely to the role of black religion in black liberation. In fact, because of this association, Du Bois has been viewed as an ally of black radical religion and a forerunner of black liberation theology. It is to this relationship that we now turn.

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91 Du Bois, The Negro Church: Report of a Social Study Made under the Direction of Atlanta University, 1903 (Walnut Creek: AltaMiraPress, 2003), 207.


*How the fine sweet spirit of black folk, despite superstition and passion has breathed the soul of humility and forgiveness into the formalism and cant of American religion.*

Q: Why do you shout?
A: I shout because I just feel the spirit come on me.
Q: How does it feel?
A: When the spirit comes on you it feels just like a bucket of water has been poured on me.
Q: What is the spirit?
A: The spirit is the grace of God. When the preacher starts to telling the things you know is true and have experienced, it makes you feel so good you feel like shouting.
– interview with black worshipper

In 1829 David Walker made his famous *Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*. Perhaps the greatest abolitionist manifesto ever written, Walker’s *Appeal* declared with heightened urgency the heinous nature of chattel slavery and the undeniable obligation of black people throughout the diaspora to topple it. This trailblazing abolitionist treatise refuted gradualism and claimed black agency to guide the demise of that (not so) “peculiar institution.”

Walker was a member of the May Street Methodist Episcopal Church, home to the Methodists of black Boston, stop on the Underground Railroad, and predecessor of the present-day Union United Methodist Church. Active in the anti-slavery and desegregation movements, in 1949, famed educator Mary McLeod Bethune keynoted the formal dedication of the congregation’s ministry at its new South End location, having moved from the West End through Roxbury during the migration of black Boston.

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The following year, in 1950, Thurgood Marshall presided over the national convention of W.E.B. Du Bois’s National Association for the Advancement of Colored People at Union—at its final meeting at a church—which voted to pursue “the complete destruction of all enforced segregation...in American public education from top to bottom—from law school to kindergarten,” a decision that culminated in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. Since then, the congregation has played important roles in resisting South African apartheid, promoting economic development, and welcoming queer folk into sacred religious space, becoming the first black Methodist church to do so officially in 2000.

Boston’s historic Union no doubt inherits its liberation legacy from its May Street forerunner: its contemporary work deeply grounded in a 200 year-old bold witness of freedom and autonomy. In 1796, black members of the predominately white Bromfield Street Methodist Episcopal Church of Beacon Hill began gathering freely and independently for worship, prayer, and scripture study because “whites were uncomfortable with the African style of worship, with its vigorous singing, swaying, and hand clapping, shouting and praying aloud in the Spirit.” As their movement and independence grew, this church-within-a-church petitioned the bishop for its own pastor, calling the Rev. Samuel Snowden, a former Carolina slave, from Portland, Maine. And in 1818, the May Street (later Revere Street) Church was formed.


Union United Methodist Church, “Our History,” http://unionboston.org/about/history (accessed June 1, 2016).
This groundbreaking church, which spiritually nurtured Walker, the trailblazing pamphleteer, exists today largely because it was too exuberant—too African—for its white midwife. Its spirit was not a gift, but a curse, to compatriots. As a result, the liturgical expressiveness catalyzed the emergence of an independent congregation committed to the liberation and the emancipation struggle. Social progress for African Americans was not antithetical to freedom in the Spirit, but rather contingent upon such liberty.

In this chapter, I explore the tenuous relationship between charismata and the black liberation struggle. Giving special attention to how the demonstrative becomes demonic in the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois and other prominent black men of letters, I trace the role of rational spirit in the emergence of black theologies of liberation. For Du Bois, the gift of spirit that animates the gift of black folk is not khárisma, the “freely given gift of grace,” that blew through the Azusa Street Revival (1906-1912) and birthed modern Pentecostalism. Although there has been a recent revival of interest in the religious imagination of Du Bois, his articulation of soul and spirit are not to be mistaken for the ecstatic expression of southern revivals that he abhorred.

While examining how 20th century black theology engages Du Bois as a source for its liberation project, I will interrogate some dangers and bequeaths in claiming Du Bois as a ground for a constructive theological imagination. At the same time that the Du Boisian genius opens new vistas, it also forecloses other possibilities: his pathologizing of ecstatic black religion, particularly the charismatic “frenzy,” fits, and shouts, narrows the field of view for black theological thought. When black theology appropriates Du Bois’s color line

Next, I correlate the absence of pneumatology in black theological thought with black intellectuals’ attempt to regulate “frenzied” bodies. As black theology takes up Du Bois and the “problem of the color line,” it prioritizes the “person” of Jesus to the exclusion of the “person” of the Holy Spirit. I contend that this theological turn toward Jesus \textit{qua} incarnate God is nothing short of an exorcism.

Still, I believe there is great promise in the appropriation of Du Bois, when corrected for his anti-charismatic sentiment. Thus, having presented an account of rational spirit in Du Bois, I adjust for his obsession with respectability and offer a pneumatological intervention that responds to the aforementioned limitations of black theology, thus paving the way for deeper engagement with “spiritual things” in this Age of Spirit.
2.1. Sibling Rivalry: Black Theology and the African-American Radical Tradition

In 1975 the private debate between brothers Cecil Wayne and James Hal Cone went public. The basic question at stake: Was black theology black enough? Understood as the liberation-oriented articulation of Christian faith from the African-American standpoint, black theology has been under development since 1966. It comes of age in James Cone’s writings, most notably *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970). Still, according to his brother, writing in *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (1975), black theology failed to ground itself in black religion. Cecil Cone argued that Joseph Washington, James Cone, and J. Deotis Roberts disappointingly gave birth to a child for which the religious experience of African Americans was not the mother.

In particular, Cecil Cone charged that the emergent black theology was overly concerned with, and thus self-conscious in the face of white academic theology and black power radicalism. These loci of origins do not represent the lived religious experience of African-American Christians, and as a result, the early expressions of black theology, according to Cecil Cone, were not ‘authentic’ to the essence of black religion. He writes: “In order to avoid the problem of identity, it is necessary for the black theologian from the very beginning to get clear in his own mind what constitutes the essential elements of black religion.”

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8 Cf. *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005). John L. Jackson, Sr. challenges the application of the term “authenticity” to willful subjects. To avoid the deployment of this term, with its essentialist trappings, Jackson instead uses “sincerity” to “add some nuance to contemporary considerations of social solidarity and identity politicking” (13).

9 Cone, *Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, 36.
Washington’s emphasis on the “quest for freedom, justice, and equality in this world” [italics in original]; Cone’s focus on liberation; and Roberts’s concern with universalism and the acceptance of black theology in the academy “distort” and distract from the true aim of black religion: worship of God derived from the African religious experience. “The divine and the divine alone occupies the position of ultimacy in black religion” and “not white people.”

James Cone accepted the challenge and altered his approach in subsequent works. Although Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation (1972) and God of the Oppressed (1975) offer Cone’s first book-length direct response to such criticism levied by his brother and others, it is really not until For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church (1984), Martin and Malcolm (1991), and Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation (1999) that his integration of black sources and norms reaches maturity. There, Cone not only taps the deep reservoir of African-American religious thought, but he also engages in the reflexive, second-order consideration that constitutes (immanent) critique.

This is to say, Cone concerns himself not only with criticizing the racism of white theology and constructing an alternative, but also he evaluates the adequacy of these constructive theological responses that he and other black theologians offer. There is a development of thought, then, from consciousness to self-consciousness to self-evaluation.

10 Ibid.,114.


In order to live up to the term “black theology,” which he coined, the product had to be both faithful to the African-American religious experience and to the discipline of theology.

Cone confesses:

One reason black theologians have not developed an enduring radical race critique stems from our uncritical identification with the dominant Christian and integrationist tradition of African-American history. We are children of the Black Church and the Civil Rights movement. The spirituals have informed our theology more than the blues, Howard Thurman more than W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., more than Malcolm X, and prominent male preachers more than radical women writers. We failed to sustain the critical side of the black theological dialectic and opted for acceptance into white Christian America.

Cone acknowledged the legitimacy of his brother’s assessment and thus sought to preserve the tension, which is the genius, of African-American religious thought.

In order to accomplish this recalibration of the dialectic, Cone suggested that he and his contemporaries needed to excavate African-American (religious) history with intensity like never before. In this act of retrieval it became clear that the pioneering historical and sociological work of W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, Benjamin Mays and J.W. Nicholson did not sufficiently fund the type of theological apparatus that was being constructed. Something else was needed. An intellectual history of the religious ideas that supported the emergent black theology was required. Cone credits Gayraud S. Wilmore with being the chief architect in this new experiment.

Wilmore’s Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans (1973) is a turning point in the study of African-American

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15 Cone, For My People, 61.

16 Ibid., 59-62.
religion, indeed pivotal in the emergence of African-American religious history as a discipline. In many ways, it is reconciliation of the Cecil Cone’s charge against the black theology of Washington, Roberts, and James Cone. That is, Wilmore’s text establishes the phenomenological connection between African-derived black religion and religious efforts for black liberation. After examining religion on the African continent, Wilmore discusses the emergence of the black church from slave religion, and its varying degrees of relationship to black nationalism.

As a first of its kind, this text begins and ends with epigraphs from one who made quite a many firsts in his storied life: William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. Like any inscription, the use of this quote to open Black Religion and Black Radicalism signals the weight that Wilmore places on Du Bois. Generally speaking, prior to hearing the author’s own voice, the epigraph is the word before the word. Du Bois is the frame, the lens through which Wilmore interprets black religion from its “African Beginnings” to apotheosis.

Quoting from The Negro (1915) at the text opening and from The Gift of Black Folk (1924) at its conclusion, Wilmore depends upon Du Bois to frame his analysis. To be clear, the scaffolding vis-à-vis Du Bois is more than anecdotally ancillary. Wilmore goes on to situate the entire black religion/black theology project by deploying one of Du Bois’s calling cards: the notion of spiritual striving. Wilmore writes:

> Since the early 1960s black believers—Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and African traditionalists—have attempted to express what they believed were some of the distinctive attributes of African American religion—the ‘spiritual strivings’ (Du Bois)—of oppressed and scattered Africans who refused to surrender their

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17 Du Bois writes: “Always Africa is giving us something new or some metempsychosis of a world-old thing. On its black bosom arose one of the earliest, if not the earliest self-protecting civilizations...Nearly every human empire that has arisen in the world, material and spiritual, has found some of its greatest crises on this continent of African...As Mommsen says, ‘It was through Africa that Christianity became the religion of the world.’” Cited in Wilmore 1, quoting from “African Culture” chapter in Du Bois’s The Negro (1915).
humanity under enslavement and never lost sight of the freedom and justice they believed were God-given.18

The liberation within black liberation theology gains significant conceptual grounding in Du Bois.

Prior to Wilmore’s intervention, Cone’s earliest articulations of this theology are largely devoid of the Du Boisian influence. Du Bois plays no explicit role in either Black Theology and Black Power or A Black Theology of Liberation. At best, perhaps, there is trace. While Cone does reference this intellectual giant in God of the Oppressed (1975), albeit scarcely, it is not until For My People (1984) that Cone gives more than the cursory mention of Du Bois, a turn which is mediated by Wilmore. Cone writes in the chapter entitled, “Black Theology as Liberation Theology”:

The key to Wilmore’s new appreciation of the autonomy of the black religious tradition—or at least one important and neglected stream of it—was W.E.B. DuBois’s The Souls of Black Folk (1903). It was DuBois who pushed him toward Africa, and Wilmore then pushed us to read John Mbiti (African Religions and Philosophy; New Testament Eschatology in an African Background), Bolaji Idowu (Olódùmaré: God in Yoruba Belief; Towards an Indigenous Church), Harry Sawyerr (Creative Evangelism; God: Ancestor or Creator?) and Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (editors of Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs).19

Using Cone’s framework, the radicalism of black theology begins to find footing, not externally from secular Black Power, but rather from within its own affinity group. That is, Du Bois in The Souls of Black Folk gives voice to the “spiritual strivings” of African Americans, which is subsequently interpreted as black religious experience. Liberation-oriented black theological thought therefore sources itself in a religious worldview and not a secular, political ideology.

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18 Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 23.

19 Cone, For My People, 62.
Wilmore largely treats Du Bois as a sympathizer of religion, using Du Bois’s deployment of trope “spiritual” to fund his treatment of black religion. To this end, Wilmore makes no mention of Du Bois’s deep critique of the failures of African-American Christianity. And further, Wilmore assumes that spirit-talk denotes religion. Wilmore defines:

Religious institutions such as the church, therefore are of the greatest importance...To them accrue the primary responsibility for the conservation, enhancement, and further development of that unique spiritual quality that has enabled African and black people of the diaspora to survive and flourish under some of the most unfavorable conditions of the modern world.20

The word “spiritual,” therefore, becomes the primary point of contact between Wilmore's black religion and Du Bois's black liberation.

For a moment, let us suspend the question of whether Wilmore is correct in his interpretation of Du Bois. (Wilmore’s read of Du Bois varies significantly from most of Wilmore’s contemporaries like David Lewis and Arnold Rampersad who view Du Bois as largely irreligious, or further, a secular humanist.) What is primarily important to observe here is that the pioneers of black theology turn to Du Bois—particularly his Pan-African vision—when attempting to establish black theology’s subjectivity, its “autonomy.” They observe something in his writing that lends itself to their project and appropriate its intellectual substance toward that end.

And so, just as Wilmore begins Black Religion and Black Radicalism, so he ends the text by imprinting Du Bois on it. In his concluding chapter on “Survival, Elevation, and Liberation in Black Religion,” those “distinctive attributes of African American religion,” which Wilmore documents over the course of the manuscript, participate in what Du Bois

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20 Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 253.
describes as “the gift of black folk.”\textsuperscript{21} The spiritual strivings, or the struggle of oppressed African Americans to maintain their humanity, gives way to free spirit.

2.2. The Spiritual Striving of Du Bois and his Critique of Religion

To say that W.E.B. Du Bois was a renaissance man is, quite simply, an understatement. While he characteristically moved through disciplines, professions, and genres with ease, Du Bois birthed new frontiers in scholarship; he did not simply restart them. When more than a century now intervenes and his famed “Sketches and Essays” still captivate the hearts and minds of so many—reflection on them serving as a rite of passage for young scholars, as Henry Louis Gates notes—a more magnanimous title must be given: \textit{The Souls of Black Folk}.\textsuperscript{22}

But it is not only this literary classic that funds black theological thought. Published the same year as Souls, \textit{The Negro Church: Report of a Social Study Made under the Direction of Atlanta University; Together with the Proceedings of the Eighth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, May 26\textsuperscript{th}, 1903} stands at the head of the “black letters” concerning religion. As Du Bois does in sociology with the \textit{Philadelphia Negro} and \textit{The Suppression of the African Slave Trade} in history, \textit{The Negro Church} paves new ground—or, should I say, paves the ground—for religious scholarship of the American-American experience.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.


To be sure, the relationship of Du Bois and religion, however, is a complicated one. At once, Du Bois should be read as both a primary and a secondary source in the development of the professional discipline of black religion.\textsuperscript{24} His articulation of the vitality and direction of African-American identity, as well as his research and data on the Negro Church, a term he coined, constitute the first- and second-order material that his heirs would utilize to further construct the field. Tracing this relationship, therefore, is messy as it attends to the complexity of his position.

Du Bois was a fierce critic of black religion, specifically the Negro Church that he studied, which is apparent when following both trajectories. “Our religion with all of its dogma, demagoguery, and showmanship, can be a center to teach character, right conduct and sacrifice,” maintains Du Bois in his “Talented Tenth Memorial Address” at Wilberforce (1948),\textsuperscript{25} the site of the infamous event that haunted his career.\textsuperscript{26} Although theologians and religious historians, at least since the 1970s, have interpreted Du Bois as a constructive resource for developing their disparate positions, canonical interpreters of Du Bois generally sidelined any descriptive account of Du Bois’s relationship to religion.

Most have taken Du Bois’s attack on the rigidity and performativity of black religion as grounds for its dismissal, and as a result have generally marginalized religion in their treatments of his oeuvre and legacy. Relatedly, although there has been much attention given to the trajectories Du Bois births, there has been little attention to the philosophical

\textsuperscript{24} Curtis Evans, \textit{The Burden of Black Religion} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).


traditions to which he is indebted. Given Du Bois’s sustained use of “souls” and “spirit” as axial themes, which undoubtedly have theological lineage and religious significance, this omission is quite conspicuous.

David Levering Lewis in his herculean biography concludes that by the time Du Bois finished Fisk he had lost the faith of his childhood and rested in “serene agnosticism.”  

Adolph Reed slams Manning Marable’s characterization of Du Bois as a “public agnostic” as being too generous, thus emphasizing a form of irreligiosity. Arnold Rampersad points to the “instability of his religion” citing it as “now agnostic, now atheistic.” Too, Shamoon Zamir claims that Du Bois was an “unreligious New Englander.” While some remain disciples of this approach and continue to announce flatly with Phil Zuckerman that “Du Bois ultimately rejected Christianity,” increasingly a congregation of dissenters has emerged and reveal nuances in Du Bois and, more broadly, how complicated the question

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27 David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Holy, 1993), 65-67. Lewis goes on to argue that during his Wilberforce professorship “Du Bois’s religious views were wholly decoupled from orthodox Christianity and from any notion of a personal deity. At best, he recognized a vague presence manifesting itself in laws slowly revealed through science—a force best expressed in Hegelianisms such as *Weltgeist* (world spirit) or *Dasein* (presence) and above all in private without emotion” (166). As we will see below, this presumption is now rife with challenge. Not only is there deeper assessment to the actuality and implications of this “decoupling”, but also further unpacking of the relationship of theology and Hegelianisms.


33 Perhaps the raging debate points less to Du Bois himself than to the “instability” of his interpreters. This is to say, I believe scholarship on Du Bois’s religious sensibility has suffered for several reasons: First, many
of religion *always* already is.\textsuperscript{34}

Although conventional scholarship on Du Bois has mainly overlooked the religious texture in his writings, in recent years new interest has emerged. Some scholars have attended to his own practices and the nature of his own ‘faith’ while others have traced, as of late, Du Bois’s influence on black religion. Edward J. Blum in *W.E.B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (2007) and Jonathon S. Kahn in *Divine Discontent: The Religious Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois* (2009) have given the most sustained attention to the “religious” in Du Bois. While Blum focuses more on Du Bois’s persona, describing him as a “hero with a black face,” a “dark monk,” “spiritual father” and ultimately a “prophet,” Kahn takes a different approach, situating the religious contours of Du Bois’s writings within broader schools of thought. This “religious imagination” is not solely of Du Bois’s own making, but rather participate in the jeremiad tradition of black nationalism and the religious naturalism of American pragmatism.

Blum demonstrates “that many of Du Bois’s contemporaries approached him as a sacred figure, an American prophet with insight into cosmic realities,” and one “who used

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\textsuperscript{34} See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1962). In chapter five particularly, the founder of Harvard’s undergraduate concentration in religion, makes the case that “religion” as a concept is inadequate because it tends to obscure diversity and the dynamic and historically-situated lives of people of faith. There is never a Christianity, but always Christianities as developed and lived by certain people under certain conditions. He recommends talking about “religious” people and traditions instead of the singular and misleading “religion.” Although, for the sake of simplicity I continue to use “religion” at times I maintain Smith’s understanding of the internal diversity within the term.
religious idioms to wrestle control of black selfhood away from whites.”35 While Blum does not try to determine what (if anything) “a deeply spiritual Du Bois” believed religiously, noting that Du Bois was exceedingly coy, he is interested in what he did with religion and how others viewed him as a sage. That being said, Blum contends, “The irreligious Du Bois presented by so many historians, especially David Lewis, is a mythical construction that serves the purposes of the secularized academy far more than elucidates the ideas and beliefs of Du Bois.”36

Kahn adds to Blum’s contributions, asserting: “My deeper claim is that Du Bois’s writings exhibit a spiritual life of their own—that in light of his vast and powerfully engaged use of religious modalities, a portion of Du Bois’s work expresses a deep religiosity or religious sensibility.”37 Vis-à-vis Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblance,” Kahn argues that, in Du Bois’s case, the spiritual is the religious. This is to say, the relentless use of religious language by Du Bois, his own religious faith notwithstanding, constitutes the religious nature of his works. Beyond mere rhetoric, Kahn views Du Bois’s religious language as metaphorical albeit non-metaphysical. Du Bois “uses the language of religion not to reflect on God’s nature but to urge changes in this-worldly realities such as justice, mortality, love, guilt, and hope—though always shaped by the circumpressure of politics and race.”38

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36 Ibid., 10-11.


38 Ibid., 19.
In the end, Kahn situates Du Bois as the progenitor of an “African American pragmatic religious naturalism,” a tradition inclusive of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *The Fire Next Time*, and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. According to Kahn these texts reveal that religion can promote a “beautiful uncertainty,” which “attempts to replace certainty as the source of deep human meaning with indeterminacy and ambiguity.”³⁹ In this light, it is not a far leap to bring Du Bois’s spiritual strivings alongside notions of divine mystery.

Curtis Evans in *The Burden of Black Religion* insightfully demonstrates various contours in the depiction of African-American religious experience in the development of professional discipline of black religion. His goal is to complicate its image, revealing the pressures endured by black religion—from without and within. In this critical history Evans illustrates how black scholars utilize social scientific approaches to reframe African-American religion (in this case, the Negro Church) as a social institution for uplift, distancing it from pathological depictions of the innate religiosity of African Americans that supported claims of black inferiority.

Not surprisingly, in the history that Evans presents, Du Bois plays a crucial role: he is both creator and critic. Evans writes:

> Du Bois slipped through the constraints of the academy, embraced the life of a ‘propagandist,’ and entered real-world debates about race, religion, and culture. However, his impatience with the racism in American culture led him not only to criticize white scholars and their biased interpretations of black religion but also engage in a normative religious assessment of the very people that he had sought to help. Du Bois’s implicit and sometimes explicit normative religious critique of African American religious was steeped in many ways in the social scientist discourse of primitive races that he set out to refute.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid., 134, 135.

The infamous twoness and double consciousness that frames Souls is written on Du Bois himself. In a way, Evans claims, he is unable to escape the struggle and wrestling that he observes in others.

In order to apprehend Du Bois’s influence on black religion and to deploy his work as a theological resource, it is not necessary to categorize him as an adherent. Neither is it essential to position him antithetically to black Christianity. Terrence Johnson offers a helpful assessment, with which I agree:

Defining Du Bois as an agnostic, atheist, or believer oversimplifies his tenacious battle with the realm of transcendence and the earthly constructions of God and of Jesus. Throughout Du Bois’s audacious intellectual and political life, black religion and the questions of the supernatural flooded his political imagination.41

In fact, it is this type of binarism that undermines our capacity to mobilize his scholarship in contemporary struggles for justice.

This recent archaeological work has excavated a Du Bois that we have heretofore not seen, giving a more complete picture of his worldview, all these while giving rise to a new genealogy of black religion.42 In many ways, this dynamic participates in the ongoing process that is a reinterpretation of religion itself.43 Increasingly the hard-and-fast line between the sacred and the profane is blurred, and the boundaries of religiosity and

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secularity become more porous. “Spirit” is the locus of this loosening. In our relentless “spiritual, not religious” age, and given the explosion of charismatic Pentecostalism, it seems that there might yet be more to learn from Du Bois, given his enduring dependency on the “spiritual” language to articulate his black uplift strategy. At the same time, however, Du Bois’s indictment of shouting, or the “running sperichils,” further complicates the landscape.44

A Terrible Spirit of the Frenzy

Despite the ambiguity of Du Bois’s own faith, his normative assessment of black religion comes into stark relief in his description of southern Christian revival camp meeting in Souls. At the start of his essay “Of the Meaning of Progress,” Du Bois quotes Friedrich Schiller, saying, “Deine Geister sende aus!” But later in Souls, in his essay “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” Du Bois indicts the charismatic works of the Holy Spirit, saying, “A sort of suppressed terror hung in the air [of the southern revival] and seemed to seize us,—a pythian madness, a demoniac possession that lent terrible reality to song and word.”45 With this flourish in language, Du Bois does not seem comfortable with whatever is going on there—it is wild, wicked, and whelming—even though it stirred up “when the Spirit of the Lord passed by.”

44 Raboteau, Slave Religion, 73.

What is to be made of this assessment? While it is tempting to dismiss this commentary as “mere rhetoric,” I agree with Kahn who takes seriously Du Bois’s religious symbolism, if nothing else because of its endurance.\footnote{Cf. Elizabeth A. Pritchard’s “Seriously, What Does ‘Taking Religion Seriously’ Mean?”, \textit{Journal of the American Academy of Religion} 78:4 (2010), 1087-1111.} This description of the southern revival, which appears in \textit{Souls} of the early part of his oeuvre, remains largely unaltered in \textit{The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois}, written in his ninth decade and published posthumously. In this light, I read “Of the Faith of the Fathers” and “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” as a pair (much like Luke-Acts), placing them in context of his overall project of elevating the so-called masses through education.

For Du Bois, as well as another prominent critic of ecstatic black Christianity, Bishop Alexander Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, charismatic expressions like “running sperichils” distract from the illuminating capacity of religion, which he views in positivist fashion, or, if not positivist, in an Enlightenment and progressive fashion. While the “sorrow songs” were “the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people,”\footnote{\textit{Souls} 122.} for Du Bois they still had not reached apotheosis. A more rational spirit manifested in a more sophisticated religious apparatus that represented the fullest development of this greatest gift. In contemporary vernacular, the spirituals were a gift card, whose full value would remain unrealized until redeemed through education.

“The Negro Church,” according to Du Bois, is the first and most important African-American entity, predating even the Negro family. Before black folk had control of their households, due to the treacheries of slavery, they had the “invisible institution.” In
particular, Du Bois depicts the African Methodist Church as “the greatest Negro organization in the world.” As a result, the church played an indispensible role in the advancement of black folk. But according to Du Bois, in order to facilitate this forward march, the church had to leave behind its backward practices. Advancement was predicated on black folk distancing themselves from terrorizing practices experienced in the southern revival. In a word, the Negro Church had to undergo self-alienation.

This move is ironic (and complicated) because at the same time Du Bois affirms Africa—promulgating Pan-Africanism, himself eventually expatriating and dying in Ghana—his demonizing of ecstatic black religion participates in the condemnation of Africa. In the attempt to overcome debilitating white racism, Du Bois and others contribute to a racist logic. To be sure, his notion of backward African religious practices participates in primitivism.

Moreover, Du Bois, who also at times depends on essentializing logic (“Conservation of the Races,” for example), wants to re-form the very essence of black religion. Du Bois writes:

Three things characterized this religion of the slave,—the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy...the Frenzy of “Shouting,”” when the Spirit of the Lord passed by, and, seizing the devotee, made him mad with supernatural joy, was the last essential of Negro religion and the one more devoutly believed in than all the rest. It varied in expression from the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor,—the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms, the weeping and laughing, the vision and the trance.

48 Ibid., 94.


50 Du Bois, Souls, 91.
These elements persist in the southern revival, which is the point of departure for the essay, providing the firsthand evidence that he places in continuity with slave religion. “Those who have not thus witnessed the frenzy of a Negro revival in the untouched backwoods of the South can but dimly realize the religious feeling of the slave; as described, such scenes appear grotesque and funny, but as seen they are awful.”\(^{51}\) To be sure, the southern revival leaves an impression on Du Bois, and not in a good way. His choice of words—demoniac, mad/madness, terror, terrible—do not suggest appreciation.\(^{52}\)

Such is also the case with African Methodist Episcopal Church Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne. His *Recollections of Seventy Years* (1888) provides a riveting autobiographical account of his encounter with ecstatic Christianity at “Mother Bethel” in Philadelphia, the denomination’s founding congregation. It is one of the earliest and clearest descriptions of anti-charismatic intellectualism in black Christianity, deployed in the struggle for African-American empowerment.

In many ways, Richard Allen’s Bethel represents an original location of black agency: Emerging out of racial segregation, Allen led African-American worshippers out of St. George’s Methodist Church when they were forced to interrupt altar prayer and instructed to return to the balcony ‘where they belonged’ in 1794. Although Mother Bethel

\(^{51}\) Ibid.

\(^{52}\) Stephanie Shaw, in her chapter “The Religion and Songs of Souls,” argues against the conventional reading of Du Bois’s description of the revival that concludes he was unable to identify with “the folk.” Contrary to Cornel West’s assessment in *The Future of the Race*, Shaw interprets “awful” in the affirmative, but provides a scant dictionary definition to defend this counter-position. Had she taken up, perhaps, Rudolf Otto’s assessment of *mysterium tremendum* in *The Idea of the Holy*, there might be a better grounding for such assertion. But that would not jive so well with Du Bois’s notion of religion-as-development, since Otto’s concept of the numinous *grows out of awe qua terror*. Further, as I will consider below, I remain unconvinced by her judgment that the spirituals represent Hegel’s Absolute Knowing, which depends upon affirming Du Bois affirming the frenzy. While Shaw’s overall analysis is remarkable, it ignores the role of positivism in Du Bois and Hegel. Stephanie Shaw, *W.E.B. Du Bois and The Souls of Black Folk* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 115-158.
initially stood in fellowship with the Methodist Episcopal Church, in 1816 Allen and others formed the first independent African-American denomination.

In May 1888, Bishop Payne, the senior episcopal leader, visits Mother Bethel in order to show:

how England had become great by habitually making her people read the Scriptures on Sunday in the great congregations; and how the colored race, who had been oppressed for centuries through ignorance and superstition, might become intelligent, Christian, and powerful through the enlightening and sanctifying influences of the word of God.  

Payne provides an extended description of the “praying and singing bands”, and explanation of why he considers it “heathenish,” “fanatical,” “evil,” and “disgraceful.” To Payne, this “Voodoo Dance” represents a pre-Christian practice that interferes with the progress of black folk. Not only does Payne interrupt the “ring shout”, but also he instructs the parish pastor and others to forbid such practice in the future.

Not everyone agreed, however, and were reluctant to “desist and to sit down and sing in a rational manner.” The praying and singing band, in their view, was the very mechanism for advancing the Christian agenda. The band leader contested:

“Sinners won’t get converted unless there is a ring.” Payne responds: Said I: “You might sing till you fell down dead, but you would fail to convert a single sinner, because nothing by the Spirit of God and the word of God can convert sinners.” He replied: “The Spirit of God works upon people in different ways. At camp-meeting there must be a ring here, a ring there, a ring over yonder, or sinners will not get converted.” This was his idea, and it was also that of many others.

Likewise, Du Bois’s “study of Negro religion as development” advocates, then, for the continued ‘evolution’ away from this terrible “heathenism” toward an ethical religion that improves the sociopolitical lot of black folk. That is, black religion must concern itself


54 Ibid., 254.
primarily in addressing the “Negro Problem,” which actually is the “problem of the color line.” This is precisely why James Cone and others will later mobilize Du Bois in the formation of black theology, although Cecil Cone maintains black Christianity is not foremost about liberation but rather worship.

Du Bois discusses Payne in *The Negro Church*, so it is probable that he is also familiar with Payne’s own position. Although Payne wants to rid black Methodism of its ecstatic extremism, Du Bois offers an interesting description of the senior bishop: “The goodness of the older class developed toward intense, almost ascetic piety, represented pre-eminently in the late Daniel Payne, a man of almost fanatic enthusiasm, of simple and pure life and unstained reputation, and of great intellectual ability.” While Du Bois does not elaborate on the nature of “this almost fanatic enthusiasm” we can be sure that it does not involve the demonstrative praise he sought to root out for rational religious expression. For both Payne and Du Bois, intellect was paramount, and was the primary gift of [the] spirit.

Interestingly, spirit-talk describes religious progress for Du Bois. During slavery heathenism, he judges, was defined by a “spirit of revolt and revenge filled [the] heart” of the Negro *qua* “religious animal.” Originally resisting slavery with this animalistic rage, the enslaved Negro is domesticated by an intensely fatalistic Christianity. He writes:

> The Negro, losing the joy of this world, eagerly seized upon the offered conceptions of the next; the avenging Spirit of the Lord enjoining patience in this world, under sorrow and tribulation until the Great Day when He should lead His dark children home,—this became his comforting dream.

This dream is realized in Emancipation and ushers in the next epoch of black religion.

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Although there is development, from heathen spirit of revolt to the fatalistic Spirit of the Lord, one should note that the latter is not “Holy Spirit”, given its awful manifestations. While in Christian doctrine, the “Spirit of the Lord” is synonymous with the “Holy Spirit,” Du Bois does not attach such respect. In fact, despite the historical metanarrative of black religion’s development, in the southern revival the Lord’s Spirit stirs up the past heathenism. If anything, the Spirit of the Lord is indeed very much an Unholy Ghost.

Noting the difficulty of describing “the present critical stage of Negro religion,” ultimately Du Bois observes a divided ethical orientation in black Christianity: northern anarchistic radicalism against southern hypocritical accommodationalism—neither of which is adequate for further black progress. Using the familiar language of “doubling” introduced in “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” he positions the next movement of spirit to resolve the “double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to presence or to revolt, to hypocrisy or radicalism.”

In his Autobiography Du Bois places his assessment of black revival religion in context of his broader education-based platform for the betterment of the African-American community. Du Bois’s chapter, “I Go South” recounts his studies at Fisk University and teaching in rural Tennessee, prior to his matriculation at Harvard College where he would receive his second bachelor’s degree. It is here that he encounters the southern revival that leaves its mark on his conscience. In this rendition, Du Bois quotes himself from Souls again describing the revival as a “pythian madness, a demoniac possession.”

57 Ibid., 96.
This time, however, Du Bois is less interested in schematizing black religion, or the 
“faith of the fathers,” than he is in educating the masses beyond the “dark fatalism.” It is 
through education that African Americans might achieve all that which they had been 
denied. He writes:

I have called my community a world, and so its isolation made it. There was among 
us but a half-awakened common consciousness, sprung from common joy and grief, 
at burial, birth or wedding; from a common hardship in poverty, poor land and low 
wages; and, above all, from the sight of the Veil that hung between us and Opportunity.58

Du Bois go on to lament his inability to go immediately to Harvard, because of the lower 
standards of his high school, thus requiring more preparation. The time spent in the South, 
however, was far from a waste. In fact, it was there that Du Bois “became aware, once a 
chance to go to a group of young people of my own race was opened up for me, of the 
spiritual isolation in which I was living.”59 Moreover, there he began his program of racial 
uplift: “Black folk were bound in time to play a large role in the South. They needed trained 
leadership. I was sent to help furnish it,” he writes.60 Later he goes on to expand:

The net result of the Fisk interlude was to broaden the scope of my program of life, 
not essentially to change it; to center it in a group of educated Negroes, who from 
their knowledge and experience would lead the mass. I never for a moment 
dreamed that such leadership could ever be for the sake of the educated group itself, 
but always for the mass. Nor did I pause to enquire in just what ways and with what 
technique we would work—first, broad, exhaustive knowledge of the world; all 
other wisdom, all method and application would be added unto us.61

Du Bois's time in the South very much shaped his outlook toward black progress and black 
religion. Religion, then, must also be respectable.

58 Du Bois, Autobiography, 76.
59 Ibid., 67.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 78.
While condemning its failures, still Du Bois saw the hope of black religion. Indeed as Du Bois outlines “a planned program” for the uplift of black people, he includes “The Negro Church.”\textsuperscript{62} Thus, Du Bois saw the potential for black religion to be a participant in black advancement, just as it had been critical in shaping black identity during and in the wake of slavery. In order to do so, however, black religion had to lose its enslavement to “dogma, demagoguery, and showmanship,” as well as its so-called primitivity. 

Returning to Evans’s language, the “burden” involves black religion’s distancing of itself from itself. “Eager to turn their backs on a shameful Southern past, which they saw as a locus of otherworldly and primitive religion,” Evans writes, “they [black leaders] vehemently sought to influence black church leaders to pool resources of the churches to help an oppressed and downtrodden people.”\textsuperscript{63} Du Bois stood at the forefront of this project in shaping religious respectability.

\textbf{Negotiating Black Respectability}

Cornel West in “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization” goes to task on Du Bois’s respectability. While acknowledging the enormous and definitive contributions of “this great titan of black emancipation,” the “brook of fire through which we must all pass in order to gain access to the intellectual and political weaponry needed to sustain the radical

\textsuperscript{62} Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham makes clear that the black church “was the one space truly accessible to the black community, and it was this characteristic that led W.E.B. Du Bois, long before E. Franklin Frazier, to identify the black church as a multiple site—at once being a place of worship, theater, publishing house, school, and lodge.” \textit{Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 7.

\textsuperscript{63} Evans, \textit{The Burden of Black Religion}, 176.
democratic tradition in our time,” West ultimately judges Du Bois’s Enlightenment rationality, Victorian elitism, and American exceptionalist optimism as a liability. West concludes:

He certainly saw, analyzed, and empathized with black sadness, sorrow, and suffering. But he didn’t feel it in his bones deeply enough, nor was he intellectually open enough to position himself alongside the sorrowful, suffering, yet striving ordinary black folk.

West points to Du Bois’s response to the southern revival as case-in-point: “In short, a black ritualistic explosion of energy frightened this black rationalist.” I concur with West that Du Bois characterizes charismatic Christianity as antithetical to black rationalism, a necessary component of social empowerment.

It is worth noting that Stephanie Shaw thinks that West is mistaken in his assessment, which signals a key interpretative challenge in reading Du Bois. On the one hand, West points to Du Bois as a prophetic pragmatist standing in the American philosophical tradition. On the other hand, Shaw and Shamoon Zamir trace the Hegelian stream in Du Bois’s Souls; West finds Zamir’s analysis ultimately “fascinating, yet ultimately unconvincing.” In this chapter’s subsequent sections, I will expound upon approaching Du Bois through these two schools of thought. But first, let us complicate the meaning of respectability vis-à-vis Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s Righteous Discontent as way of further framing my approach.

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65 Ibid., 58.

66 Ibid., 60.

Gilroy’s theory of diaspora, which has deeply shaped black cultural studies, takes up double consciousness, interpreting it not according to strict binarism but rather in terms of layered complexity. The text begins, “Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness.” Ultimately, Gilroy advocates a diasporic approach that depends upon the coherence of multiple identities and aims within a particular person, position, or politics.

His “Black Atlantic” is a counterculture of modernity that is deeply shaped by and at the same time critical of Euro-Enlightenment norms. As will be taken up in chapter three, Gilroy’s theory mobilizes metaphors of movement, water, and ships that we will bring alongside Peter Hodgson’s interpretation of pneumatology. What concerns us now is the manner in which, vis-à-vis critique of West, Gilroy wants to ensure that readings of Du Bois reject any antinomies. Gilroy writes:

According to West, Du Bois felt that their backwardness could be remedied by an elitist and paternalist political agenda that viewed racism as an expression of stupidity and implied that progress, rational social policy, and the Victorian moral virtues advocated by the talented tenth could uplift the black masses. There is much merit in this view. To be sure, Du Bois does “provide American pragmatism what it lacks.” I do not wish to minimize these elements in Du Bois nor to overlook the proximity of his thought to Emerson and other representative American pragmatists. However, I want to suggest that this way of positioning Du Bois’s work can lead to the novelty and power of his critique of modernity being overlooked.

Du Bois’s double consciousness, according to Gilroy, epitomizes the countercultural mode: reshaping from within the very thing that has shaped the reformer.

Higginbotham, in her groundbreaking text, interprets black Baptist women’s respectability as an exercise of authority and power. It was an everyday mode by which


69 Ibid., 136.
black women could exert control over their individual and communal lives. At once, an aspiration to bourgeois Victorian ideals, a promotion of strict Christian morality, and a panoptic policing of nonconformity, Higginbotham demonstrates that it was a means by which poor, black women engaged in social uplift. “The politics of respectability,” she writes, “constituted a counter-discourse to the politics of prejudice.”

Higginbotham continues:

The politics of respectability afforded black church women a powerful weapon of resistance to race and gender subordination. It provided the very groundwork for protest, voting, and other traditional recognized forms of political activity. Thus the history of women in the black Baptist church not only challenges the historical validity of the accommodation versus protest dichotomy that has for too long dominated studies of the black church and the black community, it also challenges the authorial voice of such overarching figures as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in the consciousness of ordinary black people.

Respectability politics, in Higginbotham view, cannot be reduced to a simple “us” versus “them” dichotomy. Thus, the language of “backward” and “forward” is less about opposition than about continuity.

Higginbotham's overarching approach underscores this point: she understands the black church not according to Lincoln’s and Mamiya’s dialectical system, but rather in terms of a multiplicitous whole. She describes:

I characterize the church as a dialogic model rather than dialectical, recognizing “dynamic tension” in a multiplicity of protean and concurrent meanings and intentions more so than a series of discrete polarities. Multiple discourses—sometimes conflicting, sometimes unifying—are articulated between men and women, and within each of these two groups as well. The black church constitutes a complex body of shifting cultural, ideological, and political significations.

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71 Ibid., 227-228.

72 Ibid., 16.
Like Gilroy, Higginbotham challenges us to unpack deeply these significant concepts in apprehending African-American identity and empowerment. She offers a method that holistically integrates diversity and complexity.

In light of West, Gilroy, and Higginbotham, we might now think of Du Bois’s respectability neither as a simple turning away from southern backwardness nor as a turning toward Euro-American modern ideals. Instead, it is a complicated problematic that attempts to guarantee a better future in light of a painful past-present. While not wholesale rejection of blackness or embrace of whiteness, it attempts, however flawed, to take the “best of both worlds.”

Still the question remains: If not the charismatic spirit of the revival, what spirit, then, is Du Bois invoking? This spirit-talk attunes us to what is hallowed for Du Bois: the Geist, or rational spirit that animates the Talented Tenth. He concludes “Of the Faith of the Fathers” by stating, “between the two extreme types of ethical attitude which I have thus sought to make clear wavers the mass of the millions of Negroes, North and South; and their religious life and activity partake of this social conflict within their ranks.”73 It is the role of the “educated few” to function as the messianic saviors of the unlearned populace.

2.3. On the Care of the (Social) Soul

In the response to world missionary E. Stanley Jones’s Christ on Every Road—A study in Pentecost (1930), George Vaughan writes to Du Bois inquiring about “spirit.” Vaughn expresses dismay: “I am wondering how the present spiritual outlook reads to you. For my

73 Du Bois, Souls, 98.
part, I have been an optimist; but the later years of contact with the world, especially with
my own (legal) profession, have revealed symptoms of a discouraging indifference to the
things of the spirit.” He continues on to lament about the decay of the moral fabric of a
global society. But his probing of Du Bois is rather straightforward: Vaughan associates
spirit within a Christian evangelical framework linking Pentecost, world mission, and
morality.

Du Bois responds with insight in a letter that must be cited in its entirety:

I may say frankly that I am unable to follow the reasoning of people who use
the word ‘spirit’ and ‘spiritual’ in a technical religious sense. It is true that after any
great world calamity, when people have suffered widely, there is a tendency to
relapse into superstition, obscurantism, and the formal religion of creeds in a vague
attempt to reassure humanity, because reason and logic seem to have failed. This
instead of being a ‘spiritual awakening,’ is to my mind, an evidence of ignorance and
discouragement.

On the other hand, among some people, there comes in time of stress and
depression, an increase of determination to plan and work for better conditions.
This is not usually called a ‘spiritual’ awakening, but it is apt to be condemned by the
ignorant as ‘radicalism’ and an ‘attack’ upon the established order. It is, however, a
manifestation of the spirit in the highest sense and something of this I seem to see
beginning today.

This letter, to some extent, provides the key to unlocking the meaning of Du Bois’s
prolonged use of so-called religious phrases like spirit, soul, and spiritual striving in his
platform for black progress. In turn, it will set up our consideration of the idealist traditions
of Geistesphilosophie that inform Du Bois.

Edward Blum in the opening to W.E.B. Du Bois: American Prophet articulates in many
ways what has been hidden in plain sight: “No scholar has considered in depth the soul of
the man who first gained national recognition for a book on souls, for a book that Cornell

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75 Ibid., 477-8.
students likened to the Psalms, for a book that still inspires religious introspection.”

This is to say, despite what we consider to have been Du Bois’s own religious practices or what scholars have interpreted to be his positions to formal religion, why did Du Bois invoke the term “soul” and why does it continue to resonate in the souls of generations since? My basic response, following Blum, Kahn, and Johnson, is that Du Bois chooses souls to humanize blacks and to counter white supremacist rhetoric, as well as to inspire idealism and social (spiritual) striving.

To be clear, *Souls* is a highly complicated literary piece of “sketches and essays.” From start to finish even its most obscure selections participate in a social-political project to reimage black people *qua* people who deserve access to the America’s social and political life. He speaks into a landscape only decades removed from civil war and chattel slavery, very much in the troughs of Jim Crow and indigenous terrorism. We need not rehearse the scope of the Negro’s oppression and disadvantage; we need only to say that *Souls* stands as the cornerstone to Du Bois’s lifelong fight for black equality.

Therefore, when Arnold Rampersad correctly writes of the difficulty that subsequent generations have had with the form of particular sketches such as “Of the Coming of John” and “Of the Passing of the First-Born,” we must recapture their original function as political discourse, even if there can be “no grand claim can be made about it [the latter piece] as art.” Although “Passing” is certainly the lament of a father, it always serves as a deepening of his concept of the life within the Veil and the pervading sense of

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black hope. It is a way of complicating an already complex analysis of the “problem of the color line”, which has become Du Bois’s best known legacy.

In the eulogistic “Passing” Du Bois makes the soul content most “intimate”—flashing forward to the language he uses later when writing to Wilcox, as mentioned above—by situating his very child, literally “bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh,” behind the Veil. With all the charges of elitism and aloofness (which in no doubt contribute toward many interpretations of Du Bois’s anti-religiousness), one should not downplay this point. His call for the Talented Tenth, and later the “Guiding Hundredth,” to lead black advancement is not a matter of separation but rather the highest form of ethical responsibility, which is very much linked to a problem that he articulates in terms of his very own son. So, the “second sight,” “double consciousness,” and “twoness” that is the gift and curse of the Veil applies even to the child of the one who makes the profound assessment.

“Of the Coming of John,” which echoes the Advent story of John the baptizer and Jesus of Nazareth, too has social-political import. The transformation of black John and his ultimate demise seems to be both a clear warning to black and white people. In the former, Du Bois consciously names the alienation from popular culture that accompanies higher education of African Americans. This distance, however, is a necessary sacrifice so it seems

78 Ibid., 1.

79 Ibid., 100.

that Du Bois is imploring the prophet to understand the consequences of leadership and
the people’s graceful response.\textsuperscript{81}

Perhaps more importantly, although a bit more obscure, Du Bois warns white
America of the risks of nihilism. That is, black John becomes aware of the Veil in the North
and leaves frustrated, only to return home as an alien, is not allowed to empower his
people through education, and is left ‘enlightened’ and without options. Thus, when he
finds his sister being raped by white John, he reacts with nihilistic disregard of the
consequences and kills Jennie’s attacker “with all the pent-up hatred of his great black
arm.”\textsuperscript{82} Perhaps then through the prophetic voice of John, Du Bois releases a literary
harbinger of the result of hopelessness. Not only will black people eventually ‘react’ against
the lack of options, but also black people are warned that such rash reaction comes with
the risk—or guarantee—of death. Instead, a more calculated, sophisticated social response
on the part of whites and blacks is demanded.

The rich opening chapter to \textit{Souls}, “Of Our Spiritual Striving” teems with religious
language, with talk of salvation, faith, God, and “souls.” Describing the peculiar plight of the
black artist and \textit{savant} Du Bois writes:

\begin{quote}
The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-
dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist;
for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger
audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people. This
waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought
sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand thousand people,—
has sent them often wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at
times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves.\textsuperscript{83}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{81} Du Bois, \textit{Souls}, 110-120.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 119.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 4.
At the close of the essay after speaking of “broader, deeper, higher culture of gifted minds and pure hearts,” “love,” and “freedom,” Du Bois concludes:

Merely a concrete test of the underlying principles of the great republic is the Negro problem, and the spiritual striving of the freed-men's sons is the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race, in the name of this the land of their fathers' fathers, and in the name of human opportunity. And now what I have briefly sketched in large outline let me on coming pages tell again in many ways, with loving emphasis and deeper detail, that men may listen to the striving in the souls of black folk.84

For Du Bois, the language of souls is a way of countering the Negro as problem. Du Bois proposes to transcend the color line by articulating blacks as folks with souls and as soulful people. For him, the language of “souls” unlocks the best traits of humanity while overcoming its destructive shortcomings.

Blum in his chapter “Race as Cosmic Sight in The Souls of Black Folk” fashions Souls as a direct response to the manner in which black people were seen as less than human. Because religion, particularly Christian theology, conspired with white supremacists to legitimate slavery and broader racist ideology, Du Bois reverses—recall again the notion of doubling—this trend and turn the gaze of faith in opposite direction. Blum suggests, “Working in combination with the book's title and the chapter titles, the forethought instructed readers on new ways of seeing and perceiving: black folk had souls; people of color were spiritually connected in sacred ways; and Du Bois was no mere scholar but a biblical and prophetic writer with the power to reveal the unseen and sacred.”85

In this turn Du Bois levies a two-fold indictment against white people and against (white) Christianity. He attacks at its base the supremacist attitude that black people lay

84 Ibid., 7.

outside of the order of humanity. Du Bois continues the analysis that he raises in his much
criticized “The Conservation of Races” that black people do participate in the “real history”
of the “race idea, the race spirit, the race ideal.”

Because “The deeper differences
[between races and nations] are spiritual, psychical, differences—undoubtedly based on
the physical, but infinitely transcending them,” giving black people souls placed them on
the plane of this higher analysis of race.

Moreover, Du Bois assaults the blatant hypocrisy of Christian theology by talking of
God, souls, and salvation. Blum explains: “The Souls of Black Folk confronted white
supremacist theology in a dramatic and an extraordinary way...With its structure, rhetoric,
focus, and metaphors Souls inverted the principal arguments of white supremacist
theologians and did so with a new set of religious arguments, ones that spiritually
dramatized the modern history of race relations in the United States.”

For this reason, as
mentioned above, Du Bois thus stands at the summit of what will later become black
liberation theology and the dismantling of white racist Christianity.

It would be an overstatement to convey Du Bois’s use of “soul” as strictly a re-
interpretation of religion in view of Christianity. As will be explored below in the
discussion of American pragmatism, his use religious language has a more abstract,
universal resonance. Indeed as he states in Darkwater (1920) “no one knows himself but
that self’s own soul.”

Thus, he invokes soul in the sense of self-knowledge and self-testing

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87 Ibid., 41.


that goes back to classical Greece and Rome. The soul is the site of the Delphic command to “know thyself,” the Socratic urge to care for the self, the Platonic turning from appearances, and Seneca’s instruction to “lay claim to yourself.”

Still, *Darkwater* is precisely the place where Du Bois’s play off Christianity is most intriguing and most perplexing. This is to say, here Du Bois most directly invokes Christian creedal, liturgical, and biblical themes—albeit in nontraditional form. Du Bois opens the text with a five-part “Credo” that calls to mind confessional affirmations of faith. Here Du Bois confesses his belief in God, the Negro Race, Pride of race, Service and the Devil. Weaving together acknowledgment of the evils of oppression, commitment to black self-help, and the opposite of “being ashamed of oneself,” Du Bois articulates God in terms of humanity and its condition, not the opposite.

Subsequently, to each of his chapters in the text Du Bois offers a liturgical response that riffs off of a confessional theme: “The Second Coming,” “Jesus Christ in Texas,” “A Hymn to the Peoples,” and perhaps most interestingly “The Prayers of God.” While Blum executes a more expansive exegesis of these verses, what ‘God says’ (or does not say) speaks most directly to the social-political emphasis at stake in this chapter. Here Du Bois poetically raises one of the most central and challenging aspects of faith: theodicy. In other words, Du Bois questions the very meaning of religious faith in the face of terrible social-historical injustice. Indeed Du Bois echoes throughout the “Prayers” that God must be

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impotent because in the wake of “hell” and “murder” and madness, “Thou sittest, dumb...And Thou art dumb...While Thou art dumb.” He continues on to speak of a lynched God, an obvious socially-grounded allusion to the crucifixion of Jesus. And then after asking “Can God pray?”, it is Du Bois who assures: “Courage, God, I come!”

Although Blum and others interpret Darkwater as Du Bois writing himself as a “hero with a black face” or a “dark monk,”94 I want to stress less Du Bois’s own religious persona than what comes to the fore in “The Souls of White Folk.” Even when Du Bois executes his reversals, he maintains a religious specter. That is, he does not simply criticize organized religion and abandon it, but rather he turns it and performs “immanent critique,”95 from within the veil, so to speak. Instead of humanizing blacks with souls and emphasizing the ‘devilish’ ways of racist whites, Du Bois chooses to speak of the white soul.

Just as one can choose to dismiss religious language a ‘mere’ rhetoric or irony, so too could one choose to view this reversal as Du Bois capitalizing on the success of Souls. But that hardly seems plausible given the lengths to which Du Bois went in the former collection. The verses of sorrow songs and verses from Western philosophy enfold these essays and sketches with profundity that is anything but simple form. It seems that just as Du Bois wants whites to engage blacks and their struggles, Du Bois is willing to engage the “new religion of whiteness”96—on the deepest level, the level of soul. Du Bois is not suggesting that one ought to practice such a ‘religion’, but he does seem to argue that one

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93 Du Bois, Darkwater, 121-123.

94 See Blum’s first chapter “The Hero With a Black Face: Autobiography and the Mythology of Self”, particularly pages 27-40 and his third chapter “A Dark Monk Who Wrote History and Sociology.”


96 Du Bois, Darkwater, 16.
must *engage* it. Thus, this ironical formulation is a way of actually taking whiteness seriously so that its oppressive expressions can be mitigated.

In the wake of World War I, one certainly sees continuity with *Souls* and maturation of the themes he first raised there. Indeed whiteness and colonialism are viewed in a more cosmic **gaze**, and in light of his growing emphasis on economics and class. “Souls” then has not only a deepening sense, but also a broadening one. The redemptive thrust that the term has in *Souls* however is replaced by the caustic intonation here. Questioning the rationality of war and imperialism Du Bois answer: “This is not Europe gone mad; this is not aberration not insanity; this *is* Europe; this seeming Terrible is the real soul of white culture—back of all culture,—stripped and visible today....Europe has never produced and never will in our day bring forth a single human soul who cannot be matched and over-matched in every line of human endeavor by Asia and Africa.”

Despite the clear interrogation of whiteness that rings throughout, we are implored to remember that whites *have* souls however corrupted by greed. In other words, Du Bois could have concluded that white people do not possess souls, and thus are outside the scope of redemption. This approach would flounder on several fronts, including the illogic of dehumanizing a people in an attempt to humanize another and that it would oppose his life’s project of persuasion and propaganda. Although it would not be literarily consistent or rhythmic to speak of the “soullessness of white people,” it seems specious that Du Bois would sacrifice content for form. Thus, we are led to conclude that Du Bois *does* in fact hold on to hope that white people can be ‘saved.’ The essay’s coda, “The Riddle of the Sphinx,” its

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birth of a black Christ and the awakening of the world, indeed beckons to this hope. To me, then, to engage the souls of white people is not to affirm the religion of whiteness, and subsequently does not suggest that we ought to abandon religion. Rather, this tension suggests that altering whiteness is about examining souls.

Finally, before turning to “spirit” of black folk, which Du Bois articulates as the world’s redemptive hope, I interrupt to reference Evelyn Higginbotham’s “Introduction” to *Darkwater*, which provides another means of interpreting the religious in this text and throughout his work. Higginbotham describes:

> If *Darkwater* is a strident political critique, it is also a graceful work of art...And it is precisely the juxtaposition of defiance and hope, of rage and faith that produces the combined effect of light, darkness, and shadows. Indeed, the book’s multifaceted analysis can be likened to chiaroscuro, the artistic technique first invested by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian painters who sought to give three-dimensional, lifelike quality to their subjects on canvas. Like these Renaissance painters, Du Bois moves beyond the contouring lines of the two dimensional and introduces depth and volume through his representation of color—through his contrast and shading of white and various darker peoples.

Indeed this religious analysis of Du Bois, or the analysis of the religious in Du Bois, for me is a means of deepening and shading, texturizing and illumining this great man’s legacy.

### 2.4. Ancestral Spirits in the Soul of Du Bois

In 1924 Du Bois released a prolonged tract outlining in affirmative form why he spent his life to date fighting for their equality: it bore the title *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negro in the Making of America*. Although Du Bois in retrospect admitted to errors because of his haste in writing, *Gift* still stands as a significant though understudied part of Du Bois’s

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98 Ibid., 26-27.

99 Ibid., xxxiii-xxxiv.
massive corpus. He walks through ‘black history,’ or rather American history in light of its black participants, calling to the fore the ways in which African Americans have enabled this very nation to be. From labor and economics to music and arts to the very roots of democracy, Du Bois makes the case that without black people there simply would be no United States. The text’s final chapter, “The Gift of Spirit” focuses on black contributions to the practice of faith, but more importantly to the American ethos. He writes:

It [the Negro] has kept before America’s truer souls the spirit of meekness and self abasement, it has compelled American religion again and again to search its heart and cry ‘I have sinned;’ and until the day comes when color caste falls before reason and economic opportunity the black American will stand as the last and terrible test of the ethics of Jesus Christ.100

Recalling (and inverting) the language of self- and double consciousness made famous in Souls, then, black people have been the conscious of America, constantly prodding it to become its better self.

Indeed it is Du Bois’s use of “spirit,” in relation to but distinctive from “soul,” that signifies the social aspect of life forever in view for Du Bois. While soul alludes to the transcending of self, discussed above, spirit refers to a form of transcendence of selves. The final words of the chapter and the text read:

This then is the Gift of Black Folk to the new world. Thus in singular and fine sense the slave became master, the bond servant became free and the meek not only inherit the earth but made that heritage of a thing of questing for eternal youth, of fruitful labor, of joy and music, of the free spirit and of the ministering hand, of wide and poignant sympathy with men in their struggle to live and love which is, after all, the end of being.101

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101 Du Bois, Gift, 124. Indeed, Terrence Johnson in “‘My Soul Wants Something New’: Democratic Dreams Behind the Veil” gives a prolonged look to the manner in which Du Bois’s confrontation of physical death (from disadvantage and killings) opens the door for America to turn toward a new life. Johnson concludes: “Embracing death, which I believe allows moral agents to face their finitude, reorients persons and allows them to envision themselves within a community of finite creatures who are also struggling to achieve
African Americans, in Du Bois’s view, contribute a unique paradigm in the existential quest to live as fully and freely as humans.\textsuperscript{102}

Stephanie Shaw in her chapter “Striving” provides a helpful summary, which draws upon a Platonic-Aristotelian understanding of soul and spirit:

Scholars have devoted considerable energy to contextualizing Du Bois’ use of the term “folk” at the expense, I think, of accounting for his use of “soul.” If the “veil,” as an allusion to “race” and to the great potential of the folk, resonated with Du Bois’ black readers, the idea of “souls” must have had equal power considering its religious connotations. After all, in religious contexts, all souls are equal. But it is the philosophical meaning that matters here, and, importantly, it reinforces the symbolism of the veil. A turn-of-the-century philosopher would have understood that “[t]o speak of soul is to speak of a capacity or a propensity to function in a certain way...or it is to speak of the actual exercise of such a capacity.” And if “soul” represented spirit in potentia to a philosopher, “spirit” represented “the developed energy of the soul”—the actualization of potential.\textsuperscript{103}

Shaw further distinguishes soul and spirit by placing these concepts in the context of an ancient conversation. The individual soul participates in a greater movement of collective spirit. Thus, the souls of black folk are constituent of the dynamic of human spirit. Against the backdrop of the religious context of his oeuvre, proffered vis-à-vis Blum and Kahn and a brief hermeneutic of Du Bois’s own spirit-talk, we are now in a position to consider situating souls, spirit, and striving within a philosophical lineage.

In his biography of Du Bois, David Lewis identifies a meaningful connection to Hegel. Not only did Du Bois complete graduate study at Friedrich-Wilhelm III Universität at Berlin

\textsuperscript{102} Glenda Carpio writes in her “Introduction” to The Gift of Black Folk: “Throughout the book, Du Bois walks a tightrope between a patriotic embrace of an America in which African American culture has become an inextricable part and an exhortation of the rebellion and struggle out of which that culture arose. The extreme complexity of these positions is implied from the very beginning in the use of the word ‘gift’ in the book’s title” (xiii).

\textsuperscript{103} Shaw, W.E.B. Du Bois and The Souls of Black Folk, 25.
(University of Berlin), where Hegel occupied the first philosophy chair, but it is generally accepted that Du Bois's general dialectical reasoning, particularly his infamous conception of double consciousness has Hegelian form, emerging from his description of “unhappy consciousness” in Phänomenologie des Geistes (Phenomenology of Spirit (Mind)).

It is true that Ralph Waldo Emerson too speaks of double consciousness in his lecture “The Transcendentalist,” as well as the “veil” in “The Over-Soul”; in fact, in the next section I will take up the role of American pragmatism in shaping Du Bois’s views. The Hegelian inspiration, however, runs deeper (or at least has been explicated more by Du Bois scholars) than the Emersonian one. Lewis writes:

And for all James’s supposed pragmatic and empirical influences upon him [James was his undergraduate advisor and one of the mediators through which Du Bois encountered the German philosophical tradition], Du Bois found in the Hegelian World-Spirit, dialectically actualizing itself through history, a profoundly appealing concept. "Lordship and Bondage," Hegel’s lodestar essay, explicated a complex reciprocity of a master and slave in which the identities of both could be fully realized only to the extent that the consciousness of one mediated through that of the other...Surely this was an idea Du Bois would eventually reformulate more poetically [in The Souls of Black Folk].

For better or worse, Hegel’s analysis of the master-slave dialectic as constituent of Geist, however abstract, provides a concrete touch point for Du Bois, who wrote The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade.

Shamoon Zamir in Dark Voices: W.E.B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888-1903 compares “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” the first chapter of Souls, and Phenomenology, saying: “Du Bois does not adopt Hegel but adapts him to his own ends. To understand Du Bois’s investigation of historical consciousness out of Hegel it is important to see how his reading

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104 See, for example, Shaw, W.E.B. Du Bois and The Souls of Black Folk, 62.

105 Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 139-140.
differs from Hegel as it is to note the parallels.”106 As we shall see further, Zamir moves us beyond a dyadic view of Du Bois’s indebtedness to either European continental philosophy or American pragmatism. Instead, Zamir guides us toward a more nuanced theory of multiplicity that “resists dogmatism and recognizes that creative life at its best is not reducible to ideological compartmentalization.” 107 Du Bois drew from a variety of conceptual tools available to him in order to develop his own platform for black social uplift.

Shaw in W.E.B. Du Bois and The Souls of Black Folk builds upon Zamir’s adoption/adaptation distinction, and details parallels in the entirety of Souls and Phenomenology. Her central assertion is “that Souls adds black people to Hegel’s queue in a way that makes it clear that the souls of these folks were no different from the souls of others...Du Bois did more than write an important and moving history of the post-emancipation world in which black Americans lived: his study added the nineteenth century and America to Hegel’s philosophy, via the souls of black folk.”108 This argument locates Du Bois’s brilliant appropriation of Hegel in his creativity. Whereas Hegel in Philosophy of History writes Africa, as “Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit,”109 out of the dynamic world-historical Geist, Du Bois’s account of the spiritual world of black folk writes them back in.

106 Zamir, Dark Voices, 114.
107 Ibid., 17.
To this end, Shaw offers the first manuscript length account of the parallels between Hegel’s and Du Bois’s philosophies of soul qua spirit in potentia. Whereas Zamir states “Du Bois’s emphasis is not on the singular Geist but on souls,”\(^\text{110}\) Shaw takes a different approach. The adaptation, according to Shaw, examines black souls into order to rework Hegel’s Geist qua Soul. Shaw argues:

Readers [and subsequently, scholars] regularly focused on the proverbial trees (the veils, the color line, double consciousness), rather than the forest (the soul). Although it is impossible to miss the point that Du Bois’ volume is about the souls of black folk—that is, after all, the title of the book—it is important to examine precisely how, and how prominently, soul figures through Du Bois’ text.\(^\text{111}\)

Shaw’s analysis sheds light on a very important insight of Du Bois’s for contemporary conversations regarding identity.

Premised on conceptions of the soul’s sovereignty in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, Shaw argues that Du Bois’s discussion of the color line through spirit-talk makes a key claim: race does not create blackness! “The color line complicated, stunted, and had the ability to (and sometimes did) destroy the striving; but the color line did not generate it. Striving—the hallmark of a functioning consciousness—originated in the sovereign souls of black folk.”\(^\text{112}\) This is to say there is complete and independent authority in blackness that does not upon its definition or warrant in relationship to whiteness. In this vein, Du Bois’s double consciousness ceases to be exposed to charges of pathology (pan-Africanist Joseph Hayford saw double consciousness as “pathetic”) because consciousness of the soul does

\(^{110}\) Zamir, Dark Voices, 115.


\(^{112}\) Ibid., 40.
not rupture its underlying sovereign unity. Shaw concludes the chapter on the sovereignty of soul by saying, “Spiritual striving did not develop in response to white racism; nor was it imposed upon black folk from some other ‘outsider.’ It came from within and reflected the essence of humanity—Soul.” Essentialism for Shaw, in view of Du Bois, is not racial but humane.

Kwame Appiah’s “contemporary philosophical theory of identity” in Lines of Descent: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Emergence of Identity (2014) is helpful here. Premised on his Ethics of Identity (2005) and his 2010 W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures at Harvard University, Appiah argues, “Du Bois found his way into a narrowing orbit around a notion of race that was nominalist, narrative, subjective, and even, sometimes, antirealist.”

In this view, Shaw’s identification of the sovereignty of black souls does not require a singular racial essence although there is a shared racial identity. “Nominalism about social identities is preferable to ontological realism,” aids Appiah, “What holds groups together is often not a shared essence but simple a shared name…social identities require labels” [emphasis in original].

In tracing the lines of descent, Appiah acknowledges the mark the role that Hegel plays in understanding Du Bois, but not prominently—that position goes to Johann Gottfried Herder. For Appiah, the influence of Hegel is placed in context of the development

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113 Ibid., 41.
114 Ibid., 60.
115 Ibid., 135.
117 Ibid., 148.
of German philosophical tradition from Immanuel Kant through Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and in relation to the aforementioned treatment of Africa in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*.

Appiah stresses that, not necessarily to the exclusion of Hegel, Du Bois’s “souls of black folk” must be read in light of Herder’s nationalist cosmopolitan *Volkgeist*. Appiah writes, “Du Bois’s debt to this intellectual legacy—the theory of the Volkgeist—is hard to avoid: it hovers over the title of his best-known book. He is showing his readers the *Geister* (this is the plural of *Geist*) of black Volk...the Herderian strain in Du Bois’s cultural cosmopolitanism fairly courses through *Souls*.”\(^{118}\) Du Bois mobilizes Herder in order to appeal to the communal implications of self-consciousness. That is, Du Bois is interested in “souls,” the group aspect of *Geist*.

Before turning to the metamorphosis of the German philosophical tradition into American pragmatism, and its continued shaping of Du Bois, let us return to the religious nature of *Geist*. For Appiah, *Geist* has religious origins but in German philosophy tradition requires not religious interpretation. He writes, “Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* has been translated both as *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and as *The Phenomenology of Mind*; but however you translate ‘Geist,’ its meaning had diverged far from the Christian idea of the soul, which came to repose in the term *Seele*. As a result, an educated German reader need hear nothing specifically in talk of the Geist.”\(^{119}\)

While this is certainly the case, given that Du Bois is writing about the *Volk*, there might be something gained in further examining the religious texture of *Geist* although it is not required. In fact, Appiah also writes, “The word ‘Geist’ has a wider range of meaning

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 46-47.

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 57.
than any of the English words we might use to translate it. In particular, it can mean soul, spirit, or mind. Another sense, which we can largely ignore, is shared with English in our word ‘ghost,’ which now only has the sense of ‘spirit’ when it is used to refer to the Holy Ghost,”

120 or poltergeist.

To be sure, our intent here is not only not to ignore the ghostliness of Geist, but also to call it from the shadows—to amplify it, so to speak. Tracing the lines of descent that shape black identity, ever active though sometimes spectral, constitutes a central concern. By drawing attention to the politics and struggles as identities are worked out at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, it might be possible to resist the exorcistic effects of respectability and conformity. By taking into account the ethereal, we invoke these ghosts explicitly in the discourse, so that they may haunt the shaping of black identity.

This examination is certainly part of Shaw’s project. She states:

The different views of philosophers and theologians are nevertheless important to note...What might be more important is that serious thinkers in religion and philosophy are very much concerned with spirit. And both groups of scholars are ultimately concerned with what a being has to do to fulfill his/her being—destiny. 121

She argues that Du Bois’s chapter in Souls about Episcopal priest Rev. Alexander Crummell is an enactment of the Platonic Philosopher-Ruler notion of the Talented Tenth/Guiding Hundredth. His life as rendered by Du Bois, who venerated him as one of the few paradigmatic role models, in the stages of Hegel’s self-consciousness: stoicism, skepticism,

120 Ibid.

and unhappy consciousness.\textsuperscript{122} She concludes the chapter “Spirit: Alexander Crummell, Prophets, and Destiny”:

Throughout \textit{The Souls of Black Folk}, the purpose of work was not merely to develop discipline, and certainly not to accumulate capital or even to eat (the immediate, determinate, and material objectives of labor), but to discover one’s self (self-consciousness), to realize the meaning of a life (reason), to arrive at true being (spirit). Du Bois could not have ignored the particular (unique) details of Crummell’s life story: it was without a doubt a Christian’s journey, and, consequently, the study easily took the literary form of allegory. But Du Bois, the philosopher-intellectual, was, himself, a phenomenological observer who saw Crummell’s life not only as a spiritual journey in which a Christian constantly searched for evidence of God’s presence, but also as a spiritual journey like that which Hegel characterized as consciousness’s seeking its wholeness of being. And in this context, too, Crummell’s life story provides a perfect example.\textsuperscript{123}

For Shaw, Du Bois integrates philosophical and theological concerns in \textit{Souls}. Du Bois's account, therefore, does not require philosophical precision to jettison adjacent religious interests. For the purposes of this dissertation, in particular, it is critical to properly account for the philosophical lineage of soul, spirit, and striving before spirit-talk can be mobilized constructively. The careful attention, as will be further explicated below, help to protect against the deployment of \textit{Geist} in marginalizing projects. While it cannot necessarily overwhelm deep-seated biases and closed systems—hence Hegel—if there is openness to be surprised by spirit from the start, then critical spirit-talk guides our understanding of spirit’s dynamic movement.

Although I affirm Shaw's general approach, finding her reading of \textit{Souls} in view of \textit{Phenomenology} as a brilliant and long overdue intervention in DuBoisian scholarship, I do take issue with her particular assessment of “The Frenzy” in “Of the Faith of the Fathers.” Shaw writes, “Du Bois witnessed in sermons and especially in songs a spirit in the church

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 93-96.

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 98-99.
that had not been destroyed (nor was it suffering from double consciousness)...Du Bois was not embarrassed by ‘the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms’ that took place in those churches.” Following Robert Gooding-Williams’s distinction between the masses and the folk, who follows Herder, Shaw interprets the former as a pejorative label and the latter a laudatory one.

Shaw, in my view, depends too much on Herder here to the exclusion of Hegel, which is ironic given her text’s overarching aim and methodology in analyzing Hegel. In her chapter “The Religion and Song of Souls” Shaw asserts of the southern revival “what Du Bois witnessed was awe-full because he witnessed the powerful union of the finite and the infinite—the evidence of Absolute Being—spirit knowing spirit. This scene also suggests Hegel’s ‘Revealed Religion’—in which ‘[a]ll mean and women are incarnations of God’ (spirit knowing itself as spirit).” More to the point, however, later Shaw states, “The Sorrow Songs represent the culmination of soul’s/consciousness’s education from the notion (appearance) of knowledge to true knowledge, truth, or science/philosophy.”

In light of our earlier discussion, I illustrated how Du Bois despised ecstatic religion, although he saw the indisputable value of the Negro Church. The Frenzy in “Of the Faith of the Fathers” represented an earlier form of religion’s development. Even if the frenzy is the property of the folk, and not the masses, it still needed evolution. Given Du Bois’s overall platform of social uplift via the Talented Tenth/Guiding Hundredth, informed by Shaw’s

\[124\] Ibid., 53.

\[125\] Ibid., 128.

\[126\] Ibid., 148.
own observations about the Platonic Philosopher-King—of which religion is party—then religion too must advance in Du Bois's scheme.

Whereas Du Bois unequivocally praises the Sorrow Songs, which provide the framing for *Souls*, his view of the Frenzy is not as clear. The spirituals can be the creative example of Hegel's Absolute in history, which Hegel was himself unable to provide, without the frenzy functioning as Hegel's Revealed Religion. Given Hegel's and Du Bois's positivism, the southern revival does not hold up as an example of soul's emergence as spirit in history. To the contrary, Du Bois sees the southern revival as a primitive form of religion, as old as “Delphi and Endor”; continued religious practice in the view stunting the achievement of a politically-oriented rational religion. I believe Shaw ends up unnecessarily falling victim to Maslow's law (i.e., when you are a hammer, all you see is nails). Because the spirituals are not synonymous with African-American religion for Du Bois, one must distinguish the religion and songs of *Souls* in order to get a more accurate picture of Du Bois's views.

### 2.5. Prophetic Pragmatic Underpinnings of Spiritual Striving

In his third ‘autobiography’, Du Bois reveals:

> With the best will the factual outline of a life misses the essence of its spirit. Thus in my life the chief fact has been race—not so much scientific race, as that deep conviction of myriads of men that congenital differences among the main masses of human beings absolutely condition the individual destiny of every member of a group. Into the spiritual provincialism of this belief I have been born and this fact

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has guided, embittered, illuminated and enshrouded my life. Yet, how shall I explain and clarify its meaning for a soul? Description fails—I have tried that.\textsuperscript{128}

With his characteristic openness and obscurity, Du Bois laments the difficulty of giving an account of oneself, to borrow Judith Butler’s description.\textsuperscript{129} He expresses that the interface of biography and race, as \textit{Dusk of Dawn’s} subtitle, “An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept,” relates the personal and social. For Du Bois, there simply is no way to encapsulate fully that “striving” that defines his life and the life of black people. The language of soul and spirit, short of being an appeal to the occult and otherworldliness, is a means of transcendence. In the face of such personal and social turmoil, one is shocked to find the utter resiliency and pervading hopefulness that thrives.

Always concerned with the social location of black folk, using his own story as a conduit toward this larger aim, Du Bois employed a broad cross-section of resources to this objective. He modified Hegel’s \textit{Geist}-formulations of progress toward very practical ends. One might say, then, that pragmatism was a significant means that Du Bois marshaled. A host of towering intellectuals with varying degrees of appropriation and affirmation of Hegel’s philosophy, including John Dewey, Josiah Royce, William James, and George Santayana, influenced Du Bois’s Hegel.

According to Zamir, the deployment of Hegel is ultimately a political move to empower black folk vis-à-vis the Talented Tenth through deeper understanding of self-consciousness. “In ‘Strivings’ Du Bois dramatizes black consciousness as it actively


struggles within political confinement toward a transformation of the self and its world.”

After detailing Du Bois’s study with George Santayana, who models *The Life of Reason* on *Phenomenology*, Zamir points out that for Santayana (in contrast to James) “consciousness was characterized by the creativity of metaphor and the synthetic imagination.”

Further, Zamir states, “Like Dewey, Royce stresses that dialectical negativity is the process by which a higher harmonization and unity are achieved...[and] foregrounds relationality and organic collectivity in his reading of Hegel. So the self is seen as a ‘knot of relationships to other moments and to other people.’” Later he goes on to explain:

In contrast to James or Emerson, Du Bois is able to *locate* the subject in relation to the world, particularly the political and social realms, more concretely and with greater specificity than either James or Emerson, precisely through a literary psychology of a radically *decentered* subject and through his refusal of *nondialectical* transcendence” [emphasis in original].

In the same manner that Du Bois extends and inflects Hegel toward his constructive project in a creative fashion, so also does he amend James and Emerson in his vision for the American democracy.

Terrence Johnson, in his essay “‘My Soul Wants Something New’: Democratic Dreams Behind the Veil,” writes of Du Bois’s tragic soul-life, which he defines as “the moral and political resource that led Du Bois to find his genius and the geniuses of black folk. Tragic soul-life is representative of the rich moral and political traditions within the evil. The expression of sorrow, despair, and hope in tragic soul-life is rooted in a moral ideology

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130 Zamir, *Dark Voices*, 167.
131 Ibid., 158.
132 Ibid., 122, with embedded quotation from Royce’s *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (1892).
133 Ibid., 163.
of struggle, sacrifice, and hope.” Despite the difficulty of such description, one final attempt remains to give an account of Du Bois’s religious sensibility.

Cornel West in *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (1982) lodges African American critical thought squarely within a prophetic black religious tradition. For him, to wrestle with blackness in America—the shaping of identity and the overcoming of white supremacy—inevitably means struggling with Christianity. West identifies the two “sources” that contribute most to a philosophy of black empowerment as the prophetic Christian and pragmatist traditions.

In order for this critical thought to reinterpret and reshape history, provide a genealogy of and respond to white supremacy, engage black Christian thought and Marxian social analysis, and help define the prospects for liberation, black thinkers must do two things. First, they must “confront candidly the tragic character of human history (and the hope for ultimate transhistorical triumph) without permitting the immensity of what is and must be lost to call into question the significance of what may be gained.” Second, they “can avoid both absolutist dogmatism and paralysis in action. Pragmatism also dethroned epistemology as the highest priority of modern thought in favor of ethics: not the professional discipline of ethics but the search for desirable and realizable historical possibilities in the present.”

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136 Ibid., 19.

137 Ibid., 21.
Although West does not give Du Bois sustained attention in this text, and although Du Bois himself is not interested in the formal type of Afro-American revolutionary Christianity that West proposes, it is clear where the analysis of Du Bois’s religious sensibility finds resonance in West’s essay. Insofar as West defines that “revolutionary Christian perspective and praxis pave this middle pathway [between bourgeois idealism and ring-wing Marxism],” then we can locate Du Bois squarely within this effort.

In *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* though, West describes Du Bois as “The Jamesian Organic Intellectual” who appropriated the best of Ralph Emerson in application to the race question. “Du Bois’ classic text [*Souls*] can be viewed,” argues West, “as being in the Emersonian grain, yet it conveys insights ignored by most of white America. Du Bois attempts to turn the Emersonian theodicy inside out by not simply affirming the capacity of human powers to overcome problems, but, more important, raising the question ‘How does it feel to be a problem?’ in America—a problem America neither admits it has nor is interested in solving.” True to his profound ability to reverse and rethink the status quo, West’s reading of Du Bois turns Emerson’s American transcendentalism inside out.


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138 Ibid., 145.


140 One should note that Kahn combines the terms “religious” and “naturalist.” Precisely to my point, Du Bois obscures the categories of religious interpretation, thus demanding a re-interpretation of religion.
Christianity. At the same time, Du Bois establishes the blackness of his religious voice as much in its criticisms and revisions of traditional African American formulations."¹⁴¹ Thus as Kahn earlier notes, the “dialectical tension here is thick.”¹⁴² Later, Kahn continues:

> Given the complexities of Du Bois’s religious voice—particularly his hostility to metaphysics and his focus on human finitude—it is well worth our while to consider the ways in which we might understand Du Bois as a pragmatist and a pragmatic religious naturalist, for it is when we begin to see Du Bois’s engagements with religion along pragmatist lines that we can fully appreciate the way in which his religious voice represents a moment of radical creation in black religious faith. As a pragmatic bricoleur, he transformed the African American religious tradition: in pragmatic religious naturalistic ways to produce a distinctive black faith: African American pragmatic religious naturalism.¹⁴³

Demonstrating Du Bois’s connection and debt to William James, John Dewey, and George Santayana, Kahn makes the case that Du Bois’s ‘faith’ was one focused on human experience and social engagement.

Kahn carefully traces the differences between James, Dewey, and Santayana, arguing that James’s focus is more individualistic, while Dewey and Santayana define their religious pragmatism more collectively. Further, Kahn makes the case that Du Bois perhaps is closest to Santayana because “in contrast to Dewey’s beliefs, Santayana’s faith nurtures a complex tension between religious practice as social activism and what one might describes as a contemplative activism.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, in Du Bois we find a strong connection between the pragmatic and the prophetic.

¹⁴¹ Kahn, Divine Discontent, 24.
¹⁴² Ibid.
¹⁴³ Ibid., 25.
¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 39.
Du Bois then fits well within West’s conception of “prophetic pragmatism”\textsuperscript{145} insofar as this American invention moves squarely away from the “epistemology-centered philosophy”\textsuperscript{146} that tended to dominate continental European thought. As now clearly established, Du Bois was not one for dogmatic givens, and rather preferred the shaping of critical thought based on experience. His notion of the race concept epitomizes how discourse reflects personal and social encounter with reality; in turn the engagement with this thought is employed as praxis to transform this reality.

2.6. Towards a Black Liberation Pneumatology

If Du Bois is a “pragmatic prophet,” then second-generation black theologian Dwight Hopkins seeks to further extend his political philosophy in a constructive theology. Building upon the forerunning work of his mentor Cone, as well as Wilmore, Roberts, and Washington, through Du Bois, Hopkins attempts to expand the cultural underpinnings and implications on which this new discipline of black theology is founded. Hopkins’s project not only deepens the connection of black theology to slave religion, but also Hopkins probes the transatlantic, Pan-African possibilities of black theology, particularly in South Africa.

In \textit{Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology} (1993), Hopkins examines representations of black “folk” religion in story narrative and literature, as well as in the formal leadership of Du Bois, Martin King, and Malcolm X. Hopkins’s chapter “W.E.B. Du Bois: Theological Reflections on Democratized Political Power” presents Du Bois

\textsuperscript{145} West, \textit{The American Evasion of Philosophy}, 7.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 5.
as a black leader of faith who presents a “political theology.” Utilizing a sampling of excerpts of writings from *Crisis, Prayers for a Dark People*, and other correspondence, Hopkins connects Du Bois’s political agenda with the egalitarian, democratized vision of Christianity. He asks, “What theological insights can we draw out from Du Bois's understanding of politics and democracy in order to [further] develop a black theology of liberation?”

While the question seems appropriate to the task of constructive theology, it misses the mark on grounding black theology in the *religious* experience of African Americans. Although Hopkins claims, “The theology of Du Bois’s thought symbolizes a faith in freedom present within the overall black political heritage,” it is unclear how that constitutes religious experience or theology. Who is the audience of Du Bois’s ‘theological’ thoughts? Who is his congregation? Who is listening to his sermons, reading his prayers? What people of faith are utilizing Du Bois’s ruminations, however poignant, as their catechesis? What black theologians are utilizing his critique of the Negro Church to propel their construction?

The archival work completed by Hopkins is invaluable in unearthing Du Bois’s opinions on the religious themes of God, Jesus, and human purpose, to be sure. But they remain Du Bois’s opinions, because unlike his systematic, sociological treatment in *The Negro Church* they lack the scholarship to substantiate the claims. In Du Bois, there is no attribution of theological lineage, no comparative evaluation of theological themes, and no

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148 Ibid., 132.
intellectual history of the religious concepts he takes up, and no consideration of historical theology. Du Bois’s ‘political theology,’ however, is certainly not what J. Deotis Roberts or Carl Schmitt had in mind.\textsuperscript{149}

Most puzzling is that Hopkins fails to consider *The Souls of Black Folk*—a rather conspicuous absence. If, according to Wilmore and Cone, it is this work that became a primary text for early black churchmen and theologians in the 1960s and 1970s, then one naturally expects analytical consideration of *Souls* when discussing sources for a constructive black theology. But Hopkins’s analysis of Du Bois entirely overlooks *Souls* when judging the theological significance of Du Bois’s corpus. Because of this ambiguity and these omissions, Hopkins’s treatment of Du Bois does not well constitute a source for doing black theology. Because, in the end, Hopkins succumbs to the same pitfall as first-generation black theologians (Cone, Roberts, and Washington), according to Cecil Cone’s charge: he does not source from within the African-American *religious* tradition.

As a result, one must consider the implications of Hopkins’s approach, given that it obscures the actual source with a false one. A constructive theology that utilizes Du Bois as a source does not need to be predicated upon Du Bois’s own theology. The overreach by arbitrarily attributing a theology to Du Bois—almost in an *a priori* manner—especially given his deep suspicion toward religion and the divided mind of the scholarship, undermines the constructive theological project. It seems rather dogmatic, falling into the trappings of “ontological blackness.”\textsuperscript{150} This is to say, there is no need to ascribe immanent


structure within the subject of study in order to derive theological meaning from it.

Instead, Du Bois’s discussion of dogmatism and demagoguery offers the most valuable resource to the liberation project of black theology. In the development of black theology, its originators are crafting a language that possesses the moral vigor and existential urgency to lead to significant social transformation. Although Hopkins misses a significant opportunity to ground his analysis in Souls, still we see that black liberation theologians find such resources in Du Bois. From start to finish, Du Bois must be considered as a freethinking man. His platform for racial uplift and social change depended heavily on the notion of the public intellectual, a role that he epitomized. To be a leader is to be a person of letters, which demands “release from self-imposed tutelage,” to borrow Kant’s description of life in an age of enlightenment.151 To this we now turn.

In his essay “The Training of Negroes for Social Power” (1903) Du Bois articulates what he means by education. For him, training ultimately has little to do with a lection or catechism: it concerns neither lists of common texts nor strict pedagogies for instruction. Sure, these may be starting points for the search for knowledge, but only insofar as the journey begins “from below.” The aim of education is not regurgitation or the propagation of systems of mechanization “from above,” dropped from the sky. To the contrary, education draws out “from within” the standards of autonomy and agency in the human subject. And because of this liberty, then an individual can seek the civil liberties of others.

Social uplift, for Du Bois, is tethered to personal freedom. Or said another way, with the history of bondage in full view, subjugation of thought can by no means replace the subjugation of slavery. Mental captivity cannot be substituted for physical bondage.

Emancipation is not only a change in legal status, but walks hand in hand with the capacity to make decisions for oneself. The social-political designation is intimately interwoven with what plays out on the individual level. Thus, Du Bois vehemently rejected “Men [who] openly declare their design to train these millions [Negroes] as a subject caste, as men to be thought for, but not to think; to be led, but not to lead themselves.”

But to analyze education only negatively inhibits viewing its full scope. While it is true that education is not indoctrination or solely “emancipation from mental slavery” (Bob Marley), one must also note that education for Du Bois invokes human potentiality. Indeed we recall Shaw’s explication of soul as spirit in potentia. To effectuate black development, Du Bois believed that education must be allowed to expand the limits of human reason. He writes:

The Negro Problem, it has often been said, is largely a problem of ignorance—not simply of illiteracy, but a deeper ignorance of the world and its ways, of the thought and experience of men; an ignorance of self and possibilities of human souls. This can be gotten rid of only by training; and primarily such training must take the form of that sort of social leadership which we call education.

Thus, at its core, education qua enlightenment frees the individual to be and become an agent, most notably an agent of social change.

The integration of leadership, education, and potentiality comes to fore in the notion of the “Talented Tenth.” In the opening paragraph of the essay Du Bois writes: “The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men...Now the training of men is a difficult and intricate task. Its technique is a matter for educational experts, but its object is

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153 Ibid.
for the vision of seers.”\textsuperscript{154} The educated elite of black people is burdened with a responsibility for the masses, particularly for the “Submerged Tenth.” According to this formulation, the pyramid’s pinnacle stands not at the top, but rather at the base. Through the work of a narrow few, the future is opened up widely. Those with vision, “forethought,” and “second sight” call into the present an anticipated hope.

For Du Bois, leadership that inhibits free thought and self-making—if it can even be called that—is anathema. His literary attacks on Booker Washington and Marcus Garvey model his eschewal of demagoguery. In “On Booker T. Washington and Others” from \textit{Souls}, Du Bois notes that Washington’s efforts were challenged by \textit{inter alia} “the disappointment of displaced demagogues and the spite of narrow minds.”\textsuperscript{155} Needless to say, by the end of the essay Du Bois indicts Washington on similar grounds: he attacks Washington’s myopia. The falsehood of Washington’s leadership lodges itself in shifting all responsibility for advancement to the Negro, while exonerating white people.

When Du Bois reflects again on Washington in \textit{Dusk of Dawn}, after he assures his readers that “[a]s I read that statement [his essay on Washington in \textit{Souls}] now, a generation later, I am satisfied with it. I see no word that I would change,”\textsuperscript{156} Du Bois attacked Washington because his leadership kept the Negro intellectual under a veil of silence. The social leadership of the Talented Tenth could not be exercised to the fullest because Washington wielded so much power in political matters and effectively squelched dissent. There must be freedom within community. Du Bois writes: “I was greatly

\textsuperscript{154} Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth” (1903) in \textit{The Future of the Race}, 133.

\textsuperscript{155} Du Bois, \textit{Souls}, 23.

\textsuperscript{156} Du Bois, \textit{Dusk of Dawn}, 41.
disturbed at this time, not because I was in absolute opposition to the things that Mr. Washington was advocating, but because I was strongly in favor of more open agitation against wrongs and above all I resented the practical buying up of the Negro press and choking off of even mild and reasonable opposition to Mr. Washington in both the Negro press and the white.”\textsuperscript{157}

Wilmore’s \textit{Black Radicalism and Black Religion} gives Du Bois’s invocation of spiritual receives an “overplus of meaning.”\textsuperscript{158} Although it is evident that both Wilmore’s and Hopkins’s assumptions about Du Bois may be overstated, we must observe the underlying genius of this towering intellectual. First, the breadth of Du Bois’s position catalyzes a variety of interpretations. While not all are \textit{equally} plausible, still his works are highly generative. And second, the creativity of black theologians cannot be overlooked.

There is significant theological imagination underway in black theology, which moves beyond description into a constructive theo-ethics with real life manifestations. The critiques of black theology by African-American religious historians notwithstanding, black theology opens new academic terrain previously foreclosed to people of color.

Indeed the interpretative work that first- and second-generation black theologians complete vis-à-vis Du Bois initiates a conversation that now can be further advanced. Given what we presently know about Du Bois, in view of the critical work of Blum, Kahn, Johnson, Shaw, and Appiah, spirit-talk has significant import although not in a traditional orthodox sense. This perspective funds the constructive theological work on Du Boisian hope, which constitutes this chapter’s final section, to which we now turn.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid 39.

2.7. On the “Unhopeful Hope” of the Sorrow Songs

Du Bois interpreted black spirituality as the heart of American religion. Interestingly though, for Du Bois, the “sorrow songs” breathed spirit into the static formalism of white Christianity. For Du Bois, these verses are sophisticated speech regarding the black struggle against slavery and death. To be sure, it was not joyful revival music—with its ecstatic fits of passion—that enlivened American religion. Rather, melancholic mourning, birthed in the crucible of chattel slavery and expressed as elegies, resuscitated religion’s corpse. The spirit coursing through the religion of black folk is that “dogged strength” to endure and survive the devastation of slavery. For Du Bois, the sorrow songs paradoxically provided hope.

The prominence of death in Du Bois finds its person in his essay in Souls, “On the Passing of the First-Born.” Comparatively, it is a brief, but brave, intimate account (which Lewis laments borders on “bathos”159) of the lived consequences of slavery’s legacy: segregation and gross inequity. Du Bois and his wife, Nina, lose their son, Burghardt, to nasopharyngeal diphtheria, which goes untreated adequately due to the lack of black physicians in Atlanta, where he was teaching in 1899. Du Bois writes:

Within the Veil was he born, said I; and there within shall he live,—and Negro and a Negro’s son. Holding in that little head—ah, bitterly!—the unbowed pride of a hunted race, clinging with that tiny dimpled hand—ah, wearily!—to a hope not hopeless but unhopeful, and seeing with those bright wondering eyes that peer into my soul a land whose freedom is to us a mockery and whose liberty a lie.160

Premised on Du Bois’s insights, the message that both haunts and in-spires us today: In the face of continued devastation of black bodies, never lose hope; imagine another possible

160 Du Bois, Souls, 100.
world in the midst of life’s ambiguity; and keep creating this world through relentless work.

Clinging to Hope

Expressing sorrow represented more than capitulation to slavery’s destructive legacy, more than weak resignation to the way things were. Far from merely bemoaning circumstances beyond their control in palliative fashion, sorrow songs were rendered by vocalists—those who claimed their voice to offer willful critique of the oppressive injustice they endured. Singing the sorrow songs constituted an act of agency, tactical though it was. For Du Bois, the sobering solemnity of the spirituals is the point of departure for his philosophy of progress. Yes, the spirituals cry out from the death-dealing devastation of slavery. When, there is so much hope to be lost, Du Bois cries out: cling to hope, even when it seems that all is lost.

This intimate meditation draws parallel between the “Shadow of Death” and the “Veil of Color,” both of which claim innocent victims. Du Bois does not succumb to bleak resignation, however, despite the heart-wrenching personal loss perpetually enveloped in sea of communal heartbreak. The lyrical epitaph—the unnamed spiritual as sorrow song—utters, “I hope my mother will be there in that beautiful world on high.”161 Although the spiritual speaks of meeting sister, brother, and Saviour, Du Bois had his son in mind. The essay ends, “Sleep, then, child,—sleep till I sleep and waken to a baby voice and the

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161 Ibid., 99.
ceaseless patter of little feet—above the Veil.”\textsuperscript{162} The agony of personal loss, predicated on social conditions, is dampened by a vision of veil-lessness.

This eschatological hope does not signal simple otherworldly flight, even when he writes: “All that day and all that night there sat an awful gladness in my heart,—nay, blame me not if I see the world thus darkly through the Veil,—and my soul whispers ever to me, saying, ‘Not dead, not dead, but escaped; not bond, but free.’”\textsuperscript{163} Instead we situate the declaration within Du Bois’s ‘irreligious’ view of the afterlife, perhaps even within the Kübler-Ross model of grief, where acceptance is not mere resignation, but predicated upon the process of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. Lewis notes that the loss of Burghardt weighs heavily, wreaking a psychological toil on both Du Bois and Nina; it permanently altered their marriage, like the death of child would do to any couple.\textsuperscript{164}

In fact, as Lewis also points out, Burghardt’s death motivates him to work all the more to overcoming the conditions that causes his son’s death. Theologically speaking, this is the best of eschatology: a vision of a time to come spurs concrete action in the present age. In \textit{Not Every Spirit} Christopher Morse helpfully summarizes:

The case has been made for the refusal of Christian faith to believe that the true hope for the life to come does not lead to active engagement in the work of love here and now. That work may take as many forms as there are various gifts of the Holy Spirit, and certainly includes a contemplative life of prayer and asceticism that is not merely self-absorbed but concerned with the work of love for others. Further, the disavowal is implicit in Christian confession of the life to come of any spirit or spirituality which claims that the true hope of such life rests upon a capacity to transcend the body. This is reiterated in the recognition that any resurrection from the dead as either the disembodiment of human life, or its isolation from the

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 102.

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.

community of a world, is not credited as trustworthy or given credence in the testimony of Christian faith.\textsuperscript{165}

Hope is about real world work. Looking beyond death, in view of the corpse, does \textit{not} promote a turn away from, but rather turn toward life. Death transforms life. It is an autopsy that allows the collective body to be seen. In chapters four and five, I will return to the thematic of embodiment as a means of social progress.

At this point, however, I want to note that there is an air of paternalism in the account—mother becomes manic while the father girds his loins to carry on—that harkens to Du Bois's view of emotion(al religion). Lewis writes, “The fact that he presided over these deliberations ["The Negro in Business" Atlanta Conference] six days after burying his son in Great Barrington's Mahaiwe Cemetery, while a wrecked Nina remained behind in the Berkshires, testifies to the iron self-control and intellectual purpose typical of Du Bois.”\textsuperscript{166} While his labor might have been his coping mechanism to their shared guilt that more was not done to save Burghardt, the gendered nature of the account cannot be lost upon a contemporary audience, continuing to shape the intersectional, pneumatological construction.

\textit{Another World is Possible}

Du Bois's interpretation of the African-American lyrical response to slavery is as nuanced as his research on the development of the slave trade itself. Embedded within both these arguments is the irony that things are not always as they appear to be. And


further, things do not need to remain as they are. “Rather than writing a straightforward history of the suppression of the slave trade, Du Bois underscores a paradox: the slave trade flourished under the guise of its suppression,” 167 writes Saidiya Hartman in her introduction to the 2007 Oxford reprint of the text. It is in this vein that we must examine Du Bois’s complex understanding of the spirituals (and soon Hurston’s alternative view).

Despite the magnanimity of the abolitionist efforts against slavery, which tend to control the historical narrative of the antebellum period, Du Bois unearths a much more complicated and truthful reality. Moral suasion alone did not topple the mounds of proslavery materialist considerations. While, in retrospect, we want to think of ourselves as a nation better than we were, Du Bois demonstrates that while abolitionist rhetoric grew, so did the trade and the institution of slavery itself. Du Bois concludes his dissertation: “Even then, after a long and earnest crusade, the national sense of right did not rise to the entire abolition of slavery. It was only a peculiar and almost fortuitous commingling of moral, political, and economic motives that eventually crushed African slavery and its handmaid, the slave-trade in America.” 168

Du Bois’s doctoral dissertation (which is published in 1896 as the first volume in the Harvard Historical Studies series) offers significant insight into the infamy of Souls. It provides further texture to the role that dialectics plays in his oeuvre. “But Souls, like The Suppression of the African Slave Trade, undermines exceptionalist and progressive versions of American history.” 169 Although written with much different audiences in mind, and


168 Du Bois, Suppression, 135.

169 Zamir, Dark Voices, 115.
utilizing disparate methodologies, we observe a unity of intent and a commingling of perspectives among these works. In other words, although the genres diverge, Du Bois’s chief concern for black advancement remains as paramount in *Souls* as it did in *Suppression*. And as a result, this overarching intent sheds light on parallels between the texts.

At the same time, however, Shamoon Zamir demonstrates that the interweaving of modalities makes Du Bois’s rendering even less straightforward and more paradoxical than it otherwise would be. Not only does Du Bois show that the history is more complicated that it may seem at first, but his analysis itself adds another layer of complexity. Zamir sets forth:

*Both The Suppression of the African Slave Trade and The Philadelphia Negro* adhere closely to the empirical realism of [Gustav von] Schmoller’s idea of the social sciences and of the methodological emphasis Du Bois had encountered through Hart and others at Harvard as well as by following contemporary sociological debates in America...On the whole, then, both *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* and *The Philadelphia Negro* are contained within the positivist house practices of Du Bois’s training. But the problem was that this method serving the cause of social amelioration and progress could be dependent upon an appeal to pseudo-objective reason at a time when America was virulently racist. Du Bois turns to a more positivist approach as a means of analyzing and improving African-American life at a time when this method is being used in American social science largely in support of a legitimation of progressive and exceptionalist accounts of American social process, as well as in defense of racist apologetics.*170

If *Souls*, like *Suppression*, undermines progressive, exceptionalist readings of American history, then its sorrow songs also possess an intricate multivalence. The sorrow songs, too, flourished under slavery’s gaze. The nature of this flourishing then reveals a complicated relationship among the major players in the drama. Still, the mournful lament of the sorrow song captured the catastrophic legacy of slavery, grounding hope resolutely in tragedy. Those from within the Veil used their gift of “second sight” to rehabilitate a nation by naming the existential pain in lyrical verse.

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*170 Ibid., 81, 82.*
Herein lies the brilliance of the sorrow songs: they are cultural countermeasures that spring up from “socially dead people.”\(^{171}\) Even in the face of acute loss, there is still a sense of possibility that cannot fully be extinguished. With the second sight, it a new vision is seen: another world is possible. As such, the sorrow songs invoke a spirit signifying life after death. Again, it is not an otherworldly afterlife, but an earthly, communal life that is resurrected from social death. This resurrection does not just happen: it is hard fought. In fact, it is life forged out of deep ambiguity, a point that Tillich’s pneumatology underscores and will be considered in chapter five, alongside the discussion of Thurman’s mystical spirit.

Du Bois’s brilliant essay situates the “hope not hopeless but unhopeful” within over a dozen phrases of potential that deploy the prefix “un.” This possibility, however, is not unidirectional: the “unbowed pride of a hunted race” contrasts the “unmothered wretched of the race”; Burghardt’s “unspoken wisdom of life” resists his “ideals unattainable”; Burghardt’s transcendent and innocent “unworldly look” superintends Du Bois’s “unvoiced terror of my life.”\(^{172}\) The hope to which Burghardt’s “tiny dimpled hand” clings is not ready-to-hand; it requires choice. The “preferential option” of Latin American liberation theology and the “God who takes sides” of black liberation theology comes to mind.\(^{173}\)

\[^{171}\text{Orlando Patterson, in his landmark comparative study }\textit{Slavery and the Social Death: A Comparative Study} \textit{(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), elaborates the paradoxical life of death. He sets out to demonstrate, “The joint rise of slavery and cultivation of freedom was no accident. It was...a sociohistorical necessity” (ix). Despite the common moniker, Patterson asserts that there is very little peculiar about the so-called “peculiar institution.” The mutual unfolding of conceptions of liberty and oppression throughout both time and space are inextricably linked to one another. That is, as human beings we have conceptualized radical freedom only through the denial of humanity vis-à-vis enslavement, which has been a “substitute for death, usually violent death” thus defining the “slave, however recruited, as a socially dead person” (5).}\]

\[^{172}\text{Du Bois, }\textit{Souls}, 100-102.\]

In this essay we find a poignant vision that stands against the notorious assessment of the color-line problem that commences Souls. Du Bois recalls:

He knew no color-line, poor dear,—and the Veil, though it shadowed him, had not yet darkened half his sun. He loved the white matron, he loved his black nurse; and in his little world walked souls alone, unclothed and unclothed. I—yea, all men—are larger and purer by the infinite breath of that one little life.174

Du Bois imagines a “trans-racial” world, which is not post-racial, in-spired by the breath of the next generation. Even in death, Burghardt’s breath resuscitates Du Bois: “I long for work. I pant for a life full of striving.”175

Du Bois directly connects, through the work of social uplift, spirit qua breath and striving, the “spiritual striving” about which he writes in another Souls essay. Similar to his essay “Of the Meaning of Progress,” this essay could aptly be named “Of the Meaning of Hope.” Du Bois finds hope in working to overcome the near inescapable racism, which even greets Nina and Du Bois with calls on “Niggers!” during the funeral march on an “unknown street” on that “ghostly unreal day,—the wraith [phantom spirit] of Life.”176

Breath, spirit, white supremacy, and striving collide in this scene as an “autobiography of a race concept.”177 The particular tragedy of Burghardt’s death from nasopharyngeal diphtheria—an acute, infectious disease that compromises the upper respiratory tract—ironically serves as metaphor for the asphyxiation of the social death from slavery and segregation.178

175 Ibid.
176 Ibid.
177 This phrase subtitles Du Bois’s third personal narrative, Dusk of Dawn. Souls is the first, Darkwater the second, and the fourth is the most plainly titled, posthumous The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois.
**The New Creation: We Must Be Born Again**

This suffocation reverses the creative breath of God (*ruach*) that hovers above the waters in biblical witness of Genesis. Still, in dialectical fashion Du Bois holds out birth *qua* creation as a form of possibility. On the one hand, death and on the other life, which serves as an invitation—a challenge: we must keep creating in the face of death. The Apostle Paul’s resurrection question, “Where, O Death is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55) is answered by Du Bois in no uncertain terms: though death may be *swallowed* up in victory as the scripture testifies, the bite of death is most certainly felt. Even when Du Bois attempts to make meaning—“Better far this nameless void that stops my life than a sea of sorrow for you”\(^ {179}\)—his pain is woefully felt: Du Bois cannot bear to utter his son’s name throughout the entire essay.

Yet, the essay opens, “‘Unto you a child is born,’ sang the bit of yellow paper that fluttered into my room one brown October morning. Then the fear of fatherhood mingled wildly with the job of creation.”\(^ {180}\) Du Bois goes on to utilize other religious metaphors of “glory” and “transfiguration,” casting the birth of his son as a quasi-messianic rebirth. Indeed the Transfiguration of Jesus on a mountain, recorded in Matthew 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36, is a divine act of glory.\(^ {181}\) Du Bois writes:

> I too mused above this little white bed; saw the strength of my own arm stretched

\(^{178}\) Lewis explains further: “Brooding about his career, the butchering of Sam Hose, and the impotence of social science to improve society, Du Bois was suddenly struck broadside by a great personal tragedy. The death of Burghardt was an agony of such devastation that he would soon try to recast it in eschatological terms” (226-7).

\(^{179}\) Ibid., 102.

\(^{180}\) Ibid., 99.

onward through the ages through the newer strength of his; saw the dream of my black father stagger a step onward in the wild phantasm of the world; heard in his baby voice the voice of the Prophet that was to rise within the Veil.\footnote{182}

In the children, Du Bois finds hope for a better future for the race. Offspring are not only immortality but also transcendence—progeny is prophecy.

Birth \textit{qua} creation is the ongoing process of communal resurrection. Du Bois utilizes biological birth as a conduit of embodied, spiritual progress. Being “born again” and the new creation, therefore, is not spiritualized but rather tethered resolutely in the devastating, but not debilitating, reality of African-American life, pleading Assata Shakur’s #BlackLivesMatter. But like Burghardt, we cling to a “hope not hopeless but unhopeful” in pursuit of life beyond death, premised on the pain of death experienced but yet still giving way to spirit, the life after death.

\footnote{182 Du Bois, \textit{Souls}, 100.}

“If you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it.”
– Zora Neale Hurston

And I will become even more undignified than this.
– 2 Samuel 6:22

The cultural heritage of the African-American is “sometimes sorrowful, sometimes jubilant, but always hopeful.”
– Alvin Ailey

The conventional narrative of African-American leadership in the post-Reconstruction era pivots the political assertiveness of Du Bois’s Niagara Movement against the economic accommodationalism of Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Machine. Although in reality, Washington largely controlled the apparatus of black uplift during his day, over time Du Bois’s idea(l)s have dominated discourses concerning blackness. His political philosophy and lived theories of propaganda prevail as the defining voice of African-American culture, outshining Washington’s practical politics. However one interprets them, Du Bois’s writings are undisputable classics in black studies and American history writ large.

In many ways, his archetypal concepts of double consciousness, the talented tenth, and twoness continue to shape present-day theorizing of black identity and social progress, and in so doing, carry forward a robust legacy of respectability. For Du Bois, and many of his contemporaries like Alain Locke, Charles S. Johnson, and Hubert Harrison, black uplift was predicated upon becoming ‘brand new’: Progress was gained by achieving distance from backward, proletarian culture and in turn adopting a more advanced bourgeois “New
Negro” sensibility. This progress depended, in large and small part, upon adherence to European norms governing everything from public behavior to interpersonal mannerisms.\(^1\)

This distancing, however, was never absolute. The nature of the relationship between the new and old Negro inevitably varied in degrees. The spirituals, which represented for many the religious essence of black Christianity, were often doctored up, “concertized,” and arranged for white audiences, ripping out rhythms and polishing vernacular.\(^2\) Although the spirituals were a “gift” according to Du Bois and Locke,\(^3\) they had to be ‘enhanced.’ Nevertheless, they still possessed some of their defining “southern” features, which were often experienced as exotic under a (white) normative gaze. The New Negro sensibility writ large inescapably brought with it even the slightest bit of its muse.

To be sure, the New Negro movement was more discursive than it was descriptive. Locke’s *The New Negro* was a normative project attempting to shape the future of black America. Although the movement was representative of the Harlem Renaissance, and the renaissance of African-American progress, the black community was far from monolithic. For example, there were those of “the younger generation,” to whom Locke’s anthology is dedicated, who resisted this approach to some degree: Eric Walrond, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Richard Bruce Nugent, along with Zora Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes. In some sense these dissidents had one foot in the New Negro movement, while at the same time criticizing it for its shortcomings.

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In this chapter I pose a set of basic questions: What if the point of departure for theorizing blackness is not DuBoisian respectability? What fissures are created in the orthodox rendering of African-American identity if the critique of black respectability is centered as the point of departure for imagining blackness? What happens if we begin not with Du Bois (an ardent propagandist), but rather with Zora Neale Hurston, self-proclaimed “Queen of the Niggerati” (whose complicated politics at times rendered her apolitical or politically conservative)? What would it look like to advance black progress by privileging deviancy, not conformity—substituting the rational spirit of Du Bois’s respectable religion for the charismatic spirit of Hurston’s sanctified church?

“A Genius of the South,” Hurston writes a counter-discourse to the Du Boisian logic of resistance.\(^4\) She offers an alternative vision that diverges from Du Bois’s positivist approach to black progress that, while undermining white supremacy, still in many ways mimics whiteness by foregrounding respectability. Hurston, on the other hand, imagines race outside of the prevailing conventions of her day. From an early age she plays with the racialized gender expectations that she inherited. Hurston resists the performance that merely reinscribes and redeployes what already is at play.\(^5\)

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\(^4\) Alice Walker writes in “Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View”: “For what Zora’s book [Mules and Men] did was this: it gave them back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had grown ashamed...and showed how marvelous, and indeed, priceless, they are...This was my first indication of the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora’s work: racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature. (In my opinion, only Du Bois showed an equally consistent delight in the beauty and spirit of black people, which is interesting when one considers that the angle of his vision was completely opposite of Zora’s.)” *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1983), 84-85.

Instead, Hurston literally rewrites the narrative, all the while defining anew the meaning of the so-called classic. Particularly, I am interested in the constructive implications of her courage to write black folk into sacred stories, as she rewrites sacred texts themselves. In Moses, Man of the Mountain, for example, Hurston manipulates a familiar biblical narrative in order to usher in a new form of exodus. Fascinatingly, she accomplishes this feat by turning to quotidian, and often scorned, folk accounts to speak of spiritual things. “In an era when many educated and cultured blacks prided themselves on removing all traces of their rural black origins, when a high-class ‘Negro’ virtue was not to ‘act one’s color,’ Zora not only celebrated the distinctiveness of black culture, but saw those traditional black folkways as marked improvements over the ‘imaginative wasteland of white society.’”

Spirit in Du Bois points toward a discontented hope made manifest in a relentless leadership that strives for full integration of black people, and thus utilizes respectability politics as a means toward this end. In Hurston’s writings, spirit suggests a non-conforming courage that, while resolutely pressing toward a better tomorrow, still rejoices in the present moment. The focus of this chapter, then, is the spirit of non-conformity: the religious politics of disrespectability and the courage to affirm everyday black life. I will examine Hurston’s interpretations of the spirituals, in light of Du Bois’s, in order to make this case.

6 I appreciate David Clairmont’s “Persons as Religious Classics: Comparative Ethics and the Theology of Bridge Concepts” and his argument that bridge concepts do not often adequately attend to the variance and struggle of religious traditions, people, and their ideas. The movement, not just across cultures, but also across disciplines and schema alerts us to the reality that something will be “lost in translation.” In our case, the bridge concept of “courage.” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 78:3 (2010), 687-720.

3.1. Tears of Joy and Songs of Unsorrowful Verse

If Du Bois interpreted the sorrow songs as invoking a *spirit signifying life after death*, then Hurston views the *spirituals as life in spite of death*. African-American spirituals are reducible neither to lament nor melody. In Hurston’s view, the spirituals should not be understood simply as verse produced of slavery, representing the trauma and anguish of the (not so) peculiar institution. To render the spiritual synonymous with song short-circuits its brea(d)th. And, further, exchanging sorrow for spirit—however tethered to resistive agency—constricts and diminishes its orientation to vitality. At stake in the spirituals, then, is not mere survival. They should not be viewed as solely as responses to a particular moment in time. Rather, spirituals are an ongoing act of creation.

In her essay “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” in *The Sanctified Church*, Hurston blasts:

> The real spirituals are not really just songs. They are unceasing variations around a theme. Contrary to popular belief their creation is not confined to the slavery period. Like the folk-tales, the spirituals are being made and forgotten every day....The idea that the whole body of spirituals are "sorrow songs" is ridiculous. They cover a wide range of subjects from a peeve at gossipers to Death and Judgment. The nearest thing to a description one can reach is that they are Negro religious songs, sung by a group, and a group bent on expression of feelings and not sound effects.\(^8\)

Spirituals defy easy definition, according to Hurston. And she argues that the prevailing manner in which they have been depicted (by Du Bois) constrains their full scope. Hurston contends that spirituals are more than (1) they appear; (2) sorrowful; and (3) a pastime. *If*  

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categorization is possible, then spirituals belong to classes that resist airtight description: folklore and religion.9

Hurston’s drawing together of folk tales and spirituals discloses a pathway, attentive to both content and method, through which we might deepen our consideration of spirit. First, in her discussion of the spirituals, Hurston attends not to theological or philosophical abstractions, but rather to the everyday stuff of human existence. Spirit is not ephemeral: it is like a dove, fire, wind.

Following this approach, I turn my gaze toward one of life’s most basic elements, without which there is no life: water.10 By “wading in the water,” as the spiritual goes, we will learn something about the *ruach* that hovers above the face of the deep because we have focused attention on this common element. Using *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and her consideration of the mythic icon of black liberation who parts the Red Sea, I consider Hurston’s literary anthropology of the quotidian religious expressions of black folk. Ronald Thiemann’s meditation on the “humble sublime” will help frame the discussion. Following womanists Katie Cannon and Emilie Townes, and their attention to everyday experiences, the orientation of such inquiry is decidedly ethical.

Cannon’s attention to disclosure of “unshouted courage” in Hurston’s works, vis-à-vis Paul Tillich’s “courage to be,” leads us to the second pneumatological pathway: Hurston


offers us a tactical approach—correlation—that draws together two things and in so doing discloses characteristics of each other. The method of correlation, central to Tillich’s systematic theology, will help advance the dissertation’s constructive view of spirit-as-unspoken resilience. Here, we will continue the pneumatological exploration of human creativity, of soul as “spirit in potentia,” begun in chapter two.

In other words, we gather data about the spirituals when we examine folklore, and in discussion of folk tales we learn something about spirituals. And through the analysis of spirituals, we might approach spirit, however asymptotically. Because of Hurston’s assertion of false attribution—“the real spirituals are really not just songs”—this indirect inquiry allows us to approach “truth from a slant,” to borrow Parker Palmer’s phrase.11 This via negativa illuminates—or, in Hurston’s language, “drenches in light”—the subject matter more than a direct style could.12

Since we are so used to talking about these matters, we may become blind to what is standing right before us—“hidden in plain sight.” It is precisely for this reason that I choose to approach spirit theologically from a slant. By conversing with literary, historical, and philosophical sources that are not overtly ‘religious’ (i.e., confessional, catechismal) texts, it becomes more possible to see what otherwise would remain buried. In the absence of a Christian theology of spirit, deeply grounded in African-American religious experiences, I intervene in the void not by approaching it head-on. Instead, we move gingerly, cautiously. One ought to be attentive in minding the gap, respecting that it is not simply empty space.


Rather it has been hallowed/hollowed out with serious methodological concerns for “testing” and not binding the spirits.\textsuperscript{13} Consideration of these texts, which I refer to collectively as black cultural discourse, perhaps will promote better attunement to the pneumatological ‘place’ that tenderly calls our attention.

3.2. Behind the Veil

Palmer, in \textit{A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life} (2004), which bears a secondary subtitle “welcoming the soul and weaving community in a wounded world,” explores pathways to integrating the inner and outer life. It is a chronicle on self-reconciliation. In Palmer’s view, wholeness achieves visibility when the appropriate conditions are created to permit the “shy” soul to show up sincerely. The proper environment is cultivated not through straightforward probing, poking, and prodding. Instead, the depth of our being is called from its recesses through a more covert, veiled activity.\textsuperscript{14} He writes:

When the space between us is made safe for the soul by truthful speaking and receptive listening, we are able to speak truth in a particularly powerful form—a form that goes deeper than our opinions, ideas, and beliefs....Storytelling has always been at the heart of being human because it serves some of our basic needs: passing along traditions, confessing failings, healing wounds, engendering hope, strengthening our sense of community.\textsuperscript{15}

The use of “third things” like stories and poems draw out intimacy that gets at the heart of the matter.

\textsuperscript{13} 1 John 4:1. See also Christopher Morse, \textit{Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief} (Harrisburg: Trinity International Press, 1994).

\textsuperscript{14} Palmer, \textit{A Hidden Wholeness}, 89-112.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 122.
Hurston told stories—vivid ones. Long before Hurston became a trained anthropologist tracing southern black folklore, she was a storyteller. Her capacity to hold an audience through her tales was legendary. Harlem Renaissance compatriots like Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps remember the special gift she possessed in hosting parties and entertaining her guests through her stories of Eatonville and “directing everyone in the singing of rousing spirituals.”¹⁶ Not only was she a conveyor of stories, but also she was a creator of them. Most famously, Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* becomes a literary masterpiece about black identity and personal self-discovery.

In Hurston’s work we observe the challenge embedded in being both an artist and art historian. Literary critics chide Hurston when she tends toward ‘objective’ research and favors documentation at the expense of creativity.¹⁷ Her product lacks in-spiration.¹⁸ But when Hurston is subjective, using her own story to create one, then her texts come alive. In fact, it is precisely this turn to the self, and the embrace of personal experience, that becomes the foundation of womanism and womanist theology, which we will discuss below.

Hurston dedicated her life to bringing her southern black inheritance—characterized by its stories, songs, and tales—to life. “Hurston was not ashamed of her origins, and she made no effort to hide them…she refused to repudiate the folk origins that were such a rich part of her total identity. She abhorred pretense, and she had no desire to

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adopt a bourgeois respectability.”\textsuperscript{19} Ironically, Du Bois’s platform for uplift, the redemption of souls of black folk, relied on the “talented few.” Hurston saw beauty in the souls of black folklore, and celebrated the common, everyday devoid of elitist trappings.\textsuperscript{20}

In her “How It Feels to Be Colored Me”, which is published in May 1928 of The World Tomorrow (edited by Reinhold Niebuhr), Hurston offers a thinly veiled criticism of Du Bois’s Souls. Although she does not invoke Du Bois by name, it is clear to the informed “Gentle Reader” that Du Bois is being indicted. After offering a brief account of when she became aware of her blackness, stating, “I remember the very day that I became colored,” Hurston follows:

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.\textsuperscript{21}

Hurston’s feeling of blackness is neither one of lament nor mournful resignation. It is closer to apathy, an indifference that dismisses the haranguing preoccupying many of her learned contemporaries. This indifference, to be clear, is not rooted in the privilege that can overlook a struggle that is not one’s own. As one who encountered hardship throughout her life, Hurston very much understands hers as challengingly combative. In that vein, she

\textsuperscript{19} Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, 27.


\textsuperscript{21} Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels To Be Colored Me” in Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New York: Literary Classics, 1995), 827.
makes a choice: grief distracts from the work of resistance, so Hurston dedicates little time to weeping.

This approach stands in stark relief to Du Bois’s position in *Souls*. For Hurston, there is not double, but rather singular, consciousness. Spirituals not “sorrow songs” signifying blackness, and African Americans are not haunted by the specter of slavery, but rather sustained by the “Great Soul.” Hers is not an *apology*, or an explanatory brief that defends blackness against the assaults of whiteness. Instead Hurston seems to challenge in satirical fashion the very premise of racial logics altogether, in *kerygmatic* fashion.

While acknowledging her own racial identity—the essay's opening line being, “I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother’s side was not an Indian chief”—Hurston does not posit race as the grand organizing principle from which all things emanate. She was not *born* colored but rather *became* colored. Race is not a matter of being, but rather becoming. In today's rubric, one might say that her racial identity is more of a social construction that she encountered in experience than it was an ontological given.

Hurston attributes her upbringing in Eatonville, one of the nation’s first incorporated “Negro towns,” as the source of her unique perspective. This place mattered.

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22 Ibid., 829.


In socially locating herself as a child of Eatonville, Hurston establishes blackness as the norm, and not a derivative or deviation from whiteness. As a result, there was no such thing as being colored. Rather, in Hurston’s experience, whiteness was the response to the blackness she always knew, and held to be true.

For Hurston there is no double consciousness, no self-awareness that splits the unified subject and dampens the soul. Hurston does not claim the dominant narrative as normative—neither that of whiteness nor the prevailing New Negro response to white supremacy—allowing it to be written upon her body. Instead Hurston invokes a spirit that does not redeem the soul because it is already free. Rather it magnifies the soul putting it on display for the world to see and marvel.

To be sure, in much of the commentary on Du Bois and Hurston, soul and spirit often are used adjacently and interchangeably. For example, in describing Hurston’s move to Harlem, Hemenway writes, “She was now a New Negro, a part of the cultural movement illustrating the genius of black souls; her very presence exposed second-class citizenship as absurd and irrational practice.” And in the very next sentence, Hemenway continues, “Zora Hurston was an extraordinarily witty woman, and she acquired an instant reputation in New York for her high spirits and side-splitting tales of Eatonville life.”

My aim is not to sort out or classify neatly the precise manner in which these terms are deployed by Du Bois, Hurston, and their commentators. I am not seeking the so-called original meaning of the terms for them. Such an attempt does not seem fruitful, not to mention possible, for at least two reasons: First, a discernible pattern does not emerge in either the original works or their commentary that commends itself to strict categorization.

26 Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, 22.
Du Bois and Hurston both seem completely disinterested in providing definitions as a precursor to deployment. Invoking the power of soul and spirit is not predicated on articulation—or even understanding. Which takes us to the second reason: both soul and spirit point to that which cannot be grasped—at once something subtle and sublime. Hemenway is correct: “The Harlem Renaissance was more a spirit than a movement, and because a spirit is ephemeral, generalizations about the Harlem Renaissance are either too hard or too easy.”

My task is constructive: careful exegetical work excavates the terrain around the text such that meaning can be drawn out, not for the sake of dis-covering original intent (or better, deceivingly re-constructing it), but instead for the sake of creating something fruitful. For me, soul signifies interiority and intimacy, while spirit exteriority and community. Still there can be no false dichotomy between soul and spirit (and body), as if they are not always intimately related to one another. “May the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

I read Hurston and Du Bois in a “hermeneutical circle” that contributes to working definitions (like Thurman’s “working paper”) that will then allow us to deploy these definitions in reading their works forward. In other words, without ascribing my definitions to them, I converse with them on my terms for the sake of arriving at a new vista.

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27 Ibid., 35.
3.3. Constructing Choices: The Everyday Ethical Task of Womanism

The constructive task is precisely what defines Katie Cannon’s sustained conversation with Zora Neale Hurston in *Black Womanist Ethics*. Cannon offers up something new, in an attempt to put to rest old ways of doing things, which have left the contributions of black women largely outside normative discourses of Christian theology and ethics. In this text, Cannon explores Hurston’s life and works, charting an innovative ethical pathway that centers the experience of African-American women toward the creation of a more ethical world. Toward this end, Cannon writes:

> My goal is not to arrive at my own prescriptive or normative ethic. Rather, what I am pursuing is an investigation (a) that will help Black women, and others who care, to understand and to appreciate the richness of their own moral struggle through the life of the common people and the oral tradition; (b) to further understandings of some of the differences between ethics of life under oppression and established moral approaches which take for granted freedom and a wide range of choices I am being suggestive of one possible ethical approach, not exhaustive. I make no apologies for the fact that this study is a partisan one.\(^{28}\)

According to Cannon’s formulation, the constructive ethical project is not individualistic, catering to one’s own fancies and desires. It always rooted in community, and from the strength of the community, one might find fortitude to face whatever challenges come one’s way. “Zora Neale Hurston and her fictional counterparts are resources for a constructive ethic for Black women, wherein they serve as strong resilient images, embodying the choices of possible options for action open within the Black folk culture,” offers Cannon. She goes on to say, “As moral agents struggling to avoid the devastating effects of structural oppression, these Black women create various coping mechanisms that free them from imposed norms and expectations.”\(^{29}\)

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\(^{29}\) Ibid., 13-14.
This array of choices to which Cannon points cannot be understated. She suggests that strength is rooted not in uniformity but rather in variability. Within “Black folk culture” there are multiple sites of resistance and many pathways forward beyond the experienced oppression. Resilience emerges from the creative possibility that there are always options, no matter how bleak the present situation.

Not only this, but Hurston is a key resource in the entire womanist project, which cuts across literature, theology, history, and ethics. Trailblazed by Alice Walker, who is responsible for Hurston’s “rediscovery”, at the start of In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose, Walker provides the canonical definition of a womanist:

1. a black feminist or feminist of color... 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually... 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.30

What makes womanism distinctive from black feminism it that is especially sources an empowering worldview from the experiences of black women. In womanism, of the possible options, there is a “preferential option” for the stories, struggles, and sustenance of black women.

Emilie Townes, in Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil (2006) vis-à-vis Toni Morrison and Walker, develops the notion of the “womanist dancing mind” to “make sense of the worlds surrounding us—sometimes enveloping us, sometimes smothering us, sometimes holding us, sometimes birthing us. It is more than my desire to reconfigure the world and then invite others to come and inspect the textures, the colors,

the patterns, the shapes, the sizes of this new order, this new set of promises.”

In this process of interrogating the inherited world, Townes presents images of strength that challenge the “fantastic hegemonic imagination” that fashions black women as object of a white normative gaze.

In the end, Townes concludes that the only way to begin undoing the hegemonic imagination that has constructed Aunt Jemina, Sapphire, the Tragic Mulatta, the Welfare Queen, and Topsy—is by turning to the everydayness of our realities. “This hope,” she says, “is unequivocal and unambiguous. It does not detach the human spirit from the present through mad delusions and flights of fancy. This hope is one that pulls the promise of the future into the present and places the present into the dawn of a future that is on the rimbones of glory.” Since the othering stories constructed by others does not describe one’s own truth, one must tell her own story.

While Townes does not offer a sustained consideration of Hurston as explicitly in Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, her concluding (and amended) invocation of Hurston’s “rimbones of nothing” speaks of invisible things. This phrase, which is found in Jonah’s Gourd Vine, Their Eyes Were Watching God and “Conversions and Visions” essay in The Sanctified Church, becomes a recurring trope in Townes’s writings, having been inspired toward this phrase by Katie Cannon. In fact, it is the organizing metaphor for Townes’s 2008 Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion: “Walking on the Rim Bones of Nothingness: Scholarship and Activism.” (It is interesting to


32 Ibid., 163.

33 “Invisible Things Spoken: Uninterrogated Colorness” is the title of chapter four of Townes’s Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil.
note that, of the three places this phrase appears, two are in works of fiction; the lived life reference comes from Hurston’s study of the sanctified church.) It is from this social location, the rim bones of nothing, that we find illuminated a courage that is the passion of life.

In an earlier work, Emilie Townes establishes womanism as a religious worldview that always works to reshape the world toward justice, especially for African-American women. She writes In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness (1995): “Womanist spirituality is not grounded in the notion that spirituality is a force, a practice separate from who we are moment by moment. It is the deep kneading of humanity and divinity into one breath, one hope, one vision.”³⁴ For Townes, religion is “lived” and practiced everyday and confronts the inhumane, oppressive realities that seek to diminish human flourishing. This perpetual intersection of faith and praxis is spirituality, which is always social witness.

She continues, “Womanist spirituality is not only a way of living, it is a style of witness that seeks to cross the yawning chasm of hatreds and prejudices and oppressions into a deeper and richer love of God as we experience Jesus in our lives.” Townes concludes with an apocalyptic vision—emblazoned and glorious—where people of faith utilize their stories as poetry to confront racism, sexism, colorism, and classism.³⁵ According to Townes, it is this eschatological hope that creates spiritual health and spiritual home.


This spirituality finds its origin, at least heuristically, in an impassioned worship characterized by evangelical conversion, shouting, singing of spirituals. In her first chapter entitled “The Spirit That Moves Us: African Cosmology in African American Synthesis,” Townes sketches the emergence of African-American Christianity qua slave religion. Interestingly though, although she asserts that spirituality is not a separate force, Townes speaks of “the Spirit.” I find this puzzling: It is unclear what Townes signifies in this spirit-talk. In tracing this nascence, Townes references Kongo cosmology and evangelical Christianity, which do rely on notions of spirit-as-force. While Townes is clear in saying what spirit is not, it would be helpful to know what Townes desires spirit to be.

Similarly, the subtitle of Katie’s Canon, “Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community” begs for further explication. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Townes and Cannon have sloppily deployed terms without precisely articulating their meaning. Instead, I am yearning for greater discussion of soul, spirit, and spirituality and how they can be employed and deployed in the ethical struggle. Just as womanists look to their own stories—personal and inherited—as re/sources, we might turn to the soul and spirits running through us as sources themselves. It is evident that these concepts possess significant centrality, perhaps even an “overplus of meaning” and with a groaning like the spirit in “sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26).

That being said, in this discourse of the everyday, the autobiographical seems to be a particularly relevant mode of theologizing. In many ways it is my attempt “to give account

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36 In her Presidential Address to the 2008 American Academy of Religion Townes makes clear: “The research we do is not a free-floating solitary intellectual quest. It is profoundly tethered to people’s lives—the fullness and incompleteness of them...What I am arguing against is the kind of disinterested research tact that doesn’t figure in that our work is going to have a profound impact on someone’s life in some way and some how. We should do our work with passion and precision and realize that we should not aspire to be the dip sticks for intellectual hubris” (9-10). Emilie M. Townes, “Walking on the Rim Bones of Nothingness: Scholarship and Activism,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 77:1 (March 2009), 1-15.
of myself.” And realizing that, with Cannon and Townes, the autobiographical is ethical, with Judith Butler, I acknowledge upfront: “The stories do not capture the body to which they refer. Even the history of this body is not fully narratable...my account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story. I cannot explain exactly why I have emerged in this way, and my efforts at narrative reconstruction are always undergoing revision. There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account.”

Delores Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (1993) provides a parallel that is helpful:

Black women are, then, more apt to see Jesus/Christ as spirit sustaining survival and liberation efforts of the black community...Jesus is whoever Jesus has to be to function in a support way in the struggle. Whether we talk about Jesus in relation to atonement theory or Christology, we womanists must be guided more by black Christian women's voices, faith and experience than by anything that was decided centuries ago at Chalcedon.

Utilizing the biblical narrative of Hagar [notably, a woman of color] as the organizing trope, Williams wrestles with the two stark realities: (1) sources of the black experience often represented the black *male* experience and (2) full liberation, especially for black women, was rarely realized because black women were often oppressed through surrogacy. As a result, with some options foreclosed, the womanist choice is survival and sustenance.

Just as womanism is less concerned with Christology than the “everyday Jesus” of lived religion, it also does not seem concerned with pneumatology as such. Still, Williams

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draws a connection between black women, African-American worship, and a coming theology of spirit. She writes:

Walker’s mention of the black womanist’s love of the spirit is a true reflection of the great respect Afro-American women have always shown for the presence and work of the spirit. In the black church, women (and men) often judge the effectiveness of the worship service not on the scholarly content of the sermon nor on the ritual nor on the orderly process. Rather, worship has been effective ‘if the spirit was high,’ i.e. if the spirit was actively and obviously present in a balanced blend of prayer, of cadenced word (the sermon), and of the syncopated music ministering to the plain of the people.39

With Walker’s definition in view, Williams gestures in her essay “Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices” that “womanist theology could eventually speak of God in a well-developed theology of the spirit...Womanist theology has grounds for shaping a theology of spirit informed by black women's political action.”40 In some way, Sisters is a partial response to this earlier observation.

Her concluding chapter “Womanist Reflections on ‘The Black Church,’ the African-American Denominational Churches and the Universal Hagar’s Spiritual Church” draws together Williams’s meditation on Hagar and some valuable definitional insights that add dexterity to the matters at hand. Williams distinguishes “the black church” from African-American denominational churches, insofar as the former is an abstraction and ideal.

She writes, “We cannot confine the black church to one special location because it can move faster than a bird in flight, faster than a rocket soaring, faster than time – but slowly enough to put spiritual songs in our burdened souls – slowly enough to put love in


40 Ibid.
our broken lives – slowly enough to bring moments of liberation to our troubled people.”41

Here, there is an echo of Hurston in Williams: the black church, like its spirituals, refuses containment in time and space. Being the best hope of the ancestors, she continues Raboteau’s notion that the present-day black church is “invisible”, like its slave religion antecedent. The nature of this “invisibility,” as we shall see, is more than meets the eye.

Williams roils African-American denominational churches, which represent for her the embodiment of oppression-from-within. Not only do these churches too often facilitate sexual and emotional exploitation of women, homophobia, and various forms of immorality, but also “the tendency of the proclamation and teachings of the denominational churches to be so spiritualized and ‘heaven-directed’ that women parishioners are not encouraged to concentrate on their lives in this world and to fight for their own survival, liberation and productive quality of life.”42

Alongside these images of the ideal and the worst, Williams points to the black spiritualist movement as a complicated example of empowerment of women and resistance of denominational elitism. She highlights the fact that spiritualist churches emerge in cities as “storefront churches” and embrace black rural migrants who could not find their place in established denominational churches. Further, she observes that although these churches, like the Universal Hagar’s Spiritual Church,” often deploy androcentric language, women are generally experienced as leaders (and not just congregants). And although “esoteric

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41 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 205.

42 Ibid., 208-209.
elements in the syncretistic composition of some of the black spiritual churches,” they do not seemingly fall prey to the sin of spiritualization.

In these spiritualist churches, spirits are real and inhabit the lived world of men and women. Spirits are not merely otherworldly, but have this-worldly activity. To spiritualize, by contrast, is to draw a stark divide between heaven and earth, and thereby resolving earthly needs in an otherworldly afterlife. Mediumship is the art of communicating with these spirits, facilitating their interplay between the phenomenal and spirit worlds. And in this process, one might say that, chiasmata takes place: the crossing over of properties from one site to the next.

Williams, following Walker’s conclusion to The Color Purple, invokes herself as a medium: “She thanked ‘everybody [in the book] for coming.’ And she signed the final page, ‘A.W., author and medium.’ This last word, medium, suggests that she felt herself to be merely the instrument through which other voices were enabled. There is something of the spirit in this last stroke of Walker’s pen. Something sacred.”

According to Williams, the Spirit generates a spirit of courage and non-conformity, rooted in the diversity of black life: “I saw many things about the African-American community and church history that I had not seen before….the uncanny resilience of mothering/nurturing/caring/enduring and resistance capacities of Hagar and black women has birthed a spirit of hope in the community.” Spirit-talk opens new horizons of

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43 Ibid, 223.


45 Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness, 235.

46 Ibid.
possibility. Williams look at the spiritualist church, and its celebration of spiritual gifts (e.g., miracles, prophecy, and *glossolalia*) helps us to cast a new vision.

### 3.4. Oceans of Possibility: Everyday Fluidity and the Array of Choices

Not only are there various “options for action,” but also it is increasingly becoming clear that there are multiple oppressions, as well as multiple types of moral agents. “Black folk culture” embraces not one, but many. To this day, the struggle continues to demystify the myth of the monolithic black community. Williams's excavating work and attention to the (obscure) Universal Hagar's Spiritual Church point to this reality.

In the last few decades, contiguous with the rise of cultural studies, there has been a discursive expansion of black religion to signify more than orthodox African-American Christianity. Increasingly “black” encompasses the African diaspora on both “sides” of the Atlantic and the Caribbean people “of the sea.” It has been often said that black Africans were baptized in the waters of the Middle Passage. The transformation that occurred created the “new” being known as the African/black American, so goes the metaphor. The emancipation of African Americans from slavery is symbolized by a reversal of this

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49 Theological discussions of water and body in the dissertation allude to the Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. I will not delve a discussion of Christian sacraments in a formal way, as it would take us too far afield from Du Bois and Hurston, and even Thurman. For a general ecumenical discussion of these Christian sacraments, please see World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper No. 111) (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982). Also, M. Shawn Copeland’s *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) offers a way of thinking about black bodies Eucharistically.
crossing: the invocation of the biblical Israelites’ exodus from Egypt through the Red Sea (or Sea of Reeds, as it were), epitomized in the spiritual “Go Down, Moses,” unravels the knots of American slavery. Just as enslavement happened by crossing the waters, liberation too comes through water.

Vincent Harding in *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (1981) and Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) centrally deploy the trope of water to illustrate Afro-diasporic identity. For Harding, African Americans are a flowing river through time and space:

> The river of black struggle is people, but it is also the hope, the movement, the transformative power that humans create and that create them, us, and makes them, us, new persons. So we black people are the river; the river is us. The river is in us, created by us, flowing out of us, surrounding us, re-creating us and this entire nation.\(^{50}\)

The dynamic life-giving movement of the river, with its turbulence and volatility, offer a critical lens through which to view the African-American freedom struggle.

Gilroy utilizes water, ships, and movement—particularly its tumult, not serenity—to define the diasporic “Black Atlantic,” not in terms of nationalist origins, common ethnic heritage, and claims to purity, but rather in terms of politics.\(^{51}\) What binds the disparateness of the Black Atlantic, within the “maelstrom of modernity” into a unified whole, is shared political objectives of overcoming oppression and subjugation and the empowerment of black people.

What interests me here, then, is a mode of rethinking black progress pneumatologically vis-à-vis Hurston and her attention to everyday, black folk. The water

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motif will significantly fund this process, dually from the perspective of black religious studies and constructive theology. There is a correlative coming together of identity formation, pneumatology, and ethics. Peter C. Hodgson opens his *Winds of Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (1994): “Theology is rather like sailing. It is in contact with powerful, fluid elements, symbolized by wind and water, over which is has little control and by which it is drawn and driven toward mysterious goals.”52 He leans on this metaphor in order to signify the freedom of God’s Spirit, and the constructive attempt to interact with the movement of God. Spirit is like water: it moves.

Hurston in her novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, considers this foundational event in the construction of blackness. Notably, Hurston is at the forefront of the celebrating the sources that expand “black religion” beyond African-American Christianity, and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* ‘syncretizes’ hoodoo and Christian values inherited from Judaism, and satirically so.53 In so doing, Hurston “troubles biblical waters,” to borrow Cain Hope Felder’s phrase, and again diverges from the prevailing interpretative lens constructing blackness.54 During a time when many African Americans were attempting to distance black Christian practices from so-called “African retentions,” Hurston celebrates these syncretisms by literally deepening them. Hemenway explains:

> Her voodoo reporting, as in the earlier accounts from *Mules and Men*, consistently treats voodoo as a legitimate, sophisticated religion. It is as old as creation: “It is the old, old mysticism of the world in African terms. Voodoo is a religion of creation and life. It is the worship of the sun, the water and other natural forces, but the

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symbolism is no better understood than that of other religions.” By stressing its religious nature, *Tell My Horse* dignifies voodoo worship, removing it from the lurid and sensational associations held by the popular mind.55

This defense of voodoo (and hoodoo) adds further context and contrast to Hurston’s appreciation of the spirituals, and their African and southern influences.

In the Preface to the first volume of *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925) James Weldon Johnson (author of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the “Negro National Anthem”) writes:

“shout songs”...are not true spirituals nor even truly religious; in fact, they are not actually songs. They might be termed quasi-religious or semi-barbaric music...This term ‘shout songs’ has no reference to the loud, jubilant Spirituals, which are often so termed by writers on Negro music; it has reference to the songs or, better, the chants used to accompany the “ring shout.”56

Johnson agrees with Du Bois and Payne, and goes on to observe, “the ‘ring shout’ was looked upon as a very questionable form of worship. A great many colored people distinctively frowned upon it. Indeed, I do not recall ever seeing a ‘ring shout’ except after the regular services” [emphasis in original].57 Hurston offers a different perspective:

There can be little doubt that shouting is a survival of the African ‘possession’ by the gods. In Africa it is sacred to the priesthood or acolytes, in America it has become generalized. The implication is the same, however, it is a sign of special favor from the spirit that it chooses to drive out the individual consciousness temporarily and use the body for its expression....Shouting is a community thing. It thrives in concert.58

Where others saw deficit and deviancy, Hurston saw beauty and holiness.


57 Ibid. Emphasis in original.

58 Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, 91.
Hurston’s refusal to write as a “race man” is deeply rooted in a politic that transcends race without being “post-racial.” Although I will speak more of transcendence below in relation to Thurman, in Hurston we encounter a capacity to be deeply concerned with a subject and still not be ultimately concerned with it. This is to say, Hurston examines—and appreciates—everyday practices of black religious life on their own merit. She refuses to interpret everything from the perspective of racial uplift, which risks flattening or reducing the complexity of the practices themselves. Hurston is less concerned with the perceiving “shout songs” from the perspective of the white normative gaze, than she is in seeing and celebrating their role in shaping and sustaining community.

Although Higginbotham’s period of examination predates Hurston’s period of productivity, Higginbotham’s analysis is still relevant: “The politics of respectability equated nonconformity with the cause of racial inequality and injustice.” Hurston, by contrast, equated nonconformity as a means of racial freedom. Higginbotham continues, “The Baptist women’s repeated condemnation of nonconformity indicated the significance they attached to individual behavior in the collective imaging of black people.” 59 Hurston exercised individual freedom as a way of re-imagining that collective image.

In the same vein that Hurston does not approach the Exodus story conventionally, she also wrote controversially regarding slavery itself. In “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” Hurston boasts:

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the grand-daughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you...Slavery is the price I paid for civilization and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had

a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think—to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep.  

While many pro-black commentators saw slavery as a vile scourge of American society, Hurston interpreted it with a bit more ambiguity.

When Hurston points to slavery’s ‘civilizing’ effect, despite all her celebration of diasporic folk culture, she reinscribes the stereotype of African savagery. It is possible to hear Hurston positing the “making a way out of no way” resilience about which Delores Williams writes. Like Hagar, black folk must forge a “quality of life” regardless to circumstances, and especially in the face of atrocity.

One also hears echoes of Charles Long’s “Primitive/Civilized: The Locus of a Problem”: “No one denies that there were and are peoples and cultures in the world who possess different technologies, customs, manners, and so forth; the general designation of these forms of human reality as primitive is less than a description and more than a definition.” Embedded within Hurston’s language, then is a conceptual supposition that, however glibly, plays into the normative/subordinate distinction she eschews in black folklore.

Similarly, Hurston’s politics of integration runs counter to what one might assume: she opposed Brown v. Board of Education, contending that African-American education did not require the stamp of legitimacy of whiteness. Whatever deficiencies existed in black schools ought to be remedied in their own right. Noting that Hurston was “not a systematic

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60 Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” 827.

61 See Williams’s “Hagar’s Story: A Route to Women’s Issues,” Sisters in the Wilderness, 15-33.

political thinker,” Hemenway demonstrates that “the celebrant of black folkways became a political conservative in her later years.” He continues:

Hurston’s conservatism grew primarily from three sources: an obsessive individualism that began with the self-confidence of Eatonville and expanded to generate great self-pride, almost a kind of egotism; a long suspicion of the Communist party and collectivist government, a suspicion that turned into mild paranoia during the McCarthy era, matching the mood of the country; and the social science philosophy that informed her folklore collecting. The last source is by far the most complex. Zora had begun collecting folklore in the twenties with the conscious intent of celebrating the black folk who had made a way out of no way, like their folk heroes... She liberated rural black folk from the prison of racial stereotypes and granted them dignity as cultural creators...Zora was concerned less with the tactics of racial uplift than with the unexamined prejudice of American social science.63

Some have argued that her approach was a betrayal to the very folk she desired to celebrate. But Hurston’s oeuvre revealed a subversive nonconformity that was sometimes “in your face,” but always affirmative of the everyday life of everyday folk.

We must interpret this contrarian “woman in the shadows,”64 taking note of the deceptive nuance of her assertions, all the while appreciating the overall arc of the project. In other words, given the slippery nature of folklore itself, it behooves Hurston’s interpreters not to read her flatly or unidirectionally. Instead we must move in the dynamic flow of her work.

**Rewriting Spiritual Identities**

This is all to say, Moses, Man of the Mountain opens up vistas of more deeply figuring ‘everyday’ black identity, and its ethical consequences, in its variety. And it does so by imaginatively playing with the conventional narrative—bending, twisting, and reshaping it.

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63 Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, 329-330.

Like the biblical story, Hurston’s rewritten story begins, ends, and runs through water: the escape from death is bathed in the Nile; Moses’ becomes Hebrew by “crossing over” the Red Sea; the Hebrews are emancipated by wading through the dry waters of the Red Sea; and later they enter the Promised Land “yonder over Jordan.” But still, there is much that is different: mostly notably, Moses is Egyptian and not born Hebrew but becomes Hebrew, echoing her claim in “How It Feel to Be Colored Me.” The transfiguration doubles: First, it is both a claim of blackness to Moses, who has been such a pivotal character in the black struggle for freedom. Second, it is an assertion to the power in speaking the subaltern’s story, which is one of the aims of womanist theology: By telling African-American women’s experiences, realities might be reordered.65

This identification with the oppressed, which leads him to become Hebrew although he is born Egyptian prefigures theologies of identity, such as black theology and queer theology. When Cone argues that the “God of the Oppressed” is black, anyone who fiercely stands with and fights with the oppressed are black, too.66 Similarly, in Marcella Althaus-Reid’s The Queer God the claim that “every theologian is a bisexual” means:

Remembering that our task is the Queering of theology, we should now be able to embark on the road of per/versions to start to think about the theologian and her praxis outside dyadic constructions, and to reflect upon her vocation, role and risks, in transit from closeted theology.67


Whereas the composers of the spirituals write themselves into the biblical narrative through song, Hurston goes one step farther: she renarrates the biblical story itself, detaching it from its “original” history, penning her story.

Hemenway writes:

Hurston acts as a tradition-bearer for an Afro-American worldview in Moses, simulating the process of creation that had led to the spirituals, reaffirming the act of imagination that could make Moses African rather than Hebrew, a conjure man instead of a mere conduit of divine power. She identifies with the creativity that could make slaves a chosen people in the midst of a culture structured to deny them a sense of special status.68

The spirituals that she loved and celebrated, not simply as sorrow songs, but as Johnson describes “songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope.”69 During the antebellum era, enslaved blacks planning escape sang, “Wade in the Water” as a call to gather. “Deep River” describes a home that resides over Jordan, and while some have appealed to the otherworldliness of these and similar lyrics pondering the “Promised Land,” it is now clear that double-speak and code switching was at play.70

In order to disguise aspiration for abolition and life in the American North, envisioned as the biblical Canaan, enslaved blacks would intentionally “spiritualize” their hopes for actual freedom. What appeared to be a desire to cross over to the afterlife was a veiled political claim to emancipation in this life. To borrow Lawrence Levine’s words, this was the “language of freedom.”

68 Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, 260.


Hemenway draws upon Levine, author of trailblazing *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, to situate Hurston's work in the context of “improvisational communal consciousness,” allowing Hemenway to conclude: “Moses could be simultaneously the product of a mass creativity that had made him special to black people and the product of Zora Neale Hurston's improvised vision.”\(^71\) When slaves cried that they would lay down burdens, meet their deceased parents, and put on a heavenly crowns “down by the riverside,” heaven was metaphorical but not abstract and escapist.\(^72\)

Especially given the deployment of theologies of proslavery, in a way, these spirituals’ invocation of water thereby constitutes the very de-sacramentalization of the Middle Passage, which Hurston in a way, re-sacramentalizes. That is, if Africans were baptized in the Atlantic on the way to becoming African American, then the wading in the waters of exodus, reverses the original '(de)consecrating' act. In this sense, black identity is flooded with deep ambiguity. With her unconventional views of the role of slavery and integration, the crossings from freedom to slavery and from slavery to freedom are intertwined and not easily disencumbered in Hurston's work.

**Real, Everyday People**

Ronald Thiemann’s discussion of the sacramentality of everyday life, in *The Humble Sublime: Secularity and the Politics of Belief* (2014), is instructive here. This is to say, to interpret these water-themed songs sacramentally may reveal more than meets the eye, or

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\(^71\) Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, 259.

\(^72\) Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 35, 45.
the ear as it were. In conversation with “humanists” Anna Akhmatova, Langston Hughes, George Orwell, and Albert Camus, Thiemann beautifully demonstrates that notions of secularity based on antimonies, particularly that of Charles Taylor in his tome The Secular Age, are overstated because they obscure complexity. For Thiemann, sacramentality refigures the sacred/profane and religious/secular polarity by pointing to the divine in the everyday.

Thiemann asserts that the dichotomies are closer to distinctions that do not have to be oppositional. He writes:

By depicting the world of ordinary experience through the eyes of Christian faith, late medieval reforming theologians [Luther and Calvin, in particular] sought to provide a cruciform lens through which to see and act within the world. For these reformers God’s presence lies hidden ‘in, with, and under’ the ordinary and everyday. God is not ‘beyond’ our everyday lives but rather hidden deeply ‘within’ them. Those who believe that in Christ God has brought life out of death, hope out of sorrow, and love out of cruelty are now called to see the world, the everyday and ordinary, with new eyes, the eyes of faith—and to live lives of hope and love directed to the neighbor in need. To be sure, this view undermines many of the safe distinctions that we have come to rely upon—particularly the distinction between the sacred and the secular; but it seeks to replace those dichotomous categories with integral notions like incarnation and sacrament. In so doing this view seeks to relocate the sacred not beyond but within our everyday experience.73

The notion of the “hidden sublime” (we also recall Parker’s “hidden wholeness”) thus reconfigures the secularization debate entirely because it challenges its constitutive architecture. If the concept of the “secular” depends upon a contrasting definition of “sacred,” then Thiemann’s work resolves the tension by suggesting that the tension never really existed in the first place. Or, that the tension only existed in our imagination, such that we release the conflict by reimagining the problem.

The “Christian imagination,” as Willie Jennings puts it, particularly that which emerges from the reform tradition under Thiemann’s investigation, is a continuous mode of dynamic “representation” always resisting stasis.\textsuperscript{74} Thiemann defines: “Sacraments as signs (\textit{signa}) point to a reality (\textit{res}) that lies beyond the signs themselves. Thus sacraments \textit{represent} the divine reality, the very presence of God in Christ...Sacraments thus \textit{represent} the divine reality even as they \textit{re-present} that reality in the ritual act.”\textsuperscript{75} In Thiemann’s view, it becomes possible—necessary even—to see holiness within ordinary life and practice. The key to such observation lies in looking at the same ‘things’ differently.

Thiemann goes on to say: “The incarnational logic of Christianity resists a simple separation of divine and human, spirit and flesh, sacred and secular by focusing on the interpenetration of those apparent opposites.”\textsuperscript{76} Co-operation instead of conflict becomes the manner in which we come to describe the “divine” and the “ordinary.”

The lived experiences of black people, as expressed in the musical traditions of African Americans, grounded James Cone’s liberation-oriented black theology. His work is relevant to this consideration of everydayness on several fronts. First, \textit{The Spirituals and the Blues} represents a second wave of Cone’s intellectual production that situates black

\textsuperscript{74} Willie James Jennings, in \textit{The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), concludes: “I yearn for a vision of Christian intellectual identity that is compelling and attractive, embodying not simply the cunning of reason but the power of love that constantly gestures toward joining, toward the desire to hear, to know, and to embrace.... I want Christians to recognize the grotesque nature of a social performance of Christianity that imagines Christian identity floating above land, landscape, animals, place, and space, leaving such realities to the machinations of capitalistic calculations and the commodity chains of private property. Such Christian identity can only inevitably lodge itself in the materiality of racial existence” (291, 293). See also Peter C. Hodgson’s \textit{Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), chapter one, for an interesting framing of theology as a fluid discourse.

\textsuperscript{75} Thiemann, \textit{The Humble Sublime}, 36.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 41.
theology most explicitly in the everyday of black life. Published in 1972, after the controversial and groundbreaking *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), his first systematic account of black theology, *The Spirituals and the Blues* analyzes black history and African-American attempts to understand existence and ultimate reality from the standpoint of their songs and music. Although black theology has always lodged Christian theology in African-American norms and sources, *The Spirituals and the Blues* becomes his first sustained theological account of everyday experiences. He writes, “The spiritual, then, is the spirit of the people struggling to be free; it is their religion, their source of strength in a time of trouble...Black history is a spiritual!”

Second, Cone’s conception of blackness itself is a form of re-presentation. That is, to be black is not simply a description of phenotype. Rather, it is a constructive fashioning of identity that appeals to the particular experiences of African-Americans but has universal appeal. In *God of the Oppressed* (1975) Cone argues:

> To say that Christ is black means that God, in his infinite wisdom and mercy, not only takes color seriously, he also takes it upon himself and discloses his will to make us whole—new creatures born in the spirit of divine blackness and redeemed through the blood of the Black Christ. Christ is black, therefore, not because of some cultural or psychological need of black people, but because and only because Christ really enters into our world where the poor, the despised, and the black are, disclosing that he is with them, entering their humiliation and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants.

Black theology then is a sacramental discourse because, as Thiemann defines, it has social purpose; depends upon verisimilitude; and is highly constructed. Black liberation

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78 Ibid., 125.

theology ultimately seeks to free oppressed people, constructed as “black” from any and all attempts at dehumanization. In the end, while blackness is lodged in the African-American experience, black theology’s widening of the definition of blackness yields a necessary openness. For Cone, all people have the potential to be black insofar as they can relate to the experiences of marginalization.

Returning directly to the trope of water, we now observe more clearly what is at stake in the waters. When African Americans “wade in the water,” below the surface resides a sophisticated claim to personhood, subjection, and most basically to humanity. When black people sing the spiritual “My Soul’s Been Anchored in de Lord” and the more contemporary gospel song “My Soul’s Been Anchored in the Lord,” the medium of water is not insignificant. Through the vocal and musical imagery of the sea storm, a people’s encounter with slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and socioeconomic inequality takes shape. Yet and still, the waters connect black people to the distant shore of freedom, and to a real and present God that they understand as liberator and redeemer.

“Though the storms keep on raging in my life
And sometimes it’s hard to tell the night from day;
Still that hope that lies within is reassured
As I keep my eyes upon the distant shore;
I know He’ll lead me safely to that blessed place He has prepared...

I realize that some that sometimes in this life we’re gonna be tossed
By the waves and the currents that seem so
But in the word of God I’ve got an anchor
And it keeps me steadfast and unmovable despite the tide.”

The embedded theology of the song points to the importance of relatedness and association. Any given entity, moment in time, or idea is not isolated, but rather is a part of

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some greater whole. To place the everyday alongside theology, then, is to track the interconnections. It is to acknowledge that each unit is constituent of a web of movement and reflexivity.

Several interlocutors articulate this process, the movement of life, in terms of a dialectic. Lefebvre lodges his *Critique of Everyday Life* in the Marxist form, seeking to wrestle with the notion of alienation although he observes many Marxists reject consideration of the everyday as bourgeois.81 “The critique of everyday life,” he defines, “takes the form of a living, dialectical pair: on the one hand, ‘modern times’ (with everything they entail: bourgeoisie, capitalism, techniques and technicity, etc.), and on the other, the Tramp [which he defines earlier as “the reverse image”]. The relation between them is not a simple one.”82 Thus the dialectical process is a tensive one, in which opposites are disallowed from mutual exclusivity. Rather, poles are held together because in fact their differences are not as great as they appear. Lefebvre says, “But to the define ‘the new’ by sifting out everything that distinguishes it from the old is not as easy as the dogmatists with their lack of dialectic used to believe. Our era is truly an era of transition; everything about it is transitory, everything, right down to men and their lives.”83

Although it may be simpler to resort to Manichean dichotomies—between the real and the illusory, the sacred and profane, the sacramental and the secular—dialectical analysis acknowledges more texture in relationships. The everyday cannot simply be reduced to daily routines. As Michel de Certeau makes clear, the “practice of everyday life”

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82 Ibid., 13.

83 Ibid., 50.
is not synonymous with “daily practices,” just as he distinguishes “strategy” from “tactic.”

Spirit unites the body and the soul, the one and the many.

As a mechanism of sacramental interpretation, this dialectic is articulated variously, but the basic structure, reminiscent of Hegel’s thesis, antithesis, synthesis remains. For example, as Thiemann has illustrated in triadic formulation, we might imagine the movement in sacramental terms as absence, presence, representation; in literary terms as sexuality, indeterminacy, context; in theatrical terms as form, content, performance; or generally as familiarization, defamiliarization, refamiliarization or as preconfiguration, configuration, refuguration. Despite the variance and ordering the three-step process stays intact. Hegel’s _Lectures of the Philosophy of Religion_ (1827) make the case that often the antithesis is first visible before the thesis can be articulated methodologically. For him human life (the antithesis of spirit) is in view before spirit can be posited, even though epistemologically spirit moves through its antithesis in humanity before ‘arriving’ at the Absolute.

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84 See the “General Introduction’ (especially p. xx-xxii) of Michel de Certeau, _The Practice of Everyday Life_, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). De Certeau explains: “I call a ‘strategy’ the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an ‘environment’. A strategy assumes a place than be circumscribed as proper (propre)...I call a ‘tactic,’ on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality” (xix). He goes on to explain that “a tactic depends on time”. His discussion of time converges with Michael Hanchard’s notion of time in “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora,” _Public Culture_ 11 (1999): 245-268. There he explores how blacks become subjects in the control of their time, which as slaves they did not order. Once blacks could dictate the everyday uses of their time in strategic ways, not depending on tactical openings in time—breaks and other opportunities to “Steal Away”—then the becoming not just agents but also willful subjects.


It seems to me, then, that the critique of African diaspora vis-à-vis the trope of water is a way of reimagining the ethical consequences of identity shaping. The process of black identity formation is one of locution, illocution, and perlocution that oscillate in, above, and through the waters of the Atlantic, like the primordial biblical *ruach*. Theories of the black diaspora typically begin first with the relationship of African-descended people to modernity and the Enlightenment presentation of blacks as wholly other to whites. Europe and the United States are separated from Africa by water. Twentieth century articulations of African-American identity then rejected the racist ideologies of the Enlightenment and in the process rejected the ideal of modernity.

The black subject, though no longer a dehumanized object, was fashioned as the antithesis of the European notion of modernity as blacks forged connections across the Atlantic. Many conversations, as we will see in greater detail below, centered around what was carried across or lost in the Middle Passage as African retentions or not. The third phase, in which we find contemporary theories of the African diaspora, situates the idea of blackness in the movement itself. Rather than imagining an African past or attempting to disassociate with Enlightenment-initiated and Europe-sited modernity, these diasporic theories embraces the dialectical multiplicity. In so doing, identity is forged square *in* the waters, hence Paul Gilroy’s groundbreaking conception of the “Black Atlantic.”
3.5. “Water-Washed and Spirit Born” Folk

In many ways black theories of diaspora, like black theology, are a response to the depiction of Africans, African Americans, Caribbeans, and other African-descended people as less than human. Early systematic portrayals of “blackness,” forged during the Enlightenment era, were constructions of race that devalued African-descended people in light of whiteness or Europeanness. With the rise of science came “proofs” of the genetic inferiority of those with black skin, thus attaching to blackness an ontological character.

Michelle Wright in *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004) traces well “The European and American Invention of the Black Other” which becomes the point of departure for the de- and re-interpretations that will come later. She begins her chapter on the construction of race saying, “Over two hundred years before Jacques Derrida became celebrated for his theory of deconstruction, Blacks in the Americas were deconstructing white Western nationalist discourses celebrating the dawn of democracy.”

She uses David Walker’s *Appeal To the Coloured Citizens of the World* and John Marrant’s *A Sermon Preached on the 24th Day of June 1789* as examples of this discourse.

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Their counter-discourses, Wright explains, are responses to the Enlightenment norm that framed black people as ‘wholly other’, most prominently crafted by Hegel in *Philosophy of History* and *Philosophy of Right*, by Count Arthur de Gobineau in *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines*, and by Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Following the work of Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein in *Race, Nation, and Class*, Wright explores how blacks are constructed as Other vis-à-vis nationalism in two forms, the Other-from-within and the Other-from-without. She explains: “The Other-from-without is what we find in Hegel’s text: located outside the West yet nonetheless brought in as oppositional and best understood as void who has the potential to be taught Western values and cultures.”

Later she continues, “In the *Philosophy of History*, Africa is simply the antithesis to the European thesis: it signifies immobility and stagnation, a continent of nonsubjects who are necessary subject to European free will and the necessary drive toward synthesis.” In order to create the European subject, Hegel interprets Africans (continentally separated by the Mediterranean) and African-descended Caribbeans and black Americans (continentally separated by the Atlantic) as Other existing entirely outside of the German nation. As such, the Black Other is philosophically justified as the target of slavery and genocide because ‘it’ is literally the antithesis of the European subject. Whiteness is a response to the blackness Europe imagined.

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90 Ibid., 31-32.
91 Ibid., 37.
92 Ibid., 40.
Gobineau (who is known as the “father of modern racism”), Wright explains, is concerned with the decline of Aryan civilization, which differs in part from Hegel's idealist construction. She states:

Gobineau asserts that the African races are the most inferior and, to the artistic temperament with which he accredits those races, he adds the irrational lusts of the savage for violence, blood, and sex...his Negro Other is an Other-from within because its cruel, violent, and oversexed natures poses a direct threat to the relative purity of the Aryan subject and Aryan civilization.\(^{93}\)

Across the Atlantic, and decades prior, Wright explains that for Jefferson the Negro constitutes a “problem” because “it” is a slave and shares geography with the white subject. But in a way, for Jefferson the remedy, in logocentric form, is definitional, contends Wright: “the presence of Negroes in America did not mean they were part of the nation, for America was a nation produced by democratic ideals, not geographical or historical boundaries.”

Therefore, “Jefferson proceeds to construct ‘blackness’ as a thing rather than a shade of color, using the metaphor of the veil as nature’s marker of inferiority, an ultimately unknown quality that nonetheless covers the Negro’s face and therefore with it the visage of humanity.”\(^{94}\) The collusion of Enlightenment logic and racism perhaps is clearest in Jefferson, as blacks are defined as non-humans—“as a separate species (prone to mating with apes when in Africa).”\(^{95}\) In a way, then, Jefferson constructs the Black Other from within the geographical boundaries of the state, but still entirely from without the definitional boundaries of the democratic nation and of the species.

Although the nuance of Othering is important, particularly illustrating the manner in which different views of blackness as objectification and dehumanization developed in the

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{94}\) Ibid.

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 31.
United States and in Europe, Wright rightly concludes: “Others-from-within and Others-from without are not radically different from one another; they are best understood as variations on the theme of alterity rather than two discrete categories.”⁹⁶ For Hegel and Gobineau, Africa was simply a distant land across the sea that was constructed to form the European subject (Hegel) or constructed as a threat to European Aryan identity (Gobineau). For Jefferson, although the Negro resided geographically with the white American, he was never an American and thus his primary identifier as a non-human still resided across the sea in the imagined and inferior construction of Africa.

**De-Familiarization: Traversing Waters**

The presentation of black people as objects and Others, then, is the first move of the dialectic in the interpretation of black diasporic identity vis-à-vis the trope of water. The second move is the ‘de-presentation’ that occurs in the first waves of diasporic theory, as articulated by black people. W.E.B. Du Bois, Franz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, and others, create a “counter-discourse,” says Wright. This counter-language then is an attempt to de-familiarize the racist norms of the Enlightenment; they seek to offer a context. Racist texts are written upon black bodies *qua* antithesis, prompting black people to write the context to whiteness *qua* thesis.

Among the most prominent systematic theories of black diasporic identity of the first half of the 20th century are those of Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier and Melville Herskovits. Charles Long explains in *Significations*:

The issue of persistence of African elements in the black community is a hotly debated issue. On the one hand, we have the positions of E. Franklin Frazier and

⁹⁶ Ibid., 64.
W.E.B. Du Bois, emphasizing the lack of any significant persisting elements of Africanism in America. Melville Herskovits held this same position but reversed his position in the *Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston, 1958), where he places a greater emphasis on the presence of African elements among the descendants of the slaves in North America.\(^9^7\)

As J. Lorand Matory points out in *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (2005) the Herskovits-Frazier debate is central in African-American studies.\(^9^8\) Their interpretations represent two poles of connecting the black American to Africa. In this movement of our interpretive dialectic, the question is not what separates Europe/America from Africa, but rather an attempt to determine what connects it. In other words, the question becomes what—if anything—survived the Middle Passage? What, if anything, traversed the Atlantic waters?

Sidney Mintz’s and Richard Price’s *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (1976) and Albert Raboteau’s *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (1978) present the foundational arguments that mitigate the Herskovits-Frazier debate. In their view, black culture in the Americas represents neither a full retention of an African past nor a full loss of it. While much is destroyed in the tumultuous seas of the “Maafa,” a great deal also survives.\(^9^9\) The key point, however, of Mintz’s and Price’s as well as Raboteau’s work is that a new culture is born in the encounter between the African and the Americas. The child of this contact is the

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\(^9^9\) “Maafa” is the Swahili term meaning “great tragedy” that is used to describe the transatlantic slave trade, enslavement in the “new world,” colonization and its vestiges.
"African American," which is not entirely African or Western/European (or American as such). Mintz and Price conclude:

The general theoretical position we take in this essay is that the past must be viewed as the conditioning circumstance of the present. We do not believe that the present can be ‘understood’—in the sense of explaining the relationships among different contemporary institutional forms—without reference to the past. We suppose this to be the case, whether our interest be in the European peoples who conquered the world they called ‘new,’ the Indian peoples they destroyed and subjugated with it, or the African—and, later, Asian—peoples they dragged into it. New World it is, for those who became its peoples remade it, and in the process, they remade themselves.100

It is in the remaking that the African American is born.

With emphasis on religion, Raboteau illustrates the unique black religion that is birthed in the western hemisphere. While he traces significant differences in the way that faith is practiced in the United States and in the Caribbean/South America, new religious forms that are African-derived and descended come to exist in the Americas. Indeed the text’s title witnesses to this creation. African-American religion during the period under investigation is neither entirely African nor entirely non-African. Instead it is “slave religion.” Raboteau explains:

In the midst of slavery, religion was for slaves a space of meaning, freedom, and transcendence…As the one institution which freed blacks were allowed to control, the church was the center of social, economic, educational, and political activity. It was also a source of continuity and identity for the black community. In their churches, black worshippers continue for decades to pray, sing, preach, and shout as they or their parents had during slavery.101

As scholars of black culture attempt to describe black identity in contrast to the racist propositions of Hegel, Gobineau, Jefferson, and others, they seek to travel across the Atlantic—to traverse the waters—and build a connection to Africa. The waters do not

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strictly separate, but rather they are to be bridged in constructive fashion. In the waters of the Atlantic, indeed in the pain of the Middle Passage, African-American culture is conceived and thus birthed as something novel in the Americas.

**Re-Presentation: Wading in the Waters of the Black Atlantic**

In 1993, Paul Gilroy dramatically shifted the conversation of black diasporic studies with his publication of *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Gilroy’s invocation of the concept of black life behind the veil continued in Du Bois’s legacy: just as no American interpretation of blackness could circumvent Du Bois, no contemporary analysis of the African diaspora can evade Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic* functions as a keystone in unlocking black identity because it re-presents African-descended people as complex leading characters in an age-old drama. They stand not as the anti-thesis of whites and Enlightenment-inspired modernity, but rather as protesting products of it. This is to say, black people are modern, while at the same time being “countercultures of modernity,” which is the theme of the first chapter. In this formulation there is dialectical tension and transcendence in which blackness is defined both in terms of the West and the ‘non-West’. Gilroy explains:

> The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity. These desires are relevant to understanding political organizing and cultural criticism. They have always sat uneasily alongside the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in national political cultures and nations states in America, the Caribbean, and Europe.102

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Through his analysis of slave culture, the transnational character of black music, and the expatriation black luminaries such as Du Bois and Richard Wright, Gilroy demonstrates how blackness is not simply a product of either Africa or America, but rather is shaped by and also lives in Europe. Without German idealism there would be no Du Bois as we know him; Richard Wright (and James Baldwin) depended upon Paris, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus to render his critique of race and racism in the United States. Black nationalist movements of the 20th century, from Garveyism to Negritude, develop through articulations of the modern European notion of the nation-state.

Not only this, but as a black Briton, Gilroy presents the vibrancy of black culture—especially through his analysis of funk and hip-hop music—in places like Great Britain. For Gilroy, blackness is constantly in motion, moving from continent to continent. This transnational and intercontinental movement is not unidirectional and frozen in history, as in the Middle Passage and subsequent theories evaluating the degree of African retentions. Rather, the flow of people, music, ideas, and other forms of culture is mobile and multidirectional, and ongoing in the present.

Hence, the concept of the "black Atlantic" where the unifying principle of the African diaspora is the water. He moves away from attempts to construct a bridge over the water, in order to close a perceived gap. Thus, in Gilroy's formulation appeals to racial and ethnicity purity and authenticity are no longer the ‘center’ of the black diaspora. Instead, water becomes the “stuff” of diaspora, the medium of black subjectivity. He states:

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for this enterprise and my starting point. The image of ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons...Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various project for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas
and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs.\textsuperscript{103}

The re-presentation of blackness as the black Atlantic returns us most squarely to the waters. To be black not only is to wade in the waters, but rather it is be birthed and to live in the waters. “I’ve known rivers,” pens Hughes in a poem dedicated to Du Bois, “Ancient, dusky rivers / My soul has grown deep like the rivers.”\textsuperscript{104} Spirit and water is life, spirit is what binds life (bio-diversity) together. And still, water is ambiguous (sometimes dangerous) and as Morse reminds us vis-à-vis the Johannine text, “not every spirit is of God.” Navigating the waters of spirit, then, is an act of utmost courage.

3.6. “Un/Shouted” Courage

Hurston’s \textit{Moses, Man of the Mountain} is a narrative about water that reimagines identity. It begins with birth of a child whose survival (according to the legend in Hurston’s rewriting) depends upon the mercy of the Nile, in light of the Egyptian slaughter of Hebrews boys (Exodus 1:22). When the nameless boychild is born, his father is terrified to the point of filicide, because of the ruthlessness of the Egyptian soldiers who will decimate the entire family if they attempt the boychild’s survival. Upon his birth, the family goes to great length to muffle his cry so as not to alert the marauding guards. The nameless boy, in Hurston’s text, becomes the child not allowed to cry.

Hurston writes, “Amram turned his stricken face upon his wife. ‘Jochebed, there are different kinds of courage. Sometimes ordinary love and courage ain’t enough for the

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 4.

occasion. But a woman wouldn’t recognize a time like that when it come.” The threat of one’s own demise, and that of the family, forecloses in Amram’s mind the only possible choice. Later “Amram said huskily, ‘Shall we grant it merciful escape, Jochebed?’”

But the boychild’s mother is unmoved by her husband’s idea of mercy and declares, as the child is set adrift up the Nile in a basket: “One thing I know Pharaoh can’t make out of me. He can’t take my son away from me and make me a murderer at the same time. That’s one thing I don’t aim to let him do.” The child’s mother Jochebed possesses an unshakable determination not to be changed by her circumstances—even if it cost her life. In other words, she will risk her life in order to remain herself. “There are some things in life that are worse than death.” Ordinary love and courage, Hurston says, can be enough.

Mary Burgher, in her essay “Images of Self and Race in the Autobiographies of Black Women” explores how African American women forge and depict “tenacity of spirit” and “creative identities” amidst otherwise debilitating circumstances. Despite the fact that, Burgher illustrates that these autobiographies do not resign themselves to one-dimensional bemoaning the black woman’s condition, but rather resolve to thrive in the face of every countermeasure to flourishing.

Reflecting on Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on the Road*, Burgher writes:

Black women autobiographers write about experiences more varied, much harsher, and at times more beautiful than most others encounter... *The Caged Bird*, like other


106 Ibid, Kindle Location 420.

autobiographies by Black women, is a valuable resource because it reveals and symbolizes the Black woman’s daring act of remaking her lost innocence into invisible dignity, her never-practiced delicacy into quiet grace, and her forced responsibility into unshouted courage.\textsuperscript{108}

The everyday struggles of black women, Burgher submits, reveal a resilience that endures in the face of unimaginable suffering. They are not, however, mere victims of oppression. Instead they are powerful actors that exhibit character and strength, even when they cannot readily and prominently voice their story. Although not an autobiography, in Hurston’s \textit{Moses, Man of the Mountain} the child that cannot cry is met by the unshouted courage of a mother’s love. It is worth mentioning that this suppressed potentiality is reminiscent of the unhopefulness in Du Bois’s autobiographical “On the Passing of the First Born.”

Womanist Katie Cannon takes up this notion of Hurston’s “unshouted courage,” which is a form of what Cannon calls “the inaudible stoutheartedness of Black folk”\textsuperscript{109} and writes:

\begin{quote}
In Zora Neale Hurston’s essays the inference of “unshouted courage” continued to be derived from its prominence in the Black community. Alice Walker, in introducing Hurston’s nonfiction, asserts that the fundamental thesis that Hurston embodied and exhibited in her essays was that one “must struggle every minute of life to affirm black people’s right to a healthy existence.” This idea concurs with the understanding of courage in Paul Tillich’s work. Tillich says that courage is an ethical act when humans affirm their own being in spite of those elements in their existence which conflict with their essential self-affirmation.\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{109} Cannon, \textit{Katie’s Canon}, 78.

Although Cannon does not elaborate, I find Cannon’s invocation of Tillich immensely important. For Tillich, courage necessarily implies theological God-talk packed with immense significations. Even if Cannon does not intend to tether her analysis of Hurston deeply in Tillich’s systematic theology, her reference does open the slightest of fractures that offers fertile ground for the constructive project. Moreover, it opens a window to give additional attention to Hurston theologically, and in conversation with a systematic theologian.111 Whereas Cannon is explicitly interested in constructive ethics, her appeal to Tillich provides the overlapping immanent bridge to engage in constructive theology without forcing the connection. I will cross this Tillichian bridge in the next chapter.

In this instance, the difference between ethics and theology might best be described in terms of kinetic and potential energy. Rather than being separate and unrelated, kinesis and potentiality are tethered to one another, and the “main thing” under consideration is energy. To some extent the distinction is drawn to call attention—to a particular snapshot in an ongoing process of flux. There is necessary permeability between these categories, in much the same way that intersectional divisions of race, class, gender, and sexuality are heuristic.

Chapter 4. Queering Spirit: Theological Transgression as a Way Back Home

“Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die... For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live. (Ezekiel 18:31-32)

“for indeed our God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12:29)

“Come home and build your self a house.” These were Aunt Susie’s words to me, summer 2008, as she showed me the family’s land in Bessemer, Alabama. This country plot, however, resembled little of the rented split-family homes I had known growing up in the ghettos of Buffalo, New York. Well, except that both begged for repair. But when my graduate work at Union Theological Seminary afforded me a travel fellowship to explore something personal that would allow me to do my future work better, I turned to my past—not mine, per se, but that of my family.

In order to do the work of empowerment, integral to the liberation theology that had become mine at Union, first I attempted to literally give an account of my family's liberation. I had to complete the ante-work if I were to accomplish the real work. I wanted to trace my lineage to American slavery, and if possible, through it and beyond. As a descendent of enslaved people and an activist in contemporary movements against human trafficking, it made sense that I be able to speak my own story “up from slavery.”¹ It was the fulfillment of the familiar adage: in order to know where you are going, you have to know from whence you came. Thus, I began writing my family’s history in order to compose a

genealogy, and it landed me on my great-great-aunt’s porch. For days I listened to stories about a past that was entirely about my present. Preparation for my future meant spending time in my ancestral home.

But Alabama is hardly my home, and the likelihood of me settling there is slim. I felt far more comfortable in Manhattan where I lived for years than I ever would in the deep South. Nevertheless, much more than an imagined nostalgia connects me to this “place.” It is such an unsettling and tenuous connection that I will explore below. By examining Hurston’s relationship to “place” I seek to expand the limits of what constitutes “home.” The process of reexamining the very things we take for granted—and queering them—enables us to do much better that which our hearts desire.

Said another way, and following Collins’s and Bilge’s notion that intersectionality is “critical inquiry and praxis,” good practice demands re-membering. While its goal is not to arrive at orthodoxy, the task of critical knowledge formation is about orthopraxis. The way we think is influenced by the way we act—and vice versa. In this recollection, which is as

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2 Again, by “place” I do not mean a physical location, but rather something that is at the same time more abstract and more substantial, as will be discussed below. See Jacqueline Nassy Brown’s Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

3 By this I mean, theologically differently and eschatologically in view of an-other possible world. Marcella Althaus-Reid writes, “Queering theology, the theological task and God is all part of a coming out of the closet for Christianity which is no longer simply one option among others, nor is it sidetrack outside what has been regarded as the highroad of classical theology. Queering theology is the path of God’s own liberation, apart from ours, and as such it constitutes a critique to what Heterosexual Theology has done with God by closeting the divine. In theology, as in love, this quest is a spiritual one, which requires continuing to the Other side of theology, and the Other side of God...Our task and our joy is to find or simply recognize God sitting amongst us, at any time, in any gay bar or in the home of a camp friend who decorates her living room as a chapel and doesn’t leave her rosary at home when going to a salsa bar.” The Queer God (New York: Routledge, 2003). 4. See also April S. Callis, “Playing with Butler and Foucault: Bisexuality and Queer Theory,” Journal of Bisexuality 9:3-4 (2009), 213-233.


5 I have in mind the familiar emphasis of praxis before reflection in liberation theology. See, for example, chapter one of Gustavo Gutiérrez’s A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation, 1973 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988).
much about construction as it is about dis-covering, I “become again what I never was.”
Oddly enough, figuring out that I was quite a foreigner in Bessemer strengthened my connection to this ‘home’—not exactly the breaking of chains that I anticipated.

Zora Neale Hurston’s journey from Eatonville to Harlem and back is a pilgrimage of self-discovery that re-introduces the American south to the world. Likewise, in the process, Harlem becomes spiritual home allowing her to rediscover Eatonville, her ancestral home. Representing a key turning point, Harlem is site of Hurston’s conversion, the place where her life pivots and she becomes an artist concerned with putting the black south on the world stage.

In this chapter, I focus our ‘gaze’ upon the transformation that occurs in Hurston’s Harlem. My interest, in particular, is her role as the self-proclaimed “Queen of the Niggerati”: the queen mother of Richard Bruce Nugent, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman, black gay men who along with Hurston comprised the literary group that published FIRE!! and inhabited the Niggerati Manor. If nothing else, their home is a queer site of resistance, and finding home—or better, building a home—is a creative act of defiance.

In light of their engagement with black Christianity, they help us to see that finding a “church home” starts with an embodied living, which is to be at home in one’s self. Their attention to transgressive acts of passionate, bodily expression has everything to do with spirit. And spirit is fire. Their creativity transgresses the status quo, claiming the power to be oneself. In this light, one might consider Hurston’s project as a “preface to liberation,”

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likened unto Foucault’s “preface to transgression.”\textsuperscript{7} This chapter heeds Aunt Susie’s invitation to build a (discursive) home.

I continue moving through deconstruction to construction, from negative dialectics toward an affirmative dialogic. Not only is Hurston a constructive source for womanist theology, as Cannon and Townes have shown us, but here I read her also as a source for queer pneumatology; that is, for imagining spirited transgression. This “queering” of Hurston, vis-à-vis her comrades, places her own fierceness in greater relief. It extends her “straight-lick with a crooked stick”\textsuperscript{8} into a way of further reading Hurston ethically into the world. In so doing, I reverse the heterosexist appropriation of sanctified (deviant) Christianity, which pivots off Hurston, advocated by Cheryl J. Sanders.

The fierce love of the body, signified by God’s Spirit inhabiting human flesh, reveals that empowerment depends upon weakening. That is, transgression destabilizes systems (of oppression), and ushers in an other way of living. In this chapter, I will converse with Paul Tillich, Roger Haight, and Marcella Althaus-Reid to advance a transgressive (queer) pneumatology. The \textit{kenotic} act of love of God-becoming human, which is the first death of God, stimulates freedom of the body. The overcoming of the second death of the crucified God in resurrection, reestablishes Jesus as ghost—but one whose materiality and cross remains. It is here, then, that I most deliberately interpret Jesus as the Spirit of God.

\textsuperscript{7} Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression” (1963) in \textit{Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault}, ed. Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999), 57-71. Particularly, I am thinking of when he writes on page 64 that philosophy must take up a “less ambitious goal.”

\textsuperscript{8} Zora Neale Hurston, “High John de Conquer” (October 1943), in \textit{Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings} (New York: Literary Classics, 1995), 922-931.
4.1. Womanists Love the Spirit?

Womanist trailblazers Katie Canon and Emile Townes, as explored in chapter three, have turned to Hurston in their ethical projects to celebrate black women’s experiences. Reading everyday struggles as sacred texts, they have found spiritual home in Hurston, drawing deeply from her well of folklore that features African-American women prominently. Christian social ethicist Cheryl J. Sanders, in her study of the Sanctified church, also converses with Hurston and womanism.

In her study of Holiness-Pentecostalism, Sanders discovers the productive power of black women, focusing on sanctified worship traditions in which spirit baptism and spirit possession is front and center.9 Sanders illustrates that a great deal of attention is given to the intentional invocation of the Holy Spirit, whose presence is verified by embodied manifestations such as shouting, speaking in tongues, and dancing. “The tradition thrives upon the integration of aesthetics (cultural authenticity), ethics (implementation of Christian norms), and epistemology (ways of knowing) in its characteristic verbal and bodily articulations of praise.”10 According to Sanders, encountering God is mediated through demonstrative and ecstatic experiences.

Sanders demonstrates this movement is a type of “Christian reform” because it women and the poor play a central role in the emergence and persistence of the sanctified church.11 Whereas they were marginal actors in that mainstream Christianity, the involvement of poor and female members is inseparably constitutive of the Holiness-

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10 Ibid., 70.

11 See also Anthea Butler’s Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
Pentecostal experience. It is a form of expression that drew the best from Baptist and Methodist traditions to initiate a new tradition. Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote—dubbed by William Andrews as “sisters of the Spirit”12—are three Methodist forerunners of the Sanctified Church, whose embodiment of sanctification would come to typify this fresh movement.13

Sanders opens her text Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture by referencing Hurston’s groundbreaking research. She then articulates a comprehensive definition of the Sanctified church that builds on the thought of Turner, Hurston, and Gilkes but adds a needed ethical dimension: *The Sanctified church is an African American Christian reform movement that seeks to bring its standards of worship, personal morality, and social concern into conformity with a biblical hermeneutic of holiness and spiritual empowerment* [emphasis in original]. This ethical emphasis is a critical element in the definition because the Sanctified churches are congregations of “saints,” an ethical definition members apply to themselves as an indication of their collective response to the biblical call to holiness.14

Sanders’s description of the Sanctified church correlates biblical conformity and social ethics. Sainthood and spiritual empowerment are achieved through alignment with scriptural holiness. Contrary to Hurston’s nonconformist tendencies, demonstrated in the

12 *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1986). Andrews writes: Andrews writes, “Indeed, some apologists for slavery predicated their arguments on the idea that the Negro had not been endowed by his creator with a soul...Like Lee and Elaw before her, Foote’s brand of feminist activism within Christianity evolved out of her conviction that salvation made possible the gift of spiritual ‘sanctification,’ i.e., a purifying of one’s inner disposition to willful sin, a liberation of the soul to voice the indwelling voice of Christ” (1, 4).


14 Sanders, *Saints in Exile*, 5.
previous chapter, Sanders leverages Hurston *inter alia* in order to shape a definition rooted in conformity. In fact, while we have seen Hurston’s creative alteration of scripture, Sanders mobilizes Hurston to promote an orthodox biblical hermeneutic.

Sanders, an ordained Church of God minister and congregational pastor, has demonstrated a commitment to conservative, biblical orthodoxy in several venues, especially with regard to human sexuality. In a roundtable discussion with womanist theologians, Sanders challenges Alice Walker’s foundational description of womanism on this orthodox ground, deeming it antithetical to Christianity.

According to Sanders, Walker’s womanism is objectionable because it celebrates sexual freedom over restraint, ignores traditional Christian notions of sacrality, and avoids Christology.\(^{15}\) The womanist claim to “love the Spirit” is vague and indistinctive, says Sanders.\(^{16}\) I agree with Sanders that the womanist definition, along with black theology, has a very ambiguous deployment of Spirit. As discussed in chapter three, this dissertation contributes to Delores Williams’s suggestion that “womanist theology could eventually speak of God in a well-developed theology of the spirit.”\(^{17}\)

However, I get off Sanders’s train when she goes on to say that the womanist concept undermines the black family, black church, and black community: “The womanist nomenclature...conveys a sexual ethics that is ambivalent at best with respect to the value of heterosexual monogamy within the black community.”\(^{18}\) In a move that Katie Canon

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\(^{16}\) Ibid., 131.


\(^{18}\) Sanders, *The Womanist Reader*, 133.
finds infuriating. Sanders borrows Hurston’s definition of a mule to deem “womanist theology” an egregious misnomer. Sanders charges:

The term womanist theology is in my view a forced hybridization of two disparate concepts and may come to resemble another familiar hybrid, the mule, in being incapable of producing offspring. Novelist Zora Neale Hurston once declared in the voice of one of her characters that the black woman is “the mule of the world,” but unlike the mule the black woman has often sought to cast upon the Lord those burdens too hard for her to bear, and has reproduced herself, body and spirit, through many generations. Not only does this scant attention to the sacred render the womanist perspective of dubious value as a context for theological discourse, but it ultimately subverts any effort to mine the spiritual traditions and resources of black women.

Sanders declares war on womanism, weaponizing Hurston against those who rediscovered and popularized her works. She asserts womanism’s sterility, the ultimate insult to the school of thought first described in Walker’s In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens.

While Sanders advances the emotive ‘hysteria’ of charismatic worship, queer sexuality and sexual freedom become the sacrificial lamb. Sanders repeatedly endorses heterosexual monogamy on reproductive grounds for the survival of the black family. In both academic and church settings, Sanders advocates the view that homosexual practice assaults a black community already under attack by white supremacy. For Sanders, homosexual practice is sinful and conflicts with biblical holiness.

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20 Sanders, The Womanist Reader, 131.


22 Cf. Kelly Brown Douglas, Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999). Douglas traces “The Impact of the White Cultural Attack” in the formation of orthodox black Christian views toward sexuality in Black sexual practice and its politics have been shaped by white supremacy, and the control of black bodies dating back to slavery. As a result, black communities have failed to develop a “sexual discourse of resistance,” and instead “virtual silence – beyond moral invectives and self-righteous assertion” (88) has emerged that depends upon inconsistent reasoning biblical literalism. Ultimately, Douglas concludes that homophobia, not homosexuality, is unfaithful to the black faith tradition.

Interestingly, this othering counteracts the sexual and gender fluidity proximate to Hurston and her Harlem “Niggerati,” as will be discussed below. The staggering irony cannot be understated. Sanders’s “empowerment ethics” follows the manner of social uplift predicated on the proliferation of the other.24 Just as the affirmation of blackness by “race men” has subjugated gender,25 the working class consciousness of Sanders’s charismatic Christianity subjugates sexuality. At stake in the construction of the spirited black soul, then, is the stabilizing of disparate identities through the production of deviant ones. The reclamation of sanctified Christianity vis-à-vis Hurston is predicated on the exorcism of queerness. This move, I argue, is not a “sincere”26 response to Hurston’s story: it appropriates and makes Hurston foreign to herself. Constructively I take Hurston back home.


26 Again, I follow Jackson’s use of “sincerity” instead of “authenticity” in Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005). John L. Jackson, Sr. challenges the application of the term “authenticity” to willful subjects. To avoid the deployment of this term, with its objectifying, essentialist trappings, Jackson instead uses “sincerity” to “add some nuance to contemporary considerations of social solidarity and identity politicking” (13). See also, Jackson, “On Ethnographic Sincerity,” Current Anthropology 51:2 (October 2010), S279-S287.
4.2. **Home to Gay Harlem: Queer Identities Seeking Safety**

*No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown (Luke 4:24)*

Hurston had a complicated relationship to her birthplace, Eatonville. At once, Hurston valorizes Eatonville, one of the first independent Negro towns in the United States. She inherited this sense of independence, which coursed through her veins; in many ways Hurston was a product of her place, as many biographical accounts suggest.27 “For Zora Hurston, Eatonville was always home. Throughout her life, she would claim Eatonville as her birthplace and refer to it as her ‘native village,’” comments Valerie Boyd.28 This locale plays a prominent role in her corpus, sometimes named explicitly and at other times referenced through allusion.

Often at odds with her father, however, in the wake of her mother’s death, 13 year-old Hurston leaves home and begins venturing out on her own. Hurston writes in her autobiography:

> Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to “jump at de sun.” We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground. Papa did not feel so hopeful. Let well enough alone. It did not do for Negroes to have too much spirit. He was always threatening to break mine or kill me in the attempt. My mother was always standing between us. She conceded that I was impudent and given to talking back, but she didn’t want to “squinch my spirit” too much for fear that I would turn out to be a mealy-mouthed rag doll by the time I got grown.29

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With her mother no longer urging her to jump, Hurston had to flee lest her father kill her spirit. Having lived intermittently in Eatonville, after a physical fight with her stepmother, Hurston must courageously depart again at age 21 in order to later return home.

In some regard, Hurston is like Du Bois’s “John,” who becomes an outsider when he returns to his southern birthplace after his northern education.\(^{30}\) After her studies with famed anthropologist Franz Boas at Barnard, Hurston attempts her first anthropological research in Florida, which was by and large a failure. Hurston reveals in *Dust Tracks* that

> the glamor of Barnard College was still upon me. I dwelt in marble halls. I knew where the material was, all right. But, I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, ‘Pardon me, but do you know any folk-tales or folk-songs?’ The men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores looked at me and shook their heads.\(^{31}\)

Hemenway judges, “The results were unsatisfactory and dispiriting.”\(^{32}\)

Hemenway further explicates Boas’s chastisement of her inability to get to the heart of the matter, having been clouded by her head knowledge:

> After reading two different batches of transcriptions, Boas was exasperated with his student, pointing out that “what you obtained is very largely repetition of the kind of material that has been collected so much.” He stressed that he was most interested in was manner rather matter, style rather than substance: “You remember that when we talked about this matter I asked you particularly to pay attention, not so much to content, but rather to the form of diction, movements, and so on.” Boas was implying that any white collector could obtain an accurate text of a folktale or folksong, but what Hurston could discover, since informants would be more natural with a member of their own race, was the actual folk style. “Habitual movements in telling tales, or in ordinary conservation,” for example, would be more open to Hurston’s observation than in a performance for white folks.\(^{33}\)

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\(^{31}\) Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 127-128.

\(^{32}\) Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, 90.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 91.
Yet, she does not resemble the fictional John at all, because she did attempt to rescue and convert the south. Hurston utilizes “northern” scholarship to feature southern sensibilities. She struggled to allow what she had learned to highlight what she already knew.

**Close to Home: Proximity and Community**

Harlem was the “Promised Land,” the symbolic home for black folk emerging as “New Negroes,” from the end of World War I until the mid-1930s. It was the site of great creativity and new life, which continues to shape African America to this day. “Whatever the rival claims of Boston, Philadelphia, or Washington, Harlem took for granted that the intellectual center of Afro-America was located above Central Park,” writes the great historian and biographer David Levering Lewis in *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1979). Lewis’s masterful account of the “Harlem Renaissance” depicts the variety of social, cultural, and political reasons that this village became a cross-section of often competing ideals for the future of African Americans. It was home to “Negrotarians,” Hurston’s term for white humanitarians, the Niggerati (learned black artists), and everyday black folk, all who shared, in varying degree, enjoyment of emerging forms of African-American music, visual art, literature, and leisure.

Carl Van Vechten’s controversial *Nigger Heaven* (1926) captures—however vulgarly—both the aspiration and assortment of African Americans that made Harlem their home. Criticized for its insult of black people, and Van Vechten for his white voyeurism, *Nigger Heaven* was praised by “younger artists” like Wallace Thurman whose celebration of

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blackness disavowed the principle of respectability, preferred by the senior black intelligentsia, in favor of a more confrontational decadence.\textsuperscript{35}

Hurston moves to this black utopia in 1925, urged by Charles S. Johnson, the editor of the National Urban League's \textit{Opportunity}. This transition from Howard to Harlem accentuates her free spirit, and provides it adequate space to soar. Surrounded by the support of other creative artists, Harlem becomes the everyday lived literary club in which she participated under Alain Locke's tutelage at Howard. Although she had published short poems and short stories in \textit{Opportunity} and Marcus Garvey's \textit{Negro World} prior to arriving in New York, the renaissance afoot in Harlem offered her endless occasions to intermingle with artists in various venues, including socials, soirees, and awards dinners.

During her early Harlem days, Hurston's resided at the "267 House" (267 West 136\textsuperscript{th} Street)—the Niggerati Manor, as its inhabitants christened it. Hurston biographer, Robert Hemenway describes:

\begin{quote}
Her apartment was always open for Niggerati meetings, with a pot on the stove that visitors were expected to contribute to in order to create a community stew. At other times she fried okra, or cooked Florida eel. Zora had moved into the apartment without furniture or money; yet within a few days it had been completely furnished by her friends with everything from decorative silver birds, perched precariously atop the linen closet, to a footstool for the living room.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

The locale of transgression, as signified in the name itself, is essential in situating Hurston as an influential 20\textsuperscript{th} century artist. The Niggerati Manor brought Hurston proximate to queer people who lived together in a community of resistance. She was in relationship with men who, also estranged from their "homes," created a new sense of togetherness and

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\textsuperscript{36} Hemenway, \textit{Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography}, 44.
“being with.” Along with Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and Bruce Nugent, Hurston offered a fresh vision for African Americans, which did not depend upon the respectability constraints of racial uplift.

**Langston Hughes, the Favored Son of Harlem**

Perhaps the most well known of the Niggerati, both in his day and ours, is Langston Hughes. His poetry has become part of the American literary canon, capturing the pulse of his age with poignant beauty. Hemenway writes, “Hughes was always a quiet observer of this scene, unfailingly kind, but never missing a thing, well embarked on a career that would make him the poet laureate of Harlem.”\(^{37}\) It is Hughes’s poem “Fire” that inspires *FIRE!!*, the one-issue Niggerati journal; it’s refrain: “Fire, Fire Lord! Fire gonna burn my soul!”\(^{38}\)

His essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” however, captures in direct and poignant language the pulse of the younger artists’ revolt against the elders. Published in *The Nation* (1926), it is an explicit charge against respectability politics, which he argues is rooted in the self-hatred of “Nordicized Negro intelligentsia,” defined by being ashamed of dark colored skin, ecstatic and expressive religious worship, and other ‘folksy’ ways. Hughes laments, “The road for the serious black artist, then, who would produce a racial art is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high.”\(^{39}\)

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\(^{37}\) Ibid., 45.


Although it is now commonly accepted that Hughes was gay, first wave scholars of the Renaissance observed little conclusive evidence to cut through the early ambiguity around Hughes’s sexuality. Arnold Rampersad’s two-volume biography, *The Life of Langston Hughes* (1986, 1988), which remains foundational, casts Hughes as a childlike asexual. Subsequent scholarship, no doubt building off of Rampersad’s work, as well as the nascent influence of intersectionality, interrogate Hughes in a different light.

Juda Bennett in “Multiple Passings and the Double Death of Langston Hughes” interprets the ambiguity of his sexual identity in view of Hughes’s more explicit meditations on racial passing. Because of his fair complexion and hair texture, Hughes could be and be perceived as other than black, and discussed in narratives such as “Who’s Passing for Who?” and his *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (1940) and *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (1956).

Bennett interprets racial passing as the first act of “disruption,” through which we might consider the ambiguity of Hughes’s persona and performance. “Hughes resists killing his transgressive characters and delights in the act of transgression, rewarding what others punish. It is the constant questions of a stable and normalized identity that finally argues for Hughes’s queer sensibility and postmodern sophistication.”

Hughes, according to Bennett, refuses to locate homosexuality stably in his oeuvre, and “instead delights in the indeterminacy of identity and other forms of passing” in *Not Without Laughter*, “Café: 3 a.m.,” and “Blessed Assurance.” The latter is a story of an effeminate young man, Delmar, whose rendition of an anthem about the biblical Ruth,

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41 Ibid., 672.
intended for a female voice, causes its male composer to swoon and fall off the organ bench. Hughes plays off the ambiguous nature of the real relationship between Naomi and Ruth, while playing off the stereotype of gay musicians in black churches. Integrating subtle insider knowledge of black churches, mixed with delicate humor, Hughes frames one reason why alternative sexual identities in African-American communities are shunned: “Negroes have enough crosses to bear.” It is already hard enough being black; to be black and gay is unbearable, as goes this logic.

Delmar’s performance not only sends the Minister of Music, Dr. Manley Jaxon into ecstasy (emphasis mine)—who is only revived once “the church’s nurse-in-uniform applied smelling salts”—but also prompts his father’s outburst: “‘Shut up, son! Shut up,’ he cried. ‘Shut up.’” In response, and interrupting a deafening silence, the presiding preacher calls the deacons to “raise a hymn” to “bear us up”: “Blessed Assurance,” which ends the story. The song's and story's titles ironically signify the precarious position of queer folk, in Hughes’s view. Are the queer lives sacred? Can the black church be safe space for those who non-conform to normative sexual and gender identities?

Bennett, who points out that Hughes “encourages us to laugh at the ‘outing’ of Dr. Jaxon,” concludes that Hughes challenges us “to distrust the gossip” that has clouded his own life. Referencing Duke Ellington’s “Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me,” which is played

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at Hughes’s funeral, Bennett ends: “But rather than read the final moment in Hughes’s funeral as another gesture toward the unknowability of identity, I would argue that it should be read as a further example of silence as meaningful.”

Instead there is a contra-knowledge at play, a cognition and celebration of ambiguity, ushered in through song.

**Wallace Thurman, the Infant of Spring**

If Hughes was the poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance, then Wallace Thurman is its unsung hero. In his short life, meeting an early grave at age 32, Thurman was a fierce critic and contributor to the New Negro movement. Influenced by the Nietzschean H.L. Mencken, who famously writes of the “grave-yard of dead gods” (“Memorial Service”), Thurman also took critical aim at religion. Eleonore van Notten in *Wallace Thurman’s Harlem Renaissance* interprets his poems “The Last Citadel” and “God’s Edict” in terms of “Menckenite polarity between the isolated individual and the inferior mob.”

In his description of the Niggerati, Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway depicts Thurman as a man isolated from himself and others: “Thurman was a tortured man, never able to create art measuring up to his own high standards, torn by an ambivalent sexual nature, tuberculosis, self-destructive alcoholism, sarcasm, cynicism, and a neurotic consciousness of his very dark skin.” Thurman is never quite at home in his own skin, at

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46 Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, 43-44.
once casting a veil over and motivating his writings. This is to say, he was constantly struggling to make sense of the living, breathing contradictions that others tried to bury.

Thurman’s submission to FIRE!! captures some of this tension: “Cordelia the Crude” places promiscuous sexual activity on display in a manner previously unseen in black letters. He begins the narrative: “Physically, if not mentally, Cordelia was a potential prostitute,” continuing on to describe the 16 year-old’s exploration of a Harlem theatre notorious for cruising. The nameless narrator (arguably Thurman), “pursues” Cordelia, but in uncommon fashion. “Cordelia soon remarked,” writes Thurman, that I was different from mos’ of des’ sheiks, and when pressed for an explanation brazenly told me in a slightly scandalized and patronizing tone that I had not even felt her legs...!”47 Perhaps a nod to Thurman’s same-sex attraction—his marriage to Louise Patterson would last just six months—the narrator’s meeting of Cordelia climaxes in an “animal kiss” that brusquely ends the rendez-vous.48

Cordelia’s corporeality is extended from a short story to the full-length Broadway hit play, “Harlem.” Subtitled “A Melodrama of Negro life in Harlem,” written with William Jourdan Rapp, a white American, this play lives up to its name. Centered on the infamous Harlem rent party, further sensationalized by murder, this melodrama features Cordelia the “chippie” in a love quintangle! Eternally untamed in her sensual prowess, “Delia” leaves home and casually moves about from Basil to Roy Crowe to Kid Vamp to Ippy Jones, all in a single night. Although there is no evidence of sexual activity on the night of the rent party, Cordelia’s promiscuity hovers above scenes full of seduction and innuendo.

47 Thurman, Collected Writings, 304.

48 Ibid.
For Thurman and Rapp, Delia’s sexual freedom connotes fierce agency. As her third suitor of the evening (Kid Vamp) moves in on Cordelia, who just moments ago left home with the now-dead second suitor (Roy), Kid suggests that Roy (pretending that Roy is still alive) was planning to pimp her out. Cordelia responds: “Don’ see how he could, less I wanted to. De man ain’t born dat can make me do something I don’ wanna.” Córdelia is in full control of her body and choices—well, as much as an underage teenager can—“strutting her body,” as one stage instruction indicates.

Cordelia’s actions deeply upset her parents, whose exasperation runs the melodrama’s length. Father Williams washes his hands of his daughter, while Mother Williams only wants Delia’s sins washed away. Unrepentant, Cordelia leaves home and a man wants to marry her, in favor of an unrestrained life of hedonism.

The thematic of home is central in “Harlem,” the presentation of which is mixed with religious innuendo. In order to sustain a roof of their heads, the Williams family like many others of their day, rent out spare rooms in the apartment and regularly throw rent parties in order to supplement their incomes. Describing a couple that moves into the Williams’s home, Thurman and Rapp write:

*Tired of drifting around from room to room singly, they have decided to live together without the benefit of clergy. This act is typical of their philosophical objectivity. They are not immoral, but practical. They are all for anything that can assure them a little fun. They get quite a kick out of life and themselves.* [italics in original scriptnotes.]

Thurman and Rapp establish the Williams home as a partial counter culture of religious conformity.

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49 Ibid, 348.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid, 326.
The rent parties, in particular, create a monthly moral dilemma for Mother, whose reserved religiosity shuns the scene created in her abode: “The dancing is lewdly abandoned and accompanied by much shouting. It is a virtual saturnalia of desire.” But as Father points out to Mother whenever she condemns the wickedness of the “den of iniquity,” there are no other options. The parents’ choicelessness contrasts Cordelia’s decision to pursue pleasure and do as she pleases.

So Mother must stomach the dance fête full of “mess-around.” Thurman and Rapp explicitly poke fun at Mother’s quandary, who eventually explodes and empties her home, causing guests to complain that they didn’t pay for a prayer meeting. At other times, their critique is more subtle: As the party begins and the music plays, they describe the gyrating gathering like the biblical psalmist, “Body calls to body.”

Mother stops at nothing to redeem her wayward child and bring her back home, to what Basil (Cordelia’s original suitor) describes as “a respectable house, and we don’t want any questionable underworld characters here.” Although she is successful in dragging Delia back to their apartment momentarily, her stay is short-lived. Cordelia leaves again, with yet another man. The play concludes:

*Mother:* (moaning) Lawd, save her soul! Save her soul! She’s only a poor ign’runt sinner! *(The Jazz from the party across the way bursts out in a sudden crescendo. The Mother throws up her arms in a gesture of supplication) Lawd! Lawd! Tell me! Tell me! Dis ain’t de City of Refuge?

*(The Jazz becomes louder and louder as the curtain falls)*

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52 Ibid., 361.
54 Ibid., 333.
55 Ibid., 369.
“Harlem: A Melodrama of Negro Life” epitomizes Amrijit Singh’s observation: “Thurman writes against the grain of black bourgeois respectability, which would shackle literary creation by requiring it to present a whitewashed and preapproved idea of African American life.”

Singh goes on to say:

Thurman, arguing against the older generation’s insistence on representational didacticism and idealism—for him, indistinguishable from the bourgeoisie’s obsessions with uplift and respectability—was the consuming passion of his life. He not only wrote more forcefully and persistently than others on these issues, he also tried to organize the opposition of the younger generation through the publication of both Fire!! and Harlem.

Although Cordelia represents Thurman’s transgressive project, to be sure, her character is not without challenges.

One cannot be blind to the implications of Thurman’s male gaze upon a woman’s body. Thurman’s Cordelia certainly possesses some of the “Sapphire, the emasculating bitch” that Townes exposes in Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil. Given the nature of (hetero)patriarchy, Thurman to some extent operates within this “fantastic hegemonic imagination” precisely because it is he who gives voice to Cordelia. It is two men—one black and one white—who tell the story of a black woman. Instead of writing about his own sexual identity, Thurman writes about a woman’s. One wonders, perhaps wishes, that at the very least Thurman would have co-authored the play with Hurston.

56 Ibid., 13.
57 Ibid., 18.
Hurston’s short story, “Sweat” likewise published in FIRE!!, also engages embodied agency. Also the account of a “Delia,” in which religious rhetoric plays a key role, Hurston writes:

Delia’s work-worn knees crawled over the earth in Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary many, many times during these months...Delia and Sykes fought all the time now with no peaceful interludes. They slept and ate in silence. Two or three times Delia had attempted a timid friendliness, but she was repulsed each time. It was plain that the breaches must remain agape.59

The philandering Sykes constantly tormented Delia, making her house anything but a home. Knowing that Delia is deathly afraid of snakes, Sykes brings a rattler into their abode, which escapes from his basket and strikes him, ironically causing his own death. Although Delia could have warned Sykes, her silence is resistance (recalling Bennett’s assessment)—ultimately vengeance for his torment. Like Hughes’s “meaningful silence,” Hurston offers a different approach to embodied transgression that does not reinscribe the “emasculating bitch” stereotype, however contrarian.

Thurman’s shortcomings and oversights notwithstanding, his work is noteworthy. Singh explains: “Thurman strikes us today as a transgressive artist in almost all forms of writing that he attempted—dealing courageously with radical, even forbidden themes such as intraracial color prejudice in The Blacker the Berry and Staatsgewalt of forced sterilizations in the film script of Tomorrow’s Children.”60 Overlooked for too long, Thurman’s contributions might help us take the first step toward a more expansive view of the diversity within the Harlem Renaissance.


60 Thurman, Collected Writings, 17.
Nugent the Grand Transgressor

Although we now know there to be many gay artists of the Renaissance, Nugent is chief among them for at least three reasons: Not only was he unashamedly “out,” but he also features homoeroticism explicitly in his work. Often scandalizing, third, his shocking depictions—visually and verbally—of same-gender love were one of a kind, appearing decades before Baldwin, in their rejection of respectability.

His work, like Hurston’s and somewhat like Thurman’s, was a celebration of transgression and non-conformity. In Hurston’s biography, Hemenway describes:

Nugent was a multitalented youth from a proper Washington family who was probably the most Bohemian of all the Renaissance artists. He seldom knew where he was going to sleep, dressed in whatever clothes were around when he woke up, and spent much of his time creating beautiful erotic drawing, shocking to even the most liberated viewer.\(^\text{61}\)

Nugent was quintessentially a free spirit, unconstrained by racial and social mores that would constrain his capacity to be himself in the name of modesty. “Only by rejecting the burden of representing the race as a whole, as Nugent did,” writes Thomas Wirth, “or by insisting that ‘the people’ be defined broadly and pluralistically so as to include gay people, among others, have gay black writers been able to emerge.”\(^\text{62}\)

Alain Locke, the father of the Harlem Renaissance and editor of *The New Negro* anthology, who was also openly gay (and a suitor of Nugent’s), criticized those of the younger generation for the liberties they took in their art. Wirth, in his extensive introduction to *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent* (2002), records that Locke, in a review of Claude McKay’s *A Long Way from*

\(^{61}\) Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, 44.

Home, condemns an “unspecified New Negro writers and artists, he accused them as a group of ‘spiritual truancy and social irresponsibility’ and deplored their ‘exhibitionist flair.’” Wirth continues:

Nugent’s open assault on mainstream religious sensibilities is not without precedent in African American culture; it echoes David Walker’s devastating attack on hypocritical Christianity in his 1829 Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World. Nugent’s stories are more subtle than Walker’s Appeal, but they, too, were highly subversive. By placing Biblical characters in a context in which traditional Christian assumptions about sexuality and race are violated, Nugent challenged reader to acknowledge that their prejudices were (and are) inconsistent with basic Christian principles. Nugent continued his commentary on religion, the church, and sexuality in his sexually suggestive drawings of monks—drawing that still have not lost their power to shock.

Nugent stands in the transgressive tradition of Walker: To be fully one’s self, and placing this self in plain view, is a radical act of courage. The process of claiming one’s voice, and exercising it publicly, appeals to inner strength and fortitude, to which I will return in the final chapter.

Arguably his most important piece, “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade,” published in FIRE!! with its disorienting “modernist prose-style,” riddled with fragmenting ellipses, tells of the protagonist Alex’s carefree, polyamorous lifestyle. This autobiographical short story references by name other contributors of FIRE!!, weaving them into Alex’s narrative. Much to his mother’s disdain, Alex seems unconcerned with the financial security of a conventional career. Instead, wanderlust was his mind’s work: “he blew a cloud of

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63 Wirth, Gay Rebel of Harlem, 49-50.
64 Ibid., 60.
65 Ibid., 44.
smoke...oh the joy of being an artist and of blowing blue smoke through an ivory holder inlaid with red jade and green...” [sic].

This brief account is one of the first explicit pieces of African-American literature that is unafraid to invoke homoeroticism, and without reliance on parody as in Hughes’s work. With narrow distance between the writer and his work, “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” celebrates ‘alternative’ sexual identity: “Nugent was the first African American to write from a self-declared homosexual perspective; his work therefore occupies an honored place in the now-burgeoning literature of the gay black male.”

Nugent was dissatisfied with Harlem as “remarkably tolerant of a variety of sexual identities, even though homophobia remained a fundamental aspect of black culture,” and thus kept queerness largely veiled and outside of public celebration. He desired more. Nugent refused to be a “dirty little secret,” and showcased the fullness of his self in his daily living and printed work. “Nugent, then, was a black gay man who insisted on participating in the most advanced discourse of the dominant culture, even as he defied that culture’s norms.”

Nugent’s literary and visual arts called into question Christian theological norms. Like Hurston and Thurman, Nugent creatively riffed off Christian scripture and expounded biblical stories to challenge conventional readings. Although never reaching a wide audience, “Beyond Where the Star Stood Still” alters the nativity-epiphany account of the arrival of the three kings from the East. In Nugent’s rendition, it is not a dream that warns

66 Nugent, Gay Rebel of Harlem, 81.

67 Ibid., 1.

68 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Foreword” to Gay Rebel of Harlem, xii.

69 Wirth, Gay Rebel of Harlem, 45.
the Magi not to return to Herod, who would kill the newborn Messiah, but rather Carus, Herod’s male attendant who falls in love with Caspar at first sight. The short story ends with Carus, who is effeminately depicted in Nugent’s print, fleeing Palestine with the wise man: “Caspar drew Carus to himself as he would a babe and consoled him. And they set off for Bethlehem, where the star stood still.”

In a subsequent story, “The Now Discordant Song of Bells,” Nugent continues this biblical redaction, expanding upon Caspar’s and Carus’s meeting in Herod’s palace and Carus’s escape to Ethiopia through a meditation on the Johannine theology of love. Nugent draws together, even conflates, romantic and divine love. This fusion is embedded in the heartrending dismissal of Carus, ordering him to go attend to Caspar’s cousin, Simon of Cyrene. Nugent suggestively writes:

Carus’s fondness for Caspar became even love, and Carus knew he had never loved before….The day that Caspar told Carus of his plan was bright and hot. Caspar was lying full in the sun on the palace roof, his beautiful black body bare and a linen cloth of great whiteness thrown across his loins.

The story concludes with reference to one of the key biblical texts used in affirming same-gender love: 1 John 4:7. Carus, who is introduced to the notion of God, in his parting words, confesses: “I leave thee, Caspar, to do thy bidding and thy wish. I pray thee speak nothing. I have learned too well thy teachings and shall work thy will wherever I go. But likewise I would have thee understand. Thou hast said, “God is love.” Now that I leave thee, know thou this likewise. So also is Love God.’ And Carus left as Caspar watched—watched and watched until Carus disappeared into the setting sun and tears.”

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70 Nugent, _Gay Rebel of Harlem_, 121.

71 Ibid., 128.

72 Ibid., 130.
Wirth explains the significance of “Nugent’s Bible stories, written in the late twenties after ‘Smoke, Lilies, and Jade’ appeared, were stylistically less radical, but in the context of the time, they were, if anything, more transgressive.” He continues:

Unlike [John Addington] Symonds and other British homosexual writers, such as Edward Carpenter, who cited biblical or classical references in an effort to make homosexuality respectable by association, Nugent’s use of biblical themes is confrontational. Same-sex desire, to him, required no justification—it was a fact of life. His Bible stories directly challenge both homophobia and shallow piety...Nugent’s confrontational stance mirrors the iconoclasm of his friend and fellow Harlem Renaissance writer, Wallace Thurman, the editor of FIRE!!

Nugent, like Hurston, writes himself into the biblical canon, which is a profound act of courage, given the orthodox sentiments of black Christianity during this period.

In a way, Nugent’s alterations are even more transgressive than Hurston’s because they directly confront sexuality, and homosexuality at that. “Few have more skillfully attacked prevailing sexual, religious, and racial norms simply by celebrating the joyous potential of transgressive sexuality.” Hurston, Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent help us to see that spirit is FIRE!! The courage to be free manifests in a transgression of sexual orientation. Hughes is correct, according to orthodox personal morality: “I ain’t been good / I ain’t been clean / I been stinkin’, low-down, mean / Fire / Fire, Lord! / Fire gonna burn my soul.”

Or, Hughes offers a prophetic message that inverts Isaiah’s, and offers a different notion of holiness, beauty, and glory:

On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. Whoever is left in Zion

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73 Wirth, Gay Rebel of Harlem, 45-46.
74 Ibid., 59.
and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night.\textsuperscript{76}

The survivors of the “refiner’s fire,”\textsuperscript{77} those called holy, are they who dared to be their beautiful selves. Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent cleanse themselves from the spirit of judgment and emerge gloriously at home in their own bodies. Indeed they realize that like (Hurston’s) Moses, who encounters “I AM WHO I AM” in the bushing bush,\textsuperscript{78} they are standing on holy ground in themselves.

\textit{“Roots and Revisions”\textsuperscript{79}: Transgressing Place and Liberating Spiritual Identity}

Aunt Susie and I sat on the porch and talked for hours. Within moments of my arrival to my ancestral home at 817 Borah Avenue, she instructed me to retrieve my pen and pad, because she had a story to tell. I was eager to comply: perhaps she would offer some clues about our family’s journey from slavery toward liberation.

But I crossed the line when I started to dig too deeply, asking the question in plain sight: why did her sister, my great-grandmother, move from Bessemer to my hometown of Buffalo? While she recited other facts lucidly, Aunt Susie’s memory faded here. I already had the answer, but I wanted to hear her account of the affair that sent Granny north

\textsuperscript{76} Isaiah 4:2-5.

\textsuperscript{77} Isaiah 48:10

\textsuperscript{78} Exodus 3:1-22.

\textsuperscript{79} I borrow this title “Roots and Revisions” from a friend’s senior thesis in performance studies (Shelby Braxton Brooks, Harvard College, 2003).
without her children and somewhat of a bounty on her head—the transgression that is the preface to my story. Foucault is helpful here:

Thus, at the root of sexuality, of the movement that nothing can ever limit (because it is, from its birth and in its totally, constantly involved with the limit), and at the root of this discourse on God which Western culture has maintained for so long…a singular experience is shaped: that of transgression. Perhaps one day it will seem as decisive for our culture, as much a part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought. But in spite of so many scattered signs, the language in which transgression will find its space and the illumination of its being lies almost entirely in the future…Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses.80

I imagine that Aunt Susie “forgot” these details to leave my memory of Granny intact. Little did she know that this untold story changed nothing at all and everything at once. Or worse, its non-telling keeps the “hidden in plain sight” the disciplining power of sexuality, which can be crossed over. While love for kin overcomes the ‘truth,’ can one truly love if the present is rooted in a lie? In other words, we love more deeply when meaning is made by confronting the reality of the past-present and future-present.

Still, what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem, or Bessemer with Buffalo, or more to the point, what does Foucault have to do with Hurston’s home and my family tree? In a way, nothing at all and everything. In the former, I take Amy Ritchlin’s feminist critique of Foucault quite seriously.81 Not only does The History of Sexuality curiously leave me “absent,” in some regard so does much of his gaze at Western knowledge construction and (re)subjectivation. The rich histories that Foucault rewrites to examine power structures


hardly, if ever, directly invoke protagonists—personnages—that outwardly resemble me. But, in the latter, to say that I, as a black subject, am not formed by and as a part of the West is folly. Ancient Greece and modern France have quite a bit to do with contemporary African diasporic people.

In fact, many present-day theorists of black identity contend that the sole grounds for black nationalism and transnational black unity is the common struggle for equity, equality, and justice. Although this process is scarcely the instantaneous and ubiquitous stuff of “transsubjectivation,” it is the best that we can do. In other words, black people “become black” not by appeal to a mythic African ancestry, but rather through the experience of and resistance to oppression in the historical present. It seems, then, that this re-telling of the story of blacks in the West by Paul Gilroy and others qua the writing of “counter-stories,” resembles very much the Foucauldian project of rethinking the link between Athens and D.C., Rome and Paris.

The performance of blackness, in sacred worship and sacred quotidian spaces, cannot be disentangled fully from the histories of oppression that have set the stage. Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic, a counterculture of modernity and alternative to

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83 It is worth noting that, in recent years Greece and France, in particular, have had to face “overpopulation” associated with undocumented immigrants from northern Africa.

84 See Gilroy, as well as Tommie Shelby’s We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

85 Foucault, Hermeneutics, 214.


87 Gilroy describes the “Black Atlantic” as a “counterculture of modernity”; see chapter one.
“black nationalism,” ensconces blackness with ambiguity and movement. The Black Atlantic in particular and diaspora in general not in terms of origins, common heritage, and claims to purity, but rather in terms of politics. In other words, what binds the disparateness of the “Black Atlantic” into a unified whole is the shared political objectives of overcoming oppression and subjugation and the empowerment of black people.

The genealogy of the black subject in the West means traversing the “middle passage” at the expense of an easily spoken narrative. The connections and challenges are complex and amorphous. Liberation means breaking bonds we thought—or perhaps wish—we had. Heeding Ritchlin, though, I am not suggesting that such a consideration depends upon Foucault in any causative way. Little is gained by fashioning Foucault as the exclusive gateway to such critical thought, so in that regard Ritchlin is correct. Rather, it seems that the application of some of Foucault’s analytical ‘principles’ risks to improve the underlying task. What stands to be gained if we allow Foucault to speak to our futures? What happens if we let Foucault’s concerns “infiltrate” our own? How does Foucault’s mode of critique become a prefatory technology toward our ‘liberation,’ or shall I say, our re-subjectivation?

Foucault prompts me to suggest that liberation (and its theologies), or at least its preface, is a ritual of crossing over. It is the process of choosing to move from this space to that space, this time to that time, indeed from this place to that place. My ritual of constructing a family genealogy, a process so in vogue at present (and commercialized, I might add), yearned to be something like that. Liberation means reframing conceptual

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space, restarting time, and reinvesting meaning in the places we “live and move and have our being.” At the base, Foucault forces us to consider the stories about power and liberation that we tell ourselves. Thus, liberation becomes less about the absence of power and more about changing our configuration to power—or perhaps better said, within power. Liberation is about risk management. And liberation theology is about transgression. This process becomes more about adjusting what we mean when we say “liberation,” thus making the claim a bit more modest.

Although one cannot change history, if what is meant is one’s relationship to the past. But one most certainly can change history if, as Foucault suggests, it is written of and for the present. I can control my great-grandmother’s actions as much as I influenced the transatlantic slave trade. But because of them, here I stand. And just as I can hardly ignore what landed me here, it behooves me to integrate the ugly histories that comprise my present identity. In other words, we can change how we talk about the present and the past, and thus we begin to shape a new future. Veridiction and re-subjectivation are partners. In a way this has been Foucault’s project all along. Memory is not merely Socratic recollection but also re-membering.

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89 Jonathan Z. Smith, To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Smith writes: “Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process for marking interest...It is this characteristic, as well, that explains the role of place as a fundamental component of ritual: place directs attention” (103).


91 Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression” (1963) in Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault, ed. Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999), 57-71. Again, I am thinking of when he writes on page 64 that philosophy must take up a “less ambitious goal.”


93 Ibid., 453-476 (lecture 23).
The analysis of individual and social identity formation by Jacqueline Nassy Brown in *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool* (2005) relates well to the messiness that we have described above. For Brown, the claiming of identity in the African diaspora is a project that interlaces power, personhood, and “place.” She describes the intent of her essay:

One of this book’s goals is to analyze the ways that place takes on meaning in relation to ideologies of localness, while also showing that neither place nor the local is limited to the terms set by the other. Place is an axis of power in its own right. As a basis for the construction of difference, hierarchy, and identity, and as the basis of ideologies that rationalize economic inequalities and structure people’s material well-being and life chances, place is a vehicle of power...Place, I further argue, must be understood first and foremost as an abstraction, not a set of physical properties just there for the eye to see...The very urge to make meaning out of materiality of places—what they look like, feel like, and where they are, for example, and who occupies them, what social relations define them, and what processes unfold within them—is produced through an axis of power and subjectivity that we might call place.94

Therefore, in order to liberate our language about liberation, we must be willing to transgress space and time into place. And when we get there we have to be willing to move around bit. But to dance there, of course, is to realize that “there” is no where at all. It is very much an abstraction that is constructed in relation—of the self to the self, and to others. We do not gain freedom simply through utterance, but the alteration of speech is a pathway to the place of emancipation. Surely this has something to do with “the questioning of language by language in a circularity which the ‘scandalous’ violence of erotic literature, far from ending, displays from its first use of words.”95

Like Caspar in Nugent’s “Beyond Where the Star Stood Still,” we might recall that after their encounter with the Christ-child, and in fear of Herod, the “wise men” had to go

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95 Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” 70.
back home by another route. Similarly, we go back and come forward by another route in order to return “home.” And for me home is not Alabama, but rather some place that resembles it. The journey across time and space lands us in an entirely different place of being, or nonbeing, or perhaps even in a search for Being-itself. Now we might re-think the promise of the God-child Jesus in a new way.

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Excursus

Before journeying any farther, a brief detour is in order. Perhaps, in a way, the excursus illustrates Palmer’s point about “third things” that appear to distract us by taking us away from the target, but in reality lead us much closer to the place where we are going.

What is to be made about placing Hurston in theological conversation with a slew of “dead white men,” and a living one? Given our concern with respectability vis-à-vis Du Bois, and Hurston distancing herself from that method of New Negro social uplift, one might wonder whether such engagement is a form of authorization? That is, depending on white conversation partners merely reinscribes the theological legitimization of the black religious experience from without. Such is the charge levied again James Cone (and others), who is accused of turning to Barth, on whom he wrote his dissertation, to provide the methodological underpinning for the first iterations of his black theology. As discussed earlier, Cecil Cone (James’s brother) interrogates this “identity crisis,” pointing to the failure to source explicitly the African-American religious experience.

James Cone remedies this faux-pas in God of the Oppressed and The Spirituals and the Blues, inter alia, turning squarely to black sources, the charge persists, sending a ripple
effect throughout his and others’ works. One might say that the identity crisis yields to an “identity politic” to which must be attended. Even when black sources are used, an account must be given to the race of white theological interlocutors.

For example, in The Cross and the Lynching Tree Cone leans heavily on Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christology and at the same time Cone indicts Niebuhr’s silence on race matters. This silence does not dis-qualify Niebuhr, although it does qualify him. That is, in the accounting sense, there exists a significant notation that explains certain anomalies. Although Niebuhr was a product of his time, and thus often (sub)consciously participated in the architecture of white supremacy, which was his privilege, as a theologian prophetically ahead of his time in other matters, his positionality does not absolve him of contribution to America’s “original sin.” Prophetic theology, therefore, requires attentiveness to and addressing of the prevailing oppressions of the day.

Cone’s approach, rooted in the Du Boisian trajectory, therefore takes us beyond tragedy by first wading through it. In order to converse with white theologians, there must be a comprehensive account of their whiteness! Honestly I find this approach as exhausting as white liberals socially locating themselves as beneficiaries of white privilege as a prolegomena. I am not sure what it accomplishes other than participating in now all-too-expected and all-too-rehearsed political correctness that celebrates instrumental race consciousness, but still ends in “now that we’ve gotten that out of the way.”

I am not attempting to ‘unpack’ Cannon’s interlocution with Tillich, as if to suggest that her treatment is incomplete, because it is not. And I am not offering an apology for conversing with Tillich. Rather, riffing off Gilroy, I situate black/womanist theology as a counter-cultural critique of systematic theology, offering an alternative discourse in
conversation with the very thing that has helped shape—for good or for bad—it.

In describing his project, Vincent Harding says, “I am simply carrying on a tradition, trying to write and to live the story of our struggle, creating a history that has already created me, seeking to keep the faith.” I turn to Tillich not for approval, but because black theologians and womanists have just as much claim on Tillich’s systematic theology as anyone else—just as African Americans have a stake in a white supremacist United States and queer Christians in homophobic churches.

4.3. Courage to Find Home in One’s Self

Hurston’s “unshouted courage,” argues Cannon, is the ethical fortitude to live life well despite debilitating obstacles. Cannon connects this “struggle...to affirm black people’s right to healthy existence” to Tillich’s “courage to be.” In this section, I further situate this courage amidst Tillich’s theology of Spirit in view of the ambiguities of life. The struggle to find safety and home in one’s self, examined in the previous section, comes alongside Tillich’s “quest for unambiguous life” within the power of Spirit.

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96 Harding, There is a River, xxiii.


In the opening of *The Courage to Be* (1952), Tillich makes clear that his selection of the concept of “courage” relates essentially to its fundamental place in the human condition. Precisely because courage has been considered in the sciences and philosophy is the reason why he chose it as the topic of the Terry Foundation lectures from which the book emerges. Thus through the notion of courage, he traced the relationship of philosophy, sciences, and religion as per the lecture stipulations.

But for Tillich, the relationship is not simply an epistemological consideration, which would mean that courage is solely descriptive of human existence and how humans come to know and define ourselves within finitude. No, consideration of courage has to do with the structure of human existence, and thus points beyond our finitude to the source of our understanding and our being. Therefore, at the summit of the lectures, Tillich interprets “the courage to be as the key to being-itself.”  

In other words, courage extends beyond humanity to God. Or more properly, courage emerges from being-itself.

Tillich writes, “The ultimate source of the courage to be is the ‘God above God’; this is the result of our demand to transcend theism.” Therefore, the ontological nature of courage, although it relates to religion, transcends religion as well as science and philosophy. Later he continues:

Absolute faith, or the state of being grasped by the God beyond God, is not a state which appears beside other states of mind...It is not a place where one can live, it is without the safety of words and concepts, it is without a name, a church, a cult, a theology. But it is moving in the depth of all of them. It is the power of being, in which they participate and of which they are fragmentary expressions.

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101 Ibid., 186.

102 Ibid., 188-189.
The task of theology, then, is to point to the “place where one cannot live” but to which one desires to be. Theology gives voice to the quest of life.

At the heart of Tillich’s theology, and therefore the language of theology, is the dialectic, or the method of correlation. Simply put, without an understanding of the dialectical method one cannot understand Tillich. He binds together polar opposites in a necessary unity. Not only does one need to acknowledge both poles, but also the human must embrace both poles and bring them both forward together as it advances.

Similarly, Hurston utilizes a method of correlation to advance her argument about the spirituals. Folk wisdom discloses knowledge of God, the language of the people discloses God-talk. By placing them alongside folklore, Hurston relates the spirituals to something more tangible and thus mediates a discourse oft criticized as otherworldly.

Hurston’s act of mediation operates on at least two dimensions: First, she expands the scope of spirituals beyond sorrow songs, pace Du Bois. In a way, Hurston contends that the reduction of spirituals to sorrow song is the deficient move—not the frenzy of shouting songs. As Burgher’s essay reveals: black women claim a view of the self that celebrates and constructs life even in the midst of death. Second, by relating the spirituals to folklore, theological and ethical language become indistinguishable, as the divine permeates everyday language of living. As Thiemann notes in The Humble Sublime “God is not ‘beyond’ our everyday lives but rather hidden deeply ‘within’ them.”

This dialectical method is crucial because it frames this tension not as a liability but an ontological reality that, when recognized properly, is productive. This is to say, the

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acknowledgement of finitude’s connection to infinitude drives being to resist succumbing to nonbeing. Because method takes stock of what is, courage stands in place of anxiety.

Indeed Tillich structures his *Systematic Theology* in the correlative form of a dialectic. The substantive sections of the text are: reason and revelation, being and God (volume I), existence and the Christ (volume II), life and Spirit, history and the Kingdom of God (volume III). The former constituent of the dialectic represents that which is situated squarely within the ontological structure of being. The latter section is that which transcends being, and thus becomes a form of being-itself.

While one pole is typically ‘greater’, for Tillich it is impossible to consider the transcendent pole except through the immanent, lesser one. Indeed there is always an “and.” The method of correlation interrogates these constituents in their uniqueness, without destroying their dialectical relationship. He writes: “In using the method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are answers to these questions.”

For Tillich, the questions are human and the answers that emerge from theological analysis are divine. Our knowledge of God, Christ, and Spirit are such divine revelations. From the human standpoint, Tillich stresses that there is no way of understanding the divine parts of the dialectic without their situation in history and through reason. His section on the “Reality of God” begins by offering a phenomenological description of God-talk. “‘God’ is the answer to the question implied in man’s finitude; he is the name for that which concerns man ultimately.” He continues: “The phrase ‘being ultimately concerned’

points to a tension in human experience. On the one hand, it is impossible to be concerned about something which cannot be encountered concretely...On the other hand, ultimate concern must transcend every preliminary finite and concrete concern.”\textsuperscript{105} Thus, the approach of the understanding of God from the standpoint of the human being reveals that our concern in the ultimate is incomplete when concrete, and thus must be transcended in the “realm of imagination.”

Tillich also describes mystery in terms of revelation, stating that “‘mystery’ should not be applied to something which ceases to be a mystery after it has been revealed” hence its absolute character. By this definition, the contradiction of a statement like “God has revealed himself and that God is an infinite mystery” need not be resolved.\textsuperscript{106} On these grounds it is clear why Tillich ends the volume with a discussion of holiness and faith. “Faith in the almighty God is the answer to the quest for a courage which is sufficient to conquer the anxiety of finitude. Ultimate courage is based upon participation in the ultimate power of being.” Faith is not reconciliation of tension through reason, but to acknowledge that reason is absorbed into another plane of ‘existence.’ In other words, we need not cancel out ourselves and the uniqueness of human existence. Instead through reason we turn elsewhere. “Neither finitude nor anxiety disappears, but they are taken into infinity and courage.”\textsuperscript{107}

Thus, the method has three senses for Tillich: as correspondence and interdependence, as theo-cosmological (God and the world), and as qualification of the

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 211.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 109.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 273.
“divine-human relationship within religious experience.”

108 Noting the objections of some (like Barth, who is a key figure to whom Tillich is ‘relating’), Tillich makes clear that correlation does not suggest ontological dependence, of God on man, for example. 109 And neither does ‘correlation imply causation’ because systematic theology is never deductive or deriving; 110 to the contrary as he makes clear in the introduction to the second volume, it is often paradoxical. 111 “In using the method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions.” 112

The method of correlation points directly to the dialectic of philosophy and theology, to the consideration of being and God. While “philosophy asks the question of being as being,” for Tillich, “the basic theological question is the question of God. God is the answer to the question implied in being.” 113 This means that, constituting the first section of Part II: Being and God, the structure of reality (the ontological structure) demands an answer. Religious people name this answer “God.”

Theologians, then, interpret “God” to signify the “ground of being.” So while philosophy is broader, theology is more “essential” insofar as it attempts to unify the

108 Ibid., 61.

109 Cf. Tillich’s masculine theological language, and later Howard Thurman’s to Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation, 1973 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985). She writes toward divine castration, “if God is male, then the male is God” (19).

110 Ibid., 68.


112 Tillich, Systematic Theology I, 62.

113 Ibid., 163.
analysis of being vis-à-vis its revealed ground. This ground, or ontological object, is the necessary postulate of the dialectic of self and world [ontological structure]; of individualization and participation, dynamic and form, freedom and destiny [the ontological elements]; and of being and finitude. To be clear, while theology is analysis and though God is the ground of being, that upon which our theology is formed, we cannot prove God as such in our theological pursuit. Tillich's summation in the volume's introduction is perhaps clearest:

God is the answer to the question implied in human finitude. This answer cannot be derived from the analysis of existence. However, if the notion of God appears in systematic theology in correlation with the threat of nonbeing which is implied in existence, God must be called the infinite power of being which resists the threat of nonbeing. In classical theology this is being-itself. If anxiety is defined as the awareness of being finite, God must be called the infinite ground of courage.\(^{114}\)

In this way, the ontological as the category of ultimate concern is understood through relationship, not the question of being as being, but rather the answer of being as being, which is God.

Said differently, when man confronts his finitude, according to Tillich, he risks his own annihilation. Anxiety of nonbeing has the potential to overcome man because man exists. But this extermination does not occur due to courage: instead of being lost in it, man participates in infinity, moves in form, and freely lives in destiny. This unity constitutes the essence of being. And it is the power of being that sustains the tension, this essence. Thus God is more than “essence” since the power has to precede the finite parts. Being, comprised of the essential and the existential, then for Tillich, is necessarily ambiguous. So, too, the ground of being as spirit is ambiguous insofar as it includes the ontological elements, whose nature is ontological.

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 64.
Tillich also describes this ambiguity in terms of the possibility of the question of God. He notes that debates over the existence of God point to the possibility of God, even though Tillich rejects argumentation as mode of theological discourse. “The ground of being cannot be found within the totality of beings, nor can the ground of essence and existence participate in the tensions and disruptions characteristic of the transition from essence to existence...God does not exist. He is being-itself beyond essence and existence.”

Thus Tillich goes on to clarify again that theology can only be “analysis and not argument.” The possible question of God becomes necessary vis-à-vis the cosmological (the relationship of self to world). “The cosmological question of God is the question about that which ultimately makes courage possible, a courage which accepts and overcomes the anxiety of categorical finitude.” In other words, when the ontological question of God qua argument shifts to the cosmological question of God qua analysis, then possibility becomes necessity.

**The Spirit of Courage**

Hurston’s “unshouted courage” represents the power of African Americans to live amidst the denial of life. This strength is a deeply paradoxical, and is rooted in the structure of life itself. Human life, according to Tillich, is ambiguous and yet always in search of unambiguity, or self-transcendence. Courage is the power not to succumb to the anxiety of human finitude in light of life’s ambiguity.

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115 Ibid., 205.

116 Ibid., 209.
Tillich’s theology of Spirit, situated within the ever-important method of correlation, funds the constructive rebuttal of the heterosupremacist pneumatology, typified in Sanders’s account of sanctified holiness. More important than a refutation of Sanders, though, is imagination of sanctification as queer-affirming. Hurston’s quest for the joyful life beyond sorrow, which I have placed alongside of her queer Niggerati home, is a courageous act of Spirit. Robust, sanctified spirit-talk, then, chooses to embrace radically those who radically affirm and celebrate the fullness of life.

In part IV of his *Systematic Theology*, “Life and the Spirit,” Tillich unites the quest for unambiguous life (self-transcendence) and possibility of a new reality. Life is conditioned, according to Tillich, by external and internal factors, and yet always tends toward unconditionality: divine Spirit. Tillich correlates the actuality of another possibility with human potentiality and participation in the life of Spirit “We can speak of Spirit only because we have spirit, so we can speak of Creation only because creative power is given to us.”

During his discussion of life and Spirit, Tillich’s “courage to be” returns, and is amplified to disclose a new dimension: faith.

The courage to surrender one’s own goodness to God is the central element in the courage of faith. In it the paradox of New Being is experienced, the ambiguity of good and evil is conquered, unambiguous life has taken hold of man through the impact of the Spiritual Presence. All this is manifest through the picture of Jesus the crucified. God’s acceptance of the unacceptable, God’s participation in man’s estrangement, and his victory over the ambiguity of good and evil appear in a unique, definite, and transforming way in him.

That which is, is not all that there can be. Courage not only resists anxiety of finitude but it participates (paradoxically) in the dynamic process toward Spirit beyond life.


118 Ibid., 226.
Imagination is a courageous act: the vision of something other than what is, is glimpsed because in the Spiritual Community we have seen the New Being of Jesus as the Christ. Tillich describes the relationship of the manifestation of divine Spirit in life (Spiritual Presence) and Jesus Christ as “Spirit Christology.” 119 The power of Spirit, which is revealed in the “life span of Jesus,”120 becomes manifest as spirit in the Spiritual Community. The Spirit at work in Jesus' incarnation, baptism, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost is also at work in us.121 The embrace of this power, which is courage, breathes life into the struggle to overcome that which resists life.

Tillich denotes this process as “sanctification,” which he explicates as “increasing awareness, increasing freedom, increasing relatedness, and increasing transcendence.”122 The Spiritual Presence radically alters human existence, perpetually calling humanity to overcome the restrictions of ignorance, oppression, separation, and selfishness. The sanctified life, or life in the power of the Spirit, leaves no room for marginalization, and exclusion. To the contrary, the divine Spirit manifest in life as faith and love,123 inspires us to imagine otherwise. There is something inside of us that always calls us beyond ourselves and into relationship with each other.

119 Ibid., 144-161.

120 Christopher Morse in the chapter on “The Holy Spirit” argues: “The term 'Jesus Christ' in the context of the New Testament accounts denotes the full life span, including what happens in, to, and as the future of Jesus of Nazareth, and is not limited to merely the factuality of Jesus’ first-century historical existence.” Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1994), 181.


122 Tillich, Systematic Theology III, 228-236.

123 Ibid., 129-137.
**Jesus as the Christ and the Spirit of God**

The ethic of empowerment is a central feature of a “Spirit christology,” which is significant for a pneumatology adhering to the African-American Christian experience. In *Jesus, Symbol of God* Roger Haight argues that Spirit christology is the “foundational metaphor”\(^{124}\) for a Christian imagination that seeks an interpretation of Jesus that is contemporarily relevant:

A Spirit christology empowers Christian life on the basis of the continuity between Jesus and us; he is a human being like us in all things except sin...Because of this continuity between Jesus and disciples, one can be inspired by and imitate Jesus. There is no gap between him and us. One can project upon him all the weaknesses of human existence in order to retrieve from him the inspiration of the power of his earthly life. Spirit christology gives a solid grounding for a spirituality of following Christ.\(^{125}\)

The Spirit at work in Jesus, which reveals him as the Christ, is also at work in humanity. Spirit christology emerges “from below,” in contrast to Logos christology that is developed “from above” and emphasizes the eternal Logos. Rather than resting solely on the authority of doctrine, Spirit christology depends upon consonance with human experience and analogy. Likewise a Christian theology of Spirit is formulated in view of God from the perspective of our lived, everyday reality.\(^{126}\)

The orientation of this theological approach parallels Haight’s method in his construction of Jesus as *symbol* of God. Haight explains in the preface to his text:

The apologetic intention of this christology...is reflected in frequent appeals to the imagination as integral to the process of knowing, for imagination is the bridge between concrete reality and our understanding of it...Because this is a christology from below, Jesus is called “Symbol of God,” for although this symbol is a sacrament and never “merely” a symbol, “symbol” is the broader and more recognized interdisciplinary category. In the christology of this book, the symbol mediates in

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\(^{125}\) Ibid., 465.

\(^{126}\) Ibid., 447.
both directions: it draws human consciousness toward God, and it mediates God’s presence to the human spirit.\textsuperscript{127}

Haight’s text, which led to his censorship as an ecclesiastical theologian within the Roman Catholic Church,\textsuperscript{128} did not intend to diminish the theology of Jesus as Christ. Instead, it sought to empower persons of faith to understand better the dynamics implied within the doctrine of Jesus Christ. By taking seriously human experience as the starting point of Christian theology, in view of divine revelation, Haight struggled to stimulate human imagination as a gift of Spirit.

According to Haight’s approach, then, Christians come to see a deep symbolic correlation of God, Spirit, and Jesus that is revealed as a creative life-giving power experienced as grace, liberation, empowerment, and love.\textsuperscript{129} Such a Spirit christology asserts

\begin{quote}
that Jesus experienced the power of God as Spirit in his life; that he was aware of this in these terms; that this empowerment was manifested in his actions; that these empowered actions were construed as the ruling of God; and that people recognized this even during his life-time.\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

As a result, through both scriptural and conciliar witness, Christians come to interpret the resurrected Jesus \textit{qua} Christ \textit{qua} Spirit.\textsuperscript{131} “Jesus is the real symbol who bodies forth God as

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item \textsuperscript{127} Ibid., xiii.
  \item \textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 447-449. Haight explains: “A method of correlation entails bringing together the present and the past, bringing into conjunction our present situation and the tradition about Jesus from a past that extends right up to the present. I understand tradition in a broad sense that includes the witness of scripture. Interpretation occurs in the meeting, sometimes the confrontation, between tradition and our present situation” (45).
  \item \textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 449.
  \item \textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 450.
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Spirit present and at work within him; Jesus as symbol participates in God as Spirit mediates God, and makes God present."^{132}\footnote{Ibid., 458.} Christians speak of Jesus in the power of the Spirit symbolically, which is to participate in divine, and thus is always dialectical and analogical.\(^{133}\footnote{Ibid., 457.}

Haight’s use of symbol and Thiemann’s deployment of sacrament, discussed in chapter three, cohere in that both point to the divine from the perspective of everyday life. Hurston’s attention to the everyday introduced the engagement with courage, which inspires the writing of marginalized stories as and into scripture, as seen in her and Nugent’s work. Black bodies become sacred texts, no longer oppressively written upon, but writing a new reality that begins to right past wrongs. Ultimately, at the conclusion of this chapter, this movement of courage will allow us to argue theologically that Jesus is the Spirit of God who empowers the marginalized to claim spirit as the freedom unto life after death.

**Courage and (Non)Conformity**

Conformity, too often, is the price of the ticket for community. Haight’s experience in the Roman Catholic Church post-*Jesus, Symbol of God*, is case in point. “Don’t rock the boat” is sound advice given to the individual desiring success without struggle. And consensus becomes the product of respectable groupthink and not the deep wrestling among those who respect the variety of each others’ voices. As Higginbotham demonstrates in *Righteous
Discontent, explored in chapter two, policing conformity was a means of promoting social uplift in the respectability politics of black Baptist women.\textsuperscript{134}

Hurston offers a different take: community is at its best when its members are courageous enough to become themselves. Wading in these turbulent waters is not easy—and sometimes paradoxical—because it demands both a strong sense of self and an equally strong sense of one’s relationship to others. “Zora Hurston was a complex woman with a high tolerance for contradiction,” introduces Robert Hemenway in his authoritative literary biography.\textsuperscript{135}

Empowerment of black folk, according to Hurston, was not to be achieved through a platform of racial uplift. So she did not write about it. Instead, she wrote through black folklore. Through the “lyin tales,” Hurston found her voice and subsequently sought to tell these tales to the world. Because Hurston believed that African Americans claimed their power when they celebrated the beauty of black culture. If spirituals are like folklore, then sustained consideration of the spirituals also tap into a source of power. We are deceivers and yet true (2 Corinthians 6:8).\textsuperscript{136} And deception is not falsity. By not telling the truth, it is discovered. We cannot approach it head-on for we risk colonizing. Hurston biographer Robert E. Hemenway, introducing her turn to anthropology, writes: “Folklore is exceedingly difficult to define, and folklorist themselves quarrel over precisely what it is.


\textsuperscript{135} Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, 5.

\textsuperscript{136} See also Reinhold Niebuhr’s “As Deceivers, Yet True” in Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History, 1937 (Salem, NH: Ayer Company, 1984), 1-24.
Some claim simply to know it when they see it; all agree that folklore is not error, as in the phrase “That’s only folklore.”Spirituals, too, are not error.

Spirituals are derivatives of spirit, and like their integral, cannot be contained. Spirituals, like spirit, are free. The antidote to the suffocating strictures of conformity is the celebration of creativity. Although Hemenway (and Hurston) does not use the language explicitly, I would suggest that this wholeness is achieved at the intersection of soul and spirit.

Hurston’s choice to be whole still came at a price. Walker’s “cautionary tale” warns the gentle reader of the consequences of a black woman becoming herself in pre-civil rights America. Not only did she die poor and in relative obscurity, but throughout her life she had to fight against efforts to contain her free spirit. In light of all the setbacks of “post-racial” America, one ought to flash this warning still today. Cannon defends:

When Zora Hurston wrapped her hair in beautiful cloth turbans, her critics charges that she was trying to pass for an African queen. When she dared to divorce, not one, but two husbands, with rumor alluding to the possibility of a third marriage, her critics portrayed her as indecent. However, Hurston refused to take a defensive posture for acting in ways which were not acceptable for women until decades later.

Still, Hurston shaped community without conformity.

Courage is a virtue. Hurston possessed the courage to rewrite oneself in rewritten holy texts. Her canon is uncommon. Courage to tell her own story even if no one read it, to speak her own truth even if no one was listening. Maya Angelou is correct: “Dust Tracks on a Road is written with royal humor and an imperious creativity. But then all creativity is

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137 Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, 84-85.

138 Cannon, Katie’s Canon, 110.
imperious, and Zora Neale Hurston was certainly creative.“139 The courage to live as oneself in search of home is a transgressive act of war. Spirit gives courage to become other than what one is. Or perhaps spirit is the courage to live fully as one’s self.

4.4. Queer Transgressions and Indecent Theological Proposals

Sanders’s empowerment ethics reclaims the deviancy of charismatic Christianity in the name of biblical holiness. She affirms the “irrational exuberance”140 of the Sanctified church, once deemed backward and associated with (lower) working class southerners, and attaches it to scriptural orthodoxy. This is to say, Sanders reworks respectability to denote biblical conformity (inflected through Victorian morality), disinterested in Enlightenment rationality. Sanders’s ethics expands the limits of what is acceptable Christian practice, but I argue does not go far enough. It empowers some (i.e., poor, charismatic Christians), but still leave others (i.e., queer, gender/sexual fluid Christians) outside the boundaries of acceptability. Further still, this empowerment depends on disempowerment: othering of gays, lesbians, and sexual nonconformists.

With the aid of Haight’s transgressive spirit christology, Tillich assisted my constructive interpretation of Hurston’s queer Niggerati and the courage to find home in one’s self. Still, Tillich’s theology of Spirit maintains the ambiguity of life, which ultimately is concerned not with transgression but rather with the dialectic of ultimate concern.


Tillich contributes valuable insights in liberation-oriented theologies, but it does not necessarily chart fully the way forward. As “indecent theologian” Marcella Althaus-Reid points out:

Mary Daly reminds us of Hannah Tillich’s memories of her late husband the theologian Paul Tillich, and how he was unable to confront the immediate reality of his life drawn as it was into sadomasochistic practices and bondage and which he replaced by theo-ideological abstractions (Daly 1978:95). What is to be condemned and regretted is not that Tillich was a sadomasochist, but the fact that he did not find 'the courage to be' out of the closet of his sexuality; a sadomasochist theologian, for instance, reflecting on an issue of importance in his life as in the life of others. Our difficulty with Tillich is his lack of integrity and not necessarily his developed taste for bondage practices, which were probably shared by many other academic colleagues, fellow priests and everyday fellow Christians. Systematic theologians such as Tillich are representative of the millions of Christian people struggling to remain in their own sexual closets in their own preferential beds while building their identities without sharing their sexual stories and even condemning them in their writings.141

I maintain that a truly empowering Christianity must wade into the messiness of our complicated lives, and advocate intentional pathways for action. Althaus-Reid’s theology of queerness and indecency offers such a platform.

Like the black and womanist theologies discussed above, Althaus-Reid theologizes out of lived, everyday experiences, particularly those of marginalized Latin American women. Hers differs significantly from the theologies of Townes, Cannon, Cone, and other womanists and black theologians insofar as she speaks openly about sexual practice, and theologizes from this transgressive sexual position. She notes, “Black Theology, Liberation Theology and much of the Gospel and Culture movement starts from the criterion of Sexual Orthodoxy, that is by sexual/political dogmas first, and reality only as rearranged to fit this

model.” Althaus-Reid not only speaks about gender and sexual diversity, but she theologizes from that queer location in a manner that no conversation or mode of “Christian imagination” is off limits.

In fact, Althaus-Reid speaks plainly and provocatively about taboo subjects. She criticizes liberation theologies of Gutiérrez and others for the erasure of the sexual lives of marginalized people, especially women. Sexual lives and stories not only resource, but also constitute the starting point for Althaus-Reid’s theological project. The first words of *Indecent Theology* are:

Should a woman keep her pants on in the streets or not? Shall she remove them, say, at the moment of going to church, for a more intimate reminder of her sexuality in relation to God? What difference does it make if that woman is a lemon vendor and sells lemons in the streets without using underwear? Moreover, what difference would it make if she sits down to write theology without underwear?

Like Richard Nugent, the lived, everyday experience, for Althaus-Reid, explicitly names and screams things “unspoken” and “unshouted.”

In Althaus-Reid’s oeuvre, the boundaries of contextual theology are transgressed to the point where lines are not only blurred but also entirely redrawn and reconfigured. She defines:

Indecent Theology is a theology which problematises and undresses the mythical layers of multiple oppression in Latin America, a theology which, finding its point of departure at the crossroads of Liberation Theology and Queer Thinking, will reflect on economic and theological oppression with passion and imprecise. An Indecent Theology will question the traditional Latin American field of decency and order as it permeates and supports the multiple (ecclesiological, theological, political and amatory) structures of life in my country, Argentina, and in my continent.

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142 Ibid., 62.
143 Ibid., 1.
144 Ibid., 2.
Intersectionality converges with Indecent Theology; both strategies take serious complexity and multiplicity in the constitution of lived realities. The critical praxis emerging from this complicated situation, then, does not seek simple solutions. Likewise, the constructive response ‘contains’ complexity.

For the dissertation’s purposes, though, Althaus-Reid’s method of multiplicity offers the most useful resource for a transgressive, constructive pneumatology. That is, the specificity of fascinating proposals, for example, of perceiving “God as a faggot;”\textsuperscript{145} the bisexuality of Christ;\textsuperscript{146} or a “Trinity based on amigovios instead of medieval conceptions of family”\textsuperscript{147} are less important here than the mode of transgressive theological imagination.

By this I mean, it is abundantly clear that Marcella Althaus-Reid and Cheryl Sanders have very little content in common. And the devil is in the details. To present Althaus-Reid as a respondent to Sanders on content would be insincere, very much comparing apples to oranges. They do share, however, a deep concern for the ethical empowerment of their people. I correlate them, using Althaus-Reid to respond to Sanders, at the teleological level. Although the sources for and forms of their theologies could not be farther apart, the ethical norm/thrust of their work offers common ground. Sanders’s “empowerment ethics” and Althaus-Reid’s “indecent theology” both seek to transgress the boundaries that marginalize their people.

Indeed Althaus-Reid explores “a systematically deviant Jesus,” whose “strong attachment to deviant people is preserved in collected stories which are capable of more

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 112-120.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 144. She defines: “Amigovismo is a transitional category of relationship which usually involves sex, but also a sense of friendship which trespasses beyond the heterosexual patterns of friendship in Argentina.” Thus, Althaus-Reid views the Trinity as “friends with benefits.”
than one reading into his sexuality – per/verted readings, options along the road of interpretation.”\textsuperscript{148} But I frame my view of a Jesus, the Spirit of God, as chief deviant and liberating power not by mere substitution, but as a rather as a “deviant theologian.” Althaus-Reid argues that “Queer theology is, then, a first person theology: diasporic, self-disclosing, autobiographical and responsible for its own words.”\textsuperscript{149}

The overarching thrust of the indecent and queer theology of Althaus-Reid is to move beyond theological binaries, dyads, and dualisms in order to imagine possibility amidst complexity. She writes:

The Queer theologian develops a Bisexual Theology by understanding this fluidity of thinking and by permanently introducing ‘unsuitable’ new partners in theology, which makes it difficult to fix – but this is precisely what allows changes of position and numbers in her confessor/confessant vocation…Queer Theology needs to give place to located desire, that is, pleasure. Queer Theology is a materialist theology that takes bodies seriously.\textsuperscript{150}

Here we observe convergence of black theology’s articulation of the blackness of God, womanist theology’s emphasis on the particularly of lived experiences (especially of black women), and queer theology’s methodology of “sexual positioning.”

Transgressive, queer theology, then, provides a mode of imagining the deviant Jesus out of the experiences of a deviant theologian, “from below.”\textsuperscript{151} This is the manner in which Althaus-Reid imagines Resurrection:

Indecent Christians are not disappeared. They lived and are still around and leave their traces in history. They are multitudes. People leave traces of their lives and everyday little speaks, the frustrations and pains of everyday life, in their communities, in their neighbourhoods and workplaces. They live and resurrect in lust everyday….It is in vain that theological per/versions are condemned and

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 113.
\textsuperscript{149} Marcella Althaus-Reid, \textit{Queer Theology} (New York: Routledge, 2003), 8.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 17, 19.
\textsuperscript{151} Althaus-Reid, \textit{Indecent Theology}, 122.
prevented in Christianity. The obscene (re-discovery) of God in Indecent Theology may prove that perhaps God still exists, but for that we shall need to have a sexual-story case style of doing theology from people’s sexual experiences.\textsuperscript{152}

Despite attempts to erase deviant Christians of all sorts, their spirits thrive in resurrected bodies.

\textit{The Death of Jesus, the Spirit of God}

Jesus as Christ is indispensable for African-American Christianity. There is no worship in black churches that does not name, through testimony, gospel music, and prayer, Jesus as “personal Lord and Savior,” “doctor in a sick room,” and “lawyer in the court room.” In African-American preaching, especially its charismatic traditions, the sermon climaxes, more often than not, in the paschal \textit{triduum}. No matter where the sermon begins, it ends in Jesus Christ “getting up early Sunday [Easter] morning with all power in his hands,” thereby conquering death and the cross where he was “hung high and stretched wide,” as the black church phrase goes.\textsuperscript{153} The sermonic peak, stylized in performative rhetoric, is the call, greeted by the response of the congregation in shouts, acclamation, and dance.\textsuperscript{154}

The spirit at work in ‘spirited’ worship, in view of the cross, is the Spirit of Jesus.\textsuperscript{155} All black Christianity, to some extent, must go \textit{through} Jesus, with particular attention to

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 123-124.


crucifixion and resurrection. More than a moral exemplar, the Jesus invoked in black worship must be intimately related to the biblical witness and to the African-American Christian tradition. The bond between African-American Christianity, black theology, and womanist theology has been strained in an attempt to hold “embedded” and “deliberative” theology—African-American Christian faith and black theological thought—in a productive tension. The role of the cross, suffering, and resurrection remain at the center of this struggle.

Despite the logocentric trappings of black theology and the critiques of redemptive suffering and surrogacy in womanist theology, any theology to be lived in black churches must be grounded in the “lifespan of Jesus.” And this Jesus, in my view, always points beyond himself toward ‘his Father.’ “Jesus was empowered by God’s Spirit; the Spirit of God is God present, and thus a personal presence, a power, a force, an energy, so that Jesus is an embodiment of God as Spirit.”

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160 Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 181.

The constructive view of Spirit proposed here, if it is to be practiced, has to be centered in Jesus, who is “all and all.” I concur with Powery that “The gift of the Spirit [is] a topic that is usually muted in most theological discussions,” and offer a dialogical way of connecting spirit and cross in the dialectic of African-American Christianity. My proposal is funded by the dissertation’s engagement with intersectionality, particularly the need for a transgressive queer spirit-talk. By interpreting Jesus as the Spirit of God, then, we might remain faithful to the black church tradition while at the same time, stretching of it.

Prior to this inquiry, it is worth noting that, this reading is implicitly risky. If Walker is correct that Hurston’s life is a cautionary tale, then her *Moses, Man of the Mountain* shoots one across the bow. That is, if one stretches an object too far, it may no longer be recognizable. But as Hurston’s mother said: “‘Jump at de sun.’ We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.” So we run the risk of alienation altogether, but it is a risk worth taking because in the process we might open the window wide enough for a fresh wind to blow through. If one does not create a fissure at all, well then, the future is already foreclosed. “Transgression entails ‘movement against and beyond boundaries’...to explore new intellectual terrain...compassionate solidarity with the poor in the advance of justice. Transgressive teaching grasps and communicates with the difference between life and death.”

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Jesus is the Spirit of God. This is to say, the incarnated, crucified, and resurrected one known as Jesus Christ cannot be conceived except in relation to transgression. The God who crosses over into time from eternality is the same God crucified on the cross; the very same God whose cross haunts the resurrection.¹⁶⁶ This ghastly “spirit essence of a dream”¹⁶⁷ has a body that resists the finality of death, having been freely born into life qua death. The body of Jesus is a transgressive body—one that does not remain where it belongs. It deviates from the norm: Jesus refuses to remain as disembodied God and, when in human form, refuses to stay dead.

The concealed, apocryphal account in Peter’s gospel bears witness:

⁹.3⁴ Early in the morning, when the sabbath dawned, there came a crowd from Jerusalem and the country round about to see the sepulchre that had been sealed. ³⁵ Now in the night in which the Lord’s day dawned, when the soldiers were keeping guard, there rang out in a loud voice in heaven; ³⁶ and they saw the heavens opened and two men come down from there in a great brightness and draw nigh to the sepulchre. ³⁷ That stone which had been laid against the entrance to the sepulchre started of itself to roll and give way to the side, and the sepulchre was opened, and both the young men entered in. ¹⁰.3⁸ When now those soldiers saw this, they awakened the centurion and the elders—for they also were there to assist at the watch. ³⁹ And whilst they were relating what they had seen, they saw again three men come out from the sepulchre, and two of them sustaining the other, and a cross following them, ⁴⁰ and the heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was led of them by the hand overpassing the heavens. ⁴¹ And they heard a voice out of the heavens crying, ‘Hast thou preached to them that sleep?’ ⁴² and from the cross there was heard the answer, ‘Yea.’¹⁶⁸

The cross follows the resurrected Jesus out of the tomb—and it has voice! Peter’s gospel suggests to us that the resurrection is not simply the triumph over death, as if death now disappears. Indeed the ghostly Jesus is followed by—haunted by—the very instrument of his death. The scripture offers an all-but-subtle and much-needed reminder that the voice of dead, and the means of death, still speaks from the grave.

¹⁶⁶ Moltmann writes, “The other side of Jesus’ death is also presented as his experience of the Spirit – his raising through the Spirit and his living presence in the Spirit” (The Spirit of Life, 65).

¹⁶⁷ Lady Lee Andrews, San Juan, Puerto Rico (privately published artwork).

In this “Age of Spirit,” then, we see the crucifixion of Jesus, the crucified God, which releases this “holy ghost,” is the second death of God. Incarnation, which is God’s self--emptying under the power of the Holy Spirit (kenosis), is the first death of God. Gay Catholic philosopher Gianni Vattimo, 2010 Gifford lecturer (University of Glasgow), points to kenosis in his theory of secularization and post-modern “weak thought.” Vattimo interprets secularization qua the death of God not as the process of alienation, but rather its product. In postmodernity alienation is carried to its ‘logical conclusion,’ such that the weak thought becomes the basis of a renewed faith. He writes:

[Secularization] emphasizes that the weakening of Being is one possible meaning—if not the absolute meaning—of the Christian message, through the radical reading of incarnation as kenosis. This message speak of a God who incarnates himself, lowers himself, and confuses all the powers of this world.

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169 Jürgen Moltmann writes: “The death of Jesus on the cross is the centre of all Christian theology ... the Christ event on the cross is a God event. And conversely, the God even takes place on the cross of the risen Christ.... So the new Christology which tries to think of the ‘death of Jesus as the death of God,’ must take up the elements of truth which are to be found in kenoticism (doctrine of God’s emptying of himself)” (205). The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology, 1974 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). Moltmann uses St. Athanasius’s De Incarnatione to establish the Trinitarian view of the “Crucified God.” He cites, in particular, §54: “For he was made man that we might be made God; and he manifested himself by a body that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; and he endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immorality” (Moltmann 108).


The death of God through incarnation defies absolutism that seeks to exercise control over reality through ultimate certainty. Thus kenosis *qua* humility clues us into to how we ought to live in the world.

This turn to Spirit is analogous to Vattimo’s “weak thought” and his view of incarnation-as-secularization. To this end, the turn continues Vattimo’s inquiry of what happens “after the death of God.” Religiously-infused secularization theory then shifts from the incarnation and rebuilding the body of Christ to resurrecting God through the turn to Spirit. Phyllis Tickle observes, “Ours is a shifting era….and a very vocal cadre of us were on our way to becoming practitioners of religionless Christianity.” An embodied (and embedded) theology of Spirit responds to the complexities of the present age.

The second death of God unleashes the “holy ghost” that ultimately becomes the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Inspiration as the Christian notion that God is Spirit, and that following Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, the Holy Spirit is gifted to the first Christians at Pentecost and poured out on “all people” (book of Acts, chapter 2). The event of Pentecost seeds multiculturalism and religious plurality, which from my reading, transcends the persona of Jesus Christ. Although for Christians, particularly in the Western church, Spirit is inextricably linked to Jesus, the very nature of Spirit is its resistance to

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175 Tillich, *Systematic Theology III*, 115-120.

176 I allude to the *filioque* debate, which began in the 4th century, and wedged the Eastern and Western churches in the 11th century. This debate refers to whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father or both the Father and the Son. The Western church, as represented in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, which revises the Nicene Creed of 325, maintains that the Spirit comes from the Father and Son. See A. Edward Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
containment. In an increasingly religiously plural world, Spirit-talk appears to be a fertile site for interreligious dialogue from a Christian perspective.\footnote{Haight, Jesus Symbol of God, 456.}

A God always present in the world as spirit is a God that immanently and always “with us.” Ultimately, then, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost underscores with dramatic flair what already lives among us. Pentecost is (queer) performance! All human beings are created of God and are invited to participate in the abundance of creation. This libation of the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, then, echoes the death of the already dead God.

Finally, in recent years black religious studies has seen a spiked interest in theological questions of the body.\footnote{Theologizing the black body especially concerns womanists and humanists: Kelly Brown Douglas, \textit{Sexuality and the Black Church} (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999); \textit{What’s Faith Got to Do With It? Black Bodies/Christians Souls} (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005); \textit{Black Bodies and the Black Church} (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2012); M. Shawn Copeland, \textit{Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); Anthony Pinn, \textit{Embodyment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought} (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Eboni Marshall Turman, \textit{Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).} This attention represents at once a return to classic theologies of incarnation, informed and inflected through contemporary theories of gender and sexuality—all in this post-secular Age of Spirit. At the same time, writings on spirituality and sexuality, particularly affirming (black) queer bodies. With spirituality signifying a non-possession by formal religious apparatuses (i.e., denominations, dogmas, and doctrines), these works have written against religious sentiments that would exclude queer sexualities.\footnote{As noted above, womanists like Townes and Cannon have framed their everyday, ethical work as “spirituality.” See Katie Cannon, \textit{Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community} (New York: Continuum, 1995) and Emile M. Townes, \textit{In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).} Against the backdrop, I look toward the drawing together pneumatology, theologizing spirit, and these theologies of the body.

Inspired by Hurston and her Niggerati, we might now think of transgression as a
form of embodied spirit-talk, proffered through the death of God. That is, we speak of the being at home in one’s body and the embodiment of God as Jesus, which is the crossing of God into time that makes earth God’s home (a reversal of the black Christian desire “to make heaven my home”) as acts of claiming freedom fiercely. Spirit is not respectable. Spirit is not cis-heteronormative. And Spirit is not individualistic. Spirit embodies and enlivens us—all of us. In the next and final chapter, we turn to Howard Thurman’s materialist theology of Jesus to further expand our transgressive view of an embodied faith.
Chapter 5. Enriching Spirit: Howard Thurman and a Theology of the Disinherited

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of God.
- Matthew 5:3, NRSV

The movement of the spirit of God in the hearts of men often calls them to act against the spirit of their times or causes them to anticipate a spirit which is yet in the making...
- Howard Thurman, Footprints of a Dream

How proper it is that Christmas should follow Advent—for [anyone] who looks toward the future, the Manger is situated on Golgotha, and the Cross has already been raised in Bethlehem.
- Dag Hammarskjold

When Thurman left Rochester for Oberlin, one of his most trusted seminary professors, George Cross, offered a final lesson—one last piece of advice: “But let me remind you that social questions are transitory in nature and it would be a terrible waste for you to limit your creative energy to the solution of the race problem, however insistent in nature. Give yourself to the timeless issues of the human spirit.”¹

However well-meaning, Cross’s advice wreaked of privilege and paternalism. Although Thurman chose not to offer a verbal rebuttal, later he articulated the shared cultural knowledge of African Americans: “a man and his black skin must face the ‘timeless issues of the human spirit’ together.”² Social problems are spiritual problems. For Thurman, the transitory and the transcendent were inextricably linked.³

In this chapter I present a way of reading Thurman that highlights the embodied

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² Ibid.
consequences of his “mystical spirit.” I explore what it means to call Thurman a mystic, and ask: can Thurman’s mysticism be theological ground for a materialist, social ethic? Ultimately, I suggest that the conventional characterization of Thurman as a “mystic” partially obscures our view of him. Through an examination of *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), Thurman’s most influential text, and “The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death” (1945), I observe that there is an inseparable link between the incarnate Jesus and embodied Spirit. By attending to the relationship of Thurman’s mysticism and Christology, Jesus of Nazareth is further revealed not as docile but deviant, indeed the transgressive Spirit of God. In view of Thurman’s pneumatology, mysticism need not connote otherworldly avoidance of real life challenges.

The dissertation’s final chapter, therefore, invokes the spirit of Thurman as a resource for the contemporary struggle of social justice and freedom. Thurman’s project does not avoid the real-world implications of practiced faith; it is not a veiled way of ‘spiritualizing’ Christian social action and policing respectability. Rather, Thurman’s practical pneumatology of the dis-inherited is a strategically subversive theo-ethical mode of toppling the oppressive conditions endured by "those who stand with their backs against the wall." For Thurman, tapping into that which transcends the social—that is, the spiritual—is the only way to overcome social problems.

### 5.1. The “Uncreated Element”: Howard Thurman’s (Mystical) Call of Spirit

When one reads Thurman’s books and the listen to his sermons, one cannot help but notice the constant and persistent appeal to things of spirit. Whereas in Du Bois’s and

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Hurston’s writings the stream of spirit is more subtle, requiring careful excavation, in Thurman spirit-talk is ready to hand. Spirit is one of the preferred phrases that Thurman uses to urge disciples, like he did in correspondence with Martin King, to always attend to one’s own personal growth and development (the inward life), while taking care of business (the outward life).\(^5\) Over decades of published writings, in his meditations and essays, Thurman travels great distances to explore vast expanses of human (divine) inquiry but always returns home, to spirit. In his commencement addresses and Sunday messages, Thurman consistently challenged his listeners to search within to find, hear, and heed the “sound of the genuine.”\(^6\) The concept-term “spirit” ranks among the distinctive phrases like “centering down”\(^7\) and “nerve center of consent”\(^8\) that uniquely mark Thurman’s cadence.

This seminal focus appears overtly in published titles such as *Disciplines of the Spirit*. In this text, Thurman counsels the spirit-seeker to cultivate a life of commitment, growth, prayer, acceptance, and reconciliation. These spiritual practices are aids to living holistically and thriving as a self-actualized human being. In his discussion of the discipline of prayer, Thurman defines that irreducible nature of human existence: “Man is total; moreover, he is spirit. Therefore it is not surprising that in man’s spirit should be found the crucial nexus that connects him with the Creator of Life, the Spirit of the Living God.”\(^9\)

According to Thurman, these disciplines become the critical pathway by which the human

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\(^8\) Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 222.

being harmonizes with self, overcoming self-alienation and achieving unity with God. Human spirit reconciles with Spirit.

Even when the focus is not named explicitly, still spirit subtly provides the skeletal framework for much of Thurman’s writing. In *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* Thurman proceeds from the foundational premise that social evils are ruptures in humanity’s relational fabric. The essay seeks to shed light on this observation: Jim Crow’s eclipsing of African-American dignity in particular and human connection in general. “It must be remembered,” Thurman writes, “that segregation is a mood, a state of mind, and its external manifestation *is* external. The root of the evil, and evil it is, is in the human spirit” [emphasis in original]. Although corruption of the human spirit spawns segregation, healing of the wounded spirit grounds hope. The enduring possibility for reunion of corrupted spirit with the source of Life motivates the ongoing struggle for justice. At the same time, Thurman seeks to render African Americans—dark people—as visible and luminous subjects and not simply objects of segregation.

Spirit-talk is everywhere in Thurman’s massive corpus, permeating every address, every sermon, every page. One can hardly make it a few sentences without mention of spirit, a referent or derivative thereof. The sheer volume lends instruction to the student of Thurman. Such repetition, however subtle, trains the ear and eye to this axial theme in Thurman’s thought. It calls our attention and begs for interpretation. But therein lies the rub. There is a *double bind* in considering Thurman’s spirit-speech. At once spirit-talk both beckons and befuddles.

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We are drawn into the world of spirit by Thurman’s repeated invocation, on the one hand. This constant call to spirit brings it front and center. And this is precisely Thurman’s point. We are spiritual beings enfleshed in the earthly condition. Unless we remember our primary identity we are apt to miss this fundamental characteristic of our existence.

The frequency of Thurman’s appeals to spirit-talk, on the other hand, belies a false sense of ‘understanding.’ Perhaps even one begins incorporating spirit-talk in everyday conversation, and it becomes part of the daily vernacular. Speech conveys a false sense of domestication. Because God’s Spirit surrounds us, permeating through all life, through all things, one can easily miss it; we see the work of Spirit all the time without observing it. This quandary is further complicated, because the spirit of which Thurman speaks often has a mystical dimension.

**Mystical Transcendence as Transgression**

Scholars of Thurman have routinely described him as a mystic. A student of Quaker mystic Rufus Jones, the characterization of Thurman has entered into the conventional wisdom regarding his legacy, and has brought with it much baggage given the complicated of the study of mysticism. Amy Hollywood offers a helpful frame:

Christian mysticism – and on mysticism understood as a more general religious phenomenon – often attempts to control its subject by emphasizing some features over others. Even more marked is the tendency to reduce complex phenomena, such as the interplay between transcendence and immanence or that between the communal and the individual, to one side of the pair, in the process often making evaluative judgments about what is central and what is peripheral to the mystical life or, even more damningly, what constitutes “true” as opposed to “false” mysticism. (Note 6: So, e.g., James omits “visual and auditory hallucinations,” among

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other phenomena, because he deems them insufficiently "illuminative" to count as an essential aspect of the mystical life. James is far from alone in his desire to discount such experiences, although he has his own reasons for doing so. See James, *Varieties*, p. 408, n. 2.)

Because, by its ‘nature,’ mysticism denotes a complicated form of religious experience—"ineffable" and "defies expression," according to William James’s typology—explanation will be fraught with challenges.

The characterization of Thurman as mystic has become an implicit, however masked, indictment of Thurman’s failure to engage directly in the struggles for African-American equality in the United States. This pathway comes under great scrutiny by those who viewed these timeless issues as ahistorical, otherworldly, and escapist diversions from the real matter at hand—as the epitome of inaction. Criticizing him for talking about injustice and teaching instead of protesting, Thurman’s mystical approach to social change is depicted as the quintessential (theological) trope of respectability, the prototypical smokescreen of *inaction*. Thurman recalls in his Lawrence Lecture, "Mysticism and Social Action":

> When I was at Howard University, among our list of preachers was Reinhold Niebuhr. Because the University had no guest business, they always stayed at our house, the guest preachers. One night, when Reinhold came, we were having the typical no-holds-barred discussion about religion and our society and social action and all the rest of it. On Tuesday in his lecture at Union, he referred to this discussion, and there was one Negro fellow in his class. After Reiny finished making this reference, this fellow had a rather important comment to make, which Reiny passed on to me that night by way of the telephone. He said, «I was talking about drawing some illustrations from our experience, and this young fellow said» --oh,

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I’m embarrassed now—anyway, «this young fellow said, ‘when this Thurman fellow came up out of Florida and began to talk around, many of us who were much younger were sure that at last someone had come who would be our Moses. And what did he do? He turned mystic on us!’» 

For some, like this student at Niebuhr’s lecture, mysticism necessarily denotes superfluous inaction, and evasion from this worldly concerns. 

The recent rediscovery of the “living wisdom” of Thurman, however, has troubled the understanding of mysticism and brought with it a reclamation of Thurman's direct participation and influence on the movement for social change. During the revival of interest in Thurman’s works following his death, scholars have gone to great lengths to counter this charge that mysticism was irrelevant to the desegregationist struggle. Luther Smith in Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet and Alton Pollard in Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman challenge the caricature of the mystic as recluse and withdrawn ascetic. Both essentially argue that Thurman's mysticism ought to be viewed in dialectical tension with his social prophecy. To separate the two is to do violence to the manner in which Thurman taught and himself lived. 

Pollard’s Mysticism and Social Change and Smith’s The Mystic as Prophet attempt to alter the narrative about Thurman. This apologia is circumscribed within the disparagement of black theology, which is often viewed as one's of Thurman's theological

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heirs, as an academic endeavor dissociated from the lived religion of African-American churches. Further still, the critique of Thurman as mystic, and the retrieval of his social activism, is still lodged within a Venn diagram of the critique of systematic theology and its interest in immaterial, and thus inconsequential, abstract concerns. All in all, the underlying appraisal suggests that theology—especially Thurman’s mysticism—avoids the real work of social change. Recalling Marx’s critique of Feuerbach: “philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”

Against charges of Thurman’s disengagement, Smith and Pollard argue that critics myopically interpret Thurman’s work and unduly typecast his legacy. In other words, such charges are dehistoricized on two degrees. First, it ignores Thurman’s mentorship: As a public intellectual, pulpit preacher, and college professor Thurman’s vocational task was always to influence. It reads a definition of mysticism that is apolitical back onto Thurman. Second, and more basically, it gets wrong the history of Christian mysticism. Sure, some mystics were disinterested in the social issues of the day; but the categorical assessment is overstated.

A sociologist of religion, Pollard explains that “there exists in American sociological circles a considerable intellectual parochialism and prejudice toward anything resembling ‘mysticism,’ if the preponderance of reductionist studies is to be taken seriously.” Further,
Pollard goes on explain that Thurman said, “I have never considered myself as any kind of leader. I’m not a movement man”; still he was a significant influence on the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, he drew inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi, as did King and other such leaders:

it is Gandhi’s words to Thurman which provide the best conceptualization of his role as mystic-activist:

“I devoted my life; I withdrew from politics entirely, withdrew from anything having to do with the mechanism of social change and my mandate for carrying out the truth in terms of its ethical and moral significance, and devoted my time to this other – an energy building thing for the masses of people so they would have enough vitality to be non-violent.” (emphasis added in Pollard).21

We must approach commentary about Thurman’s mysticism, therefore, with caution. Any attempt to narrow the breadth of sources and scope in Thurman will inevitably lead to a misreading of his oeuvre.

Such is the definitional quandary that cautions the present task. When one has prefixed the definition, there lies a slippery slope of application. It is quite easy to make the subject fit as an object of discussion. Of course, discursive purposes require “working theories,” this is sure. However such categories cannot themselves become hermeneutical prisons that cage in our imagination. Instead engagement—experience with the object as a subject—must be the leading edge of interpretation. In the Lawrence Lecture Thurman goes on to explain:

Fortunately for me, the outer and the inner are one rhythm. And I feel, therefore, in my work with the mystics that the life-denying and the life-affirming dimensions of the religion of the inner life represent one emphasis, rather than two contradictory emphases. But the center is in the individual, and the individual is always trying to find at the heart of the conflict that which is, what’s laid bare, integrating it, integrating it, integrating it. Announcing that all life is one, that this is a universe, that the contradictions of life are never final and ultimate, that life rejects ultimately

all dualisms, they finally break down. And I believe this.22

We must listen to what is being said, and not what we want to hear.

In fact, Thurman wrote and lectured extensively on the social manifestations of mysticism. For example, in “Mysticism and Ethics,” Thurman writes:

It does not necessarily follow that because the mystic does not accept the contradictions of experience as ultimate he is singularly devoid of protest and indignation. The structure of human experience consists of tensions and releases, of veritable contradictions and paradoxes, of trial balances between affirmations and negations; in fine, there seems to be a de-focused but conscious dialectic [sic] at the very core of experience which may have only secondary reference to reflective thought. It is a salutary fact, however, that the human spirit is reluctant to give this tension an ultimate significance or reality. The spirit seeks as its final resting place some kind of synthesis. The mystics’ sense of union with God is the ground of the creative synthesis which he achieves in experience.23

Thurman points to a deep desire for reconciliation that mysticism facilitates. The human spirit seeks (comm)union with God’s spirit; the world desires wholeness free from division and strife.

Our view of Jesus as chief deviant, the incarnate God who transgresses time and space in order to be with humanity, finds even deeper meaning in consideration of one of Thurman’s inspirations, Meister Eckhart. “Meister,” that German corruption of the Latin magister, in reality left no school because of the demise of his career under charges of heresy. To be sure, Eckhart and his interpretations were threats to conventional orthodoxy.24


In “The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death,” which will be explored in detail later, Thurman writes:

The most significant thing about man is what Eckhart calls ‘the uncreated element’ in his soul. This was an assumed fact profoundly at work in the life and thought of the early slaves. This much was certainly clear to them—the soul of man was immortal. It could go to heaven or hell, but it could not die.25

The most successful tactic for overcoming the conditionality of human existence—qualified by injustice and inequity—is to tap into unconditionality. “Every [person],” says Thurman in “Inward Journey” sermon series on Eckhart, “has the same essential increment in him...regardless to the particular circumstances of his existence.”26 There is a power within that resists (oppressive) powers without.

In his Lawrence Lecture, “Mysticism and Social Action,” Thurman points out the lifelong struggle of personal identity that ensues when one resists the social order in which one has been born:

Due to the vicissitudes of the social situation in which I have been forced to live in American society, it has been vital for me to find within myself the door that no man could shut, to locate resources that are uniquely mine, to which I must be true if the personal enterprise of my life is to be sustained despite the ravages inflicted upon it by society.27

By calling up spirit, one can endure, resist, and begin dismantling these societal ravages.

Thurman’s theology of the disinherited, framed from the perspective of Jesus of Nazareth, integrated the spiritual journey and social struggle. Thurman contends that Jesus’ solidarity in suffering provides the resources for the human encounter with


suffering. The reality of Jesus models endurance in natural suffering and the overpowering forces that create undue suffering. Jesus’ story reveals that “There is within every man a defense against the assault.” This defense has outward manifestations that confront injustice in the social order: “There is a profound element of anarchy in all spiritually motivated behavior.”

5.2. The Deviant Jesus of the Disinherited

During his life, Thurman was supremely concerned with the condition of black folk in Jim Crow America. Thurman taught at Atlanta’s Morehouse College and D.C.’s Howard University during a deliberative attempt to build up the social, political, and economic capital of African Americans. Under Mordecai Johnson, Howard’s first black president, a league of extraordinary thought leaders was assembled in the nation’s capital to drive this vision forward. With the likes of heavyweights such as Alain Locke in philosophy, E. Franklin Frazier in sociology, and Benjamin Mays in religion, Thurman became the first African-American Dean of the Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel at Howard. “His tenure as Dean of Chapel reflected an evolving desire to transcend differences based on race, sex, religious orientation, and class.”

Long before the concept of intersectionality emerges, we find in Thurman a

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sophisticated treatment of the overlapping relationship of class and race. This critical analysis unfolds most comprehensively in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, which remains a classic and perhaps the most enduring of Thurman’s texts. Historian Lerone Bennett recounts that often Martin King carried a copy of *Jesus and the Disinherited* in his briefcase.³¹ Although the Poor People’s Campaign emerged in King’s twilight, Thurman’s public theology indicted economic injustice early on.

Similarly, in that vein, Thurman is seen as a forerunner of black liberation theology.³² But if we situate Thurman more squarely in his own time, in conversation with his own peers, what emerges is a profound contribution to the black radical and American liberation tradition. In fact, I will argue that Thurman offers a theological alternative to black Marxism that takes seriously the class struggle and the plight of the poor. Howard Thurman anticipates West’s phrase: “prophesy deliverance!”³³

From the start, Thurman presents a theological assessment of the political economy of race in the United States. In order to understand the plight of subjugated African Americans, one must appreciate the interlocking nature of race and class in the U.S. Economic status is racialized. Segregation does not just keep black people separate from whites, but it also keeps them poorer than whites. By delimiting political, educational, and social access to capital based on a system of white supremacy, economic opportunity is

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necessarily restricted. In other words, segregation’s insidious hold around the necks of poor black people keeps black people poor.

Thurman’s assessment’s is theological in his view, because racism has a metaphysics: ultimately it is not solely a social question but a spiritual one. “There is some region in every man that listens for the sound of the genuine in other men. But where there is contact that is stripped of fellow-feeling, the sound cannot come through and the will to listen for it is not manifest.” 34 However socially constructed race is, racism manifests from an individual’s failure to acknowledge the humanity of another. And that failure flows from his own failure to embrace his own humanity. Because if one becomes ‘fully human’ then she stands perpetually in the presence of God. Thurman concludes:

There is a spirit abroad in life of which the Judaeo-Christian ethic is but one expression. It is a spirit that makes for wholeness and for community...It is the voice of God and the voice of man; it is the meaning of all the strivings of the whole human race toward a world of friendly men underneath a friendly sky. 35

True communion with God, therefore, forecloses the possibility of any form of racial supremacy.

There are, no doubt, very real materialist consequences of racism: limited housing options, underemployment, over-sentencing, and the like. And the spiritual root of racism is no less real—the rending of the social fabric is the echo of a fracture of Spirit itself. “May it be remembered,” writes Thurman, “that the cost to the perpetrator of segregation is a corrosion of the spirit and the slow deadly corruption of the soul. It is to be overcome by evil.” 36 This spiritual decay not only damages the culprit as well as the victim of


segregation, in dis-ease like fashion. He goes on to explain: “The spirit does with the literal fact of the existence of white person what the body does with an infection. A thick wall is built around the infected area in an attempt to prevent the spread of the infection into the rest of the system to poison and destroy it.” In some manner, the spiritual root is more important because it is the root cause.

In his classic Jesus and the Disinherited, Thurman places socioeconomic status at the heart of his theological treatise, honing in on the material consequences of social disparity. The oppressive circumstances endured by African Americans, Thurman observed, were not solely factors of race, but also matters of class. And these inequities were direct affronts to God. His interpretation of Jesus, which is the point of departure for his ethical advice to the oppressed, rests centrally on Thurman’s claim that Jesus of Nazareth was dispossessed—a poor, colonized, racial minority.

He exhumes the body of Jesus, performing an autopsy on his remains and in the process discovers that his life is still speaking although it had been silenced. This autopsy reveals that the “anatomy of segregation” is a complex ecosystem unto itself, although it oft has been interpreted as a single-cell organism. Race and class have a symbiotic relationship to one another. Class comes into clear focus in a dialectic alongside race.

Thurman’s first chapter “Jesus—An Interpretation” emphasizes the historicity that Jesus was a poor, Jewish man, part of an occupied, racial minority group. Thurman claims that in order to interpret Jesus as the embodiment of God’s spirit, one must really take

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37 Ibid, 29.

stake of his material body. Jesus’s turn to inner strength, the soul, as a source of resistance to the external forces of oppression, cannot be dissociated from the carnal reality of how his body moved in the world of ancient Palestine. In other words, there can be no mobilizing of Jesus of Nazareth for social change while at the same time spiritualizing him. Jesus is the “logical flowering of a long development of racial experience, ethical in quality and Godlike in tone...so perfect a flower from the brooding spirit of God in the soul of Israel.”

Thurman interrogates the substance of inequality and observes that its form takes the shapes of the decidedly ‘modern’ categories of identity. Deployed for the sake of assisting us in better understanding the depth of such inequality, race and class are inextricably linked because they share a common origin, a common genealogy. The singularity of social inequity—the difference—manifests multiplicitously (e.g., as racism or classism) insofar as we have created these various categories. Thurman’s examination is situated in the particularity of Jesus. Thurman’s first order claim is that Jesus is disinherited. It is not race or class, per se, that is the point for Thurman. Instead it is the fundamental fact that these raced-classed subjects have been subjugated. These heuristics of race and class disentangle the deep messiness, so that we might intervene. But what is most important to see is that violence has been done against human bodies—and that intervention is necessary.

Thurman’s text speaks to and from the experience of black people, but it is not only about black people. The circumstances of African Americans in Jim Crow United States meet the circumstances of Jesus in occupied Palestine. They do not intersect, however,

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39 Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 15-16.
because Jesus was *black*. Thurman’s claim does not depend upon remaking the God-Son in the image of African Americans; it is correlative. (Later, Cone attempts to make “black” a universal category, which continues to trouble our racialized sensibilities.40) Rather, the disinherited is a transcendent/universal category.

Still, the Jesus that we see in Thurman is a Jesus that we come to know distinctly through the struggles of segregated blacks. His identity is specific enough to speak to the particular injustices that Thurman seeks to remedy, while remaining broad enough to allow a variety of people to see themselves in the narrative and thus stand in solidarity. Disinherited is a term that can be appropriated by a variety of communities without belonging exclusively to any specific one.

In *Jesus and the Disinherited* that great sage Howard Thurman reveals the relationship between fear and societal injustice. Fear, along with deception and hatred, are age-old survival mechanisms of those living under the constant threat of violence. Thurman maintains that, however efficacious in the short term, these tactics selfimplode in the long run. While Thurman centers on the disinherited, his wisdom remains transcendent, speaking to the heart of our nation’s present problem. “The core of the analysis of Jesus is that man is a child of God, the God of life that sustains all of nature and guarantees all the intricacies of the life-process itself...The awareness of being a child of God tends to stabilize the ego and results in a new courage, fearlessness, and power.”41 The logic of fear, Thurman

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argues, can only be neutralized by the power of love. Far from weak sentimentality, this courageous love enacts justice through radical transformation of our social fabric.42

The incarnation of Jesus, then, is an embodied, ethical, divine act that unites the human spirit with the Spirit of God in a common story, indeed a common struggle. For Thurman, Jesus is the turning point—the location of conversion—on which his theology of social change pivots. The restorative love ethic, which overcomes the destructive seductions of fear, deception, and hatred, comes into clear historical view in the life of Jesus.

The inextricability of Spirit and Jesus forecloses any exclusivism, because insofar as Jesus is the Spirit of God, he does not belong to Christianity. “Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.”43 In fact, the Christian religion, which is not necessarily the religion of Jesus, has been absorbed in “missionizing superiority” that sinfully ignores the poor, disinherited, and dispossessed, and such as can be a hindrance to fully realizing the transcendent character of Jesus of Nazareth.44

Through Thurman’s interpretation of Jesus, Spirit becomes an “essence,” but not in an essentializing, reductionist fashion. Rather, it is an echo that resonates in the hearts of humanity, an energy that ignites aliveness. Spirit is the generative, creative mind-heart: consciousness of being passionately alive. “In many ways beyond all calculation and


43 Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 29.

44 Ibid., 13.
reflection, our lives have been deeply touched and influenced by the character, the teaching, and the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth,” writes Thurman in *The Inward Journey*. “He moves in and out upon the horizon of our days like some fleeting ghost...Like a great wind they [Jesus’ words] move, fanning into a flame the burning spirit of the living God, and our leaden spirits are given wings that sweep beyond all vistas and beyond all horizons.”45 The disinherited Jesus haunts us like a ghost—igniting like fire and inspiring like wind.

5.3. Still More Rivers to Cross: Singing the Negro Spirituals

Thurman’s 1947 Ingersoll Lecture on Immortality, “The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death,” argues that the particular experiences of the Negro, as captured in the spirituals, reveal something about the common experience of living in the face of death. The lecture expands more systematically his meditations in *Deep River*, and articulates the spirituals as “the voice, sometimes strident, sometimes muted and weary of a people for whom the cup of suffering overflowed in haunting overtones of majesty, beauty and power!”46 He continues to make clear: “The real significance of the songs, however, is revealed at a deeper level of experience, in the ebb and flow of the tides that feed the rivers of man’s thinking and aspiring.”47

Not only does Spirit hover above the earthly waters of creation,48 Spirit permeates

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45 Thurman, *The Inward Journey*, 126-127 as quoted in *Essential Writings*, 77.


47 Ibid.

48 Genesis 1:2.
the waters. Still, spirit is not the water and water is not the spirit. Spirit is a higher, deeper plane of conceiving the lived experience in the material world. The “uncreated” soul _qua_ spirit-in-potentia transcends even the “river of death.” The call to spirit is a call _of_ Spirit.

According to Thurman, the spirituals are keenly insightful of the human experience, because they are not limited to a single theme. Instead, they emerge from a variety of existential outlooks and moods. They address human fear, frustration, and freedom of/from death, and living responses of discouragement and despair. Thurman argues, “The note of the transcendence of death is never lacking....out of the fullness of a tremendous vitality the lowering clouds are highlighted by an overflowing of utter exuberance.” In a way, they encompass both the “sorrow songs” of Du Bois and the creative joy of Hurston.

Thurman demonstrates through his exegesis of the spirituals that, although there is death in spite of the immorality of the soul, there is also vitality in the face of death. However debilitating and fear-inducing, the prospect of death does not obliterate the drive to live. Moreover, the drive to abundant life levels death itself to the point that it ceases to have dominion. Quoting “Oh Freedom,” Thurman concludes, “There are some things in life that are worse than death.” Instead of living unfree, the spiritual speaks of the embrace of death.

Thurman is sure to establish that such embrace is hardly escapist. “Death where is your victory? Death, where is your sting (1 Corinthians 15:55)?” Nor it is otherworldly. The source of this overcoming of death, for Thurman, is embodied Spirit. The Christian view of Spirit can only be invoked in relationship to embodiment, which makes manifest

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49 Thurman, “Negro Spiritual Speaks,” 34, 36.

50 Ibid., 31.
transcendent power in real life. Thurman writes, “the unfulfilled, the undeveloped only has a future; the fulfilled, the rounded out, the finished can only have a past. The human spirit participates in both past and future in what it regards as the present but it is independent of both” [emphasis in original].

**An Incarnational Spirit**

Although Thurman view of the incarnate God comes into fuller view explicitly in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman’s theology of embodiment is found throughout his works, complementing his spirit-talk. In *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and Social Witness* (1954) Thurman explains:

> When the individual’s life comes under the influence of the God of his religious experience, then the stage may be set for a soul-shaking conflict of loyalty. At last he must decide without regard to the bearing of the decision on his loyalty to the group. This decision calls for something much more coherent and intelligible than a mere feeling that this is what God demands of him. It is here that the concept of incarnation in the Christian faith takes on a practical significance...Jesus becomes for such a view the for instance of the mind of God in reach of the tools of the individual [emphasis in original]....All of this may be achieved without any necessity whatsoever of making a God out of Jesus.

This revealing passage points to incarnation as a unique paradigm that mitigates the intangibility of inward religious experience. Jesus *qua* “for instance of the mind of God” provides a practical pathway for discipleship. The way of Jesus models how one lives ethically in the world.

In “The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death” Thurman further explains how the embodiment of God in Jesus has personal, practical consequences:

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51 Ibid, 49.

52 Thurman, *The Creative Encounter*, 82-83 as quoted in *Essential Writings*, 65.
For the most part, a very simple theory of the incarnation is ever present. The simpler assumptions of Christian orthodoxy are utilized. There was no elaborate scheme of separate office and function between God and Jesus and only a very rare reference to the Holy Spirit. Whether the song use the term, Jesus, or the oft repeated Lord, or Saviour, or God, the same insistence is present—God is in them, in their souls, as they put it, and what is just as important, He is in the facts of their world. In short, God is active in history in a personal and primary manner. People who live under great pressures, grappling with tremendous imponderables which left to themselves they could not manage, have no surplus energy for metaphysical distinctions.

In the immediate context of slavery, spirit-talk is an everyday means of denoting freedom and self-empowerment. “They [enslaved African Americans] made a worthless life, the life of chattel property, a mere thing, a body, worth living!” According to Thurman, in the spirituals, there is really no need to name the Holy Spirit as such, because the songs are all about spirit, as an act of Spirit. While Spirit pervades Thurman's writings, there is far less appeal to the traditional Christian doctrine of Holy Spirit, per se. The traditions of Christian teaching therefore do not offer a hermeneutical shortcut. Spirit is not for the individual what the magisterium has instructed. If anything, the catechesis and songs of Christian religion are templates onto which one might finds footing. They are at best the training wheels for spirit-discovery that doubles as self-discovery. They are means of not only staying alive, but also of more fully coming alive!

Although there has been a history criticizing Christianity in general, and African-American Christianity in particular, as being otherworldly and blind to the everyday matters of human existence, commonly labeled a “spiritualized religion,” this cannot be the meaning derived from an accurate reading of Thurman’s deployment of (immortal) spirit. Too often, however, formalized ecclesiastical dogma stand in the way of the true search. He

54 Ibid, 49.
writes:

The concept of denominationalism seems to me to be in itself a violation of what I am delineating as the Jesus idea....But when the church, even within the framework of the principle of discrimination inherent in denominationalism, further delimits itself in terms of class and race, it tends to become an instrument of violence to the religious experience. Here we come upon the shame of what is meant by the phrase of a certain minister [Martin King] in referring to the eleven o’clock hour on Sunday morning as “the great and sacred hour of segregation.”

Thurman maintained that denominationalism conflicted with this pursuit of self-discovery in Spirit. One must wade in the waters of Spirit, drenched in its wake and saturated by close contact. Spirit is free. For Thurman, the existential inquiry is essentially and effectively a theological and ethical consideration, deeply rooted in Jesus’ great commandment to love God, self, and neighbor.

Thurman speaks of aliveness and the “Jesus idea” in terms of developing “life's working paper.” The epilogue to Jesus and the Disinherited voices the necessity of all people to take the conditions of one's birth and environment and write the manner in which she will live in light of these them. Describing Jesus of Nazareth as the story beyond stories—the “Eternal Presence,” “God fact,” “Divine Moment”—Thurman concludes: “In him the miracle of the working paper is writ large, for what he did all [people] may do. Thus interpreted, he belongs to no age, no race, no creed.”

Centering Down by Calling Up Spirit


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55 Thurman, The Creative Encounter, 140-142 as quoted in Howard Thurman: Essential Writings 78.

56 Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 112.
believes I have never been able to find out.” Therefore, it is our quest to speak plainly about the ethical thrust of Thurman’s project, now illumined in his Jesus-grounded theology of the dispossessed. Thurman recounts in “Beginnings” of his autobiography that, from an early age, he was surrounded by those in his biological family and his church family that affirmed his inherent worth and dignity. These affirmations provided insulation—a buffer from the outside world—through which Thurman was able to become himself. These loved ones spoke a counter-narrative to the normative story that propped up segregation, exposing its falsity and thereby establishing a new norm. He writes, “It is clear to me that the watchful attention of my sponsors in the church served to enhance my consciousness that whatever I did with my life mattered. They added to the security given to me by the quiet insistence of my mother and especially my grandmother that their children’s lives were a precious gift.”

This incubatory effect of this spiritual foundation cannot be underestimated. Not only is it one of the necessary conditions of Thurman’s own flourishing, but also we see that the role of nurture is an underlying thread within his entire oeuvre. In his sermons, writings, and lectures, Thurman seeks to cultivate in the listener-reader the sense of personal growth and development as a human being. This quest to become fully human is a process in self-discovery, whereby one’s identity is shaped—or remade, as it were—and reinforced by these discoveries. When one comes to possess these spiritual resources, she is about to resist and thereby transcend temporal conditionality. It is the activation of this

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58 Thurman, With Head and Heart, 20.
possibility in which, Thurman suggests, an individual truly becomes one’s self.

Thurman in *Disciplines of the Spirit* (1963) explores the “techniques” by which one overcomes debilitating conditions of life and comes into deep communion with the “Presence of God.”\(^{59}\) Through the practices of commitment, growth, suffering, prayer, and reconciliation, Thurman suggests that human beings might come alive and become themselves. “Given the yielding of the nerve center of consent and the active release of the Spirit of God in a man’s life, a radical reorientation became possible…There has been a slow invasion of the Spirit of God that marked no place or time.”\(^{60}\) He writes of a transcendent capacity that is not the possession of the Christian church, although the institution has facilitated religious experience for millennia. Thurman draws upon, and operates in a multiplicity of traditional disciplines, in order to engage the Spirit, which is a possession of none. The manner in which Thurman destabilizes some of traditional modes of classification is particularly instructive in the exploration of spirit in African-American religious culture.

Through the commitment to growth and the practice of prayer, although one may not be able to avoid suffering, she can endure it in hope. The embodiment of self, according to Thurman, is rooted in the sense of somebodiness. For him, one of the most basic spiritual resources is the *imago dei* principle. In several of his writings and sermons, Thurman references the story his grandmother would often tell him and her other grandchildren of a slave preacher who would visit the plantation occasionally over the years, always culminating the sermon in the same manner: with an affirmation of the slaves’ basic


\(^{60}\) Ibid., 26.
humanity. Thurman recounts:

When the slave preacher told the Calvary narrative to my grandmother and the other slaves, it had the same effect on them as it would later have on their descendants. But this preacher, when he had finished, would pause, his eyes scrutinizing every face in the congregation, and then he would tell them, ‘You are not niggers! You are not slaves! You are God’s children!’ When my grandmother got to that part of her story, there would be a slight stiffening in her spine as we sucked in our breath. When she had finished, our spirits were restored.61

“For those who stand with their backs against the wall,” the black church and its antecedent slave religion interrupted the spiritual assault on the African-American psyche and established a sense of somewbodiness. Being the only realm where African-American agency was exercised communally and publicly, partially free from the panopticism of white slave master domination, this “invisible institution” as Albert Raboteau describes it, cultivates self-love and mediates healing and empowerment.62 As a “safe space” within white-controlled society, this institution functions not only in the technical sense but rather in the adaptive one.63 It is the “place” where meaning is made, relationships are formed, and the ego is solidified.64

The self-affirming role of the black church is indispensable and must be considered within the matrices of the emancipatory roles of African-American religion. If Thurman’s platform was too often criticized with being too passive and charged with oversentimentality, then this turn in the active function of the black church may invite a reconsideration of the true force of Thurman’s agenda. Implicitly, the first step in outward

61 Thurman, With Head and Heart, 21.


protest against white supremacy is the inward assertion of one’s own worth and place in society. This is liberation and social progress.

By naming spirit, Thurman draws our attention both to the matter at hand and to the heart of the matter. Spirit-talk for Thurman speaks to our surrounding circumstance and its underlying conditions. This social commentary is accomplished paradoxically by turning inward. Not only is the individual’s care of the soul necessary to sustain one’s social activism, but also it is the actual method for realizing any change in society. Transformation in the world results from the transformation in the hearts of men and women. Social policies, legal action, and political strategy have their place. They, however, are technical answers. At the root, there must be an anatomical intervention.

The call to spirit, first, is an invitation to look within—as an personal enterprise with social consequence. Spirit-talk is a means of getting in touch with our deepest selves and the truest reality. This journey to the heart of the matter requires the human body, and not the body politic, to be the primary site of exploration. Because so much of our own lives have gone without excavation, says Thurman, the first order of business is the ongoing process of self-work. It is the process of getting to know the self as self. It is becoming intimately familiar with one’s own desires and passions and proclivities. It requires spending time with oneself and asking questions of the self that lead to deeper understanding. The work of spiritual disciplines is but a mode of intentionality that responds to the basic questions: Who are you? Why am I here?65

For Thurman, when one probes her own personal anatomy, she inevitably discovers

65 *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 26, 33-34. See also Walker Fluker, “Preface” to *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman, Volume I* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina, Press, 2009), xiv.
that spirit is the “stuff” of our composition. The call to spirit, second, is an invitation to self-discovery. If there is to be any value of the work, there must exist an openness to learn something about the self that has the capacity to transform the self. The initial step of introspection has to be met with an equally important, albeit subsequent, step of confrontation. This self-acknowledgement is a form of personal truth telling that demands courage. For it is quite likely that one can easily fear what is seen when one looks inside, and thus flee from the scene of inquiry. This introspection is a reckoning that requires probing of what Fluker calls “sites of memory,” which may be painful places of personal and social trauma.66

For Thurman, the turn to the self inevitably leads one to find that anatomically the human being is spirit (and not individual soul). Thus, the call to Spirit is a summons to bring human spirit in agreement with something greater than the self. This is why we find that Thurman prefers the concept “spirit” over “soul.” Spirit signifies multiplicity, or better still, community.67

One might say that the thrust of Thurman’s invocation, therefore, is attunement or alignment. Becoming truly human is the process of approaching the “nerve center of consent”—the place where the individual comes into contact with the core of one’s being. When one becomes fully aware of and fully in touch with the driving appetites of the actions that animate existence, the human being moves from the periphery to the essence


67 Fluker, director of the Howard Thurman Papers Project, has written well on the association between ethics and community in Thurman’s thought. See for example “They Look for a City: A Comparison of the Idea of Community in Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.”, The Journal of Religious Ethics 18, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 33-65.
of herself. And it is in this place, that feeling is most acute. In fact, this location is the place of aliveness.

Thurman maintains that mining the self will lead to discoveries that have external consequences. Only when one's knows oneself can one do any external good. And for those who have been injured by dehumanizing acts, knowing the self gives the spiritual resources and fortitude to resist the deafening effects of evil. Fundamentally, then, an epistemological examination predicates the ethical consideration. It is a call to self-relationship as self-knowledge through interiority that, according to Thurman, ought to lead to relationship with others and God. While this is not the only logical conclusion, it is for Thurman the only legitimate response. That is to say, the turn to interiority could lead to individuality that at apathetic to socio-communal concerns. Such a move, however, would require the individual to deny the inherent relatedness of all life and thus deny one's identity as spirit. Experience prohibits a sequence that fails to have ethical consequences.

Spirit-talk is to not to be taken as a spirituality that signifies withdrawal or detachment from the lived reality. Instead Thurman’s living wisdom is practical in orientation. As noted, in The Luminous Darkness Thurman appeals contextually to the racialized society of his day with insights intended to govern appropriate response. Thurman’s words were disinterested in detached and abstract social commentary. Instead he sought to intervene by speaking directly to the situation at hand, with the aim of transforming the hearts of men and women listeners. While some criticized Thurman for not himself participating directly in social action and protest movements that shaped a good portion of his lifetime, such indictment misses the mark. It is a rather myopic way of defining and interpreting social change. This indictment suggests that the only manner of
resisting injustice and social inequity is through grassroots organizing and protest struggle.

James Baldwin’s critique of Richard Wright in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” warns against such a one-sided view of things. Social commentary in the form of explicit indictment, while sometimes productive, also comes with risks: The protest novel becomes predictable and ultimately cliché. As an alternative, Baldwin advocates for and takes up countermeasures with more finesse in which the characters are not typecast. The approach though tactically indirect has greater propensity to penetrate the surface level and thus get closer to the core of the issue. Similarly, Thurman believes that there are other means than grassroots protest, which constitute “direct action,” that advance the march toward the end of a just society. The critique of Thurman and others who join his tactical direction further functions as a distraction from the root cause.

This is the basic and enduring charge of Thurman’s mentor George Cross: social issues are fleeting; matters of spirit are timeless. Because the social issues are material and practical, they are the ones we most readily see because they most directly shape the human experience. But for Thurman, as influenced by Cross, they themselves are not the root cause of the present condition. Instead they are secondary, symptoms of a more primordial misalignment that resides, if you will, in the spirit-realm.

Cross’s remarkable declaration to focus on “timeless issues of spirit” and not the race problem—as if they are mutually exclusive—frames Thurman’s entire life project. This final charge was a call from the transitory to transcendence, aimed at teasing out the very best that Thurman had to offer the world. Maybe Cross possessed the prescience that Thurman would become a thought leader not only for black people but also for all people,

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68 James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).
his insights having great appeal to both whites and African Americans alike. Cross’s charges haunt Thurman. His response—“a man and his black skin must face the ‘timeless issues of the human spirit’ together”—frames Thurman’s work. He seeks to demonstrate this abiding relationship—this interplay—between the communal experience of African Americans and its continuity with the human condition. Although Cross relegates the question of race in the United States to a second-order and tangential significance in comparison to loftier and more substantive pursuits, Thurman knew otherwise.

Thurman does not seek exclusively to affirm the humanity of black people, although this is an indispensable undertone of his work. Instead he probes (the essence of) humanity through the black experience. He seeks to elevate the human’s knowledge of self by encountering African Americans. By considering intensely the moment in history of Jim Crow America, one opens the window to the timeless nature of fear and hatred and the disciplines of spirit motivated by love. This process simultaneously and necessarily constitutes the emancipatory empowerment of black people. Overcoming the race problem, then, cannot be dissociated from the basic human struggle of self-knowledge and self-identification.

In fact, for black people to overcome white supremacy, Thurman believed it was necessary for African Americans to turn to interiority, and tap into spirit, the transcendent inner power and inner strength that affirms and shores up the self against the relentless assaults and attacks of white supremacy. For Thurman, then the central question is “What does it mean to be human?” But not in the sense that Cross seemingly intended. The timeless spiritual quest is concomitant to the social question, and not antithetical to one

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69 Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 60.
another.

5.4. Creative Encounters: Pneumatological Affinity to Thurman’s Spirit

Howard Thurman was a living advocate for what he called “creative encounters.” In order to transcend social divisions that fracture our shared humanity, persons of courage must be lean into the love ethic. That is, they must be bold enough to embrace their neighbor as self. His Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, a multicultural, interreligious community is a real manifestation of this principle.70

At this point, I would like to risk a creative encounter, of sorts. Whereas the pathway between Du Bois and Cone, and Hurston and Tillich was paved immanently, here I am constructing the route. Part of the rationale is practical: because Thurman was uninterested in crafting systematic theology per se, placing him in conversation with a constructive (systematic) theologian advances the dissertation’s constructive aims. Whereas Thurman’s theology is entirely uninterested in dogma, Boff thoroughly engages church doctrine. Read centrally in light of “the Church’s three great ‘options’ or choices: for the poor, for their liberation, and for the base church communities,”71 Boff presents an apologia (defense) of what the church’s doctrinal teaching ought to be.

More importantly, I observe a deep affinity between Thurman’s and Boff’s pneumatological concern for the poor. Both center what might be expressed as “the impoverishment of spirit.” They point to an underwhelming dependency on spirit-talk and


interest in the disinherited. Spirit provides empowerment for personal and social transformation.

Interestingly, Thurman and Boff points to the demise of the Roman Empire in their analysis of pneumatology of the poor. Boff discusses the “cultural malaise” in antiquity, which has resurfaced in postmodernity (and thus creating a yearning for spirituality, or life in the way of spirit). In his Lawrence Lecture on “Mysticism and Social Action,” Thurman discusses the loss of individual responsibility for the whole of the empire, thus creating a vacuum into which Christianity enters. Boff and Thurman reject imperial power, and still identify what is learned from it. That is, Jesus’ and the church’s identity are shaped under and in relationship to empire.

There is no liberation theology, or theology for those who “stand with their backs against the wall” (Thurman), without such proper account of power, and resistance to it. Boff writes:

Theology emerging from this process of gestation of a new kind of Christian offers us a new paradigm for theology. Here we have a reflection on social reality, especially from the viewpoint of the poor, in the light of the Word of Revelation and the practice of Jesus of Nazareth and his Apostles. Suddenly a theologian is more than just a teacher, a professor. Theologians are militants, Christian intellectuals organically involved with the historical movement of the poor, their thinking, speaking, writing, and action all incorporated into the messianic struggle of “the ones who have survived the great period of trial” (Rev. 7:14). They will count themselves blessed if their discourse in quest of the interconnections of the Word of God with the course of the history of the oppressed generates meaning, joi de vivre, and an apostolic parrhesia. Then gladly will they spend their lives and intellectual

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energies on behalf of those who actualize for us the passion of the Suffering Servant, as we share with them their journey through history toward the Reign of God.  

Boff conscripts theologians in the work of the “church militant,” which is spiritual warfare against systems of oppression.

In fact, the oppressed survivors of the great trial, according to Boff, are those called to bring about a new “way of being” church. The reforming pulse is a gift of Spirit—charisma—that surges forth from egalitarian, grassroots base communities that stand in contrast to institutional hierarchy. The birth of this new way of being church—“ecclesiogenesis”—is not aimed at the demise of the Church per se, only the “top-down,” ecclesial structures that participate in the oppression of the dispossessed by collusion with state power and privilege.  

Boff articulates an emergence of church that encourages innovation:

Meditating on the Gospels and with a theological reading of the signs of the times...we are seeing the rise of a new Church, born in the heart of the old Church, in the form of comunidades de base, communities on the peripheries of our cities, a Church of the poor, comprised of poor people, in the form of bishops, priests, and religious entering into the life of the marginalized, centers of evangelization headed by lay people, and so on. It is a Church that has definitively renounced the centralization of power; unity resides in the idea of Church as People of God, a pilgrim Church, open to the historical march of peoples, a Church that shares in all the risks and enjoys the small victories with a very deep sense of following Jesus Christ, identified with the poor, the rejected, and the dispossessed of the earth.

While this new way of being church is disruptive to institutional power, according to Boff, it is completely continuous with the teachings of Jesus in the power of the Spirit.

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76 Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, 62.
Boff points to “the basic unity between Christology and Pneumatology.” He offers a scriptural hermeneutic inextricably linked to the embodied God that comes through inspiration. This interpretation is not rooted in abstract Trinitarian formulations, but rather in a mode of relationality: a triune God qua society, acting in, liberating, and re-creating the world (society).77 “From a reflection on the New Testament comes two basic propositions: first, the carnal Jesus was the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world; second, the Holy Spirit in the Church is the presence of the pneumatic (risen) Christ in the world.”78 Through the charisms, which are poured out to all people in Pentecost, the church follows in the inspired way of Jesus in order to develop a better world.79 Boff writes:

The story of Pentecost, with its clamorous descent of the Holy Spirit, is laden with theological meaning, expressed in a symbolic language known to its listeners....The founders of the Church kept in mind that it was not so important to look to the past and repeat what Christ said and did, but to look to the present and allow themselves to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and the risen Christ, making decisions that would be lend themselves to salvation and to the passing on of Christ’s project.80 Pentecost is a disruptive act of God that does not constrain faithful people, but rather frees them in order to construct a society stimulated by Spirit as the risen Christ. Relationality is a primary characteristic in dismantling marginalization. This approach coheres with Thurman’s: when humans understand themselves in vital relationship to one another, doing violence to each other becomes much more difficult, if not impossible.

In Boff’s theology, the birth of the Church at Pentecost must be situated in relation to a broader movement of Spirit, which offers an alternative interpretation of incarnation

78 Ibid., 147.
79 Boff, Church: Charism and Power, 154-164.
80 Ibid., 150, 152.
qua embodied pneumatology. Whereas incarnation nearly always connotes the (disinherited) Jesus in Christian theology, Boff offers otherwise. In his conclusion to *Come, Holy Spirit* he writes, “The Holy Spirit was the first divine Person to come into our history. It came upon Mary of Nazareth; that is, it came to dwell permanently in her (Luke 1:35).”

In this view, the coming of God into the world, then, is not only an act of but also rather the embodiment—the personification—of Spirit. This alternative reading not only disrupts theological androcentrism, but also undermines christomonism. God enters into time, in history, first by Mary, a woman and only secondarily in Jesus as the second person of the Trinity. Christian theology, then, might think differently about the female body, because as Boff points out, in Mary’s body dwelled God the Spirit and God the Son as once.

Boff’s reading, however, is not without complications. We must acknowledge Althaus-Reid’s *Indecent Theology*, which challenges the theological grounds of the impregnation of Mary, especially given the Fatherhood of God (which Boff references in the same ‘breath’). So while not entirely successful in overcoming androcentrism, Boff’s proposal does provide a fracturing.

While Thurman did not publish works in systematic theology (although he did hold the post of Professor of Theology at Morehouse and Professor of Systematic Theology at Howard), when interpreted analogically through the lens of systematic theology—and in relationship to ‘formal’ systematicians—the enduring potency of his approach comes into

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82 Ibid., 97-98.

83 Ibid., 124.

greater relief. When refracted through the lens of Leonardo Boff, and his pneumatological concern for the material concerns of the poor, Thurman's project is further illuminated—not for the sake of validation as such, but rather for the purpose of greater understanding to the veiled—mystical—significations, which will offer methodology for reconsidering the role of mysticism in contemporary critical studies. Therefore, Thurman's approach itself becomes more timeless, possessing significant implications beyond his epoch. And because Thurman’s theology is pneumatocentric, it necessarily has wider appeal than Christocentric theologies; potentially correlating to other African diasporic religious traditions.

The Holy Spirit is power. For the oppressed, poor, and marginalized, it is life-giving power in a world that tries everyday to dehumanize, demoralize, and destroy them. Even as the powers that be press daily to kill these bodies that do not matter, the Holy Ghost renews their strength with the power to fight back. These already-dead bodies gain new life, as if they are resurrected flesh.

The Spirit gives life. It finds its way into otherwise dead places where we do not typically look for signs of vitality. Spirit searches through the valley of dry bones and there finds the remnant that refuses to die. It discovers the possibility that struggles for air and so the Spirit breathes. Spirit resuscitates Thurman’s “fleeting ghost of Jesus” that stabilizes a resurrected new life for the unsteady, dispossessed, and marginalized.

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The Spirit lives for justice. Its reason to be is to make right the wrongs. Spirit hovers in creation. It is reborn out of the death of Christ. And Spirit is poured out on all people again for the sake of bringing the envisioned dream into existence.

This Spirit is Holy. Because nothing created in the image of God is unholy. We are created, and simply because we exist we, too, are holy. Despite what has been said. In spite of what has been deemed un-holy. Yes, “what is born of Spirit is spirit.”87 Deep calls out to deep and draws out the deepest, sometimes fragile, source of life that dwells within.

It is that dogged, persistent undying strength within that struggles for life without need for permission. Spirit is unquenchable fire, eternal flame that burns at all times and in all places. Occasionally it blazes, yet most time it kindles just below the surface until it truly ignites—catches hold and refines the society into the image of what might yet be. This is the spirit of the One (Jesus) that proclaimed the Year of the Lord’s favor—“the spirit of the Lord is upon me.”88

Thurman argues that tapping into the spirit within renders one fearless in the face of social oppression. “The awareness that a man is a child of the God of religion, who is at one and the same time the God of life, creates a profound faith in life that nothing can destroy.”89 When the individual is secure in oneself, that confidence overcomes fear.

For Thurman, the love ethic is rooted in Spirit. It is impossible to love without deep connection that not only transcends boundaries, but also obliterates them. There cannot be an ethic of love predicated on separation or group-preservation. Rather, the Spirit of

89 Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 56.
humanity is at the heart of true love. “The disinherit ed will know for themselves that there is a Spirit at work in life and in the hearts of men which is committed to overcoming the world.”

Spirit, therefore, is on the side of the disinherit ed and the oppressed because it seeks out those who have been dehumanized and thus separated from universality. We are all connected—this is the nature of Spirit—so marginalization is the attempt to rupture the fundamental characteristic of human existence. If the love ethic is lodged in Spirit (spiritual connection), then it is *unethical* to utilize Spirit as a means of dissociation ...disinheriting...cutting off. Spirit is radically egalitarian.

Thurman’s basic assumption is that the Christian love ethic emerges from the economic underclass: the disinherit ed. Jesus, a poor Jew, envisions justice for the oppressed by undermining the logic of oppressive power.

Thurman was a free spirit. At once uncontained by the vestiges of Christian orthodoxy and the “black church,” still Thurman remains one of the most prolific Christians ministers concerned with the plight of black people. How can this be? While deeply committed to the life of the church and its transformative power on the people (the *laos*) and the world, he could not have been less interested in preserving the Christian religion. Instead he was much more concerned with the religion of Jesus. Ultimately he strived to achieve the type of communion with God that Jesus epitomized. Thurman’s approach eschews orthodoxy, which is the norm of Christianity. Before ours has come to be known as the “Age of Spirit,” Thurman left behind the “Age of Belief.”

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5.5. Spirit and the Power Within: Overcoming the Fear of Death

*God has not given us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, and of love, and of a sound mind*  
– 2 Timothy 1:7

Something did not feel right in my gut. When rookie cop Peter Liang was indicted for the death of Akai Gurley, many rejoiced. After a series of failed indictments of police officers that killed black people, many felt that justice was served—finally. After months of rally cries that “Black Lives Matter” and protest questions, “What do we want? *Justice.* When do we when it? *Now!*”, the tide seemingly had changed. On the evening of February 10, 2015 many breathed a collective sigh of relief as the Brooklyn district attorney filed manslaughter charges against Liang. I could not yet breathe.

Although I had rallied and preached against police brutality, I realized in the dead of winter that justice was not enough. My spirit remained unsettled, the deep fire inside still raged on that bitter cold evening. Not out of anger, but in sadness: the cop’s conviction will not bring back the brother lost on that fateful November night. Sadder still because I too had been lulled into believing that so-called justice was the *real* demand. Something greater than justice, however, is needed to balance these scales.

Gurley lay dead in his home, and scores of other black people in the streets, because Liang was scared. Already on edge, patrolling with his finger on the trigger, Liang panicked when startled by the presence of Gurley. “It was so dark. I was so scared,” confessed Liang.92 He was afraid of Gurley’s dark body, in a dark stairwell, on a dark night. Therefore,

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See also the attribution of fear in Darren Wilson’s slaying of Michael Brown: Michael
if we are ever to truly address the injustice of Gurley’s slaying, then first we must excavate what is buried below: fear. Unless we uproot the xenophobic fear of the darkened other, there can be no true justice. Not until we can see other as equals—and not threats—will our spirits feel calm.

Following Thurman, we must observe that racial bias, police brutality, and mass incarceration are spiritual problems. These social ills challenge our common humanity, upending our basic connection to one another. They deny Spirit. And these symptomatic maladies expose an underlying condition: we are fundamentally disconnected people. As a result, the dominance of fear and decay of spirit inevitably become death dealing.

“I feared for my life” is the classic refrain sung all-too-often by police officers that gun down black folk in the street. Only now, as a society, are we beginning to interrogate the legitimacy of such “justifiable uses of force.” Viral videos of killed black bodies finally are forcing us to look again at the so-called “menace to society.” When barely pubescent boys are mistaken for adults, and adults automatically viewed as predators, much has gone


terribly awry. Increasingly, the perception of black people as monsters, boogeymen, and villains is being substituted for reasonable fear. And, at long last someone is asking: *What—or better yet, who—are we afraid of?* Because it seems that someone is afraid of the dark.

The patterned deaths of unarmed African Americans bring to light a systemic fear of blackness. And protest cries of “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” dramatize the lengths to which some must go *not* to be deemed an imminent threat. As a society, we are afraid of “we who are dark.” The black body too often strikes fear in the soul of non-black folk.

Socialized racial bias challenge the basic truth that Black Lives Matter. Such fear constructs a social reality in which African Americans are segregated out of the collective, their very humanity called into question. When black folk are not seen as meriting life—

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when they literally are not seen at all—it is that much easier to kill their already dead bodies. The spectrality of invisible people walks the earth.

**Afraid of the Dark**

Fear surrounds us. Haunts us. Seduces us, even. Thurman expresses that “fear is one of the persistent hounds of hell that dog the footsteps of the poor, the dispossessed, the disinherited.” Ironically, this is why I could not rejoice with Liang’s indictment. Something inside me ached. Tragically, we who are dark understand fear. Far from pitying Liang, however, we must take a closer look at the architecture of fear that contributed to Gurley’s death. Racialized bias manifest in prejudice finds root in the universality of fear. Because of these biases, Liang’s “accidental discharge” was not unexpected—no accident at all. Such incidents are becoming far too prevalent—far too predictable.

Though angered by the profoundly tragic loss of life, and enraged by systems that placed Liang in vertical patrol of an unlit public housing project stairway, punishment is a resolution that does not solve the problem. Justice must run deeper than this eye-for-an-eye circularity. If, in fact, Liang fired accidentally and without malice, what actually is gained in his punishment?

Perhaps society will not take Gurley’s death in vain, or mistake Liang’s punishment for justice, if we look more deeply under fear’s lid. Gurley’s fear-caused fatality must haunt us. Those in pursuit of justice have to dissect “the anatomy of the issues facing them...[and]

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102 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 36.
recognize fear, deception, hatred, each for what it is.” Although Thurman’s interrogation focuses on the disinherited, the conclusion has broader implication: fear is not a sustainable way of being for anyone. Our society cannot rely on a law enforcement system predicated on the self-destructive outlook of fear. And most certainly officers that are afraid of the dark—of dark women and men—cannot patrol the places where dark people live. Because fear inevitably leads to death. We desperately need a detour away from this dead-end logic.

Those motivated by the story and love-ethnic of Jesus, however, will appreciate the difficulty of finding an alternative route, a “more excellent way.” Indeed the “lifespan of Jesus”—from incarnation to resurrection—itself is marked by fear. The Biblical witness of Jesus’ birth and his life after death is circumscribed on both sides by fear. On the one hand, there is an invitation to “fear not” by angels and Jesus himself. Yet, on the other hand, there remains the dogged persistence of fear. Despite the summons, the witnesses to new life and resurrection power still shudder. “Sometimes it causes me to tremble.” Fear lingers, even in resurrection, just as the cross follows Jesus out of the tomb. Although we remain Easter people, the “terrible beauty of the cross” captivates our theological imagination.

103 Ibid., 108.
104 1 Corinthians 12:31.
106 “Were You There?”, African-American spiritual, Traditional.
**Holy Ghost Stories**

The spirit of fear and death still haunts the resurrected life. It is not easily exorcised. And nor should it be. So too must the fear-induced slaying of Akai Gurley trouble our longing for a better day. The sight of the cross—the site of unjust crucifixion—forces us to face this intersection. The elimination of “stop and frisk” and vertical patrols, while essential, does not eliminate fear as an underlying cause of some police misconduct. We must delve deeper into the crisscrossing issues at play. We cannot be satisfied with piecemeal answers or systems of retribution. Instead we need an entirely different system—always remembering “the master’s tools will not dismantle the master’s house.”

This new approach does not take root in how uncommon we are, but rather in the radical relationality of Jesus’ love-ethic.

The arc of *Jesus and the Disinherited* tends toward this prophetic witness. When one views the self as a “child of God,” fear begins to subside, says Thurman. Deception gives way to sincerity because the individual starts to act always as being seen by God. And the child of God, perpetually in communion with God, cannot hate an-other human being. Instead the other is always approached also as a child of God, perpetually in relation to the self, equally deserving of respect and care, because a common Spirit runs through us all. Love, according to Thurman, becomes manifest in this courage, honesty, and neighborliness. This love is exceedingly tough, anything but a romanticized pipedream. It is the ideal that incarnates and ‘executes’ true justice.

The spirit of fear, then, gives way to another Spirit borne at the intersection of the cross. The spirit of the cross is the Holy Ghost of God’s incarnate love, crucified yet

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lingering and alive. The haunting of a life unjustly lost meets the pursuit of justice. A pneumatology of the cross converges with the theory of intersectionality.

Confronting these intersectional oppressions demands not only acknowledgement of shared origins of these societal ills, but also coalition-building and *simultaneously* addressing wrongs experienced by disparate subgroups. “For the privileged and underprivileged alike, if the individual puts at the disposal of the Spirit the needful dedication and discipline, [this one] can live effectively in the chaos of the present the high destiny of a son [or daughter] of God.”

Because these ills are spiritual maladies, our intersectional response begins the process of spiritual healing.

Those who seek justice, then, should speak the language of Spirit. “God has not given us the spirit of fear.” Humanity finds itself most at home in this vernacular, because in our souls we deeply yearn for connection to one another. Spirit-talk undermines the far-too-frequently polarized conversation on race and police brutality, because it assumes the fundamental oneness of humanity. To be sure, Spirit like love is exceedingly difficult to define. We approach them both indirectly, often by analogy and metaphors. Still, we know it when we feel it. And we feel when something is wrong—and when it is right. “When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound *like* a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting.”

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10 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 109. Although prophetic in many areas, Thurman did not use gender inclusive language.

111 2 Timothy 1:7.

Spirit is the power within us that changes the world around us. In a world full of death and dying, surely we need more love and more Spirit, “the Lord, the giver of life.” By listening to the sound of a new wind blowing, we might yet be called to something that looks and feels like justice.

5.6. Concluding Theological Postscripts

“I can't breathe.” These were Eric Garner’s final words as the life force was choked from his body; an execution recorded for the world to see. Because Spirit is the breath of God, I have offered a theological intervention that hopes to breathe life into the struggle for justice for the marginalized. W.E.B. Du Bois’s “hope that is not hopeless but unhopeful” disclosed a life lamenting death. Zora Neale Hurston’s “unshouted courage” rejected both tragic blackness and spirituals as sorrow songs, and pointed to life in spite of death. Howard Thurman’s “uncreated element” activated his grandmother’s restorative wit revealing life transcending death. Drawing from black, womanist, and queer theologies, as well as canonical and apocryphal texts, I have interpreted Spirit as power unto life after death.

In this process of excavation, I have paid attention to the discursive production of deviancy that unfolds alongside the deployment of spirit as a signifier of black identity and social progress. At the same time that spirit-talk is spoken as a language of liberation, a counter-discourse of the “demonic” emerges as well. This is to say, the politics of black


respectability and cis-heteronormativity has rendered the souls of some black folk as “unholy ghosts.”

By observing what has happened to spirit-talk at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, this constructive theological intervention offered another story of the life of Spirit. The infrastructure we have built no longer suffices for our present reality. If constructive theology implicitly is a petition for progress, grounded in the potential that another world is possible, this thesis contributes to this remedy.

The pathway forward depends on how we tell the story. You see, we like to tell stories. In many ways, we need to tell them. They shape our reality and give meaning to the past. We speak truth. We tell lies. We create fictions. We pen nonfictions. Through different genre and media, we write narratives. They are stories of how we think things happened, how we wish they happened, how we wish things were happening, how we imagine things should happen, and how we hope for future things to happen.115

And we act because we must. From where we stand there is no other option but to act out in opposition to our experience of injustice. There is a deep urge in one’s soul, a deep tug of spirit that compels us. The calling to pursue justice is a calling of Spirit from “deep unto deep” (Psalm 42:7). Ella Baker is correct: “We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.” One’s experience of a broken reality is nothing short of heartbreak. The very core of one’s being, therefore, yearns for wholeness. The soul, spirit in potentia,

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115 The story, which is not a rulebook, compels us to write new ones. See essays on the development of theological ethics through stories in “Reframing Theological Ethics” section of The Hauerwas Reader (2001). Hauerwas compellingly argues that there is no moral to the story, but rather the moral is the story ("Vision, Stories, Character," 165-170).
remains unsatisfied until a new day dawns. So we work while there is still light in the day (John 9:4), in search of a better one.

A fresh wind of the Spirit is blowing. Let us take a deep breath.
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Articles


