

Wayward Christians, Worldly Scriptures:

Disarticulating Christianities in the

Black Atlantic Public Sphere

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Program in Religion  
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ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation will engage in a historical-critical encounter with a peculiar subset of lived Christian traditions in the black Atlantic world, and the ways in which black theology as a disciplinary formation has only partly included these competing constructions of Christianity in their account of marginalized and marooned peoples. This project will do three things. First it will explore theoretically the construction of a black Atlantic world and re-establish a genealogy of lived Christian traditions in the black Atlantic world that takes seriously a set of movements emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century (primarily 1915-1955). These movements unsettled the monolithic depiction of the black church as western and primarily connected to a European or Euro-American theological tradition. The movements also help us to rethink the black Atlantic sphere as not simply the dispersion of African bodies to regions predominately bordering the Atlantic Ocean and the resulting demographic transformation of these new world spaces, but more appropriately as the collection of spaces (often exceeding the regions bordering the Atlantic) in which black cultures have been contested, shaped, and informed by the legacies of enslavement, colonialism, and capitalism/modernity. It is my contention that by using the lenses of the black Atlantic and scripturalizing to return to this important archive of black Atlantic religious traditions we not only have access to the variety of black Christian experiences in a transnational frame, but we are able to redefine the scope of black theology and more fully engage the complex performances of black religious traditions in the public sphere.

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to the women who made this possible: Gail Edmonds, Brownsyne Tucker Edmonds, and Zora Tucker Edmonds

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## Chapter 1

*“If this option seems to separate them from the Christian community, it is because many Christians, intent on domesticating the Good news, see them as wayward and perhaps even dangerous.”<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

This dissertation will engage in a historical-critical encounter with a peculiar subset of lived Christian traditions in the black Atlantic world, and the ways in which black theology as a disciplinary formation has only partly included these competing constructions of Christianity in their account of marginalized and marooned peoples. This project will do three things. First it will explore theoretically the construction of a black Atlantic world and re-establish a genealogy of lived Christian traditions in the black Atlantic world that takes seriously a set of movements emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century (primarily 1915-1955). These movements unsettled the monolithic depiction of the black church as western and primarily connected to a European or Euro-American theological tradition. The movements also help us to rethink the black Atlantic sphere as not simply the dispersion of African bodies to regions predominately bordering the Atlantic Ocean and the resulting demographic transformation of these new world spaces, but more appropriately as the collection of spaces (often exceeding the regions bordering the Atlantic) in which black cultures have been contested, shaped, and informed by the legacies of enslavement, colonialism, and capitalism/modernity. Therefore, this initial section will attend to the construction of a

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<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), 117.



black Atlantic public sphere beginning with the Berlin Conference (1884) and the failure of Reconstruction in the United States and reaching its greatest intensity just prior to the Second World War. As its second move, the dissertation will argue that these black Atlantic Christian traditions consist of processes of reading and theorizing sacred scriptures in a transatlantic and mobile world that should be understood as a theological endeavor invested in rethinking scripture/canon, race, and citizenship. Finally, I will use a historical and theological read of the Aladura Church movement of Nigeria and Father Divine of the United States to argue for a black theological endeavor that takes seriously Brent Hayes Edwards' construct of "disarticulating"<sup>2</sup> and Vincent Wimbush's understanding of "scripturalizing."<sup>3</sup> Both disarticulating, as the process by which discourses are produced, discarded and reformulated in public sphere, and scripturalizing, the creation of meaningful social and theological worlds in the form of sacred texts, ideas, and scriptures, will function as the theoretical ground to critically and theologically engage the process by which God has been and is being made visible in black Atlantic spaces. It is my contention that by using the lenses of the black Atlantic and scripturalizing to return to this important archive of black Atlantic religious traditions we not only have access to the variety of black Christian experiences in a transnational frame, but we are able to redefine the scope of black theology and more fully engage the complex performances of black religious traditions in the public sphere.

In reconfiguring the very ground of black theological thought and expanding its method to include a more expansive account of black religious discourse, it is important to return to Charles Long and James Cone to establish the parameters for such a

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<sup>2</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora : Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3-36.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush and Rosamond C. Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible : Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 4.

conversation.<sup>4 5</sup> It is their attention to black particularity that is located in discrete geopolitical moments and spaces that ultimately created and continues to sustain the impetus to return to the archive of black religious experience. Black theology's primary interests have been Christian African American bodies and the construction of religious and racial identities within the confines of the United States. Additionally, black theology has traditionally endeavored to engage black religious identities from categories made visible by normative theology<sup>6</sup>. Cone in his earliest theological account and other theorists who have engaged in the epistemological project called black theology have been concerned with the resituating and re-contextualizing of dominant theological categories and doctrinal concerns to account for black existence.<sup>7</sup> However, the conceptual and theoretical capacity of theology and ecclesial doctrine do not fully account for the religious imaginaries or even the Christian imaginaries of African Americans. Charles Long suggests in *Significations* that opaque or race-based theologies must "deconstruct" theology and more explicitly challenge a theoretical frame that was not designed to account for religious variety especially variety amongst dark and marginalized bodies. He responds in light of the theological constraints of opaque theologies that "the study of black religion cannot be provincialized...religious forms and expressions are the sources of new worlds of meaning; the study and understanding of black religion has much to contribute to our future."<sup>8</sup>

In spite of Long's call for renewed attention to variety and dissonance, black theology and critical theological theorizing seem to be constrained by dogged attention

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<sup>4</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Charles H. Long, *Significations : Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, Series in Philosophical and Cultural Studies in Religion (Aurora, Colo.: Davies Group, 1999), 5-9.

<sup>6</sup> In James Cone *Black Theology and Black Power* as well as *Black Theology of Liberation* he engages in a systematic approach that attends to the normative systematic theological categories.

<sup>7</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 45.

<sup>8</sup> Long, *Significations : Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 23.

to western and normative Christianity, racial essentialism, and the boundaries of the nation-state. While theorists, like Anthony Pinn in *Varieties of African American Experience*, William Jones in *Is God a White Racist?* and Delores Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness*, have contested Cone and black theology's singular focus on black Christian traditions that read the Bible and perform their faiths in normative ways, they have insufficiently accounted for lived traditions that understand themselves as Christian but challenge certain ideas of biblical and theological dogma.<sup>9</sup> The question that I want to pursue is how does and how can black theology account for the varieties of Africana experiences, especially these transnational and alternative Christian traditions? How can theology be "focused upon uncovering and exploring the meaning and structures of religious experience within the larger body of cultural production?"<sup>10</sup> In response to these concerns, the productions of modernity, blackness, and diaspora have to be engaged as not tangential but fully operative in how we imagine and frame our black theological endeavors. In this regard, "scripturalizing" or the creation of meaningful social worlds in and through sacred texts and ideas must function as the ground for a new engagement with black experience. More specifically, the understanding that Africana religious traditions, specifically Africana Christian traditions, have a history of exceeding or reading against normative texts and thus the traditions of conjuring, signifying, and even "border-thinking" must not be seen as outside Christianity but constitutive of the Africana Christian tradition. This is particularly important for this project as it looks at the ways in which the transnational and global mobility of discourses adds to and complicates the traditions and reading strategies that are

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<sup>9</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 1-36.

<sup>10</sup> Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 4.

engaged.<sup>11</sup>

*Theorizing Christianity in the Black Atlantic*

While a great deal has been written on the black diaspora and the black Atlantic, minimal theorizing has been devoted to the diaspora, Black theology, and the construction of Christianities. The subfields of diaspora studies and transnational theorization offer a great degree of theoretical space to rethink the field of black theology as far more expansive than attention to African Americans and normative Christian projects. I would like to suggest that the insights of these projects also have particular relevance for the examination and engagement of Black Atlantic Christianities. In bringing a more robust discussion about the transnational and diaspora to the production and formulation of a black Atlantic Christian sphere, I would like to engage the works of three theorists in the first chapter and argue for the usefulness of their projects for a more robust and thorough consideration of black Atlantic Christianities. J. Lorand Matory and his *Black Atlantic Religions* provide a lens to think about the role of transnationalism in the discourse on African religion and by extension, black Christianities.<sup>12</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards provides the language of translation to discuss a specific practice that informs the production and contestation of diaspora and discourses that inform those spaces, and finally, Ifeoma Nwankwo in *Black Cosmopolitanism* underscores the importance of a transnational cosmopolitan public sphere that shaped

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<sup>11</sup> While this has been gestured to in many texts and even foregrounded in a few seminal ones, the aspect that is often overlooked or misread is the transnational quality of these sharings and borrowings. In particular, these movements are misread as non-Christian or are domesticated to a normalized Christianity by a series of misreads that either elide or obscure their non-Christian or extra-biblical interactions.

<sup>12</sup> James Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion : Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

the variety of responses to coloniality and modernity.<sup>13</sup>

*Re-visioning Black Theology as "Trans-Theological"*

In light of the challenges exposed by our attention to the transnational and the diaspora in the production of black Atlantic Christian public, the second chapter will attempt to more rigorously theorize black theology as a mechanism to think about the production and circulation of black Christianities throughout the Atlantic. Black theology must take seriously the interventions of womanist theologians as not just simply adding black women's experience but shifting black theology from an a project that adds black experience to theological interventions to one that takes seriously the variety and dissonance of Africana ways of being and scripturalizing. Delores Williams and emilie townes are exemplars in their attention to counter-traditions that both challenge the male and normative-theological biases of black theology. Womanist scholarship recognizes that the variety and dissonance of black religious experience does not foreclose the possibility of a category like black theology, but they argue that these various experiences require a different methodology in order to faithfully engage and explicate the counter traditions of everyday black people. Williams, Gilkes, and Sanders do not simply supply us with an anthropology of black women's experience but rather they argue that black women's experience has called for a shifted or at least variegated epistemological project. They along with Long expose theology's deep complicity with racial, gender, and imperial violence and implore us to think about a theological imagination that crosses borders and can be named "trans-theological."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the

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<sup>13</sup> Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, *Black Cosmopolitanism : Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas, Rethinking the Americas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Trans-theological is a term that attempts to marry the insights of those thinkers and writers of post-structural leanings to the concerns and issues of theology thinkers in the twentieth century. Trans-theological suggests the porous nature of the theological

womanist method disturbs the dependence on Eurocentric validation and critiques the universalizing tendency that emerged in the modern and colonial era. Womanism, therefore, critiques the impulse of a black theological project that attempts to flatten the variety and dissonance within Africana experiences.<sup>15</sup> Delores Williams reminds us that “To build contemporary systematic theology only on the exodus and Luke paradigm is to ignore generations of black history subsequent to slavery – that is, to consign the community and the black theological imagination to a kind of historical stalemate that denies the possibility of change with regard to the people’s experience of God and with regard to the possibility of God changing in relation to the community.”<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, black theology as a discourse or epistemological project that exposes variety and dissonance and that privileges the construction of sacred modalities as a transnational endeavor is a project that has not been fully embraced. Therefore, black theology as an accounting of Black or Africana Christian experience is insufficient if it does not read variety and nuance in a comprehensive fashion. This section will attempt to chart a genealogy of theorizing black variety and dissonance in the black theological discipline that pays close attention to Charles Long, the womanists especially emilie townes<sup>17</sup>, Anthony Pinn, and finally Vincent Wimbush. Their projects highlight the import of thinking the black Christian tradition and the black theological project from the margins. This “revival” of variety enables us to see the sacred and theological textures of spaces and traditions that are often rendered invisible by normative euro and

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project and argues for a method that sees theological questions or concerns as a convenient starting point but not as prescriptive or determinative.

<sup>15</sup> This is especially acute as it relates to the Townes exploration of black theology’s reduction or negation of black women’s experience.

<sup>16</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness : The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, Black Religion, Womanist Thought, Social Justice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 34.

black American theological discourses.<sup>18</sup> The spaces of literature, arts, humanist discourses, and politics become more visible when simultaneously mapped alongside theological and scriptural projects. This wider berth of black sacrality enables us to think the spaces and constructions of the diaspora more deliberately and therefore engage the competing discourses of modernity, freedom, and flourishing that expand the shape and scope of black Christian traditions.

*A Critical Re-Appraisal of Alternative Christianities*

In the third chapter, I will argue that new methods in black theology must recognize new religious movements and this expansive black Christian public sphere as not something external or tangential to theology but a radical disturbance to the uniformity of something called Christianity, Christian theology, and black theology particularly. Therefore, I am calling for a black theological method that centers the practices of disarticulating and scripturalizing as integral to understanding and engaging theological theorizing in the black Atlantic world. This project of black theology will include these marginal sites as they attempt to rethink the history and trajectory of black people's framing and construction of the divine. Black theology, as a methodological project, will not be overdetermined by Christian theological categories or an exegesis of Christian scripture but how the invocation of the sacred and divine provide opportunities for extra-canonical prophetic figures like Simon Kimbangu or Father Divine and their communities' re-articulation of black religious and political subjectivity. Moreover, this project provides us a means of interrogating the spaces in

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<sup>18</sup> While variety has been addressed in black religion, in the particular domain of black theology very few thinkers have comprehensively addressed the disparate accounts of black Christianities in the North American and global context. Furthermore, the majority of the attention has been placed on religious movements that would be considered outside of the purview of Christianity. See Diane Stewart's groundbreaking text Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey : African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

which black religious thought is being produced, what produces it, and how it creates a particular vision of “survival” and “flourishing” even as it is shaped and refracted by the colony and empire.<sup>19</sup> Historically and theologically engaging the practices of scripturalizing and disarticulating forces us to recognize the porous-ness of borders and to execute a method that acknowledges Hardt and Negri’s reminder that there is no outside, no uninhabited, space that exists beyond modernity, empire, and their subjects.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, this is precisely the space where signification, recognition, and practices of transmission and translation take place. Therefore, this theological project is not interested in jettisoning the Bible or the god talk that black theology has addressed, but along side Wimbush and Anthony Pinn this project wants to take seriously the diverse and often subterranean practices of signifying that are happening on, with, and between texts and communities.<sup>21</sup> By recognizing the theological insights of these movements and this period, black theology is closer to more fully accounting for black existence and all its Christian varieties.

The fourth chapter will look at two particular movements at the beginning of the twentieth century, their relationship to a transnational black public discourses on religion, nation, and subjectivity; their production of Christianities; and the ways that these particular formulations are central to emerging modes of Africana flourishing and freedom. These movements have not been fully engaged in any full-length treatises and they have been woefully under-theorized by black theologians. This chapter will argue that the Aladaru church movement in Western Africa and the Father Divine Movement

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<sup>19</sup> Long, *Significations : Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 191.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 35-39.

<sup>21</sup> This suspicion of imperial disciplines or what Wimbush calls the “obfuscating chatter of sub-fields” in his 2004 AAR Plenary Address is being emphasized in order to think about alternate ways of recovering black experience. This critique of scientific discourse is amplified by Foucault when he asks in *Society Must be Defended* “What speaking subject, what discursive subject, what subject of experience and knowledge are you trying to minorize when you begin to say: ‘I speak this discourse, I am speaking a scientific discourse and I am scientist’” (11).



primarily located in North America provide competing visions of Christianity that not only need to be reread from the perspective of the transnational and the production of diaspora but from a renewed interest in the variety and dissonance of black scriptural projects that are attempting to make meaning in the modern world. These movements highlight the import of religion in the black public sphere and the ways in which religion was not a break with modernity but a critical and theological re-presentation of a competing or alternative vision of it. These movements' intersection and conversation with transnational black nationalist movements, practices of engaging and exploring theological and political questions across denominational, national, and class lines, and appropriation and articulation of black transnational religious discourse point to sets of discourses that are not engaged in traditional theological scholarship.

While traditional theological scholarship does not fully account for alternative Christianities, critical theory also fails to engage black religion. Critical theory's failure to read transatlantic black religious discourses in the early twentieth century as producing competing modernities, a competing vision of black subjectivity, and even a transgression of the normative religious canon is to misunderstand black religiosity and its relation to the political. Seeing black religion and Africana Christianities within the frame of competing modernities and the construction of diverse and interconnected subjectivities challenges our hasty categorizations of alternative black religions as fanatical, non-theological, and anti-modern. The transnational nature of this black religious discourse presents Christianity or Christianities as a renewed means to think the prophetic, the nation, and subjectivity as in conversation with rather than a repetition or refusal of western modernity. Therefore, the Father Divine movement in the United States and the Aladura Church in Western Africa present a picture of black religion that is linked to the production of sacred texts that are linked less to a polity, a set of sacred practices and codes, and more to a politics.

These movements (Aladura and Father Divine), all inaugurated at the beginning of the twentieth century, recognize that church and texts constrained by the polity of Euro-American tradition and the politics of western imperialism were often antithetical to the logic of black flourishing and blacks as modern subjects. Thus, these churches inaugurate Christian-derived traditions that challenge the import of the nation-state and look for models in a prophetic, progressive transnational discourse on black subjectivity. Thus, one of the central narrative themes of these movements is not simply a re-reading of the canonical texts, the Bible or denominational tradition/polity, but the production of texts, figures and politics that engage the crisis of Africana people in the diaspora. As a result, these movements are involved in the creation of traditions that hold the normative scriptures, the diaspora, and a critique of coloniality and modernity in tension. The Aladura church movement's engagement with Edward Blyden, emerging notions of negritude, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church point to the ways in which these movements disturb the stability of the nation-state, the construction of Christian identity, and the idea of local and transnational black identities. The Aladura movement along with the Father Divine movements present a vibrant picture of the heavily contested nature of black Atlantic Christianity at the beginning of the twentieth century and the ways that discourses on black subjectivity and radical politics<sup>22</sup> are being imagined and reformulated through scriptural projects.

*A Way Forward: Black Theology as Africana Scripturalizing*

Scripturalizing within the black Atlantic Christian public is one practice that attempts to create a discourse for existence, resistance to suffering, and flourishing that

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<sup>22</sup> Radical politics is defined as the set of acts that contest or challenge normative political participation. The radicality of black intervention is that it critiques the construction of blackness as monstrous, other, and non-citizen. The radical politics is the rejection of politics as such and the creation of a counter-narrative that outlines a substantively new way of being in the world. This new way of being for the movements examined in this analysis cannot be understood outside of enchantment and theology.

often travels within an unexpected trajectory and between seemingly unconnected discourses. Thus, while the practice of exegesis and imperial epistemological projects of biblical studies, theology, and political theorizing have attempted to narrow the very possibilities of certain modes of Christian discourse, scripturalizing attempts to de-center these normative texts and projects (epistemes) and to create a much wider berth for theological possibilities by enabling a renewed way of thinking about those peculiar or estranged from modernity. This wider berth recognizes texts and discourses that are of import to an Africana religious identity and takes seriously those discourses and practices that move in this black Atlantic public. Specifically, the role of the extra-canonical prophetic figure, who is often not constrained by nation-state politics or regimes, is central to a method that wants to take seriously a people's experience with the divine and the creation of "texts, textures, and gestures" to account for this renewed understanding. The impulse to expunge these voices from certain forms of black theologizing is to render the black theological enterprise as one that is comfortable with a depiction of black Christianity that is not attentive to the margins, variety, and those influences from beyond or within the borders of the nation-state. Wimbush reminds with this shift from normative texts and disciplines that, "the primary focus should be placed not upon texts per se but upon textures, gestures, and power...associated with the phenomenon of the phenomenon of the invention and engagement of scriptures."<sup>23</sup> In this regard, Wimbush provides us a mechanism to return to Africana experience, in its transnational splendor, and to do this in a space where the varieties of religion, sacrality, racial identity, and resistance can be explored more fully.

Finally, the intervention of "scripturalizing" within the frame of diaspora enables those interested in black Christianities, the varieties of god talk amongst dark and

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<sup>23</sup> Vincent Wimbush, "Textures, Gestures, and Power: Orientation to Radical Excavation," in *American Academy of Religion* (San Antonio, TX: 2004), 5.

marooned bodies, to see and account for the production of discourses that are rendered invisible or relatively insignificant by black theological accounts. Scripturalizing enables us to not only see the constructive projects of competing Christianities like Father Divine and the Aladura Church movements but to also read the popular and the pedestrian in new and exciting ways. Thus scripturalizing opens not only the very possibility for variety and dissonance but using this method allows us to see the ways in which Africinity, Christianity, and diasporic identities were being shaped and combined to imagine black thriving and survival in a modern colonial world system<sup>24</sup>. This method or way of thinking about black religious formation forces us to attend not only to the sources and discourses that are made visible by theology but also those sources and discourses that are often seen as insignificant to western and black theologies' methods. In many ways, a renewed attention to transnationalism and the practices of scripturalizing, the process of creating sacred texts that constitutes most religious formations encourages us to rethink black theology's foundational moments and to offer a space for scriptural projects that imagine liberation and Christianity in a variety of ways.

### *Thinking Globally*

The concepts of globalization and the transnational have gained increasing currency in academic disciplinary endeavors over the last thirty years. From dependency theory to theorists of the late modern or the post-modern moments, there have been attempts to adequately address this age's conditions and to devise methodological interventions that meet these specific demands. In particular, the categories of the global and the transnational have had particular relevance for theorists of culture or cultural studies and thus have particular salience for a discussion of

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<sup>24</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush, *Theorizing Scriptures : New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 6.

religion and religion in the modern/colonial world<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, these concepts have been deployed to think more comprehensively about the colonial condition and the production of the other/outsider in the modern age. In many constructions of globalization and the transnational, specifically post-structural accounts, there has been a renewed attention to the inadequacy of normative categories to account for the wide diversity of the modern era and therefore a rethinking of the central role of other actors and knowledges in the construction of the modern moment.<sup>26</sup> Thus, theorizations of the transnational, as this chapter will outline, do not simply attempt to highlight the shifting economic conditions or the musings of a new global cartography but are deeply invested in reconsidering the genealogies of the nation-state, modernity, and Western Europe alongside the theorizations of time/space compression, declining significance of the nation-state, and emergence of new and distinct subject formations. In this chapter, I will trace the theorizations of modernity/postmodernity as they highlight the emergence and persistence of the global and transnational and the role these theorizations of the transnational play in reconceptualizing not only Europe but also the underside of modernity, specifically Africa and Africana religious identities. Highlighted will be theories of the modern and transnational in fields as disparate as political economy, history, geography, literature, and cultural anthropology as a way to look at the multiple spaces for thinking the transnational. Second, I will address how the shift to the transnational or the global also presages, in these fields, not only how the imperium or the hegemonic West is read but more importantly a new mechanism for reading the

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<sup>25</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 23-37. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Modern-Colonial World System, Public Culture*, Duke Press.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce B. Lawrence, Aisha Karim, and ebrary Inc., "On Violence a Reader," (Durham NC: Duke University Press,, 2007), 23.

other in a post-Orientalist world.<sup>27</sup> This shift will look at the reading of the global as an opportunity to not only reconfigure the modern/post-modern public sphere but also how other publics or alternative publics are reconfigured in light of transnational theorizing. The works of Paul Gilroy, Brent Hayes Edwards, and J. Lorand Matory will be essential in tracing the deployment of the transnational to think about blackness, black religious identities, and these configurations as alternative publics. Finally, in light of these new reading strategies made available by the concept of the transnational, I will highlight approaches in the study of religion that augur a methodological space for theorizing Africana religion and modernity in a global age.

*Transnational and the World Systems Analysis*

While post-Enlightenment epistemological projects have consistently dealt with the “other,” the outside, and the foreign in light of colonization and conquest, disciplinary theorizing has often premised these analyses of the other on the conception of the closed, bounded and geographically distinct cultural unit. In short, the other has been read as a product of a closed and fixed set of practices, rituals, and knowledges that can be traced through the history of that culture. In many of these readings of cultures external to Europe and the modern West, the cultures are either essentialized or seen as external or the variety within these cultures is not fully engaged by theorists. These essentialized accounts find their most fully developed models in the early moments of anthropology where the other, as the site of reading the outside, was understood as functioning as a fully enclosed cultural unit or subject. Lately, theorists of the modern and the transnational have attempted to make sense of the interaction in and between modern cultural formations. The world systems analysis is one of the first to think outside of the bounded nation-state and to argue for a primarily economic or what they

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<sup>27</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa : Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge, African Systems of Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 37-43.

call a uni-disciplinary analysis of the modern world system.<sup>28</sup> This school of thought led by Emmanuel Wallerstein argues that there have always been world systems and that the current one that we find ourselves in is a modern world system animated by the logic of capitalism.<sup>29</sup> Wallerstein points to a system that is characterized by the interaction between nation states and the interchange and flow of goods, people and ideas. He argues for a periodization of the modern world system that begins with the long sixteenth century and its technologies of exploration and expansion, pivots on the rise of liberal democratic logics embedded in French Revolution, and **closes** with the crises of 1968 in a postcolonial and modern response to the logic of capitalism. His periodization is configured to highlight the frame of modernity and capitalism for the current moment that we find ourselves and to argue that a “unidisciplinary” approach is needed to effectively counter the accounts of modernity that obscure or elide its global or transnational contours. Wallerstein and his cohort of analysts, while essentially Marxists, insist that by bringing together a political economic analysis alongside the methodological constraints of other disciplines makes their read of the modern moment more robust and more adequate account of coloniality and the world outside of Europe. While Wallerstein et al have been derided because of the seemingly Eurocentrist and the universalizing logic of their account, his periodization and theorization is useful in that it has forced other disciplines to more actively engage their methods and the ways in which their current practices often obscure the transnational and global impact of culture and capitalism.<sup>30</sup>

### *Transnational and Empire*

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<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis : An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 37.

<sup>29</sup> Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis : An Introduction*, 45.

<sup>30</sup> Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geoculture : Essays on the Changing World-System* (Cambridge [England] ; New York Paris: Cambridge University Press ; Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1991), 33.

While the Wallersteinian project highlights and frames the entire modern era as global and then argues for the ways in which the later stages in the modern moment point to greater mobility, speed, and interchange, it seems that Hardt and Negri in their groundbreaking works *Empire* and *Multitude* gesture toward a more expansive account of the modern moment as a particularly potent instantiation of the transnational. Like David Harvey and Anthony Giddens, Hardt and Negri in their multi-disciplinary approach attempt to outline in post-Orientalist fashion the economic and physical manifestations of the modern and postmodern era.<sup>31</sup> Hardt and Negri in their Marxist style argue for an analysis of labor that highlights an emergence of new hegemonic form of labor in the middle of the twentieth century. This emerging hegemonic form of labor like industrialism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is not quantitatively dominant but rather qualitatively dominant. They name this form of labor immaterial and affective and argue that the very contraction of time and space that is constitutive of the late modern era, the rise of technologies of communication that provide for creation of alternative subjectivities and communities, and the declining significance of the nation-state are all related to the emerging hegemony of immaterial labor. This immaterial or affective labor is part and parcel of a world with no exterior and that has primarily become the site for the production of cultural and social life over and against the production of physical goods.

Hardt and Negri, however, do not deny the persistence and necessity of the industrial and agricultural labor in this moment, but argue that this new hegemonic form of labor has not only changed the very logic of production, services, and labor but the ways in which subjectivities and communities are formed. In the world of “empire,” where there is no central hegemon and there is the declining significance of the classical nation state, the creators of capital are not the only ones globalized but the

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<sup>31</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 12.



local subject (the multitude) is also globalized. Hardt and Negri argue that the multitude or the classes of people that are formed by their resistance to imperial oppression have actually called empire into being. They argue, in this frame, that modernity and late modernity has not only changed the nature of the economic producer and the sovereignty of the nation-state, but that it has radically changed that nature and possibility of resistance to itself. They argue that this historic shift has its greatest resonance in the latter half of the twentieth century, but consistently point to its historical evolution and the import of following its larger trajectory. In this regard, the calling of empire or the attention to everyday actors in the construction of the global has been critical since the Fordist revolution.<sup>32</sup> The porous-ness of boundaries, the constant states of exception, the speed with which communication and practices travel all work to create a new subject in the global age and this subject emerges both inside and outside of the European setting. Albeit Eurocentric in its consistent evocation of the multitude as the new proletariat and its reliance on European derived post-Marxist theorists, *Empire* and *Multitude* provide a lens to think about multiplicity and the chaotic nature of the modern and late modern subject. Their attention to the multitude and the emerging forms of subjectivities and particularities that emerge inside empire is what separates Hardt and Negri from the analyses of Giddens and Harvey.

Harvey and Giddens initially seem to be more explicitly interested in framing modernity for their disciplines and providing, especially in Harvey's account, a positivistic account of the conditions of postmodernity as they are deployed in political economy, geography, and architecture. Postmodernity is essential in this analysis because as Harvey understands it, the postmodern analysis enables us to reread cultural history and the production of subjectivity in new ways. Furthermore, Postmodern analysis and its critique of the universal and the meta-narrative are central as they create

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<sup>32</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 34, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude : War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 13-35.

the conditions for a new understanding of multiplicity and global interaction. Along with Wallerstein, these theorists are not interested in the discovery of globality or the transnational as stable signifier but rather a genealogy, trajectory, and intensification of globality. Globality or the transnational has taken a number of different forms but foundational to it is a critique of the sovereignty of the nation, the construction of race, and the creation of alliances and models that are not constrained by either race or physical location. These new constructions of identity are particularly useful in helping to think and read moments throughout the modern era as a part of the apparatus that creates the global, the postmodern, and the transnational. Furthermore, it is through attention to other subjectivities and competing modernities that we often see the traces of the global, the postmodern, and the transnational in earlier and more diverse settings.

#### *Transnational and Cultural Anthropology*

While Wallerstein and Hardt and Negri were useful in framing this shift, it seems that the epochal shifts that the global and the transnational bring to the field of cultural anthropology are most helpful in thinking about religion and its relation to modernity. Appadurai in his work *Modernity at Large* similar to Harvey, Giddens, and Wallerstein wants to account for the changing conditions of modernity. He wants to highlight the ways in which technology and the media have radically changed the modern moment and explicitly how in this “new world order” imagination is no longer the purview of the dominant or the leisure class but that the technologies of imagination become widely diffused. However, in addition to the changing realities of late modernity, Appadurai also highlights the shifting boundaries of cultural anthropology. He points to the particular schools of thought (structural school and the functionalist school) as being wedded to a method that denied the very possibility or multiplicity of these emerging subjects of the transnational. Appadurai even points to the ways in

which area studies that emerged in the post-World War academy were premised upon creating a cartography of the globe that created in many respects a new canon of essentialist knowledge of the other. The mapping of the global led by area studies and cultural anthropologists obscured an account of the alternative subjects and subjectivities that were emerging throughout the twentieth century. Area studies' focus on identifying commonalities across large geographical areas and identifying activities and practices that distinguished them from the modern and western world led to an inherent bias in their findings. Thus, area studies often mis-read or misrecognized the constantly evolving global world, and this was further compromised as area studies insights were tied to development projects and colonial/post-colonial intelligence by western neo-liberal regimes. Appadurai suggests that the reliance of cultural anthropology on these particularly coded knowledge projects not only compromised the information collected but led to a misreading of historical moments as well as the contemporary moment.

In response to this, Appadurai calls for a new global anthropological project that is not wedded to the language or the maintenance of the bounded, cultural unit and the idea of the nation-state. He along with folks like Stuart Hall and Aihwa Ong presents a project in which diasporic public spheres are privileged and that the subjects of the modern and late modern moment outside of Europe/US are not simply seen as means to access a primordial past but provide accounts of the dynamism and complexity of agency and movement in the modern era. And while his work attends to the contemporary understanding of the late modern subject, he also holds out the possibility that this focus and unwarranted attention given to the nation-state and our fascination with the primordial provides gives us tools to reread the modern and the performance of the global in new and substantive ways.<sup>33</sup> He continues, in a similar

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<sup>33</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large : Cultural Dimensions of Globalization, Public Worlds*

vein to Hardt and Negri, that while much of the theory on the transnational ignores religion and fundamentalisms, Appadurai suggests they are thriving and that they are not necessarily connected to some idea of mythic origins or a last vestige of Europe modernity. The modern and the late modern subject are productive in their capacity to produce new subjectivities and discourses. It is in this regard that Appadurai wants to pay attention to the multiple and diffuse spaces in which agency, citizenship, and identity are formed. No longer constrained by the vexing notions of the nation-state or the uni-direction flow of information which is the basis of evolutionary and historicist accounts, the ability to read what he terms “culturalisms”<sup>34</sup> and the imaginary constructs of the late modern subject and specifically the postcolonial subject become increasingly possible. Appadurai’s critique of disciplines and an attention to the transnational provide us new tools to the present and historical moments in compelling ways.

*Voodoo, Piety and the Global*

In light of this brief albeit important genealogy of the global, I would like to turn to some of the theorizations of religion and the modern, that take seriously not only the newly framed periodizations, emerging forms of labor, and time-space compression but explicitly what the notion of the transnational and the global do for the methodological inquiries into the “other” or what Hardt and Negri call the possibility of global anthropology. There are a number of texts that are useful in this moment from Talal Asad’s *Genealogies of Religion* and *Formations of the Secular* to many of the accounts of black religious traditions (Charles Long, J. Lorand Matory, Anthony Pinn and even Kwame Gyekye) but I would like to highlight the useful intervention of two feminist anthropologists who have consistently engaged with the category of religion and the religious in their ethnographic and theoretical works.

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; (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large : Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 12.

It is my contention that any account of religion, religiosity, or religious subjects in the modern era, must have an expansive account of modernity, coloniality, and the ways in which the transnational/global are constitutive pieces of both. In addition to the account of modernity, coloniality, and the transnational, these projects must take seriously the order of knowledge or the ways in which knowledge and even disciplinary categories emerge in light of European hegemony. Again, Appadurai's critique of the colonialist tendencies of anthropology and history alongside someone like Mudimbe's critique of anthropology as an essentialist, "othering" machine becomes necessary for post-national, transnational account of the religious. Thus, one of the central features of both Mahmood's account of Muslim women's piety groups and Brown's discussion of Vodoo practices in Brooklyn is a re-engagement of the inadequacy of the post-enlightenment category of the religious. Both McCarthy Brown and Mahmood argue that far too often the constitutive features of what counts or constitutes a normative religious practice either obscure or deny the practices of those exterior to the Anglo-European accounts of modernity. Therefore, Mahmood argues not only for a rendering of a religious practice that operates outside of the traditional frame of Geertzian analysis but more specific to her enterprise is rethinking desire and agency outside of the neo-liberal feminist conceptions of agency and desire. Moreover, one would extend this reading to re-think desire and agency, especially of postcolonial subjects, apart from their relation to the normative neo-liberal accounts of capital, modernity, and the nations-state.<sup>35</sup>

Both Mahmood and McCarthy Brown, who also highlights her suspicion of functionalist accounts, argues for a rethinking of European modernity or a provincializing of it, while at the same time looking at the complex and chaotic discursive and materialists projects that inform the modern subject. McCarthy Brown's

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<sup>35</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety : The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 13-19.

attention to Vodoo and its pathways throughout the Afro-Caribbean diaspora questions our quick and easy dismissal of African religious traditions. McCarthy Brown often hailed as the beginning of postmodern ethnography or the quintessential postmodern ethnographer is particularly useful for the field of religion, modernity and postcolonial subjectivity because of the ways in which she emphasizes the porous-ness of nation-states, the idea of diasporic public sphere, multiple and flexible citizenships<sup>36</sup>, and the category of the religious as a deeply modern or postmodern inflection. These theorists are integral because of their transnational anthropological work that takes seriously the category of religious and the possibility of practices, institutions, and technologies of desire that operate outside of the frame of normative western modernity.

While Mahmood and McCarthy Brown argue from the location of cultural anthropology, Dipesh Chakrabarty in his article *Time of Gods* and his groundbreaking work *Provincializing Europe* makes the stunning suggestion that consistently in the modern world that gods and spirits are coeval with human subjects and that in many instances religious discourse has the explanatory capacity to engage the questions of race, nation, and suffering.<sup>37</sup> Chakrabarty and the subaltern school of thinkers in one quick blow undermine much of the modernist apprehension with the religious and the secular and argue that this apprehension and the subsequent clarion call that late modernity is the end of enchantment is not only an inappropriate read for most of the world but that it also functions to be an inappropriate read of late modern European and

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<sup>36</sup> Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed. (London ; New York: Verso, 1991), 12.; Stuart Hall, *Culture, Media, Language : Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (London [Birmingham, West Midlands]: Hutchinson ; Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1980).

<sup>37</sup> See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity : Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe : Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 36-45. Particularly noteworthy in Chakrabarty's analysis is the definition and construction of modernity and its relationship to a provincialized polity and culture.

US history. Moreover, the Weberian and Parsons articulation that 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity would usher in the end of the religious or the Marxist functionalist read that discounts the religious or religion as a design of the capital oppression have been consistently read as inadequate. Even the cultural anthropologists that have assigned religion as a primarily pre-modern, cultural artifact or an alternative form of nationalisms have in their theoretical apparatuses continued to highlight the persistence of religion. It is with the intervention of Said, Chakrabarty, Bhabha and Asad that not only has religion been seen as not dead but that the very ideology of secularism has been unmasked as a local European history attempting to present itself as a global or universal “design.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, Mahmood and McCarthy Brown would argue alongside Chakrabarty and Asad that the end of enchantment is inadequate not only because it obscures the persistence of religion, but that “end of enchantment” was never meant to be read as a demographic fact as much as a post-enlightenment methodological imposition. Finally, it is along with these theorists as well as the work of Bruce Lincoln that we are able to think critically about religion and its role in the everyday practices of the transnational post/colonial subject. McCarthy Brown and Mahmood engage this idea through the lens of ethnographic study, and Lincoln continues this discussion by his phenomenological account of religion’s persistence and trajectory in the current moment.

In addition to the inadequacy of “the end of enchantment” as a means of defining the modern, Lincoln and Asad argue there is the under theorization of the category of religion and its deployment in the modern moment. Asad and his critique of the Geertzian category of religion and the ways in which it implicitly (or explicitly) highlights the European shape of religion and specifically the Anglo-European shape of

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<sup>38</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs : Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, 35.

Protestantism.<sup>39</sup> In this rethinking of Geertz and the call for a definition of religion that takes practice and discourse more seriously, Asad is not simply trying to provide a correction for Geertz and the cultural anthropology school that remains deeply indebted to Geertz, but Asad is clearly suggesting that religion and religious formation have meaning and resonance for modern and late modern subjects. Asad continues that the insistence on the Geertzian frame obscures the multiplicity and variety of religious forms and that rethinking Geertz becomes essential in order to account for the current performance of Islam(s) and other religious movements in the modern moment.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, in Asad's *Formations of the Secular*, through an anthropology of secularism, he points to the distinctions between the secular and secularism and highlights the ways in which secularism is an ideological polemic against enchantment but in no way a theoretical assessment of its end. Secularism in this regard is the consolidation of enlightenment epistemological projects for the expressed purpose of expelling religion as a category of scientific inquiry.

Similar to Asad, central to Chakrabarty's project is a desire to deploy the logic and usefulness of Said's orientalism to more critically think about the logic and conditions of late modernity and its relationship to religion. Chakrabarty (with Spivak and Bhabha) reject the orientalist or historicist read that the religion or religiosity of the other is the site of the non-modern or represents earlier stages of modernity. Thus, Chakrabarty in his critique of historicism and that way that it has operated to marginalize the subaltern and the other highlights the way that it also privileges and prioritizes European epistemological projects.<sup>41</sup> Again, one of the central pieces of the

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<sup>39</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Religion, Rebellion, Revolution : An Inter-Disciplinary and Cross-Cultural Collection of Essays* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 17-21.

<sup>40</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs : Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Chakrabarty Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Provincializing Europe Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference," in *Princeton studies in culture/power/history* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press,, 2000), 13.



post-Enlightenment European project or the age of reason is that the hegemony of religion is not simply relegated to the matter of metaphysics but in the late modern age that it is rendered no longer useful for an analysis of the modern man. The modern person, therefore, has moved beyond false consciousness of religion to the site of reason/science or the other disciplines assigned for social investigation (political economic, economics, and sociology – Invention of World Religions). The world that still operates in the time of gods and spirits is clearly outside of history. *Provincializing Europe* stands to locate this secularizing and historicizing impulse as it relates to colonialism, disciplinary formations, and the category of the religious. It is a useful corrective in that it not only renders visible the local character and epistemological foundations of western, predominately Anglo-European impulse, but it also identifies the local and provincial claims of the end of enchantment.

While Asad, Bhaba, and Chakrabarty, provide a much needed historical and anthropological account of Europe that reframes the hegemony and imposition of what they term the “end of enchantment,” it is important to look at theorists that have not only consigned secularism as a particular design of late European modernity but who have also engaged in methodological projects to radically engage the production of alternative discourses and are involved in the project of attempting to provide more sustained positive descriptions of religiosity. First, I simple want to gesture again to the theorists and anthropologists of the late modern era, who have categorically rejected the notion of the end of enchantment through their theorization of the global and the transnational or through their engagement with a global anthropological project. This returns us to some familiar faces as we look at the theorization of networks and flexible citizenships that point not to the end of religion but to its rise in different parts of the multitude and the world. Theorists like Hardt and Negri, Appadurai, and Walter Mignolo point to the emergence and persistence of fundamentalisms and religious

communities that are not instantiations of neo-liberal representational politics but that are attempting to make sense of transhistoric, post-human phenomena. Their accounts of emerging Pentecostal movements, Islamic fundamentalisms, Sikh diasporic communities, and evangelical Christian fundamentalisms in the US all point not simply to the presence but the overwhelming preponderance of the religious in the modern and postmodern moment. In addition to the theorists of modernity and coloniality, there are also theorists of religion and society that point to the persistence of enchantment that include Philip Jenkins, Kwame Bediako, Lammin Saneh, and Samuel Huntington.<sup>42</sup> Finally, there are the anthropologists (Mahmood, McCarthy Brown, Comaroffs) and American Religious Historians (Byrne, Tweed and R. Marie Griffith) who continue to outline the diverse shapes and contours of religious communities and practices and in their particular methods they attempt to engage the multiple and diverse discursive circuits that animate these communities and how they construct often outside of post-enlightenment accounts of religion their own definition for religion, community, and agency.

Finally, I want to look specifically at Bruce Lincoln and his theorization of religion in *Holy Terrors*. This text functions as particularly useful for this intervention as it highlights the persistence of religion, rejects the fundamental Geertzian definition of religion, but also rejects Asad's argument that religion is too elusive to grapple with or define. Considering the simplification that this text engages in, it is particularly useful in its attempt to provide a post-Geertzian frame for thinking about religion and then to use this frame to think about the everyday practices of the 9/11 suicide bombers as well as the practices and logic of Christian exceptionalism that stand at the core of US and especially US evangelical responses to the bombing. Lincoln clearly argues that we are not in the end of the enchantment and most likely we are experiencing one of the

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<sup>42</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe : Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 19.

greatest explosions of religion and what he calls maximalist (forms of religion where all area of life are circumscribed by the logic and knowledge inherent to the religious system). In this text, he argues that all religions carry some mixture of the four following components as they attempt to make sense of phenomena, ideas, and reality that are beyond the human: discourse, practice, community, and institution.

Lincoln in this text provides extensive accounts of these components and argues that the breadth of these components provides the space to account for the variety and diversity of religious practices that animate the modern and late modern era. While his assessment of fundamentalism attempts to attend to breadth, it was his critique of the functionalists and romanticist read of religious formations that open up his theoretical analysis to think about religion and modernity on the underside of modernity. He offers that religions of the oppressed provide the greatest destabilization of the functionalist and romanticist analyses because they are not simply attempting trying to evade pain or create mechanisms to reduce suffering, but rather these religions (ideological framings) are often (not always) attempting to imagine alternative constructions of modernity and identity. This analysis of religion and religious institutions is particularly important as it positions religion not as a leftover of an earlier period or musings of displaced people but as central and enduring modern phenomenon. At this point, his theorization opens up the possibility of thinking about religious discourses as not solely a functionalist response to capital or modernity but rather an opening to think of religion as competing with hegemonic discourses of modernity and capitalism. Religion, even the religions of the oppressed, should be ready as contestory narratives or alternative epistemological projects. His theorization along with someone like Cornel West, Kwame Gyekye, Valentine Mudimbe and other theorists of Africana religious experience center the import of reading religion as constitutive of modern discourse and as a set of practices to engage in the present age. Moreover, he understands religion as being inscribed not

simple in the practices of the local or the nation-state but as having resonance throughout diaspora and within the porous nodes of the modern and late modern moment. Finally, it is in my extended reading of Charles Long, *Significations*, and especially his critique of theology as a project comprehensive enough to encounter the variety of black religious projects, that we can move the frame to think about black Atlantic religious discourse as a discursive strategy that was deeply embedded in the project of re-imagining the modern and the construction/ deployment of sacred projects.<sup>43</sup> Religion, therefore, and the religious archives of the marginal must be engaged as a possibility for a counter or Homi Bhabha has appropriately named a “contra-modernity.”<sup>44</sup>

*1884, Black Internationalism, and the Practice of Diaspora*

After engaging the ways that transnationalism has been a part of anthropological, economic, and social theory, we also must address the ways in which the transnational has played a role in Africa and African studies. Gilroy’s groundbreaking work on the Black Atlantic and the emergence of Africana scholars that were investigating the production and the mobility of black diasporas in the Francophone and Anglophone world point to the ways in which the discourse of the transnational has played a large role in the understanding of Africana freedom struggles and the role that African bodies have played in the producing, contesting, and reformulating central nodes of modernity. From the Haitian revolution to the production and importation of jazz and the blues, black bodies have played a pivotal role in thinking the very passages and configurations of a black modernity.<sup>45</sup> This particular intervention is attempting to look

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<sup>43</sup> Long, *Significations : Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 91.

<sup>44</sup> Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity : Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, 34. Long, *Significations : Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*.

<sup>45</sup> Nwankwo, *Black Cosmopolitanism : Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas*. I am invoking both Nwawko’s and Matory time line of black internationalism as a mechanism to note the rise of a black diasporic public that is

at one particular moment where religion, a black Atlantic public, and the question of sustainable modernity overlap or intersect. Thus, it is returning to the question or the concern of the relative paucity of in-depth discussions of black religious formation and the constitutive role that it played in the formation of black Atlantic public sphere and its competing theorizations of modernity.

J. Lorand Matory's groundbreaking text *Black Atlantic Religions* is useful on many levels for an engagement of Black Atlantic Christianities. Most specifically, his attention to the mobility and diffuseness of local discourses and the pervasive transnationality within the black Atlantic is quite helpful. He does for religion what Gilroy did for pop culture and aesthetics when Gilroy explores black cultural and aesthetic production from the perspective of multiple and diverse transnational locations and resists the hegemony of local African-American readings and theorizations. However, he does not just use Gilroy as a frame to think about religion and especially Yoruba religion but critiques Gilroy on how his particular evocation of the black Atlantic gestures in the direction of Africa but has bias toward the production and mobility of black Atlantic discourses and materiality through the new world.<sup>46</sup> Matory, moreover, is interested in not only new world cultures but the ways in which continental Africans also take part in the production, movement, and conception of modern identity projects. His first intervention is to locate the mobility of discourse

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actively involved in the questions of the modern nation-state, the construction of race, and the problem of coloniality. While other theorists have argued that the time line of black internationalism is more formally aligned with the abolitionists and post-abolitionists projects, it is important to note that the argument of the long duree of black internationalism requires a more thorough investigation of its evolution and its particular performance in a later moment. With modern black internationalism emerging with the birth of the Haitian state, the performance of black internationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have been shaped by a set of practices that have informed a black public. It is important to note that this black public has multiple nodes with the node must often address the political or the aesthetic, but what is important in this reading is that religious node and the role that prophetic and revelatory discourse has on the configuration of black Atlantic modernities.

<sup>46</sup>Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion : Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, 117.

both across the Atlantic and within the borders of Africa. He talks about the movement of many discourses from trade to politics and that often these border crossings were not constrained by crossings across nation-state borders but also include crossing the borders of religion, material cultural, and the like. He rejects very early on that the borders inherited by colonial projects adhere to some root logic about cultural units or the movement of certain ideologies. Rather, he wants to point to the “permissive” space on the continent in which people and ideologies move. He argues that this reframing of exchange and movement are necessary to challenge the overly essentialist accounts that deny the very participation of African subjects. In addition to challenging Gilroy’s new world bias, he also wants to highlight the other nodes of interaction of blacks dispersed throughout the modern world. While he agrees that the Atlantic and the circum-oceanic Atlantic route are important for Africana discourse, he also argues for the ways in which Atlantic spatialities and modalities are in conversation with other organizing spaces like the Mediterranean and Nile River Basin that also have much to offer to the production of black subject formation.<sup>47</sup>

Like Gilroy and Hall, Matory’s evocation of the Black Atlantic and the movement of discourses throughout the black Atlantic are quite useful for thinking about the movement of discourses in Christianity and Africana subjectivity throughout outposts in the Black Atlantic. Christianities in Africa are not simply framed by a hybridization that implies some indigenous discourse overdetermined by European insights but speaks more expansively to the discourse on Christianities that are moving through the black Atlantic throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Black Atlantic Christianities must be read in light of the constant refractions back and forth between continental Africa and new world blacks. The colonization of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and even Nigeria point not only to the presence of missionary Christianity but also to new world blacks that are

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<sup>47</sup> Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion : Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, 37.

returning and engaging with Africa and African religious systems. It is in this frame that Lamin Sanneh's work *Abolitionists Abroad*, the original texts of Blyden, the rise of Rastafarianism, and indigenous religio-political movements are extremely important as interventions in engaging Black Atlantic Christianities.

Similar to Matory, Brent Hayes Edwards in his *Practice of Diaspora* points to the import of the transnational and the black Atlantic in the production of black Atlantic discourses on blackness, subjectivity, and diaspora itself. Edwards points to the confluence of these questions and issues in the black cultural Mecca of Paris in the early moments of the twentieth century. While Edwards' work at first glance may seem to have a decidedly new world bias, he too highlights the role of not just movements from African to the metropole or the center but movements from the colony to the center. His work focuses explicitly on how diaspora is practiced and created, and he argues that central to the practice and production of diaspora was the discourse on a shared identity of blackness, the rise of print media, and the import of translation.<sup>48</sup> Edwards argues time and time again that diaspora was and is primarily animated through a practice of translation and difference. He points to the works of a number of both new world and continental blacks and how their works and theories are introduced into diaspora through the project of translation. Critical to this intervention is his contention that diaspora is not about a project of homogenization but about meeting in difference and distinction. He argues, finally, that the practice of creating diaspora and translating difference is what gives rise to a certain black public sphere. Again, the usefulness of Edwards' account of translation and black internationalism is that it points to the multiple uses of texts and highlights the role that translation has and continues to play in the production of black Atlantic Christianities and the engagement with a black

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<sup>48</sup> Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora : Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, 26.

Christian public sphere.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, this section presents the possibility of thinking black religion and the transnational and now I want to highlight a particular moment in the black Atlantic public sphere that will enable us to think black Christianities and their formation in a transnational sphere. In this case, I am interested in the moment where the black public is shaped by a reconsolidation of white supremacy in the colonial world and opens up the possibility for a renewed set of transnational discourses this time around religion and religious significations. Thus, the argument is not that this is the inauguration of transatlantic discourses for Africana bodies but that at an important moment in the history of modernity / coloniality that transatlantic discourse presents itself within the frame of religion and religious signification. This dissertation hopes to answer the question why religion and religious signification in the birth of this modern moment function as one of the compelling ways to offer a counter or competing discourse on modernity. While diaspora and production of religious identities have accompanied African bodies from the middle passage to the Haitian revolution to the current discourse on prosperity gospels throughout the black Atlantic world, I want to locate the production of this particular public represented through print media, the relative mobility of Africana bodies throughout the black Atlantic, and the politics of coloniality that led not only to the restriction and abusive utilization of black bodies on the African continent, but also the retrenchment of civil liberties and rights in black America, the Caribbean and South America.<sup>50</sup> These factors amongst others create the theoretical and experiential ground not only for production of discourses on black autonomy, agency, and religion identity / imaginaries but the transmission of these discourses throughout a

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<sup>49</sup> One of the problems or shortcomings of Edwards and many of the theorists of the black Atlantic is that of the presumed public is dominated by a cosmopolitan, post-enlightenment cohort.

<sup>50</sup> Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora : Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, 56.



world that was being shrunk by the emergence of these forces.

Therefore, in this account of black Atlantic Christian public sphere, I want to begin with 1884 which marks the failure of juridical, ecclesial and economic interventions in protecting the needs and interests of black Atlantic people in the United States and the continent of Africa and the introduction of robust transnational discourse (or black internationalism) about these failings. Black bodies in this moment come under another series of intense draconian measures and epistemological discourses which make full citizenship and economic participation relatively untenable/unavailable. We are well aware of the re-intensification of the lynching, White codes, sharecropping and the epistemological validation of regimes of terror throughout the North American continent but this moment has a corollary of slave inscription in the rubber factories in the Congo, the emergence of white assimilation education programs in Nigeria and Kenya, and denial of basic civil liberties throughout the continent of Africa.<sup>51</sup> If we are going to engage this moment as pivotal in the creation of a diasporic counter-public or transnational black Christian public, we must take seriously the interface between black Atlantic bodies in response to the failure of reconstruction and the 1884 Berlin conference which led to the second scramble for Africa by European powers.<sup>52</sup> In this regard, Edwards' accounting of the importance and variety of black internationalism is essential because it enables us to see the varied "disarticulations of blackness and Christianity" that are a response to the crisis of Africana bodies at the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century as a practice of diaspora that was informed by the failure of traditional religious, political, and national ideologies.

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<sup>51</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph : The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 23-35.

<sup>52</sup> Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction : Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 173-85.

It is at the end of the nineteenth century that disparate groups of African bodies are talking about the international, either through the language of Pentecostal leader Mary Magdalena Tate or Father Divine imagining their identities as larger than the nation state to Garvey looking at the international through the rubric of repatriation. Internationalism as an attention to the transnational or as an extension of the national becomes a trope both for those moving across borders like Garvey and Blyden and those imagining much larger communities like black Pentecostals and many of the new religious movements in West Africa. Thus, it is clear in this internationalist sphere that both blackness(es) and Christianities were being engaged through the practices of transmission and translation.<sup>53</sup> Black internationalism in this regard is fueled not simply by a simple awareness of deprivation amongst black bodies but is constituted by a series of strategic dialogues, meetings, and translations that function as a “practice” or what Edwards calls “disarticulating blackness.”<sup>54</sup> It is then of note that black Atlantic religionists and religious discourses, like Blyden and African Islam or Rastafarianism, at this time not only travels to Liberia and Sierra Leone but also spent considerable time meeting with disparate constituencies of African people especially in the post-Reconstruction and Berlin Conference moment. From Nigeria to London, Blyden is involved in the very practice of diaspora that includes the creating and translating of discourse and ideas, often about religion, for the varieties of bodies throughout the black Atlantic. Blyden provides a picture of this practice of disarticulating Christianity when in 1890, he asks a gathering in DC “reconsider their Christianity in relation to the forms of Christianity in Africa.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, it is important to note that early leaders of the Aladura church whom Blyden as director of native affairs in Nigeria interfaced with, a

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Johnson, *Returning Home : A Century of African-American Repatriation* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005), 202.

<sup>54</sup> Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora : Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 37.

more conservative, biblically focused new Christian movement in Nigeria, travel consistently throughout Africa (1925) and engaged not only black American Pentecostalism but also Rastafarianism and the Orthodox Ethiopian Church. These movements and dialogues are constantly engaging/translating the alternative visions of Christianity in the black world made available by the popular press, traveling transnational “revivals,” and Pan-African conferences.

These very practices of movement and translation muddy the notion that the black Atlantic sphere was constrained by a particular religious or political worldviews or even the borders of the nation-state. Thus, the dialogues on black identity and resources for religious and theological imaginaries were much more expansive than denominational tradition, local context, and political expediency. The purpose of recounting this fluid public sphere and the practice of translations and disseminations that it contained forces us to rethink the attention transnational and diasporic studies gives to religion and black theology gives to diasporic identities and formulations in our discussion of the twentieth century. This counter-public that is created within black internationalist discourse is one that is interested in and heavily impacts the form(s) of black religious identities. It is the very shape of these discourses that creates a Christian public that is attempting to make senses of their Christian identities as one and in relation to other transnational discourses.<sup>56</sup> These religious identities and imaginaries in this post 1884 moment are not shaped solely by normative theological concerns but are heavily impacted by the transmission and translation of diasporic discourses. Therefore, I want to argue that this engagement and acknowledgement of diasporic identity creates a practice of Africana scripturalizing that is not constrained by theological discourse or nationalist allegiances but rather a practice of signifying on disparate and diffuse texts in the international sphere.

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<sup>56</sup> Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion : Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, 15.



## Chapter 2

### *Rethinking Black Theology*

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, not only was African American religious studies beginning to take shape, but there was also the emergence of departments and programs in black studies and African American studies that began to consolidate theoretical and methodological apparatuses for thinking about black life more comprehensively. Additionally, this was a period fraught with a great degree of social turmoil that clearly sets the backdrop for any study of black or African American existence in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but is particularly helpful in theorizing African American religious and cultural life in the latter half of this period. It is in light of the devastating uprisings (Chicago, Watts, and Newark) and the deaths of critical black social and religious leaders (Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X) that mandated not only a critical appraisal of black religious and cultural life but more importantly the apparatus or methods used to perform this appraisal. While the heretofore theological and sociological contributions of Martin Luther King, Howard Thurman, Joseph Washington, WEB Dubois, E. Franklin Frazier and Carter G. Woodson were acknowledged, at this time, there was a mandate for an engagement of black theological thought that took a more robust account of blackness and the social and political milieu of the current moment.<sup>1</sup>

James Cone and Charles Long emerge as two central figures engaged in the production of discourse to address to the complexity of black religious and intellectual life within their fields of theology or history of religions as methods to respond to the

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<sup>1</sup> See Edward Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York.: Schocken Books, 1964), Howard Thurman, *Deep Is the Hunger; Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness* (Richmond, Indiana.: Friends United Press, 1973), Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter; an Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness*, [1st ed. (New York.: Harper, 1954).

particularity and complexity of blackness.<sup>2</sup> Cone, as the progenitor of the discourse that is currently conceived of as black theology, produced a discourse of Christian theology that takes the problem of blackness and black oppression as central to the theological crisis while Long on the other hand, one of the famed contributors to the University of Chicago's "History of Religion" school attempts to present a survey of black religious experience through the historical critical methods espoused by this particular school. While these key figures in the approaches to African American religio-cultural life seem to exist on the opposite edges of the religio-culture debate, it is the argument of this chapter that the early encounters with black religious life are more similar than divergent especially their indebtedness to certain epistemic biases and prioritizations of certain key factors, particularly experience. This chapter will engage the differences in their method, sources, and said goals of their theoretical projects and by covering this ground will provide a productive space to think about the future of approaches to African American religio-cultural life in a postcolonial moment.

One would be remiss to ignore the huge semantic and theoretical overlap between these two shining figures in the field of African American religious studies. It is clear that both rely heavily on the groundbreaking work pioneered by the social scientists and religious thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> It is incumbent in both of their projects to provide a robust and thick account of African American experience in

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<sup>2</sup> Noted again is the significance of Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, and Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* in the fields of African American religious studies and Black theology.

<sup>3</sup> Clearly their works are indebted to the important sociological and anthropological work of people like WEB Dubois and *The Philadelphia Negro*, E. Franklin Frazier, and Walter Fauset's *God of the Metropolis*. Cone's work on spirituality and the blues specifically highlights the way that he uses and rethinks the anthropological work of DuBois to think about black suffering and how the theological character of suffering is engaged in popular Black American music like the blues and spirituals. Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson, Mark Anthony Neal, and Anthony Pinn continue this important work in a series of book that attempts to look more closely at the relationship between popular music forms and theorizing of blackness, race, and black peoples' experiences with empire.

the Americas and particular the United States of America. Thus, it is no surprise that both pay close attention to the sociologist and social thinker WEB Du Bois. His works and theorization of black culture and existence are foundational in their articulation of black existence, their analysis of black religious life, and their articulation of a black liberation strategy.<sup>4</sup> If nothing else, the sheer data that Du Bois alongside Frazier, Woodson, and Oliver C. Cox provide to narrate the enigma of blackness and black bodies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are pivotal in any theoretical project attentive to blackness and black liberation. However, neither Cone nor Long's methods are solely a reproduction of the data and material provided by the early sociologists and thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Additionally, Cone and Long are indebted to the explicit black religious and Christian thinkers of the twentieth century. Both Cone and Long highlight their theoretical engagement with Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, and Joseph Washington. Again, central here is the fact that Cone and Long share a variety of sources that serve as the foundation for their engagement of African American religious-cultural life.

However, notwithstanding the extraordinary amount of overlap, Cone, a theologian trained primarily in the neo-orthodox school, is distinguished primarily as a theologian who locates the systematic appraisal of Christology, Eschatology, and Divine Authority as central to his analysis. Throughout the Conian corpus, it is clear that the unifying concern is not simply black experience or even black religious experience but more specifically black Christian experience and even US black Christian experience to be exact. "In this work, an effort is made to investigate the concept of Black Power, placing primary emphasis on its relationship to Christianity, the Church, an contemporary American theology."<sup>5</sup> Cone's project is clearly about refracting neo-orthodox constructions for the benefit of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century black America. More

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<sup>4</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 35.

precisely, Cone is invested in making sense of black power and black consciousness as it is related to a theological project. In this regard, Cone alongside being indebted to the groundbreaking sociologist and social scientists of black cultural life is also indebted to Karl Barth and his neo-orthodox *Church Dogmatics*, Tillich and his theological construction of being-ness and ultimate being located in the personhood of Jesus Christ, and Moltman's *Theology of Hope* that locates a possibility for theological theorizing in the post-War era.

Cone is first and foremost a systematician who is attempting to marshal the resources of theology and use theological argumentation to make sense of black life and the crisis of black religious life. In this matter, I would like to claim that Cone and his theoretical appraisals (at least his earliest ones *Black Theology and Black Power*, *Black Theology as Theology and Liberation and God of the Oppressed*) can not be understood outside of the black power movement and the crisis of black Christianity in light of that movement. Cone's project is about the production of a black theology that suggests that blacks are not simply beings (or fully human) but that the blackness and the particular suffering of black bodies in the American project are central to any modern theological project and particularly a twentieth century theological one. Cone argues at the beginning of *Black Theology and Black Power* that his thesis is that "Black Power, even in its most radical expression, is not the antithesis of Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea to be tolerated with painful forbearance. It is, rather, Christ's central message to the twentieth century America."<sup>6</sup> In this regard, Cone's Christology is central in that it is the pivotal theological space on which his systematic enterprise operates. Black theology is about marshaling the "freeing power of the gospel" for black people and that within this frame the Christ, the incarnation of God, must be seen as not simply siding with blackness, but in both *Black Theology and Black Power* and *Black Theology as Theology of*

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<sup>6</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*.



*Liberation* as identical to blackness.<sup>7</sup> The Christological center of his argument is that the liberating apparatus of the gospel can only be made legible in the modern moment if blackness becomes the central operating mechanism for gospel revelation. Jesus is black and becoming black or siding with the full humanity and dignity of blackness is the operative frame of black theology.

While Cone is clearly inscribed in the logic of theology and is attempting to etch out a theological paradigm that makes sense of black bodies and blackness, Long is methodologically indebted to the history of religions school at Chicago most notably associated with Mircea Eliade. His methodological foci are centered on a critical survey of African American religious expression through history that takes seriously its variety as well as its historical location. Long in *Significations* argues that this method is neither a means for an originary account of black religious life or expression nor is it a means to explain away the complexity of black religious life through phenomenology. He wants to provide a hermeneutic for thinking about the religious and the symbols that proceed from African-American religious life that open up the possibility for generative accounts of black liberation and existence. As a result, Long's method is inherently comparative and less wedded to the Christian forms of black religious expression. Long sees theology as inherently provincial and, therefore, unable to account for the varieties and possibilities of black religious life. Long in his critique of theology called for "not just a change of content but a change of structure and style."<sup>8</sup>

Long's wants to argue for a method that will take seriously the opacity, the specific meaning and value of another culture and/or language<sup>9</sup>. His method suggests that much of the colonialist epistemic projects from economics to anthropology to theology are so indebted to the construction of an "other" that the reality and variety of

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<sup>7</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Long, *Significations : Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 143.

<sup>9</sup> Long, *Significations : Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 117.

black life and black religious life are obscured. The hegemony of these imperial projects or projects that emerged from the normative epistemological traditions of Western Europe deny or belie the very opacity or visibility of black religious expression. However, Long does not deny the usefulness of theological projects. Thus, Long accounts for the necessity of what he calls theologies opaque or theologies of the opaque in his work by pointing specifically to Cone and Vine De Loria.<sup>10</sup> He argues that Cone and De Loria must make God black and red where discourses on blackness and redness are predicated on their being salvaged in the face of the whiteness/hegemony of imperial epistemic projects. He however argues that within the theoretical and methodological apparatus of theology that Cone and others are rendered un-able to create “an-other world.” The limits of theology and the ways in which it circumscribes the variety of black religious experience and ignores its multiple performances in the archive suggest, at least for Long, that theology is unable to adequately provide space for a creative expression of opacity. He thus argues that an unfettered engagement with the archive, which means an attention to more than just Christianity and even recourse to those worldviews that exceed the boundaries of the US nation-state, must not be overdetermined by theological norms in order to facilitate the liberation of opaque peoples.

Cone and Long are clearly both engaged in projects with black emancipation on some level as their telos. The Longian project seems heavily indebted to a return to the archive of black religious and culture experience while the Conian one sees the ultimate liberatory significance being found in a resignifying of the gospel, Jesus, and the Christian theological method. They both however share on some level a theoretical understanding of race that seems to be located or maybe locked inside a colonialist intellectual imagination. It seems that endemic or intrinsic to both of their projects is a

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<sup>10</sup> Vine Deloria, *God Is Red : A Native View of Religion : The Classic Work Updated*, 2nd ed. (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994), 3-12.

dogged insistence on the cultural and social stability of blackness alongside its stable appellation of a black subject across time and space. It is this shared imaginary, problematic or not, around blackness that in the end enable these distinct methods to be in conversation with one another. It is unfortunate, however, that Cone and Long locked in this explanatory framework seem unable to marshal the resources of their disciplines to really think critically about race, the production of its concomitant discourses, and the way that it might possibly be a signification that is far more deleterious than Long's "theology" and even Cone's "white supremacy." While their projects left a great deal of theoretical space to be explored around the issue of race and the stable or variable quality of this work, there has been a growing contingent of thinkers that have adapted the Longian and Conian encounter with race as fixed and stable. The fixity around race has also led many of these theorists to continue to situate their projects around theology or even the construction of Black American identity as distinct from or relative unrelated to the diasporic or transnational concerns facing black America.

#### *The Womanist Intervention*

If the late 1960s and the early 1970s belonged to the fathers and the masculinist read of African American religious life, one could faithfully argue that the late 1970s and the early 1980s occupies the space for a black feminist or womanist appraisal of theological inquiry. Just as black theology was accompanied by a consolidation of methods to approach black cultural and political life in the form of black and African American studies departments/programs, similarly womanist was accompanied by a consolidation or emergence of discursive strategies for thinking about black women's experience through the epistemic frames of women's studies departments, English and literary departments, as well as the emerging discipline of critical race theory. In as

much as womanist thought was accompanied or in some cases mirrored the methodological concerns of other departments, one might argue that the first generation of womanist thinkers (Delores Williams, Marcia Riggs, and Katie Cannon)<sup>11</sup> emerge as a response to the failure of James Cone and the vanguard of black theology to adequately address the questions of gender, experience, and sexuality. This brief engagement with the history of black theology and black religious studies will suggest that the emergence of womanists thinking in both its first appearance (a la Williams et al) as well as its 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of thinkers are primarily concerned with the failure of Cone et al to adequately address gender but also a failure to hold as important the experience of women and others exterior to the normative theological project. Thus, I will argue that the womanists argue that not only does gender matter but that gendered experience in all its variety can be made available through a deeper engagement with black feminist texts. This attention to fiction, art, or what Long calls the “folk artists” places womanism in much greater theoretical affinity with Long’s project of opacity than Cone’s project of black liberation. Therefore, the womanist push for a sustained look at variety, especially the variety and instability that emerges when attending to black women, and the un- and/or under-articulated aspects of black religious life challenges many of black theology’s central premises. In this regard, the womanists query the stability of categories of gender, Christianity, sexuality, race, and even the role of transnational belonging.<sup>12</sup>

Womanist’s reappraisals of Cone and the early school of black religious thinkers are useful in that they not only privilege additional methodological and theoretical strategies to engage black experience but they expose the particular gendered construction of both Cone’s black theological project as well as black liberationist

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness : The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 54-57.

<sup>12</sup> Anthea D. Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ : Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

projects of the twentieth century. The womanists especially in Williams and townes illumine the ways in which blackness and the concerns of black liberation are primarily imagined for the benefit of masculine privilege and that in a wholesale fashion obscures or erases the contributions of black women thinkers.<sup>13</sup> For many of the early womanists, it is essential to engage, expand, and re-imagine the historical archive readily available for theoretical conversation. This primarily meant that the while DuBois, Woodson, Cox, Frazier, et al provided useful information on the exigencies and variety of black life and even black religious life, that there was an explicit need for additional source archives. This meant scrubbing the archives or just simply privileging texts that had been rendered invisible by the first generation of black theologians. This led to the re-engagement of Jarena Lee, Anna Julia Cooper, the National Council for Negro Women, Ella Baker, and others.<sup>14</sup> These sources were critical in that they challenged the notion of a primary male theoretical space, but more importantly it challenged that notions of liberation that seemed to augur universal liberation but in actuality was more attentive to the concerns and needs of a black male working or middle class sensibilities. Womanists and the early ethnographers and sociologists of black experience pointed not only to the paucity of women's experience but the insufficiency of black male theology's prescriptions for survival and thriving.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to highlighting the critical gaps in black male theology's historiography and archival research, womanists also highlighted a need to better engage the everyday experience of woman. This need led to a methodological intervention that is hinted at through Cone and other's use of popular protest novels

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<sup>13</sup> See Cheryl Gilkes, *"If It Wasn't for the Women--": Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). Floyd-Thomas and her contributors highlight not only the importance of fiction as a resource for womanist theology but also how fiction functions as a response to an archive derogated as a result of colonialism.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 35.

(Baldwin, Ellison, Wright) in their analyses but that was not fully developed until the womanists began in earnest to deploy the methods of critical literary analysis. Womanists argued that black female novelists provided a “motherlode” of ethnographic and experiential data on everyday black women’s experience.<sup>16</sup> Womanists (beginning with Cannon) began to use the very material of the novel as the source for theological and theo-ethical theorizing. In this regard the experiences of church are expanded to not simply include the treatises of early theological thinkers or the male-dominated sermons of the black church, but it also included the experiences, thoughts, and theorization of black women writers. The works of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker were included as conversation partners in the production of theological discourse that more specifically addressed the existence and experiences of black women. Katie Cannon’s *Black Womanist Ethics* becomes the primary example of this as she brings Zora Neale Hurston in conversation with King, Thurman and Cone.<sup>17</sup>

While Cannon and others introduced the category of black woman’s experience as integral to theological and theo-ethical theorizing, it was Delores Williams in conversation with white female theological thinkers, that brought to the fore not simply a methodological innovation but troubled Cone’s and the early school’s indebtedness to neo-orthodoxy. In conversation with Ruether, Daly and Schussler-Fiorenza as well as Angela Y. Davis and Audre Lorde, Williams argues that the neo-orthodox systematic theological categories, especially its Christology and soteriology are inherently problematic and that their appellation has produced incommensurate pain for women and black women particularly. Williams’ argument challenges many of the early feminist theologians who suggested that liberative practices were available in a return to origins and suggests that much of the sacrificial language of the Christian narrative,

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<sup>16</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness : The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, *American Academy of Religion Academy Series* ; (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1988).

Christian history, and Christian theology are divisive if not devastating for the survival and thriving of the black female subject.<sup>18</sup> She argues that there are some pieces of the systematic theological apparatus that are untenable if the liberation and survival of black women are paramount. In her uneasiness with the theology in general and black theology's continued validation of systematic theology's denigratory and devastating impact on women, one finds a considerable overlap with Long and his project of opacity.

While some of the early generation of black womanists have a method that partially overlaps with Long and his questions about opacity and variety, it is important to highlight the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of womanist thinkers who find themselves somewhere in between Cannon's call for a radical engagement with black feminist literature as a source of black experience and Williams' call to radically rethink the systematic theological project. While there are a number of interlocutors that could be evoked to substantiate my claim concerning the current status of black womanist thought as following in the Longian project (Emilie Townes, M. Shawn Copeland, Traci West),<sup>19</sup> I would like to focus on Kelly Brown Douglas as a figure that comes closest to attending to both sides of this equation. I argue that it is her queering of black theology and even some might say of womanist theology that finds her attempting to marshal the resources offered by Cannon and Williams to articulate a theological agenda that looks at theology and variety simultaneously, albeit not variety that expands substantively the definition or construction of race.<sup>20</sup> While it is clear that Brown Douglass is a student of James Cone and seems to evoke his cultural-nationalist (racial ossification) sensibilities in her theological treatises, she is also a womanist that takes seriously the need to re-

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<sup>18</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness : The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? : Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church : A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 12-19.

evaluate the category of experience as well as reconsider the normative theological categories that animate black religious theorizing. In her last two works, *Sexuality and the Black Church* and *What's Faith Got to Do With It*, Brown Douglas argues succinctly that the problem with contemporary black theological appraisals is that they fail to radically engage the platonic tradition that informs theological theorizing and they also fail to engage the experiences of sexuality as integral to black religio-cultural life. She argues that radically engaging the platonic tradition of theology requires looking at the ways particular discourses have prevented the production of a theological imagination that would make room for divergent analyses of the biblical text and symbols in general. Secondly, she argues through Baldwin and Morrison that experiences of black sexuality have been obscured and that a womanist appraisal that takes experience and the wholeness of the black body seriously must rethink their sexual ethic.<sup>21</sup> Brown Douglas however is not willing to dispense with Cone's theological categories or his primary Christology in her analysis of black women's experience and thus finds her somewhat distanced from Williams' project in *Sisters in the Wilderness*.

In *Sexuality and the Black Church* Brown Douglas, responding to the shortcomings of earlier theological interventions, sets out to identify the ways in which race and class have impacted the construction and discourse around black sexuality and black women. She asks,

Why are we womanist theologians, who so aptly criticize black and feminist theologians for their failure to comprehend the complexity of black women's oppression, so disinclined to confront the oppression of lesbians or broadly the presence of homophobia and heterosexism within the black church?"<sup>22</sup>

Brown Douglas and others suggest that these theologians have failed to engage in a productive discourse on sexuality as a result of pervasive homophobia. This book

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<sup>21</sup> Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? : Black Bodies/Christian Souls*, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church : A Womanist Perspective*, 1.



addresses this deficiency and argues for an ethic of resistance in the black community. She suggests that, "a discourse of resistance must expose how the sexual politics of white culture ...has made it appear that homophobia is compatible with Black life and freedom?"<sup>23</sup> However, her "writing back" does not adequately challenge the racial binaries and the ineffective category of black racial identification. Her critique does not sufficiently destabilize the pseudo-scientific construction of race that is dependent upon a normative white culture. Furthermore, the absence of this account leads to the flattening of the experiences within "the black church."<sup>24</sup>

Womanist thinkers, like Brown Douglas, emile townes, and Tracy West, have all recognized the need for alternative naming strategies which help to simultaneously challenge white supremacy and privilege the subjectivity of certain bodies. They point out the ways in which the flattening of difference between brown colored bodies, previously called black, similarly denies difference and multiplicity and also supports the white supremacist project. Brown Douglas quotes Manning Marable to highlight the problem with race language. "Race is an 'artificial social construction' deliberately imposed upon people in order to secure exploitation."<sup>25</sup> However, she fails to reject race and a universally raced subject as part of the problem. Similarly Crenshaw in her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" suggests a model of intersectionality that is intending to address the insufficiency of feminist discourse. She calls for a theory of intersectionality that will look at the particular intersection of female gender, black race, and its particular role in legal theory. She argues that intersectionality is

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<sup>23</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church : A Womanist Perspective*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> The term black church has a long history in African American studies and African American religious studies. In its earliest appellation, it was described as the "Negro Church" by Du Bois and other earlier theorists of African American religion in the United States. Nonetheless, Negro Church or Black Church was a framing that intended to point to the shared cultural traditions that informed practices, rituals, and beliefs of African Americans in the Christian tradition. It was most prominently popularized in C. Eric Lincoln's seminal work.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church : A Womanist Perspective*, 17.

demanding as single-axis thinking; gender only or race only, is based on an unstated white male norm. Intersectionality is useful in this analysis as it points to the importance of looking at the multiple factors that constitute a person's subjectivity. Crenshaw exposes how both law and much of racial rhetoric have demanded that black women choose one or the other identity.<sup>26</sup> Intersectionality is a compelling first move that enables us to better theorize black woman's existence but fails to fully account for the other factors that inform the "black" of black woman's existence.

While both Brown Douglass' account of white supremacy and Crenshaw's account of intersectionality are instructive, they both give little attention to the details of the color-caste system, the prevalence of normative beauty codes, and the persistence of passing as a historical and contemporary practice. I argue that Harris' discussion on passing is the most useful corrective in response to these omissions. Her article "Whiteness as Property" in the *Critical Race Theory Reader* identifies the value associated with passing in a culture or community where whiteness is afforded the status of property.

White identity conferred tangible and economically valuable benefits, and it was jealously guarded as a valued possession, allowed only to those who met a strict standard of proof. Whiteness -the right to white identity as embraced by law -is property if by 'property' one means all of a person's legal right.<sup>27</sup>

Cheryl Walker not only outlines the value accrued as a result of whiteness or being designated as white, but implicitly outlines the value accrued by passing and one's proximity to whiteness. Whiteness as a property value is what gives meaning and value to a color caste or pigmentation based system that identifies whiteness as the norm and deviations from that as abnormal and suspect. The experience of the differently pigmented is obscured by the racial category of black and is not effectively addressed in

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<sup>26</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Critical Race Theory : The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995), 163.

<sup>27</sup> Crenshaw, *Critical Race Theory : The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, 281.

much of contemporary womanist scholarship. The persistence of whiteness as valuable or a propertied interest is not just a historical artifact but remains until this present moment. This contemporary notion of passing was most recently highlighted in the movie, *The Human Stain*, headlined by Anthony Hopkins and Nicole Kidman. Additionally, a burgeoning field on racial aesthetics in sociology departments has highlighted the persistence of beauty codes and color castes. In *Skin Deep*, the editors argue that today as much as yesteryear skin pigmentation has the impact of radically altering one's life choices and opportunities.<sup>28</sup> Again, what is central is the recognition that pigmentation and a corollary color caste system points to passing as an important phenomenon, both historically and in the contemporary moment. These phenomenon points toward the multiple experiences of people who are bureaucratically defined as black but that transgress that race or their experience of caricatured blackness by virtue of their skin color. Therefore, Walker's colored or pigmented flower is an essential addition to womanist theology and Brown Douglas as it challenges the normative discussion of blackness in the United States. Furthermore, the colored body as an analytical framework provides another perspective with which to read discursive regimes operative within the church. Churches filled by primarily African-dispersed people must be careful to examine this phenomenon and how assumed blackness or normative blackness occludes particular power dynamics. In addition to literature that explores black women's experience of race and gender, Brown Douglas must include literature that highlights this phenomenon and provides useful examples of the multiple experiences of color stratification.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cedric Herring et. al, *Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color Blend" Era* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004),6.

<sup>29</sup> These texts could include a number of well-known contemporary texts that deal explicitly with passing and color stratification in the US context. Some texts include *Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *The Color of Water* by James McBride and *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is*

Alongside the radical rethinking of biological race and an exploration of the color caste system, movement and global communication has facilitated new and diverse experiences for dispersed African communities. Using the insights from Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* and integrating his discussion with the burgeoning discourse of globalization in feminist theology forces us to reckon with not only our relationship with people groups in different locations, but also how concepts of race, beauty, and history are constituted by a paradigm of global movement. In other words, an adequate appraisal of African dispersed people, in any particular context, must speak to and acknowledge the historical and contemporary movement of these bodies. I claim that black theology and even womanist theology has failed to be sufficiently diasporic. Gilroy's Atlantic and the movements to and fro are rendered historical artifacts and virtually inconsequential. Gilroy's Atlantic and the identities they create must be addressed.

Gilroy is important in this diasporic move, as he has continuously gestured to the ways in which blackness must always engage and respond to the movement of bodies across and throughout the globe.<sup>30</sup> He focuses on the pathways that crisscross the Atlantic and points to the way in which the Atlantic only acts as a doorway to other multiple and complicated routes. He also suggests that terms and patterns of communication, worship, and knowledge are still informed by movement on these pathways. The contemporary rise of Santeria, Voodoo, and West African religious practices in the United States, Germany, and Brazil all speak to the pervasive configurations and reconfigurations that do not end with slavery and colonialism but that are constantly being refracted through Atlantic pathways. Brown Douglas gestures in this direction when she talks about practices of sexuality in the "black

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*enuf* by Ntozake Shange.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 96

American" community as having a particular relationship with practices in Western Africa. "Black people did not come from Africa as *tabulae rasae*," she claims.<sup>31</sup> However, she names this as a seemingly one time historical event and fails to adequately account for the refractions that occurred during the movement through the Caribbean and the American south. How were different color bodies impacted by these refractions and movements? How do contemporary practices still inform and challenge notions of sexuality within the communities of African dispersed peoples? `

This lack of attention to the ways in which bodies move and continue to move has similarly limited the ways in which theological imagination in the United States has been chained to American and European sources. Theological discussion and ecclesial reflection have been limited to discussing church within a peculiar Western frame. Musa Dube, biblical scholar from Botswana, has begun to question this. Throughout her career she has attempted to account for the multiplicity of Christian performances in post-colonial Africa. She understands this attention to Africa as essential to an African-dispersed identity. Diaspora does not exclude the continent and only include the Caribbean, Europe, and the Americas, but rather includes contemporary Africa as an important locus of analysis.<sup>32</sup> Her work on biblical interpretative strategies in Africa becomes particularly useful as we attempt to not only locate dispersed exegetical strategies but also identify how these strategies and traditions of reading the text resonate with our own. She reminds that "postcolonial spaces and strategies differ depending on the gender, race, class, and continents and type of colonialisms experienced."<sup>33</sup>

Dube offers her exegetical lens as a useful resource for current theological

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<sup>31</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church : A Womanist Perspective*, 63.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Piot, "Atlantic Aporias: Africa and Gilroy's Black Atlantic," in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, 1 (Winter 2001): 158.

<sup>33</sup> Musa Dube, "Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces and Religion," *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse*, ed. Laura Donaldson and Kwok Pui Lan (New York: Routledge, 1993), 115.

development and imagination. Those bodies on the continent of Africa similarly deal with a racist ideology that minimizes their cultural and local differences and negates the unique contribution that can be made to a theology of dispersed African peoples.

Dube's piece is instructive as her approach is global and transatlantic. "If imperialism is seen as a project impelled by the fear of difference and an attempt to organize the world according to the Western image, then reasserting diversity in international cultural, economic, and political systems is a crucial strategy in decolonizing feminist spaces."<sup>34</sup>

While Brown Douglass spends the bulk of her time in conversation with Reuther, Daly, Alice Walker, James Cone and Dwight Hopkins, Dube demands that attention be paid to the ways in which identity formation and theological construction, especially for African dispersed people, is a diasporic process. Brown Douglas while exploring gender, sexuality, and experience in her womanist appraisal, still fails to fully account for the varieties of blackness and the varieties of Christianity that populate the communities that she intends to represent.<sup>35</sup>

While Brown Douglas is not the quintessential Longian disciple, she along with Cannon and Williams point to the ways in which womanists have a greater affinity with Long and his construction of opacity. It is clear that the decentralizing of normative theological engagements and the privileging of the variety and complexity of black experience speaks more to Long's notion of opacity than Cones construction of black theology. Cannon suggest that the authors and the literary texts that they engage are sacred and function as integral parts in not only providing the data for theorization but also function as theorizations in themselves. This radical engagement of artistic texts and a willingness to reconsider the monopoly of theology and theological categories seems to place the womanists in concert with Long. More specifically, the Longian

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<sup>34</sup> Dube, "Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces and Religion," 115-116.

<sup>35</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Controversies in Body Theology, Controversies in Contextual Theology Series* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 16.

construct of opacity seems to have a great resonance with the womanists' evocation of experience and cultural knowledge. Long even notes in the closing chapter of *Significations* that his call for an appraisal of black religious life that "post-theology" would require a greater engagement with folklorists, musicians, and artists again signaling an overlap between the Longian construct of the opaque and the womanists' privileging of experience.<sup>36</sup> Finally, it is the womanists' central evocation that through these myriad texts provide new vistas for the discussion of an opacity that is far more expansive than the Christian worldview deployed in Cone and many black theological engagements, and begins to pay closer attention to the varieties of lived Christianities in ways that Long often under-theorizes.<sup>37</sup>

*From Post- Liberation to Post-Modern*

It is the question of lived Christianities and how they have been produced and articulated in a transnational frame that is surprisingly missing from both the Longian and the Conian corpus. Anthony Pinn is closest in his *Varieties of African American Religion Experience*. However, his central premise seems to hinge on the dismissal of not only theology but also the import of Black Christian worldviews.<sup>38</sup> In his attempt to account for variety, Pinn attends to black religious formation apart from Christianity, but seems to miss some of the richness and variety that is present within the signifying on and upon the Christian tradition. It is my argument that these significations or what others have at times called conjuring or creolizing of Christianity should be understood as simultaneously Christian and not Christian. It is their "not-Christian" appellations that are of particular interest to this project. This project looks at the ways in which non-orthodox or counter readings provide a mechanism to not only rethink critical texts like

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<sup>36</sup> Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Long, *Significations : Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering : A History of Theodicy in African-American Religious Thought* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2002), 37.

the Bible and bring in extra-biblical literature, but also to reframe epistemic projects like theology and imagine alternative publics that are alternative to orthodox forms of Christianity and what might be understood as a Christian modernity qua Christian capitalism. Pinn's important theoretical work gestures in the direction of variety and thus the specter of the marginal, the liminal, and possibly the counter-discourse as a form of resistance. In this section, I will address how Pinn's reading of variety speaks to his deep engagement with the notion of alternative publics and more importantly the way that he speaks to the porousness of extra-biblical and non-biblical traditions in the black imaginary. Following his accounting of an alternative public as well as the porousness of traditions, I will argue why his works, specifically his text on expressive art forms and on Caribbean traditions<sup>39</sup>, provides a mechanism to think about the variety of Christian significations and how black theology qua black religious studies can better account for lived Christianities of black Atlantic peoples and the sufferings of dispossessed people.

It is clear in Pinn's works from *Terror to Triumph* where he chronicles the role of black religion in the protest tradition of black people in the US from enslavement to the civil rights movement to *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering* where he is engaging the normative engagement with suffering and a theodical accounts that have been central to the black project, that the well-being of black bodies is central to his project. Like Cone in *Black Theology and Black Power* who is responding, Pinn invokes the well being and flourishing of black people as the ethical axis of his work. In doing this important work of chronicling black Christian responses to suffering and providing an account of black terror as central to the modern black religious imagination, Pinn is continuing along with Cone and others that central question for black religion and black theology is how does religious formation function as a mechanism of liberation and create

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<sup>39</sup> Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 46.



discourses/publics/performances that provide an alternative to lives of terror. How is religion a counter-memory or even a utopic musing that begins to simultaneously delimit the power and effectiveness of current oppressive regimes while opening the possibility of new configurations that better narrate a certain group's "situatedness" and open up new vistas of possibility? Easing and erasure of suffering specifically in form of racism, which is a stand-in for Pinn for coloniality, modernity, and capital, becomes the central concern of his interventions. After essentially establishing the failure of normative Christianities of adequately responding to suffering other than naming it as either spiritually redemptive or pedagogical in some other senses, Pinn begins to engage the variety of black religious experiences as a way of thinking about black flourishing and liberation that does not explain or even enable forms of suffering.

Pinn argues in his *Varieties* that "African American theological reflection troubles me because it limits itself to Christianity in ways that establish Christian doctrine and concerns as normative."<sup>40</sup> He then asks an important question that is not only relevant to Christian traditions, but what I call alternative Christianities - "how does theology address traditions that fall outside the Christian context, traditions that are contrary to, if not hostile toward, the basic claims of Christian faith?"<sup>41</sup> Pinn assumes that this rich terrain of hostility is solely limited to movements and theological exploration outside of Christianity but following the insights of womanists, Cone and Long there is compelling evidence to find this hostility and rich terrain within the semantic space of those movements that grapple with texts from the Bible, Africana identity, and tropes of redemption and salvation. It is then implicit (maybe explicit) that as Pinn is looking for this variety (often outside of Christianity) as a means to escape the suffering of black racism and the suffering that travels alongside it that Pinn is primarily interested in non-Christian traditions that are critical of black suffering as it manifests itself in racism as

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<sup>40</sup>Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 48-50.

<sup>41</sup> Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 86.

well as empire, colonialism, and capitalism.<sup>42</sup>

His account of black religious varieties brings him to an important public/counter-public in the black protest tradition. His accounting of black humanism brings him back to much of the black protest literature that informed much of the early black theological work but he looks at their decidedly non-Christian and secular biases. Pinn's recourse to humanism in both his accounts of theodicy and variety are important because he points to a tradition that has deep religious affinities and is practiced in using religious and particularly biblical texts to capture the imagination of its attendance. Its most famous interlocutors, especially for black humanists, have consistently invoked black religion and black Christian qua the black preacher as a site of a black radical public. While the humanists' overlap with religion and black Christianities is of importance, it is the humanists' transnational sensibilities that are of particular importance for this project. When Pinn invokes the black humanist tradition, he is invoking a particular reading and response to black suffering that not only had a thorough analysis of US based capitalism/racism, but that was insistent upon creating a black public that addressed the varieties of transnational sufferings that plagued the globe. Black humanism in this regard has a transnational character that is central to Pinn's discourse on human freedom and flourishing.

His accounting of the black humanist tradition provides an opportunity to explore the multi-valent character of this movement. Pinn highlights its ability to be divested from normative constructions of the modern, religious, and even racial imaginaries in ways that provide productive spaces for flourishing and freedom for black bodies. He is particularly invested in engaging the rich transnational figures like Baldwin and Ralph Ellison who used the humanist tradition to not only critique the failures of a religious inflected or more appropriately Christian inflected protest tradition, but also saw the

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<sup>42</sup> Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 23.

humanist tradition as a counter-discourse to the failure of the modern American project. Thus, the humanist project as it is constructed through the lives of this pivotal African American male writers/theorists produce humanism as a signification on American empire and exceptionalism. This signification thus reaches for critiques, discourses and conversation partners that exceed the US. The alternative-public or critique of modernity that is emblematic of the humanist tradition is one that is deeply articulated by a transnational gathering of thinkers. Black flourishing within the humanist tradition, which Pinn privileges in many of his works, is one that has a decidedly transnational shape.

It is the transnational undercurrent of his account of humanism specifically and variety more generally, which leads us to think how Pinn would theorize a form of Christianity or a production of Christianities that were not constrained by the provincial constraints of western theology in the form of black theology. It seems that when we take the varieties and transnational nature of Christianity more seriously that not only is the project of western theology dismantled but that much of it is resistant, if not hostile, to popular or dominant forms of Christianity. Therefore, alternative Christian traditions are ones that challenge the dominant or mono-logical account of the biblical text as it traffics in a variety of discourses (especially theology, black theology, and biblical studies) to make sense of Africana identity and flourishing. The variety here does not center on a non-Christian or even a secular modality, but variety speaks to new practices of signifying and for Pinn, I think, that it includes the new practices of engaging racism, modernity, and capital. This presages, in my opinion, a return to the archive of Christian experiences that exceeds the nation-state and that explores performances of Christianity that actively contests the nation, Christianity, and salvation even when the nation, Christianity, and the local seem to be dominant. Pinn in his accounting of variety takes us to a theological project that while not having to be determined by

Christianity has the space and theoretical capacity to account for Christian variety and particular how the significations of Christianity, what I may be call alternative Christianities not alternatives to Christianity, produce themselves in a transnational frame in so many unlikely places. Thus to end this section I will argue that while Pinn suggests that he is jettisoning black Christianities as a constructive frame to think about African American flourishing and responses to suffering, that what Pinn ultimately produces as a part of varieties and even his texts on hip hop and Jamaican spirituality are the beginnings of discussion of alternative Christian traditions. Pinn, wittingly or unwittingly pushes us to the heterodox Christian imaginaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century that are often missed or minimized by black theology and other historical and anthropological encounters of African American life.

### Chapter 3

“The native or the black, then, always exists in the zone of non-being. Resistance to this form of domination opens spaces for new political knowledge...we tend to look for the spectacular, the extraordinary explosive events, rather than the ordinary, deeply embedded in the cultural practices of the ‘lower orders’ of the population.”<sup>1</sup>

Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics/Black Prophets*

“He (the Negro) will embark on this struggle, and he will pursue it, not as the result of a Marxist or idealistic analysis but quite simply because he cannot conceive of life otherwise than in the form of battle against exploitation, misery, and hunger.”<sup>2</sup>

Frantz Fanon, *White Skin, Black Masks*

“The ‘sacred domain’ is a vital and integral part of popular political culture that the totalitarian and teleological ambitions of the state cannot destroy.”<sup>3</sup>

#### *Introduction*

While we have explored the relationship between black theology and its connection as a discipline to the nation-state and modern constructions of race and racism, it is important to understand wayward Christians as a critique of not simply Black theology, but as a way of looking at Christian identities that emerged outside of black theology and even womanist theologies limited purview.<sup>4</sup> In many ways for Pinn and Long it is not simply a disregard for black theology but a deep suspicion of Western Christianity and its relationship to empire, racism, and certain debilitating forms of capital/trade. This chapter will begin by looking at the connection between modernity,

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets : Radical Political Intellectuals, Africana Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, Charles Lam Markmann, and John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture., *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York,: Grove Press, 1967), 224.

<sup>3</sup> Jibrin Ibrahim, "Religion and Political Turbulence in Nigeria." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 29.1 (1991): p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Long, *Significations : Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 91.

racism and Christianity, and the interaction between these three in transnational sphere. It will argue that while these constructions, Christianity and modernity's racist underside often travel together that they do not foreclose the possibility of resistance. We will, first, theorize modernity and Christianity and then argue that while modernity creates the very conditions for Christianity and capital to often align with what Pinn calls a "why lord" moment for Africana Christianities that modernity also opens up the possibility of resistance and counter-publics.<sup>5</sup> It is my argument that theorists of modernity/coloniality as well as liberation theological analyses like Cone's and Kelly Brown Douglas have under-theorized or not fully explored the agentive capacity made possible in the significations in and on the bible which constitute the category that I am naming as alternative Christianities.

It is clear that to a large extent Western Christianity and racism were constitutive pieces of the modern colonial project beginning with the exploration of the Americas in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and continuing through the first half of the twentieth century. If like Cornel West, we are to call this period the Age of Europe and subsequently the age of US, we are reminded that this moment brings to the forward a particular Christian world view that is marked by racial and social biases as well as other knowledge projects which play in the expansion of empire and empire's subsequent (and some may say simultaneous) subjugation of the other and their knowledge projects.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Christianity in its imperial form is regarded with great suspicion both in its capability to provide authentic liberation and life for anyone and especially its usefulness for an African subject. However, like Cornel West and others, the critical suspicion of Christianity and its relationship to coloniality and other forms of empire does not render the category of religion or even Christianity as unusable or useless. The critique of

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<sup>5</sup> Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! : An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 47-63.

modernity by displaced and subjugated peoples was neither a wholesale rejection nor acceptance of the post-enlightenment demands for reason and rationality. It was what many have called an alternative modernity or an “enchanted modernity” that was engaged in an analysis that is plural (takes into account plural geneses and dispersion) rather “mono-logical.”<sup>7</sup> Religion and Christianity were clearly a part of the imperial enterprise but the imperium did not and does not have a monopoly over religion and/or Christian formation. Therefore, in this response I would like to point to the ways in which religious subject formation is an important axis of the alternative public that emerges in the epistemological projects of the colonized. These projects that attempt to imagine an enchanted or alternative modernity work to counter the hegemonic and colonizing intention of Christianity and its collaborators- modernity/coloniality. Reading religion from the underside of modernity or from the position of the colonized begins to open up more productive space for the scholar of religion and forces a renewed attention to a previously ignored or obscured archive.

This chapter will begin not by thinking of Christianity and resistance as mutually exclusive archives, but rather spaces that have provocative and often surprising overlap when attention is given to Christianity’s underside or what has been heretofore named as alternative Christianities. In the first section, I used the work of Du Bois, Davis, and Fanon to point to the importance of the archive for the reconceptualizing of black experience and finally I gesture to the works of Anthony Bogues and J. Lorand Matory as possible spaces to think about the production of scholarship interested in religion that takes seriously the obscured archive and the import of a transnational and mobile

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<sup>7</sup> This notion of plurality is evoked in many important works about the ways in which resistance can emerge from unexpected places. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is Mignolo and his notion of multiple histories in *Local histories/global designs*. Similarly, other theorists like James Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1992) and his *Weapons of the Weak* (1987) gesture toward the notion of multiple histories or what he terms multiple and competing transcripts.

account of religious formation in this newly imagined polyvalent account.<sup>8</sup> This chapter will close with a defining of alternative Christianities and the ways in which this definition will open possibilities for new readings of the black Atlantic and how black Atlantic publics have emerged not only around the secular configurations of aesthetics, politics, and capital but they have also emerged around a rich history of black Atlantic religions<sup>9</sup> but more specifically black Atlantic Christianities. In this analysis of black Atlantic Christianities, our previous engagements of the transnational and black theology will enable us to think alongside J. Lorand Matory and Anthony Bogues in order to theorize these diasporic Christian counter-hegemonic formations.

*Inside the Logic of Coloniality*

In Walter Mignolo's *Darker Side of the Renaissance and Local Histories/Global Designs* he exhorts the reader that the rhetoric of modernity that was accompanied by capitalism and Christianity is notorious for the ways in which it obscures and denies the absurdity of coloniality.<sup>10</sup> Modernity and its promise of progress, civilization, and freedom are dependent upon a darker side or a barbarous under-belly that mandates the creation and exploitation of the other. In this framing, Mignolo compels us to rethink the ways that knowledge and subjects have been produced in light of modernity/coloniality and specifically how particular periodizations (like Renaissance or modern era) and epistemic projects (economics and anthropology) are dependent upon the deployment of regional or local knowledges as absolute and universal

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<sup>8</sup> Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets : Radical Political Intellectuals*, Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion : Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*.

<sup>9</sup> Matory Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion : Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs : Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, 27.



statements of truth.<sup>11</sup> Mignolo continues that this very coloniality has not only supported the supremacy of certain epistemic projects but has denied the emergence of other counter or contestary ones. This obscuring of the other also obscures the idea that other populations also had epistemic projects as well as counter accounts of colonialism. Thus, in following Mignolo's exploration of the Americas and the response of colonized people to their "being discovered" it becomes important to return to the archive and to provide a comparatist account that takes seriously the construction of other epistemic projects and as well as their multiple forms.

*Re-engaging the Archive*

In response to this return to the archive or reading colonization from the side of the colonized, it becomes critical for scholars in Africana religious studies to actively engage the archive of Africana production that attempts to read the production of modernity/coloniality from the perspective of the marginalized or colonized. One of the more critical interventions in this regard is to begin to engage the archive in ways that centers the imagination around the black experience and the black projects of theorizing that attempt to take account of this experience. In this regard, I turn to the work of Du Bois and his emergence as a central figure in the restoration and examination of the black archive. Du Bois stands as a critical figure along with the early writers of the slave narratives (Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnett) in their attempt, though often locked in the logic and terminology of modernity, to recapture black existence and experience as critical to theorizing and resistance.<sup>12</sup> Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* alongside his *Philadelphia Negro* can be read as

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<sup>11</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs : Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Louis Gates' and others interrogations of the slave narratives and slave communities functions as an important corrective in Africana studies and to rethinking resistance in the modern era.

extended meditations on black consciousness and the role of the black in the modern American experience.<sup>13</sup> Du Bois as do the auto-biographers (vis-à-vis the slave narratives) take seriously the task of recuperating a usable history in order to engage the contemporary moment of oppression and suppression. The Du Boisian analytic of double consciousness seems in that frame to explicitly understand the role the hegemonic gaze of white supremacy and modernity / coloniality have on the colonized situation but to also argue that in the interstices of this work that there is the production and persistence of other knowledge forms. These other knowledge forms are what Du Bois refers to as the spirituals in *Souls of Black Folk* and he highlights ecstatic worship in *The Philadelphia Negro*.<sup>14</sup>

Du Bois argues that blacks through alternative religious practices and institutions have engaged in a double critique that rejects the idea of “no-religion” assigned to Africans, new world blacks, and Indians while at the same time re-imagining the very parameters of religion and religious capabilities. Du Bois’ account of the spirituals rejects the monological imposition that spirituality or even Christianity spiritualities can only be imagined as regurgitation or mimesis of imperial Christianity. As a result the Du Boisian analytic of double consciousness can be seen as not only a nascent form of critical theory (or even decolonial thinking) but also the presentation of a methodology for religious studies scholars as they attempt to provide space in their epistemic projects for Africana religious subjects.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer

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<sup>13</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, David W. Blight, and Robert Gooding-Williams, *The Souls of Black Folk, The Bedford Series in History and Culture* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), W. E. B. Du Bois and Isabel Eaton, *The Philadelphia Negro a Social Study, Publications of the University of Pennsylvania Series in Political Economy and Public Law* (Philadelphia Boston: Published for the University ; Ginn distributor, 1899).

<sup>14</sup> Du Bois, Blight, and Gooding-Williams, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 22.

self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American..."<sup>15</sup>

Again, what is made clear here is that Christianity and its particular production with capitalism, racism, and colonialism does not negate the very possibility of religion as a space for resistance or as an alternative epistemic project. Religion and religious language becomes a container or signification for the Duboisian protagonist to engage and critique the very conditions of modernity for Africana bodies.

In addition to Du Bois and the slave narratives, it is also important to outline the ways in which returning to the archive opens up the possibility for rethinking the pernicious and problematic ways in which the colonization of spirituality and being often obscures the more radical and experimental telos of Africana existence and specifically Africana religious existence. The works of Angela Davis, Stephanie Camp, and Jacqueline Jones function as a re-engagement of this archive (the Du Bois and Douglass archive) to rethink the experiences of black women in the Americas. The womanist/black feminist read also operates to rethink the coloniality/modernity from the colonized but to question the masculinist and heterosexist implications that often accompany the archive as the production of men's experiences and ideas. In their work on gender and US based enslavement, these theorists posit that obscuring of women is due in part to the ways in which imperial historiography alongside revisionist resistance accounts (Du Bois, Garvey, Douglass) often elide the participation and production of gendered beings. Scholars of religion would be remiss if they ignore the critical corrective that Davis and others provide in attempting to outline an account of coloniality from the underside. Their attention to the detail of black women's experience

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<sup>15</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, 34.

opens up the possibility of not only more robust accounts of Africana existence but also similarly the presence of dissonant and multiple colonized accounts. Therefore, the attention that Davis and others bring to gender also serves to remind the ways in which even the discussions of coloniality/modernity and its resistances have an implied male subject.

Finally, this return to the archive also finds a useful corrective in the works of the quintessential colonial/postcolonial figure of Frantz Fanon. In *Black skin, White masks, Towards an African Revolution* and *Wretched of the Earth* Fanon presents a sociogenic approach that attempts to account for the variety of Africana experience under the misery and degradation of physical colonialism.<sup>16</sup> In this particular intervention, Fanon provides an index of black experiences, as it is located in what Mignolo calls the “third stage of modernity and capitalist accumulation.”<sup>17</sup> The import of this archive for the religious studies scholar especially as it relates to the concern of Christianity is the particular role of Africa and the African. His phenomenological account attempts in this moment to challenge the argument that reason and subjectivity or “being-ness” are confined to the parameters of either Europe and its extension in the United States, but that it is also radically located in the everyday experience of resistance in colonial Africa. While Fanon does not pay a great degree of attention to religion, he again points to the multiple circuits of black and African subjects and the possibility of multiple and divergent experiences with religion. Fanon and his simple evocation of the Senegalese soldier in Martinique remind the late modern reader of the transnationality and mobility of black Atlantic subjects that did not end with enslavement but become a constitutive

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<sup>16</sup> Fanon, Markmann, and John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture., *Black Skin, White Masks*, 18-23.

<sup>17</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs : Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, 24.

part of the post-enlightenment phase of modernity.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that Fanon opens in a critical manner the means for a diasporic analysis that seems to take seriously coloniality as a transnational project and how its subjects are produced and within a transnational frame. He rejects that liberation for these transnational bodies is a return to some fictive, essentialist project but creates a deeply trans-disciplinary project that opens many avenues of resistance among subjugated peoples. It is this approach that points not only to the possibility of unlikely alliances but also the reformulation of epistemological projects that were considered unusable as a mode of resistance. While Fanon invokes modernity's logic of violence as a counter to modernity, he wittingly or unwittingly provides an entree to consider the multiple and divergent uses of modern apparatus for liberatory purposes.<sup>19</sup> Fanon alongside other theorists open up this archive to point to multiplicity and the very possibility of further innervations of the colonial archive to think both about black existence.

#### *Border Thinking in the Religious Subject*

In response to Du Boisian double consciousness, Fanonian diasporic analysis, and Davis' feminist critique, I would like to turn to the works of Anthony Bogues and J. Lorand Matory as a possible space for the study of religion that acknowledges the logic of coloniality and the scenario presented by colonization of being as being only one side of the story of modernity/ coloniality. Matory in *Black Atlantic Religions* and Bogues in *Black Heretics/Black Prophets* want to engage the interstices of coloniality by looking at the production of black Atlantic religious and intellectual traditions that defy the

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<sup>18</sup> In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon spends a great deal of time highlighting resistance and the cultural production of racism and coloniality, but theorists have often failed to acknowledge the ways in which he is nimbly framing a construct of dissonance in the diaspora.

<sup>19</sup> Fanon, Markmann, and John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture., *Black Skin, White Masks*, 25.

hegemony of Christianity and a monological account by highlighting radical and transnational configurations of Africana religious subjects.<sup>20</sup> Similar to Charles Long in *Significations* these scholars suggest methodologically and disciplinarily that religion and especially the religious practices of Africana subjects can no longer be the provenance of theology but that it must be linked to a multi-disciplinary approach that takes religion and the production of religion as the space for what Mignolo and Gloria Anzaldúa call a border epistemology or border thinking.<sup>21</sup> These religious projects are not just a reconfiguration of western imperial Christianity but must be read in light of alternative epistemological projects that attempt to re-think some or much of that which was attached to imperial forms of religiosity.<sup>22</sup> These theorizations primarily include a rejection or reconfiguration of the mapping that went along with the ways that Christianity or religion was understood under the matrix of coloniality/modernity. Additionally, border thinking involves the re-imagining of the very possibility of religious theorizing and specifically theorizing Christianities as it related to the black intellectual tradition

Both Bogue and Matory in their works provide a paradigm for rethinking the borders in the black intellectual and religious world. Implicit in their analyses is that the very constructions of borders and nationalities often work to cement and solidify colonial "exotifications" and "thingification" and obscure the very transnational nature of black religious and black intellectual traditions in the black Atlantic. Matory is specifically adept at arguing for the porousness of these boundaries and the ways in

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<sup>20</sup> Bogue, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). Anzaldúa in *Borderlands* argues that border thinking emerges as two competing epistemologies struggle to create new meaning in a shared space and thus border thinking, Duboisian double consciousness, and Mignolo's understanding of local histories are all closely aligned.

<sup>22</sup> Looking at the variety of religious formations no way suggests that all forms of Africana religious experience and theorizing are border thinking, but I want to argue for a hermeneutic of suspicion as we engage the production of religious modalities in the colonial and postcolonial world.

which the porousness of the borders contest the idea that Christianity became and was sustained as the only mechanism for thinking about religious identity. Matory opens up the very possibility of transatlantic and translocal pathways that suggest that the construction of religion was neither solely dependent on European constructions nor on autochthonous accounts or mythology<sup>23</sup>. He points to the very flexibility and mobility of the discourse surrounding religion and spirituality and how the very notion of religion and religious worldview as it was formed in the black Atlantic sphere created the space for accompanying projects that challenged the hegemony of not only imperial Christianity but also discourses on Africa, democracy, and freedom.<sup>24</sup> Matory in paying close attention both to the archive of black Atlantic religion as well as transnational mobility points to a discourse that not only destabilizes the idea of “no-religion” in Africa but also the idea of Africa as being culturally contained unit that is intellectually and spiritually closed off from the rest of the world and other blacks.<sup>25</sup> His engagement with the Yoruba tradition and the ways in which it is in conversation with multiple black religious traditions seems to argue for a renewed black Atlantic diasporic account of religion and religious formation that takes seriously the under engaged archive of the non-Christian other and the other that is participating in contestatory religious and Christian traditions.

Bogues in his work *Black Heretics, Black Prophets* also wants to recuperate black religious traditions. However, he suggests that one of the promising ways of recuperating black religious traditions outside of the normative Christianity is to engage radical political figures, who he calls prophets, use of the resources of a black religiosity to resist coloniality and domination. Bogues in this works points to these radical

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<sup>23</sup> Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion : Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, 39-42.

<sup>24</sup> Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion : Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Matory, 147.

religious figures (Bob Marley et al) alongside more traditional radical political operatives (Du Bois et al) as constituting the core of the black radical intellectual tradition. In doing this, Bogue eschews the construct that the intellectual production is somehow interminably and inevitable tied to European intellectual tradition and that intellectual production is somehow always produced in contestation with religion and religious subjects. His evocation of religious prophets and especially non-Christian religious prophets as part and parcel of the black radical intellectual tradition points to the ways in which he is resisting the notion that religion and religiosity can only travel with Christianity but also resisting the post-enlightenment rejection of the sacred as a valid epistemic project.<sup>26</sup> In reclaiming the sacred and religious innovator as a part of the radical intellectual tradition, Bogue suggests that in reading colonialism and coloniality from the underside or from its dark resources often requires unearthing in archives epistemic projects and portfolios that are incommensurate or unintelligible within our contemporary schemas. The very potency of coloniality is that it neutralizes the other by not only imposing its epistemic projects but also by obscuring the very productivity of projects that operate outside of modernity's logic of reason. Bogue is thus an important interlocutor who is naming this black radical tradition, with its important religious undertones, as a counter or alternative to western modernity.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Resources in the Christian Encounter*

It is clear that Christianity accompanied empire and provided resources not only for the subjugation of the external other (colonial difference) but also the internal other (imperial difference).<sup>28</sup> However, the very logic of Christianity and Empire that carried racism and capitalism did not and does not deny the multivalency of religious thought.

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<sup>26</sup> Bogue, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets : Radical Political Intellectuals*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Bogue, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets : Radical Political Intellectuals*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs : Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, 37.



I attempted to show through an engagement with Walter Mignolo, Bogue, and Matory that what coloniality attempted to do was to not only subject its sprawling empire to Christianity but to the logic that all knowledge projects different, divorced from, or oppositional to Christianity were not usable in the construction of human subjects. Thus, in order to be rendered human, one had to be Christian (and eventually European). However, the goal of the scholar of religion or the scholar interested in religion is to not necessarily negate religion because of its imperial pedigree but to recuperate the experience and epistemic projects of the other, who often used or signified upon religion to construct new and resistant forms of modernity.<sup>29</sup> This recuperation includes but is not limited to religious projects that mirror the imperial knowledge construction as well as those that disturb the traditional historiography of the period. Thus, I argue that scholars in religion must become creative and engage examiners and expositors of the archive and thus open to the possibility of alternative knowledge projects. Scholars of religion like Du Bois and Douglass must resist the notion that religion and religiosity only mirror a reproduction of Western epistemic values and projects but that engagement with religion might provide for a more robust analysis of the Africana subject and what Bogue names the radical black intellectual tradition. It is then the commendable work that early sociologists or the early constructors of black studies can provide the content to begin to think about some religions and religious subjects as border thinkers who produce knowledge in light of western Christianity but not as a facsimile of it.

#### *Coloniality and the Production of Alternative Christianities*

It is clear that the study of religion always has to take seriously the constructions of race and coloniality. Really, all meditations on the African subject in the modern

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<sup>29</sup> J. A. Mbembé, *On the Postcolony, Studies on the History of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 33.

moment are meditations on coloniality and its pervasive tentacles in all forms of knowledge production and existence. There is no outside to coloniality and to a large extent in the current moment that we find no outside to the norms and rules of imperial Christianity, and as a result theorists of the colonized/subaltern/marginalized are all involved in a reconstructive project that is attempting to be true to the multiple knowledge projects and epistemes that inform the construction and representation of being. This archeological approach (a la Foucault, Long, Pinn) demands a willingness to look behind, beyond, and in between normative constructions not for the authentic or the unsullied but for a representation (a better representation) that signals a more nuanced and robust account of formation from the position of the marginal/colonized/subaltern. The scholar of religion, like all other scholars invested in this project, do not have the luxury of methodological boundaries or disciplinary conventions but must be a “comparatist,” cross-disciplinary, excavation project that simultaneously engages the production of coloniality alongside production of alternative and contesting projects. The production of alternative and contesting projects can be seen in some of the alternative Christianities that this text will explore.

Christian theorists have alternatively talked about new religious movements and indigenous Christianities<sup>30</sup>, but this engagement with coloniality and modernity suggests that a better framing is t alternative Christianities as those movements that simultaneously find themselves signifying on the biblical text and normative reading of that text as well as signifying on and creating counter constructions of the modern moment. Thus, what is central to this construction is that the Christianities points to the expansive and plural nature of Christian discourses, but also attempts to locate a robust

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<sup>30</sup> While the field of New Religious Movement is important in the discussion of some of these movement produced in and during the colonial encounter, I think that mooring this religious products to the long duree of colonial signification helps us to better understand the critiques and the re-imagining of the colonial encounter. It is in that way that this project follows the methodology of Charles Long, Foucault, and Anthony Pinn.

engagement within a critique of modernity. The alternative is thus a return to the use of “alternative” in Lamin’s alternative modernities or what is often be talked about as counter or alternative publics.<sup>31</sup> So the movements or Christianities that are of particular interest are prophetic movements, their leaders, and their communities who signify in/on the borders of Christianity exploring the far reaching consequences of independence, neo-liberal development, and globalization. They reject the notion of disenchanted world and thus provide a social critique that is “mistakenly viewed as ‘prelogical or prepolitical’ but is unintelligible to many and the matrix of coloniality because it contests and is “outside the pale of political modernity.”<sup>32</sup> The decolonial subject and their alternative Christianity, therefore, are often negated in discourses that either reject religious discourses or primarily position them as a mimesis or recapitulation of previous moments.

This persistent neglect or trivialization of decolonial Christianity is found throughout popular and academic accounts of alternative Christianities as well as accounts of the rise of radicalized Islamic and Christian fundamentalisms throughout the global south. Both Philip Jenkins’ *The Next Christendom* and Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* present any assent to Christianity, fundamentalism, or religiosity as a reframing or re-imagining of an earlier European moment and therefore outside of the pale of decolonial thought. Their framing, however, fails to fully engage the ways in which the “prophetic” re-engagements with mainline Western traditions is an attempt to make space for discarded and unrealized subaltern subjectivities of mainline

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<sup>31</sup> See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent : The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, 1st Harvard University Press pbk. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus! : Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets : Radical Political Intellectuals*, 19.

Christianity or what Vincent Wimbush has called signifying and reading darkly.<sup>33</sup> It offers a new subject that is neither trying to re-imagine an earlier European Christian moment nor attempting to reify a new colonial matrix of power. These movements constructed in the borderlands are transgressive in that they provocatively and wholeheartedly take seriously the subjectivity of the Africana subject and do not attempt primarily to narrate a primordial history (à la Negritude) but are attempting to provide a renewed engagement with modernity through the meaningful vocabulary/grammar/vernacular of religious discourse. Thus survival and response to the misery of coloniality takes as its primary vernacular a renewed engagement with the fissures and fractures of Christianity, an alternative Christianity, and the possibility of a Christian vernacular that recognizes the Africana subject as coeval and healthy/whole.

While this section will look at the productive theorizing that can be done around alternative Christianities especially as it relates to black Atlantic alternative Christianities, I propose a genealogy of alternative Christianities and then suggest a way of reading a particular subset of alternative Christianities as we move forward. This section will talk about the role of African Christianities and the role that they have played in looking at African subjects, but I will eventually argue that African Christianities or the deployment of the term African Christianities in mainstream theological and religious studies circles often reifies the imperial gaze and resists a full exploration of Africana's subjects decolonial capacities. After looking at the evolution of African Christianities, I will use Mbembe's reading of the postcolony and Wimbush's reading of the scripture as a mechanism to move toward Christianities that challenge normative constructions of Christianity and modernity. We will then more robustly look at the ways in which alternative Christianities in the form of healing traditions provide a

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<sup>33</sup> Vincent Wimbush, "Textures, Gestures, and Power: Orientation to Radical Evacuation" (paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, San Antonio, Texas, 2004).

mechanism for thinking through the relation of the postcolony, black Atlantic identities, and religious formation as a decolonial move that represents an alternative to modernity through the means of signifying on the bible.

While this genealogy will focus on two contemporary theorists, Jenkins and Gifford, and their engagement of African Christianities, one would be remiss to ignore the many theorists and theologians that have engaged the topic of Christianity and Christian formation on the African continent. Gifford and Jenkins are both located in a long history of critical analysis of Christian formations on the continent of Africa that have ranged from exhaustive accounts like Adrian Hastings' *African Christianities* (1969) or Steed and Stunklers *Christianities in Africa* to anthropology works ranging from such disparate theorists as Geertz, Mary Douglas, and the Comaroffs to the works of theologians (Kwame Bediako, Lamin Sanneh, Mercy Oudoye, Musa Dube) on African Christianities and African theological production. Many of the earlier works had a particular interest in the interaction between missionary Christian and enculturation, whereas these newer theoretical analysis tend to pay attention to not only the missionary imposition and the rise of Western institutions in continental Africa, but also the emergence of divergent and contestatory initiatives. Thus, Gifford, Jenkins, et al currently point to the multiplicity of Christianities on the African continent and attempt to be attentive to not only the evolution of European Christian structures but the emergence of divergent and multiply inscribed movements. Moreover, there have been countless sociological and policy based treaties on the growth and persistence in Africa especially in response to the area studies emphases that emerged in the late sixties and early seventies. This area studies demarcation is important as it not only notes a shift in the disciplinary production in the Western academy, but it also marks the same time period when a number of African countries were emerging from colonial rule and the ideas of African Christianities was often conflated with independence and

indigenization projects. Jenkins, Gifford, Sanneh, and Bediako represent the front line in attempting to provide an exhaustive account of Christianity that primarily emerged in this “colonial/postcolonial” period but are not solely read as postcolonial (independence-derived) responses.<sup>34</sup>

### *Enchantment Intensified*

One of the central moves of both Jenkins and Gifford as well as Bediako and Sanneh is to challenge the thesis that the modern moment is the pinnacle of secularization. All of these theorists have and continue to challenge the teleological accounts of modernity that suggest that modernity is coeval with westernization and the expulsion of non-rational forms of reasoning. Following in many ways the brash proclamations of Samuel Huntington in his *Clash of Civilizations*, these theorists argue that not only has enchantment not subsided but that it has intensified and that in many ways enchantment and religious commitments have become the central animating force of the late modern moment. While Huntington in his euro-centric analysis outlines the prevalence and importance of religious and cultural commitments due to the decline of the nation-state and the emerging chaos created by volatile and diffuse borders, Gifford and Jenkins point to the demographic data that Christianity both in its orthodox and heterodox forms are increasing in the global South. Jenkins spends time exploring this growth throughout the Global South (his term for the non-Western, non-European, non-US world) and looking at its multiple manifestations throughout the world. Gifford on the other hand, focuses his theoretical energy primarily on Africa and specifically on Ghana in his latest text. Not unlike the works by Harvey Cox (*World on Fire*) and others

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<sup>34</sup> Important in these configurations is the notion that Africa has a long history with Christianity both prior to and during the colonial period. See Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995). Also see Lamin O. Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

on the rise and emergence of Pentecostalism throughout the world, one of the central emphases is that accounts of modernity that do not take seriously the supernatural and the religious. As a result, these accounts occlude and deny a very large section of the world as well as obscure the multiple and nefarious ways that human communities are being deployed.

### *Africa as Subject*

In addition to challenging the received orthodoxy that the post-enlightenment era marks the waning if not end of enchantment, they also beg the question of the role of Africa in the late modern era. In a less than explicit fashion, especially in the case of Jenkins and Gifford but less so in Bediako, these theorists argue for the engagement of Africa and African subjects as central to history and the modern moment. They again implicitly challenge the notion that Africa's lack of complete Europeanization or Westernization should be read as failure but present the possibility that the hybridization and creolization that is part and parcel of African Christian formation is decidedly modern and must be more explicitly engaged. African Christianities are thus seen as a productive and powerful site for the production of the African public sphere. Both Gifford and Jenkins point to the multiple ways in which Christian discourse in Africa have impacted the role of the state, gender, and trade. Furthermore, they argue that Africa's numerical advantage or at least the global South's numerical advantage decisively introduces Africa into the global public as it relates to discourses as disparate as theological musings and transnational border skirmishes. In many ways, Gifford and Jenkins and their centering of Africa bring the works of Mudimbe (the *Invention of Africa and Idea of Africa*)<sup>35</sup> and Mbembe (*On the Postcolony* and "Necropolitics")<sup>36</sup> into sharper relief and help us to think about the ways in which the postcolony is produced and

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<sup>35</sup> Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa : Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, 33-39.

<sup>36</sup> Mbembé, *On the Postcolony*, 12.

imagined by the outside, but also how it is produced from within. In this regard, African Christianities becomes the site for popular theorizing about Africa and the African subject that is not overly circumscribed by European discursive processes.

*A Method for African Christianities*

While Jenkins, Lanneh, and Bediako point to the popular theorizing about subjectivity, death, and healing that is constitutive of local African Christian dynamics, the authors also imagine themselves in a much larger debate about the location of this theoretical framework in the academy. I would like to argue that while Jenkins and Gifford highlight the role of African theologians in engaging the conceptual terrain of African theologies that they are most useful in the cross-disciplinary space that they open to think about the production, persistence, and consumption of these modern religious movements. While Jenkins and Gifford are heavily indebted to sociological data as well as their personal “ethnographic” encounters, the majority of their analyses point to the useful work being done on this topic in many other disciplines and the need for more thorough analytical frames. They seem to gesture for a more engaged transnational account of these movements and how these movements are impacted by a variety of contemporary and historical discursive pathways. They, simply, point to the conceptual inadequacy of a term like African Christianities even as they deploy it as a short hand to engage in their analyses.<sup>37</sup> Thus, they call by virtue of their expansive focus for more detailed engagements by theorists in disciplines like religion, history of religions, cultural anthropology, and theology as well as seem to suggest that disciplines that are unable to adequately deal with alternative modernities will have to re-imagine conceptual tools to think across disciplines and better theorize modernity/coloniality.

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<sup>37</sup> Jenkins in the *New Christendom* provides an ethnographic account that does a fine job articulating the emergence of multiple strands of Christianity, but ultimately fails to see them as connected to anything other than a relatively narrow construct of Christian fundamentalism.



Again, there seems to be a productive and fruitful space to think about Africana Christianity or black Atlantic alternative Christianities as not simply a European regurgitation in African garb but as a project that must be addressed outside of those strictures.

### *Dark Continents*

To think more broadly about coloniality and the production of the African subject in the modern moment outside of the lens of Christianity, it is useful to engage the construction of the postcolonial subject in cultural and postcolonial theory. Achille Mbembe's haunting introduction to *On the Postcolony* is a tour de force that quickly reminds the reader of the groundbreaking work that had been set in motion by theorists of the colonial and postcolonial - Bhabha, Said, and Mudimbe. He reminds that central to the post-Enlightenment modern age and the late modernity of neo-liberalism is the representation of Africa, Africana subjects, and African institutions as darkness, nothingness, and failure. These mappings of Africa and African subjects virtually name all form of existence, all moments in African history, as overdetermined by darkness.

Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly party of human nature. Or when it is, its things and attributes are generally of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality. It is this elementariness and primitiveness that makes Africa the world par excellence of all that is incomplete, mutilated and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks of nature in its quest for humankind.<sup>38</sup>

This same rendering of Africa is also foundational to other texts or readings of coloniality/modernity. Thus, the stories and other popular archives of the colony also follow this mapping. As a result, the stories of the colony or the postcolony often offered for public consumption are domesticated ones that are more invested in narrating Europe than Africa. In popular non-fiction, fiction, and historical African

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<sup>38</sup>Mbembé, *On the Postcolony*, 1.

studies, the story of the Africa has been simultaneously circumscribed by the story of colonial rule and the continuing story of the value of the Africa's natural resources in a global economy. The colony is always a space of absence, no history, and unreason.<sup>39</sup> . It is, therefore, a story about the long duree of European modernity rather than a deep interest in the historical nuances of African particularity and the African subject it encloses. It, therefore, often obscure the critique or alternative to European modernity and its attendant epistemological projects that these subjects make present.

Thus, the story of Africa, the African subject, and more recently the black Atlantic subject often becomes the story of some one else or some other nation. The darkness or "the horror" as it has been popularly characterized comes to function as emblematic of its absence.<sup>40</sup> Those who existed in darkness (the African or the Africana) need no additional narrating, but those who bring light or establish inroads need to be further explored. Mr. Kurtz in the *Heart of Darkness*, King Leopold in numerous historiographical treatises, or white missionaries like those outlined in Barbara Kingsolver's wildly popular *The Poisonwood Bible* become the central means of narrating Africa and discussing its subject position. Death and disorder in these "fictions" function as constitutive features of the dark natives and their non-modern practices and a thorough engagement of African subjectivity is primarily avoided and considered insignificant. Therefore, millions of bodies left to rot in mines or thousands of body parts displaced for economic gain are often subordinated to the psychological and physical experiences of these white interlocutors. Marlow in the *Heart of Darkness* does not lament the condition of the colony as much as he laments the condition of the colonizer in light of his relationship to darkness or Africa. " I tried to break the spell – the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness- that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the

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<sup>39</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 24.

<sup>40</sup> Joseph Conrad and Cedric Thomas Watts, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, Rev. ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 79.

awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passion."<sup>41</sup> Thus Conrad's haunting depiction of white deformation in the face of darkness becomes the central paradigm for reading the colony and the postcolony. Blackness is not monstrous in this space as it is natural to this "savage" land but whiteness on the other hand becomes monstrous in relationship to darkness. The colony and the postcolony become the place where the European is transformed and as Mbembe suggests "reveals his other self."<sup>42</sup> We, however, learn very little about the texture and discourse of the African or the formation of a "dark" subject or the epistemological they create in the modern/colonial world. Again Mbembe reminds:

It is now widely acknowledged that Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve as a polemical argument for the West's desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world. In several respects, Africa still constitutes one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origin of its norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity.<sup>43</sup>

As a response to these constraints or coloniality's production of Africa's darkness, Mbembe like Gilroy, Bogue, and other theorists of the black Diaspora call for a more robust ethnography of the negated body of the colony and the postcolony. He calls for "ethnographic description, distinguishing between causes and effects, asking the subjective meaning of actions, determining the genesis of practices and their interconnections: all this is abandoned for instant judgment, often factually wrong, always encumbered with off the cuff representations."<sup>44</sup> Ethnography or the sustained attention to the entanglement of the postcolony becomes the central means by which to destabilize the fiction of European modernity and to theorize about Africa and African subjects Mbembe points provocatively that "while we now feel we know everything that

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<sup>41</sup> Conrad and Watts, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, 75.

<sup>42</sup> J. A. Mbembé, *On the Postcolony, Studies on the History of Society and Culture* ; 41 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 185.

<sup>43</sup> Mbembé, *On the Postcolony*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Mbembé, *On the Postcolony*, 9.

African states, societies, and economies are not, we still know absolutely nothing about what they actually are.”<sup>45</sup> This dearth of knowledge forces us to re-enter the fray of the postcolony and to reconsider “the possibility of an autonomous African subject” and the option of interrogating darkness from a different frame.

*Reading Darkness, Signifying Scriptures*

In order to move from modernity’s framing of darkness, Africa, and limited constructions of Christianity to alternative framings, particularly alternative Christianities, I turn to social theorist and New Testament Scholar Vincent Wimbush. Wimbush’s work and theoretical lens is appealing on two levels. First, it takes seriously African and African American engagements with sacred texts and sees these readings and practices around the texts as possible sites of resistance. Moreover, his work reclaims darkness and deploys it not to think about the non-being subject we call African but to think about subject that has been obscured, ignored, and forgotten. Darkness in this frame refuses the static and misleading rhetoric of modernity/coloniality and argues for a renewed engagement with those dark bodies that have traditionally been pushed off the stage. More particularly, Wimbush invokes reading darkness as a practice of signifying and excavating that brings to the fore spaces, places, and thought often negated or neglected by dominant thought.

A dark and rich reading of the postcolony and scriptural exegesis in the postcolony must resist seeing it practices as solely political or as overly determined by the west or coloniality’s fascination with governmentality and discipline. To read their exegesis as solely politically is to eliminate the possibility that their interaction with Christianity and European colonialism had any impact on construction of their physical and metaphysical realities. This desire to ignore their theological and biblical excavation is an attempt to leave biblical studies and Christianity free from the gaze and insight of

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<sup>45</sup> Mbembé, *On the Postcolony*, 19.

the other. Wimbush and his call to read the Bible darkly will not allow for the hegemony of Western biblical or theological scholarship. His proposal for reading darkly is that “African American experience, or what African American experience can come to represent, be placed at the center of serious study of the Bible, including academic study of the Bible.”<sup>46</sup> This representation of African Americanness he further defines as those who are “exiled, homely, and uncomely.”<sup>47</sup> This centering of darkness means that there will be a more consistent and intense and critical focus on the modern world; more consistent and intense and critical focus on the phenomenology of social-cultural formation and the creation and uses of sacred texts; and more critical focus on the Bible as script/manifesto that defines and embraces darkness.<sup>48</sup> Wimbush pushes us to engage not only the postcolony from the perspective of its contemporary experience but to use its situation and all of its complexity to re-engage the Bible. He continues that this is not only done for practical theology purposes, but that the centering of their experience must become the methodological tool adopted by scholars of religion. His reading darkly, therefore, unveils an attention to alternative/hidden epistemologies, new methods for excavating these hidden epistemologies as well as practices for people and groups on the ground. Reading darkly and reading with dark bodies privileges an attention not only to scholarly engagement with this other subject but the emergence of this other subject. These practices in his later works are more explicitly theorized as signifying or playing. He argues that this type of endeavor “includes the practices discovered among peoples off the stage, away from the center –in the dark” which often “bring into focus the power relations and dynamics involved in but often masked in

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<sup>46</sup> Vincent Wimbush ed., *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*. New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2000, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible : Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible : Sacred Texts and Social Textures*.

communication and interpretation."<sup>49</sup> This reading of darkness pursues not what "scriptures" or texts mean (as the other reading of darkness attempts to reify Africa and Africans) but rather how scriptures and reading practices inform the lived realities and practices of people.

One particular example of reading darkly are the alternative Christianities that engaging healing as both a type of conjuring and rethinking Christian texts, but also as an affront to the totalizing and dehumanizing logic of modernity and capital as it relates to diseased African bodies. The healing movements and what Devisch terms as their assent toward villagization is one reading of darkness on the borders of imperial Christianity and indigenous knowledge systems and practices. The healing movements must not be simply read as a rejection of death but as creating the logic for alternate worlds not fully circumscribed by the market or the hegemony of the city. The healing thus sets into action the symbolic and discursive possibility for the creation of African subjects or what Bogue terms "a counter symbolic world and order."<sup>50</sup> It sets into play the possibility of counteracting colonial "darkness" and engaging the robust histories of African subjects. Healing movements argue that the formally colonized body is a body worth repairing and that the economic and political ground is worth participating in. Moreover, it names that participation as intrinsically linked to the symbolic language of the village or an adequate appraisal of history, culture, and ancestors.<sup>51</sup> The healing movements not only attempt to repair the history of African participation and the African body, but to insert in death economies the possibility for enchantment and participation. Death or the logic of coloniality/modernity is not just present but like the autocrat it is omni-present. So the healing movement is faced with the difficult task of re-inscribing subjectivity in the midst of multiple crises and increasingly complex logics

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<sup>49</sup> Wimbush, "Textures, Gestures, and Power: Orientation to Radical Evacuation", 14-17.

<sup>50</sup> Bogue, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Rene Devisch, "Pillaging Jesus: Healing Churches and the Villagisation of Kinshasha," *Africa* 66 (1996).

of death. Healing movements, thus, attempt to negate the impact of death worlds and necropolitics by creating African subjects that radically challenge the central tropes of necropower and the postcolony. These movements do this by a particular and local response to death and coloniality and thus a refusal to name universal living arrangements or mandates. Scriptures and healing practices work to free subjects for participation in a world no longer overdetermined by coloniality or colonial imperatives.

These movements' attention to the local requires that we return to the space and logic that is excavated by these movements rich account of coloniality/modernity. These movements highlight the relationship of the city and the urban not only to neo-liberal capitalism but also local manifestations of fascism. The prevalence of private indirect governments that attempt to operate under the guise of might makes right and often adopts the language and logic of other colonial arrangements in the urban area further complicates the postcolony. The locus of the transnational economic regime is rendered problematic by healing movements as they challenge the centrality of neo-liberal economic regimes and the urban space. They challenge the centrality of the urban and the privileging of profit extraction for the cosmopolitan global subject by re-engaging the local African subject and local modalities. This privileging of local modalities is not an essentialist move toward a rural, agrarian African subject but rather a challenge to postcolony's unhealthy dependence on the neo-liberal regime and multi-national corporations. It inserts an alternative construct of decolonial morality that disavows the necropolitics of the multi-national corporation and the autocrat and rather opts for the life and subjectivity of the African (the adherent of the healing movement). The engagement of the village, the history of villages, and the concerns of the local re-insert the needs of the African subject and his/her vision for an African vision in ways that the politics of death foreclose.

The salience of Mbembe's analysis of the postcolony and Wimbush' account of reading darkness is they takes seriously the politics of death and disease that is often essentialized but never fully engaged and provides us a mechanism to read the boundaries and margins of the postcolony in a radically different fashion. Mbembe critically looks at the ways in which the negation of Africa and the African subject, both in popular and scholarly sites, have prevented an engaged look at the trajectories of subjectivities and modernities in the postcolony. His method forces us to take a second look at the politics of death and its associated death worlds and to faithfully engage the creation of alternate modernities or life worlds that attempt to acknowledge African subjectivity. Wimbush and Bogues alongside Mbembe provide us the analytical tools to think about different forms of thinking or intellectual production. Their attention to the derogated archives of black religions and black prophets pointed us to Christianities that are theorizing and thinking across boundaries.

This chapter has taken seriously Mbembe's call to wrestle with the long duree of the African subject in the colonial/postcolonial world and offers that one particularly poignant site to do this are new religious movements. Healing and prophetic movements or alternative Christianities that have been articulated with in the transnational frame, become the moment to discuss the African subject and the local realities rather than an opportunity to reify the neo-liberal economic regimes and normative western Christianity. This method, this attention to the pluri-versal, is painstaking and requires a renewed interest in the details, interstices, and specifics of subaltern existence. It requires a renewed engagement with the African subject, its modalities, and its entanglement with the colony, the postcolony, and the globe.



## Chapter 4

### *Black Prophets and the Creation of Alternative Publics*

The writings on black prophetic figures have been inconsistent at best, and particularly incomplete is writing on their relationship to the broader theological and ideological events that are happening at the time. In this chapter, I will suggest through an examination of the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star and the Father Divine and the Peace Movement that these black prophets are profoundly engaged in the process of constructing a counter-modernity that are simultaneously challenging the racial, colonial, and capitalist moorings of the modern era. They are rendered veritably invisible by black theology, but I would argue that theorizing of the diaspora, Africa, and the possibility of multi-racial or post-racial identities requires the construction of a Christian worldview that places them in dynamic conversation with a number of thinkers. Furthermore, this chapter will argue that they belong in the category of black theology and black theological thinking because they suggest that a certain form of God talk is critical to the development of black public and particular the critique and construction of blackness in the internationalist sphere. Both The Brotherhood of the Cross and the Star as well as the Peace Movement articulated a mechanism for articulating and engaging race that envision a new understanding of the modern moment but more importantly new ways for Africana bodies to participate in the modern public sphere.

### *Father Divine and Alternative Black Christianity*

The critical texts on Father Divine have well documented his stories of origination and the implications of a number of different theological streams that

impacted the development of the Peace Movement in the 1920s and the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that Father Divine, born in 1876 as George A. Baker, Jr. incorporated Pentecostal, Methodist, and New Thought teachings and practices into the Peace Movement. The Peace Movement was most widely known as a positive thought movement that eschewed traditional racial categories, prohibited sex amongst its participants, and created community houses, or Peace Houses, throughout the United States that provided shelter, food, and ritual to those that either wanted or need to exist the traditional mainstream modern discourse of that age. The movement started in 1923 by George Baker and a small multi-racial group of adherents has been described alternately as a deviant and troublemaker in critical texts like *Black Gods of the Metropolis* and Hoshor's *God in a Rolls Royce* and as part of broader discourse on the rise of new religions during the rise of the industrial age.<sup>2</sup> Theorists of religion have argued that this prophet fits into the logic of the new thought movements and the new religions that were coming to the fore in a number of marginalized groups in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This section, however, will look at Divine and his Peace Movement as the result of larger dissatisfaction with the modern project, and using the language of divinity, race, and class to participate in a larger black public sphere and to challenge the shape of that public sphere that seemed to be dependent on the construction of narrow racial essentialism which Divine and his follows often challenged.

#### *Re-Articulating the Black Christian Public*

Father Divine has primarily been rendered and remembered as a Black Prophet

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<sup>1</sup> See John Hoshor, *God in a Rolls Royce; the Rise of Father Divine: Madman, Menace, or Messiah, The Black Heritage Library Collection* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A. : The Father Divine Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), Robert Weisbrot, *Father Divine and the Struggle for Racial Equality, Blacks in the New World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> See Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis; Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), Hoshor, *God in a Rolls Royce; the Rise of Father Divine: Madman, Menace, or Messiah*.

or Black “God”, but those notions of Father Divine tend to underplay his role as not just a critique of race and racialism but as a critique of the modern moment. The Peace Movement in its foundational documents highlights that, “Thoughts are things! If we dwell upon them we will become to be partakers of them, automatically. Therefore we hardly use the word that is commonly known as race, creed, or color among us.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to outlining the role and goal of creating alternate space within the United States to engage and create an alternative modern project. It is also clear that Father Divine is doing two other things that are of great importance for this analysis. On one side, Divine is clearly challenging the logic of orthodox Christianity and more importantly the logic, ritual, and scriptural cues of black protestant Christianity in the United States. On the other side, Divine is engaged in a larger debate on what constitutes an acceptable engagement and shaping of the black public. In particular, Divine’s engagement with other Black Gods in the black diaspora articulates ways not only to shape the construction of race and diaspora, but also ways in which to construct new modalities of Christianity. Therefore, this section will focus on Divine’s and the Peace Movement’s engagement with Marcus Garvey and the UNIA as an example of the variety and the competition with black publics and it will also highlight Divine’s engagement with other alternative Christian movements, specifically black led Christian movements, as a way to highlight how Divine and his movement sees scripturalizing or the creation of sacred texts and the divine as a space within which to rearticulate the modern moment.

In many ways, Father Divine and the Peace Movement emerge as a response to the deradicalization of the black church that was happening at the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>4</sup>. The black church movement in many instances, especially under the

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<sup>3</sup> *Spoken Word*, 4 January 1936, 27.

<sup>4</sup> The deradicalization of the black church at the beginning of the twentieth century has been outlined and re-engaged by multiple theorists, most notably Gayraud Wilmore in

auspices of orthodox denominations like Methodists, Episcopalians, and Baptists, had adopted the logic of the modern moment accepting a second-class status for African American subjects and attempting to participate in the burgeoning capitalist marketplace. The goal of the black church and the primary public that it heavily influenced was to achieve a level of middle class respectability in the midst of the tumultuous age between and during the world wars. Thus folks like Divine, Daddy Grace, and Wallace Fard of the National of Islam emerge not simply as a response to the black masses, but they emerge as a constitutive piece in the re-shaping of the black public sphere, specifically the Black Christian public sphere. In the earliest days of his ministry, Divine constituted his ministry as a response to the destitution of Negro migrants in the Southern United States. Much of his focus was a rejection of the racial hierarchy of the American project, particularly the American South, and to provide through his fusion of New Thought, Black Protestantism, and Pentecostalism he provides a vision of social, economic, and political progress for the black underclass.<sup>5</sup> “God’s second appearance on earth was in a form of Jew and that now he comes in the form of a Negro. He told them that he was going to bring the world to an end before long and that those who do not believe on him will be lost.”<sup>6</sup>

#### *Father Divine and Alternative Black Publics*

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his classic text. See Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism : An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983). I, however, would argue that Wilmore and even Lincoln support this thesis by narrowly identifying the black church through the lens of the mainline traditions. Once the black Christian public is broadened to include the variety of projects that are engaging or re-articulating the New Testament narrative of Jesus Christ, it is clear that this is not necessarily a period of deradicalization, but a period of re-thinking the stability and usefulness of the Christian. Black Gods like Fard, Divine, and Grace all exist as important innovators in creating an alternative Christian public that takes seriously the flexibility of sacred texts and the creation of new sacred ideas in the modern era.

<sup>5</sup> Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A. : The Father Divine Story*, 19-26.

<sup>6</sup> Jill Watts, “‘This Was the Way’: Father Divine’s Peace Mission Movement in Los Angeles During the Great Depression,” *Pacific Historical Review* 60, no. 4 (1991).

Along with a number of other black religions and cults developing during the early twentieth century, Divine and his movement are involved in the reconstruction of mainstream Christianity and particularly its relationship to African Americans newly migrated from the South. The evolution of a number of Christian projects that relied on the Christian scripture, but ultimately engaged in a reframing or re-imagining of the Christian witness dotted the urban landscape. From the Hebrew Israelites to the Temple of the Gospel of the Kingdom to the evolving holiness and Pentecostal movements, the evolving shape of black religion, specifically Black Christianity, was a part of larger discourse on what shaped the black religious diaspora and who had the power to determine that boundaries of Christian discourse.<sup>7</sup> While the Hebrew Israelites were arguing for a Afro-Jewish diaspora and the Nation of Islam and the Moorish Science Temple argued for Afro-Islamic diaspora, and others like Garvey and Blyden argued for the creation for cultural diasporas, Father Divine was in many ways creating a distinctively Afro-American religious diaspora that was focused on articulating a mechanism for black Americans and other groups to be stitched into the fabric of the American story. Divine in his opening love feast at his Sayville campus articulates the distinctively American narrative of his movement when he articulates why the term Negro was used:

For the specific purpose of bringing about a division among the people, to belittle and lowrate those that were of a darker complexion, by calling them not African by nature, neither an Ethiopian, neither an EGYPTIAN, but by calling them something that they never were.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Divine does not only identify the Peace Movement as an articulation of the American narrative of upward mobility and exceptionality made possible through positive thought and correct relationship with the divine, but he suggests that it is done not through evocation of black exceptionalism but really American pioneer

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<sup>7</sup> Glaude, *Exodus! : Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> *Spoken Word*, 30 November 1935, 20.

exceptionalism.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Father Divine and his doctrine of integration and non-raciality function as a critique of the reigning discourse of black exceptionalism or separatism. He explicitly rejects black nationalist projects as well as other black Christian movements that refer to and rely on the evocation of racial identifiers. However, this rejection of racial identifiers and his critique of the traditional black church did not suggest Divine and his followers were uninterested in the racial discourse of that age. More explicitly Divine and his movement sees their critique of black exceptionalism, traditional black Christian modalities, and especially Garveyite movements as congruent with a critique of white supremacy and the reigning racial apartheid facing the United States. It is in this way that Divine and the Peace Movement are expanding the dialogue on modernity while extending their understanding of normative Christianity.

In creating an alternative public space that was open for all bodies, his theological focus was on human anthropology. He focused on the body and the beauty of all the bodies involved in the movements, specifically the black bodies. This elevation of the body and the permanence of the body sought to stand in contrast with the ways in which black bodies were often considered impermanent, ugly, and often expendable. R. Marie Griffith is correct in her argument that Divine desired to reimagine the body and center the body as a part of his religious vision.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is clear that his version of new thought-inflected Christianity serves not only as a reflection on the role of black bodies in the public discourse, where again he supports the idea that black bodies are not exceptional but that they are radically equal. Equal, to the degree, which the re-incarnation of the divine would come in the form of the corpulent black body of Father Divine. Furthermore, in this instance Divine is engaged in creating a Christian discourse

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<sup>9</sup> Of particular note here is that Divine and his engagement of the black Christian public sphere attempts to provide alternative for black Americans that will allow them not to divest from the normative public sphere but also to engage as a sacred citizen.

<sup>10</sup> R. Marie Griffith, "Body Salvation: New Thought, Father Divine, and the Feast of Material Pleasures," *Religion & American Culture* 11, no. 2 (2001): 153.

that not only re-imagines blackness but also engages the question of the modern moment. He suggested to his followers:

I am a free gift to mankind. Of the plenty abundance which I have I give to you freely. I ask of you only faith. I take from you nothing. I take your sorrows and give joy. I take your sickness and give health. I take your poverty and give you peace and prosperity, for I am the spirit of success and health.<sup>11</sup>

His alternative Christianity in this regard is not just the evocation of a latter-day prophetic figure, but it also serves to critique the very conditions of the modern moment that imperil all bodies and specifically black bodies. It is noted time and again that his new thought trajectories do not simply suggest personal or individual uplift, but in line with the logic of the traditional black church model, he suggested that his presence and this construction of black identity functioned to correct the black public as an equal and important part of the American public.

This critique of modernity and therefore modern Christianity took place in three discrete ways. In the most immediate way, the Peace Movement was a critique and re-evaluation of the racist character of the modern moment. Divine argued that the failure of the modern moment was a failure to politically, socially, and religiously to eradicate racial bias from modern discourse. The evocation of racial categories, the continued acceptance of racial hierarchies, and the persistence of racial segregation had led to spiritual, corporeal, and political disease. His movement forbade the use of racial categorizations, argued for the removal of racial hierarchies in social interaction, and actively recruited and developed a multi-racial religious community. According to Lincoln and Mamiya, Divine's movement stood as one of the few religious movements that explicitly called for a multi-racial community and the importance of this multi-racial interaction for the ultimate health and salvation of the community.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *New Day*, 30 March 1935, 17.

<sup>12</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, "Daddy Jones and Father Divine: The Cult as Political Religion," *Religion in Life* 49, no. 1 (1980).

In addition to his critique of the racial categories of this age, Divine was also known for his explicit critique of capitalism. While his relationship to capital and capitalism changed over the course of his life, Divine, ultimately, was critical of any form of capital that created conditions of suffering and oppression. While Divine's critique of the New Deal might be read as ultimately calling for capitalist markets to remedy the problem of the Depression era, Divine was suggesting that the conditions that created and maintained the oppression and suffering that came alongside that depression could not be remedied by government handouts but by a re-appropriation of the wealth in society. While many theorist have focused on the communal nature of Divine's movement and the renunciation of individual wealth, it is important to note that Divine and his movement was critically involved in creating business cooperatives in the burgeoning space of emerging black cities, specifically Harlem.<sup>13</sup> His chain of Laundromats run by the female adherents of his movement were seen not as a rejection of capital or the modern moment, but a reorganization of the modern and especially the role of women and black women in the modern moment.

Finally, Divine's critique of the modern project was also a critique of the colonizing impulse of the United States both internally and externally. While Divine existed in the midst of both black nationalist and back to Africa movements, Divine sought to reorganize the modern public sphere by calling for a radical re-articulation of power. While Divine argued that separatist and nationalist modality inevitably doomed black bodies to sickness and failure, he ultimately rejected a colonizing impulse that would deprive the modern world access to variety and diversity in terms of cultural, political and religious options. While Divine rejected race and racial language, he did not reject the burgeoning black culture that was emerging during the Harlem Renaissance or the larger black culture that shaped him during his time with black

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<sup>13</sup> Beryl Satter, "Marcus Garvey, Father Divine and the Gender Politics Of," *American Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (1996).



church. The love feasts and the privileging of what has traditionally been called soul-food, the call and response testimonies that were the central ritualistic feature of his love feasts, and ultimately the creation and integration of music that organized his worship space. Visitors to the love feasts and to Divine's sermons often noted the import of the songs and the merging of politics and the divine in the construction of these musical narratives.<sup>14</sup> As Divine gained more and more access to the black Christian public, it was often his re-articulation of soul food and soul music in the form of cosmopolitan spiritualities that often highlighted Divine's special attention to the bodies, needs and desires of his primarily black female adherents. Father Divine was often noted and reported as saying that "I did not come to save the soul...but I came to save the bodies of children of men," and it is clear that this was a critically part of his affirmation of the particular bodies in his movement and critique of black Christian public that failed in this regard.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Divine and the Black International Public*

In addition to creating a counter-Christian public, Divine was also involved in the creation of counter-public as it related to black identity and especially black exceptionalism. Divine primarily known as an anti-racist did not just create this in conversation with other religious worldviews, but in contrast with the language of black exceptionalism that was a part of the black public sphere. While Divine and the other "Black Gods: have been virtually ignored by diaspora studies and only tangentially engaged by Africana Studies, that Divine was crucial part of the renaissance of blackness at the rise of the twentieth century. While the discourse on production of blackness has paid attention to economic, material, and religious factors, African American studies

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Allerton Parker, *The Incredible Messiah; the Deification of Father Divine* (Boston,: Little, Brown and Company, 1937), 27-37.

<sup>15</sup> *New Day*, 15 March, 1936, 35.

scholars and Africana studies scholars have ignored the import of these alternative Christian figures more broadly. However, when we return to the contested space of blackness and racial representation of the twentieth century, the black Gods are not just present but vitally important. Especially important is the figure of Divine. Divine is mentioned again and again on both local and international settings. Throughout the pages of local newspapers as Divine comes into conflicts with local communities and preachers and throughout larger national and internal organs as Divine is debated within the context of black nationalist and internationalist discourse.<sup>16</sup> It is particularly noteworthy to highlight that Divine appears in a variety of texts associated with the Harlem Renaissance from writers as diverse as Hurston, Claude McKay and James Van Der Zee.<sup>17</sup>

Divine was clearly a part of a growing public sphere that was not only engaging the creation of alternative religious and Christian modalities, but Divine's was also a part of black public sphere that was engaging the concept of race, black exceptionalism, and the role of blacks in the larger political and public struggle. While a number of theorists have addressed the ways in which the urban cults competed with one another for the needs and interests of primarily black congregants in urban cities, it is important to note the ways in which Divine was constructing an alternative version of black political participation through his use and deployment of race and the role of his non-racial movement in the political process.

Particularly noteworthy is the exchange between Marcus Garvey and Father Divine in the 1920s as they both attempted to shape the black public sphere and the role

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<sup>16</sup> Watts does a fine job engaging the interactions that Divine has with local black congregations and communities as Divine's movement spreads and begins to challenge the power and orthodoxy of local black churches. Watts and others also begin to look at the role of Divine on the national and international level, and I will continue their interventions by addressing the import of Divine's critique of modernity and the creation of a counter public sphere.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Kahan, "The Other Harlem Renaissance: Father Divine, Celibate Economics, and the Making of Black Sexuality," (2009).

of race and specifically racial language within that sphere. Divine was known for his refutations of race and the use of racial language in his movement. In many of his speeches he spoke of the crutch of racial language and racial ideology amongst black Americans. He was known for starting his speeches with the following admonition to his followers and the larger public.

While Divine clearly rejected the mantle of race, he was surrounded by black nationalist movements like the Nation of Islam, the UNIA, and even the NAACP that were elevating and outlining the import of race as not only a political concept but for the Nation of Islam as a theological framing and for the UNIA as transnational envisioning of Back-to-Africa Utopia. Furthermore, the discourse on black exceptionalism was shaping literary discourses, the rise of black popular music, and the emergence of internal discourses on Pan-African (ethnic and racial ) identities. Divine stood in stark contrast with the dominant narrative of the early twentieth century black public as he rejected the politics of racial language and argued that it was preventing blacks and other believers in shaping a useful and meaningful alternative religio-political project. In the *Black Man*, Garvey argued that the theological argument of Divine was suspect

There is no god but One Almighty Being of Heaven, wherever Heaven is. He is the Creator of the universe. Man is but a small part of his creation, and Father Divine is but man. He is physical flesh and blood and of spirit just like another human being and if it is true that he assumes the role of God, then he must be mad or a wicked contriver of deception.<sup>18</sup>

Alongside questioning Divine's divinity, he also questioned the racial ideology that stood at the central of Divine's alternative to the modern world. While Garvey had constructed a proto-nationalist plan dependent on the ideas of black exceptionalism, specifically the maintenance and propagation of black people, Divine was articulating a vision of the modern world that exterminated the concept of race, pushed for a radical

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<sup>18</sup> Robert A. Hill, Marcus Garvey, and Universal Negro Improvement Association., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

vision of integration, and ultimately suggested that race difference would be erased. Garvey saw Divine's worldview "constitute[ed] a gross attempt at race suicide, leading to the complete extermination of the Negro race." Divine's non-racial utopia was premised on the positive thinking of all individuals that was not premised upon or impacted by what he considered the negative logic and optics of race. He argued in many of his sermons and the journalist organs of the movement that "there is no so-called blood of some special race. Blood is blood, Spirit is Spirit, Mind is Mind!"<sup>19</sup> He further continued that using racial and ethnic language carried with it "the germs of segregation and discrimination."<sup>20</sup>

He believed that this raceless, genderless world would offer blacks and particularly black women new ways to participate in the modern world. Thus, while many theorists have focused on Divine's seeming evasion of race, what is most noteworthy is his suggestion that the removal of race and gender is what would allow for blacks to be seen and treated as human beings. Thus Divine inaugurates a way to enter into the transnational discourse that both supplants the language of race, but still provides for the visibility and presence of black bodies, specifically black women. It is therefore important to highlight that during the height of Divine's movement that the evacuation of race did not function as simply a symbolic or rhetorical gesture, but it has been argued that it was Divine's way of bringing together discourses on a multi-racial view of Marxist thought and a means by which to participate in the political process.

During the height of his movement, Divine was not only involved in creating an alternative Christian public, but he was imagining new ways for Christians and black Christians to participate in the democratic process. In response to the New Deal and the failure of this government intervention to respond to the bodies and concerns of this central to his movement, Divine organized a set of speeches, songs, and practices around

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<sup>19</sup> *New Day*, 24 November 1945, 7.

<sup>20</sup> *New Day*, 24 November 1945, 7.

the idea of call for Righteous Government. This call for Righteous Government that became a central point of the Peace Movement in the late 1930s was most forcefully a critique of injustice, suffering, and the horrors of capital that allowed for Divine to center the experience of his followers, most black woman, as not a “ghettoized” rallying cry but ultimately suggested that they spoke for the universal concerns of the working poor. In this way, Divine is challenging the notion that construction of a marginal or isolated cultural movement or ideology was needed to put the concerns of poor people and especially black folks at the center of his analysis. Ultimately his tactics are central to creating a black public that sees the possibility of remaking the modern moment within the shape of multi-racial space.

By the end of the 1930s, the debate between Garvey and Divine has begun to wane as a result of the growing irrelevance and marginalization of the Garveyite movement. However, at this point Divine has not only reshaped the construction of black Christianities with his model of re-imagining the limits and possibilities of the Christian worldview, but Divine is also heavily involved in the international space. In 1936, he is actively involved in creating and lobbying for an anti-lynching bill that again highlights his focus on the bodily needs of his body and has taken a more active role in local and national elections. Moreover, Divine has created an alternative discourse in the public sphere that has eschewed the provincialism of race and is arguing for a larger platform that will enable participation in the public sphere that emerges through the denial of the body (*vis-à-vis* race) as an alternate model for participation.

#### *Transnational Brotherhoods*

While Father Divine and his movement was often imagined as a critique of modern racism and the elevation of a universalizable discourse that could accommodate the needs and concerns of black Americans, the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star is another movement at the beginning of the twentieth century that is similarly challenging

the narrative of orthodox Christianity while at the same time engaging in the project of constructing an alternative black public. Like Father Divine and the Peace Movement, the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star emerges in the crucible of the reconstruction of Africana, specifically Nigerian, Christian identity, while at the same time engaging the role of the black body in the modern world view.

This tenuous relationship with Christianity and specifically mission-based Christianity is what led to the rise of what has been called new religious movements, African religious movements, or the independent African church movement. These movements emerged either as off shoots of the mission-based churches or as completely new derivations of Christianity and African religious traditions. While the language of mission-based Christianity provided a common vocabulary for African nationalists to discuss social transformation, liberation, and the universal humanity of believers, it did not adequately deal with the foreign nature of the Christian discourse itself. Religious movements like Nation Church of Nigeria called for a “God of Africa” as early as 1950.<sup>21</sup> These movements were clearly not only attempting to reconstruct religious values but to situate a religion that validated the humanity of Nigerian people, the self sufficiency of a Nigerian state, and the intellectual foundation for a usable theology in the African/Nigerian context.<sup>22</sup> These movements were not a wholesale rejection of colonial institutions, mission churches or the complex in general, but an attempt to begin the process of interpretation from the perspective of the colonized rather than the neo-colonial elite or the former colonizers.

The Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, founded in 1956 by a charismatic, unlettered gentleman, Olumba Olumba Obu, in the Calabar State of Nigeria, was one of

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<sup>21</sup> Jacob Obafemi Kehinde Olupona, International Religious Foundation., and Council for World Religions., *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (New York: International Religious Foundation ; Distributed by Paragon House, 1991), 36.

<sup>22</sup> Gordon Hewitt. *The Problems of Success: A History of the Church Missionary Society, 1910-1942*. 2 vols. London: SCM Press, 1971, 1977, 87.

these movements. This movement, although it began as a small prayer and bible study group for woman and children, always understood its relevance as suggesting that the practices and institutions of indigenous Africans were more effective than colonial institutions or neo-colonial or quasi colonial institutions.<sup>23</sup> This movement and others like it not only responded to the despair and depravity of its adherents but suggested that part of this depravity and despair resulted from an ineffective reading of Biblical/sacred texts. The solution was not the dissolution of the text, but a new reading.

The Brotherhood's reading of the Biblical text begins with the understanding that the Brotherhood is the third movement in the history of Christianity. The first movement was the Old Testament and the second movement was the New Testament. The third movement or age is the age of the Holy Spirit and this is the age God is revealed as the Holy Spirit who is breaking down the barriers that divide Christians into separate churches and humanity into separate religions. The Holy Spirit has returned in the form of the founder of the Brotherhood movement, and he considers himself to be the eighth and final incarnation of Jesus Christ. The first seven incarnations were Adam, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. His return as the eighth incarnation is significant because now the last and insufficient incarnation of Jesus can be surpassed. Jesus in the New Testament was an incomplete revelation and Obu emerges as the completion of that movement. Nigeria on the western coast of Africa and the personage of an African rural farmer, Obu, become the mouthpiece for healing and universal reconciliation.

The major tenets of the movement emphasize the centrality of this new age and the prioritization this new age places on love, the inefficacy of the last incarnation of

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<sup>23</sup> Friday M. Mbon, *Brotherhood of the Cross and Star : A New Religious Movement in Nigeria, Studien Zur Interkulturellen Geschichte Des Christentums*, (Frankfurt am Main ; New York: P. Lang, 1992), 2.

Christ, and the importance of this-worldly salvation. In one of the founder's earlier sermons he states, "In this fold, love is the only guiding principle and this is Brotherhood."<sup>24</sup> He continues, "it were better if we were called love."<sup>25</sup> In addition to its foundation of love, the movement emphasizes certain aspects of the Biblical canon. However, this movement clearly and provocatively indicates the limitations of the Old and New Testaments and argues that the current era and the current leader is a needed corrective. Furthermore, their Christology presents a Jesus figure that not only does not complete his mission, but sins and falls short of God's will. The inefficacy of Jesus demands for the eighth and final incarnation. This final incarnation is imperative in that it does not only offer spiritual salvation but it offers salvation that impacts the physical and lived realities of the Brotherhood's adherents. This emphasis on worldly salvation dovetails quite nicely with the movement's ethics and its prioritization of self-sufficiency and the spiritual, emotional, and physical wellness of its followers. However, the movement also teaches against any radical rejection of an adherent's current ethnic, social, or political status. This functions simultaneously as a safeguard against hegemonic assimilation and valuation of the humanity of the historically oppressed persons. This ethic, while seemingly contradictory to a liberatory movement, may provide insight into this group's unique engagement with the book of Revelation and its ability to see hybridity as a value rather than a liability.

#### *Brotherhood and Revelation*

One of the unique contributions that the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star makes to the constellation of new religious movements in Nigeria is its particular prioritization and interpretation of the book of Revelation. The Brotherhood argues that the book of Revelation is the primary book in the Biblical canon that has resonance for

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<sup>24</sup> Mbon, *Brotherhood of the Cross and Star : A New Religious Movement in Nigeria*, 75.

<sup>25</sup> Mbon, *Brotherhood of the Cross and Star : A New Religious Movement in Nigeria*, 75.



their movement, and it does not escape them that this book has been used by both the early church and the Anglican Christian mission.<sup>26</sup> The centrality of this text is found in Obu's *The Supernatural Teacher Book*<sup>27</sup> and he emphasizes:

...our work in this new Kingdom is not found in the books of the old Testament; neither is it found in the New Testament from Matthew to Jude. Our duty is found in the books of the Revelation.<sup>28</sup>

The movement particularly sees the text of Revelation as highlighting the third movement of the spirit that follow the first move of the Old Testament and the second move of the New Testament. Revelation is officially exposing the need not only for their vigilance against colonial rule of the Anglican Mission and the British government but also the Brotherhood's particular role in ushering in this new postcolonial era that creatively imagines something new. The Brotherhood understands the book of Revelation as a text that reveals their leader, Olumba Olumba Obu, as central to the development of this new era and the sole prophetic voice. He is, according to the *Supernatural Teacherbook* cited in Mbon, the fulfillment of Revelation 19:12:

His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself.<sup>29</sup>

His centrality in the Brotherhood's theology mirrors the centrality of the lamb in the Revelation text and thus he functions as the returned messiah who has come to redefine moral behavior and determine who the elect amongst the living is. Their specific

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<sup>26</sup> Mbon, *Brotherhood*, 76.

<sup>27</sup> I have quoted extensively from Mbon's dissertation on the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star because he provides the most extensive quotes of the movement's primary documents. Mbon is one of the few persons that has done a full-length study on this movement with specific attention to early primary sources. The *Supernatural Teacherbook* is one of the earliest manuscripts produced by this movement and thus speaks to some of their core foundational teachings. Additionally, material on the movement has been catalogued and made available on the Brotherhood's London affiliate.

<sup>28</sup> Mbon, *Brotherhood*, 77.

<sup>29</sup> Wayne Meeks ed., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993, Revelation 19:12.

interpretation of Revelation does not focus on the totality of the Revelation text, but looks at very specific texts to undergird the movement and its particular critique of the colonial/postcolonial complex and the colonial church.

This specific interpretation of Revelation that informs their critique of colonial/postcolonial complex and the encroachment of capitalism has its locus in a specific critique of the Western world and its role in the marginalization of colonized people.<sup>30</sup> At times, the Brotherhood interpretation seems to privilege not only an African/Nigerian interpretation of the biblical text but also privileging “Nigerian” institutions, philosophies, and aesthetics. However, the complex problem faced by the subaltern person in the colonial/postcolonial complex in general and the Brotherhood in particular is the absence of an authentic “Nigerian” identity. The Nigerian has been compromised or excluded as a result of the European invasion and the intermingling of European (primarily British) and Nigerian constructions and thus Brotherhood in response to this dilemma argues for a more universal understanding and aesthetic that simply privileges Africanity in the community of believers.<sup>31</sup>

The reality of the Brotherhood’s hybridity makes it difficult, therefore, to identify the locus of an authentic Nigerian interpretation over and against any culturally specific one. Thus, the Brotherhood attempts to use their particular context as a lever with which to articulate a universal understanding of Revelation and their role in its application. Obu, therefore, does not just emerge as the savior for the Nigerian poor or the original women and children in his movement. He emerges as the universal mediator that not only prioritizes the lens of Africa but also suggests that this lens will

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<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Johnston, *Of God and Maxim Guns : Presbyterianism in Nigeria, 1846-1966*, Editions Sr (Waterloo, Ont.: Published for the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion/ Corporation Canadienne des Sciences Religieuses by Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988).

<sup>31</sup> Friday Mbon, *Brotherhood*. 73.

effectively bring the end of “dis-ease” and despair.<sup>32</sup> His movement, like the lamb in the text of Revelation, presupposes that he will not only usher in a new era for the churches that are aligned with the lamb but also will challenge the problematic practices of the empire. Thus, Obu’s polemic against empire functions not only to critique the rulers/oppressors of the colonial/postcolonial complex but also to critique the monolithic nature of indigenous people within the colonial/postcolonial complex that idolize or idealize empire’s construction of Christianity, Jesus, and Revelation and reject the possibility of something beyond that. Obu argues pointedly in the *Supernatural Teacher Book* that he is that name in Revelation 3:12 that has not been spoken. Obu in the teacher book quotes Revelation:

I will make you a pillar in the temple of God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem that comes down from God out of heaven, and my own new name.<sup>33</sup>

Obu considers himself to be the new name and his hometown the city. His critique and his subsequent utopic vision are privileged because he is this anointed one, and he emerges from a place of love and brotherhood and not greed and domination. Furthermore, the colonizer’s Christianity or interpretation can not be complete because their application has had such deleterious effects. However, the negative impact of the European colonialism does not suggest that there is nothing of value to glean from the Anglican brand of Christianity that emerges and develops during the Nigerian colonial/postcolonial complex. It is this use of scripture and even some of the Anglican constructions in his sermons that speak to his desire to not only transform the indigenous population of the colonial/postcolonial complex but all who claimed to be invested in the Christian message.

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<sup>32</sup> Friday Mbon. "Olumba Olumba Obu and African Traditional Culture." *Update: A Quarterly Journal of New Religious Movements* 9.3 (1985), 42.

<sup>33</sup> Revelations 3:12, NIV.

In addition to his interpretation of the Revelation's messiah, Obu also offers a new vision for Utopia in the Brotherhood's early writing. He is invested in reforming the world and that reform beginning with the local movement of the Brotherhood.<sup>34</sup> He is seeking for the total moral transformation of the world and the return to its Edenic glory. He is invested in returning the world to one "huge, happy, and harmonious family."<sup>35</sup> Obu's Eden is a universal one in which no one is excluded. There is no retribution against the empire except for the hope that the empire or the beast would be transformed. While Obu does adopt the universalistic language of both the early Johannine community and the later mission church, he refuses to use his "power" to exclude anyone from salvation. Therefore, the utopic vision sees the importance of transformation and does not focus on one's past circumstances. The formerly colonized Nigerian is called to not lament their situation as well as to not harbor hatred to ones that may have caused their situation. This response to the future, however, does not prevent Obu from articulating the causes for the certain situation and offering means to alleviate social and cultural institutions that maintain inequities. While universal freedom is the goal, the *Supernatural Teacherbook* suggests that the leader of the new era will be Obu and that along with the Brotherhood they will rule the world. The headquarters of the brotherhood is literally becoming the site of the Revelation text so much that a river on the facility is considered to be the "river of life water flowing from the throne of God" discussed in Revelation 21.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Early Church and Revelation*

The context of the book of Revelation is important as the Brotherhood and its adherents see themselves as mirroring and bringing to completion the project started in that text. In the book of Revelation, one finds a community that is experiencing

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<sup>34</sup> Mbon, *Brotherhood*, 139.

<sup>35</sup> Mbon, *Brotherhood*, 141.

<sup>36</sup> Mbon, *Brotherhood*, 146.

persecution and is expecting a sudden and cataclysmic shift in the operation of the world. Obu and the Brotherhood suggest that they have already shifted with the arrival of the eighth and final incarnation while the early Christian community is waiting for the return of Jesus. This early community that is a relatively marginalized and oppressed group of people appears to be writing this text during a time of severe oppression. Therefore, like the independence movement of Nigeria, their renewed analysis begins during a time of transition and crisis. The severe repression by either Emperor Domitian or Nero serves as the context for which the early church creates its seminal apocalyptic text.<sup>37</sup> The letter form of text suggests that this apocalypse will only offer salvation to a select few.<sup>38</sup> Whether the seven churches are meant to identify seven actual churches are inconsequential; what is integral in comparison to the Brotherhood's analysis is that there are people that are excluded and degraded. Additionally, there is the notion that not only is empire evil or the beast,<sup>39</sup> but that one's association with empire renders them eternally stained or hybrid. The narrative suggests that the polemic is not necessarily against the evils or the oppression of imperialism or the Roman imperial cult, but that Revelation is speaking to segments of the new community who have sided with the empire. The call is for a radical rejection of syncretism or hybridity and the engagement of a pure post-Jesus/pre-apocalypse existence. Unlike Obu, the early Christian community rejects a model of syncretism or living within one's hybrid existence. The Revelation text calls for one to radically resist one's former life and to shun/reject the imperial rule and to negate the practices learned from and ascribed to as a result of interaction with the Roman Imperial cultic system.

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<sup>37</sup> Wayne Meeks ed., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993, 2308.

<sup>38</sup> Norman Perrin, Dennis C. Duling, and Robert L. Ferm, *The New Testament, an Introduction : Proclamation and Parenesis, Myth and History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 117.

<sup>39</sup> Perrin, Duling, and Ferm, *The New Testament, an Introduction : Proclamation and Parenesis, Myth and History*, 119.

Therefore, it seems that the apocalyptic community of the early church used Revelation to equally speak to the insider, other Christians, as well as the outsider, the Roman elite. S. R. F. Price in his work on the Roman Imperial Cult argues that “imperial images are not merely illustrations of ideology, they partly constitute it.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, apocalyptic incantations are not merely a compilation of a group’s ideology, but to a certain extent the group is defined or gains an identity through the material. The necessity of creating this type of document is to solidify one’s movement as a certain type of group aligned with a certain type of history. The Revelation community’s decision to create an apocalyptic text speaks to their desire to want to align themselves with a certain history and be understood in a certain manner. The apocalyptic text functions in a way that it speaks simultaneously to their desire to create a certain type of hegemony that mirrors the power of Roman rule but to also reject Roman imperial norms. The Revelation community needs the imperial cult as a site of disgust in order to solidify its unique position in response to it.<sup>41</sup> Its rejection of empire functions to articulate its values as well as critique the center which it is using. The apocalyptic literature or the exegesis of the apocalyptic literature in the case of the Brotherhood functions to identify the oppressor as a competitor for hegemony / power. The Brotherhood attacks Christianity through its interpretation of Revelation and redefinition of the colonial / postcolonial complex as it forces the center to engage their definition of Christianity. Therefore, the attack requires that the center recognize the “other” who is using its language and symbols to resist.<sup>42</sup>

*Inside Brotherhood, Inside Empire*

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<sup>40</sup>S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power : The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>41</sup> Robert Young, *Colonial Desire : Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995), 149.

<sup>42</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance : Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 113.

Not only are the critique of empire and the development of a hybrid Christian theology and ethic available in the later theological writings of the founder and the leaders of this movement, but also they are poignantly available in some of the primary documents of the founder. The critique of and the vision for a new understanding of Africa in the colonial/postcolonial complex and the rest of the world is found in the sermons of this founder which have all been collected on the Brotherhood's British affiliate website.<sup>43</sup> The sermons range in tenor from discussing the purpose and the unique nature of the organization to clarifying theological concerns around the divinity of the leader and the place of Old Testament prophecy. In order to fully address the nature of this movement, its response, and its interaction to colonial rule and the colonial church, the writings of the founder are imperative and must be centered.

In addition to the explicit and multiple references to the book of Revelation, Olumba's sermons also pay particularly close attention to the parables in the synoptic gospels. Furthermore, he tends to pay attention to the parables that sanction some type of punishment against the wrongdoer, which can be read as those who adopt oppressive practices within the colonial/postcolonial complex. This particular sermon looks at a strong parable in the book of Matthew:

Jesus saith unto them, did ye never read in the scriptures, the stone which the builder rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes? Therefore, say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, the analysis of this sermon is not an internal rebuke of problematic behavior or overly moralistic viewpoint, which was characteristic of the mission church message.

Instead, Olumba's message sees this polemic as one that indicts the outsider, the

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<sup>43</sup> The Brotherhood's British affiliate website can be found at [www.ooouk.org](http://www.ooouk.org). It is of importance to my research because of the way that it shows the popular engagement and response to the Brotherhood's teaching as well as the popular archiving of the founder's sayings and speeches.

<sup>44</sup> Olumba, "One Government, One Currency."

invader, and the colonizer and thus warrants their demise and dismissal. This message is one that implicitly attacks the colonial/postcolonial complex and its hegemonic control over religiosity.

Of particular interest in regards to this sermon and others is not only the heavy emphasis on challenging the former colonial empires and a rejection of imperial rule, but also its acceptance of some of the morality codes in the New Testament and the privileging of them in the sermons to adherents.<sup>45</sup> The work of the colonial regime to reduce witchcraft, stealing, and lying amongst the population seems to be effectively combined with the Brotherhood's new message of imperial suspicion. "Therefore, go and inform all those who are claiming ownership of one thing or the other, to desist from such claims; tell those who struggle for land, house and positions, to stop it, for the real owner and creator of everything is here."<sup>46</sup> Not only has the empire been identified as the primary suspect, but the rules and the values articulated and validated by the empire are now being used to interrogate and charge the colonial elite. The cause of their fall is not just their association with an outsider power and rejection of the "other," but also a corruption that failed to see the true humanity and dignity of the colonized class of people. This hybrid response is usable and understandable to the indigenous population precisely because it uses the norms and values ascribed by the former regime/church to articulate a vision and to sanction their removal. The dexterity of language does not only serve a psychological purpose, but it clearly serves a strategic purpose.<sup>47</sup> The norms and values of the colonial rule were not completely inadequate they were just applied inadequately. Thus, the interplay of an apocalyptic/utopic prioritization of Revelation with the tendency to highlight the norms and values of the gospels and even European civility function to provide boundaries on a movement that

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<sup>45</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance : Hidden Transcripts*, 110.

<sup>46</sup> Olumba, "One Currency, One Government" (British Affiliate Website).

<sup>47</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance : Hidden Transcripts*, 113.



could quickly spiral out of control. While this movement ardently suggests that there is an additional revelation and that the freedom usurped by empire is reappearing, their reliance and assumption of European constructions of the biblical morality help to control and define the limits of this movement.<sup>48</sup> This movement, for all of its rejection of suppression and dominance, is still a hierarchy and requires the implementation of some sort of controls to maintain a unified vision.

In many of the sermons of Olumba there are references to witchcraft and healing by the hands of humans. In this particular sermon, Olumba clearly prohibits this type of healing, polygamy, and sorcery as anathema. There is definitely an assent to the values of the Anglican Church as one of the ardent battles that the Christian Missionary Society had with the indigenous religions in Nigeria was with the prevalence and persistence of polygamy. In one of the reports of the Christian Council of Nigeria it calls for relationships with all indigenous churches but that special attention must be paid to “church order and discipline and the rules governing marriage.”<sup>49</sup> Olumba speaks to the central concern surrounding order and marriage when he establishes resonance with the Anglican Communion by stating:

God made it categorically clear that no evildoer will be saved. This explains why He teaches us to refrain from stealing, killing, idolatry, fornication, hatred, division, and falsehood and from all ungodly acts.<sup>50</sup>

It seems that Olumba’s and the Brotherhood’s acceptance of parts of the Anglican church’s normative ethical standards speaks to the intense overlap of the Brotherhood theology with the Christian Missionary Society’s understanding of indigenous practices. However, the moments of resonance are also met with moments of intense dissonance that not only challenge the way that seemingly similar ethical statements may function

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<sup>48</sup> Mbon, “Olumba Olumba Obu and African Traditional Culture,” 45.

<sup>49</sup> “Report of the Eighth Meeting of the Christian Council of Nigeria,” August 18-24, 1951, 24.

<sup>50</sup> Olumba, “One Government, One Currency.”

differently. While both the Brotherhood and Christian Missionary Society resist or challenge some indigenous practices, the Brotherhood does not see this as an opportunity to denigrate African culture or the totality of African practices. In the sermon, "One Government, One Currency," he continues after rejecting witchcraft by claiming:

Now, ask yourself why the attention of the world is focused on Nigeria in particular, and Africa in general... This explains why the whites are rushing to Africa and many are tracing their roots to Nigeria.<sup>51</sup>

Here is the characteristic prioritization of Africa universally and the local privileging of Nigeria in the theology of the Brotherhood and the sermons of Olumba. The Brotherhood in its primary documents calls this period of transition from colonial rule not only the age of the spirit but also the age of the spirit in Africa. This period, however, is not an essentialist understanding of Africa, because it is responsive to and aware of the colonial/postcolonial complex and the resources that this has offered and will continue to offer in its development. Africa, the Brotherhood argues, has something unique and powerful to offer to the discussion of Biblical interpretation and the future of the church. There is no need to highlight the degradation of Africa or the rejection of indigenous practices to develop a Christian based message. The engagement of burgeoning nationalism and prioritization of Africanity can work simultaneously with some of the values and norms gleaned from the colonial mission church. Moreover, the aligning of a postcolonial privileging of Africanity with the hegemonic Western Christian message, in fact, gives the Brotherhood's vision of the future and their understanding of scripture more credibility. The symbolic functioning of hegemonic Christianity, Christian language, and the Christian text cannot be undervalued. The ethical and textual world created by the colonial encounter is obviously significant. Bhabha and Young clearly articulate the impact and the significant role that discursive

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<sup>51</sup> Olumba, "One Government, One Currency."

Christianity plays and played in the life of the African believer when they discuss the Bible as operating as the “primary, if complex, signifier within colonial missionary discourse.”<sup>52</sup>

The central role of scripture should not be seen only as a “lust” for textuality from the perspective of movement that began with a mostly illiterate or poorly educated demographic, but should be seen also a simultaneous lust and revulsion for the hegemonic control that was associated with mission Christianity.<sup>53</sup> The centrality of scripture in the primary documents and texts of the movement speak not only to the valuation of scripture for the movement, but also the importance of structure and text as a means of institutional control. Scripture and exegesis has to be understood as essential to the development of this alternate movement and in opposition to the exegesis of the Christian Missionary Society. However, alterity has to have limits in order to prevent the fracturing of this offshoot group. Thus, their alternate exegesis and scriptural selection becomes a standardized or routinized resistance that provides a clear process of resistance that maintains the sacrality and authority of the Brotherhood. This privileging of the New Testament, the narrowing of the New Testament Canon, and the analysis of these prioritized texts defines the canon of the Brotherhood. This prioritization of texts is what leads to and helps to develop the alternate ethical focus that informs the Brotherhood’s theology and its model of social engagement. The emerging ethical focus is not just the rejection of traditional practices, but the rejection of empire and the impact of empire on the way that traditional practices have been conceptualized and operate. Olumba discusses this in his sermons:

Tell all politicians who form the habit of deceiving the people and looting the public treasury, to desist from such. Tell the troublemakers, coup

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<sup>52</sup> Johnston, *Of God and Maxim Guns : Presbyterianism in Nigeria, 1846-1966*, 34.

<sup>53</sup> Young, *Colonial Desire : Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*, 118.

plotters, usurpers of governments and all evildoers to refrain from these.<sup>54</sup>

Religion of the Brotherhood is unapologetically political and social and it is its critique of social institutions and values that make it revelatory. The Brotherhood in its focus on the social context that surround their reading of the text does not just see their social critique as one that is solely inward. Their critique also reaches to address the multiple and heinous sins of empire. They reserve considerable disdain and challenge for the United States of America and implicitly the racial and class politics that are part and parcel of the Western Christian colonial/postcolonial complex. Olumba concludes in this sermon:

There is no distinction as to colour, age, race, sex or status in life in the kingdom of God, for we are one in the Lord. This is a completely new world in which peace, love, co-operation, economic integration under one universal umbrella prevail. It is one currency under one government.<sup>55</sup>

The rejection of race, sex, and status are interesting as this utopic vision of the Brotherhood seems to accept the supposed colorblind value system of the mission church, but what this vision does not reject is ethnicity. It is “one currency and one government,” but the unique influence and offer of Africanity is what makes their utopic vision different from the color neutralizing vision of Europe. Implicit in their ethnic specific rendering of the post-raced and empire world is that hybridity inherent in ethnic difference will be seen as a value and gift to the Christian community. The church’s turn to Africa or Nigeria is not a rejection of the hegemonic European ethos that has been part and parcel of modern Christianity, but the understanding that Africanity is the crucible of hybridity that engages all parts of the universal mosaic. Furthermore, this vision of a universal church that transcends race, but does not obliterate ethnicity responds very clearly to the ways that in the church leadership had been denied to those

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<sup>54</sup> Olumba, “One Government, One Currency.”

<sup>55</sup> Olumba, “One Government, One Currency.”

that stood outside of a certain race or classed position.<sup>56</sup> The ethnic “ghettoes” that the Christian Missionary Society facilitated through the creation of native churches in the early twentieth century were being challenged as another piece of a problematic imperial agenda. The missing aspect of this utopic vision is that it suggests the height of the Christian moment is the effective synthesis of the mission Christianity with the spirit of Africa without close attention to the way that other people and ethnic groups, outside of Africa, have been impacted and responded to mission European Christianity. However, there is clearly in the ethic of the Brotherhood church the rejection of white supremacy, the impact of empire and suffering, and the call for a community of mutuality and “hybridity” that values Africa as an equal conversation partner.

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<sup>56</sup>Lamin O. Sanneh and Joel A. Carpenter, *The Changing Face of Christianity : Africa, the West, and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 84.

## Chapter 5

### *Shifting Values in the Midst of Darkness*

The Brotherhood of the Cross and Star and Father Divine and the Peace Movement help us to understand the construction of alternative Christian publics and alternative racial publics in the modern moment. More specifically these analyses have suggested that Christianities are not solely defined by their unique and innovative constructions of the text or existent theology, but these models prove the performance of and the resulting transformation caused by inter-textuality, hybridity, and miscegenation. These new movements challenge the idea that the supposed closed text of colonial mission Christianity and normative Western Christianity are the repository of truth and holds a monopoly on the characterization of the divine, Jesus, and human participation. These prophet figures in the black Atlantic public function as a critique of not only normative Christianity but also the construction of the black racial identity, and they disrupt the idea that modernity and Christianity function as “a code form for the search for white male identity.”<sup>1</sup> The hybridity of the prophetic figures and the border crossing that they theologically and political engage in ultimate create awareness of hybridity and the willingness to claim its performance lead to a renewed vision of Jesus, the divine, and modern racial project. These movements in the evocation of Jesus and in the erection of Divine as the godhead physically highlight the tensions between the public and the prophetic, inside and out, human and divine, egalitarian and hierarchical, and conformist and radical. It is not just the inherent tension between these categories, but it is the actual fusing of these categories to form categories, institutions, and models that are new, imaginative, and unruly is what is the constructive space of Divine and the Brotherhood.

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<sup>1</sup> Laura E. Donaldson and Pui-lan Kwok, *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 178.

These categories or tensions between the public and the prophetic are what Wimbush would call the “homely” and “unrefined” and it is exactly their resistance to order, modernity, and colonial hegemony that make them useful for the popular imagination. The ethical categories and standards transported and invested in by the Western part of the colonial/postcolonial complex are not unusable for the indigenous imagination, but they are incomplete as they fail to take in consideration the prior experiences of the populous. They fail as Marcia Riggs suggests in her groundbreaking womanist ethics treatise, *Awake, Arise, and Act*, to fully engage the possibility of something new emerging. She urges, “...expect kairos experiences wherein the Spirit breaks into our midst and reclaims us so that we can renounce the privilege of domination; so that we can commit ourselves to discovering untried ways...”<sup>2</sup> The voices of the Brotherhood, Divine and the variety of Africana Christianities suggest that this tension of public and prophetic is a ripe space to think and engage the contours of the modern moment and more specifically the contours of modern theological scholarship.

Riggs like Wimbush continues by arguing that what is needed is responsiveness to the humanity and creativity of all members of the colonial/postcolonial complex. Riggs calls for a communal consciousness within the subaltern group that seeks for mediation rather than a competitive one that demonizes and co-opts uncritically the project of empire. Often the presupposition of monolithic social, religious, and class demographic compromise this idea of communal consciousness. As a womanist ethicist, Riggs recognizes that social stratification within subaltern communities is a derivative

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<sup>2</sup> Marcia Riggs. *Awake, Arise, & Act: a Womanist Call for Black Liberation*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994, 100. Marcia Riggs and Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture., *Awake, Arise, & Act : A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 17.

factor of colonial oppression and white supremacy.<sup>3</sup> She unlike many race theorists spends time to discuss the impact of assimilation (not negotiation and hybridity) in the psyche and lived reality of African and subaltern identity. She profoundly rejects the notion that class stratification within the colonial/postcolonial complex is an autonomous phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> She rejects that because it fails to acknowledge the way that individuals and communities interact to inform and determine systems and ideologies. Riggs is aware of that and thus provides a clear analysis of what she calls integration and what I refer to as negotiation in the colonial/postcolonial complex and how it functions to deny hybrid performances. In looking at the roots of integration and acceptance of normative white culture as being a factor of oppression, Riggs requires that a greater number of systems be challenged and examined in light of womanist ethics. She reminds the members of the colonial/postcolonial complex throughout the Africana diaspora that the stench of white oppression does not evaporate when whiteness disappears, but that the impact of white oppression has limited their vision for a liberative future informed by a communal consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

However, her call for a liberative community consciousness fails short because she fails to truly understand the European colonizers as authentic and important members of the post-European subaltern consciousness. The African vision for a liberative future must not retreat to a truncated vision of an imagined traditional society, but must see their community consciousness and thus their community being constitutive of the white oppressors and their problematic ideologies. In the separate spaces of imagining reserved for subaltern people, they must radically address the functioning of hybridity in the lives of the subaltern and be decisive about what performances of hybridity

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<sup>3</sup> Riggs and Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture., *Awake, Arise, & Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation*, 12.

<sup>4</sup>.Riggs and Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture., *Awake, Arise, & Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Riggs, 85.



should be valued. It cannot however attempt to privilege or essentialize indigenoussness from the perspective of a pre-European world. It is this tension that we see in Father Divine's negotiation not only of black Christianity, but also Marxism, American exceptionalism, and the larger question of race. Riggs mediating ethic is of particular importance because it is through the continued engagement of the European community members that power, hybridity, and inter-textuality are brought to the fore and are not allowed to be disregarded as an insignificant factor in the creation of the post-European subaltern hybrid space.

Thus the new Christological motif that emerges from the reading of the Brotherhood and the new understanding of non-racialized commune in the Divine movement as seen through the lens of Wimbush and Riggs is not necessarily the prioritization of the oppressed because of the misery or suffering but their prioritization of the oppressed because of the attentiveness to hybridity and their willingness to engage in the public domain. Riggs mediating ethic in conversation with Wimbush's insistence on starting with the "unhomely" character of subaltern status suggests that because of human mutuality that there can be a prophetic figure or what might be termed a racial or religious "trespasser" that negotiates between the disparate and often antagonistic parts of community. This attention to trespassers or hybridity demands that sheer intellectual, material, and social proximity and dexterity of competing groups must be engaged. This hybrid Jesus in the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star and the new-thought inflected Christianity of Divine rejects the idea that Christianity or Christian expression is not determined by community, interaction, and context.

The hybrid Jesus or the non-racialized Divine community as gleaned from the public engagement of Divine and the Brotherhood do not erase or ignore suffering, but suffering understood as political, social, and economic misery can no longer function as the height of spiritual piety and belief. Suffering, therefore, does not privilege one to

truth or closeness with God. Suffering, moreover, is now read as the absence of inconsistency, negotiation, and contestation. Suffering is being totally submerged in a monolithic and univocal community. It is the inability to perform hybridity or to engage the culturally other that makes one incapable of encountering the fullness of God. The idea that suffering is assigned to one group or is validated as a sign of this group's closeness to God is understood as preposterous.<sup>6</sup> The Brotherhood and Divine, like womanists, assess the blame and identify systems and institutions. The Brotherhood and Divine refuses to see their suffering as a sign of divine proximity, but rather sees the multilayered interactions between groups as a site of possible transformation. It is clear that the Brotherhood sees the return of peoples to the knowledge and value of Africa and Nigeria as a priority.<sup>7</sup> It is cultural interaction that the Brotherhood and Divine identify as the height of knowledge and thus suffering is caused not to ossify helplessness and hopeless, but suffering is a created to remind people to reject the hegemony of others and their marginalization. Suffering is caused to galvanize people to resist, think creatively, and engage the stranger. It is caused to remind that neither tense hate nor isolated poverty is an acceptable state of being. Suffering is the product of social sin and separation and therefore is allowed to force people to reclaim the possibility of something better and hybrid as a result of community.<sup>8</sup>

Like womanists, the vision for the future is a future without suffering. This is a future that demystifies the cross and refuses to subject Jesus and Christian movements to a valorization of suffering, unfulfilled dreams, and vain imagination or rejection of the body. The vision is one that challenges silence that emerges as a result of the hegemony of the oppressive models with the colonial/postcolonial complex. The

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<sup>6</sup> Emilie Townes. Ed. *Troubling in my Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993, 2. Emilie Maureen Townes, *A Troubling in My Soul : Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering, The Bishop Henry Mcneal Turner Studies in North American Black Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 13-17.

<sup>7</sup> Mbon, "Olumba," 44.

<sup>8</sup> Townes, *A Troubling in My Soul : Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, 4.

future is one that is fraught with uncertainty as the value of establishing stable rules and even social mores is de-emphasized. Olumba articulates clearly in his works that the twentieth century is the century of Africa and of the spirit.<sup>9</sup> His understanding of spirit is that it cannot be contained or over-determined by Western hegemony. The spirit operates outside of the boundaries of reason and western logic, and thus creates dissonance and hybrid dis-ease as its foundational characteristic.

The Brotherhood of the Cross and Star alongside alternative Christianities in the colonial/postcolonial complex demand for the presence, persistence, and prioritization of dissonance. They effectively challenge what has heretofore been understood as religious, Christian, or praxis and imagine as a result of disparate theoretical and experiential resources something beyond the normative Western post-Enlightenment Christianity. Furthermore, the valuing of dissonance and hybridity found in the new religious movements demand a re-interpretation of biblical exegesis, Christian theology, and the dissonance that is part and parcel of the western Christian movements that have achieved canonical status. The demand to own up to and boldly proclaim the constituent parts of the myriad Christianities that have been operating as pure and unified is the enduring contribution that dissonance, hybridity, and darkness bring to the field of Christian ethics and religious studies.

*Reading Darkness, Reading Hybridity*

The value of re-engaging the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star and Father Divine's movements is that it centers reading both the desires and the repulsions of religious movements. The movements clearly affirm the role of contested space and the creation of black publics and black Christian publics within a transnational frame. Wimbush and others must recognize that those whose experiences are characterized by darkness and those whose experiences are not must come to terms with impurity,

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<sup>9</sup> Mbon, *Brotherhood*, 42.

hybridity, and discontinuity as normative. The acceptance or prioritization of an unqualified or “pure” identity continues to give ownership of the “un-hyphenated” types or categories to the West. Wimbush is decisively against the continued monopolization of truth and interpretation by the West, but his categories and rhetoric speak otherwise. Darkness must be employed to rethink race, the West, and a universal Christianity and not simply as a new problematic location to begin the interpretation. Darkness must fully be the renegotiation or reformulation that Wimbush speaks of when he suggests that this can only take place when people are able to effectively challenge the genocidal conditions in which they live.<sup>10</sup> However, this primary genocidal condition for people in this mixed and intermingled globe is the assumption of race and religion and its denigrated status in relation to mythic whiteness and Christianity. Reading hybridity, therefore, is reading in light of one’s miscegenated and hybrid status and reading for an affirmation of this unstable identity in equal relation to other hybrid and unstable beings. In many ways, the racially negotiated spaces of Divine and the Brotherhood movement are central to the growth of a new racial imaginary in the twentieth century. Both Divine and the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star are engaging the precarious spaces of race, modernity, and Christianity. Thus, these alternative religious movements are an important corrective to the ways in which black theology and critical race thinking in religion has failed to take these movements and their theorizations seriously.

*Alternative Modernities, Constructed Theologies*

Furthermore, Wimbush reminds that reading darkly is seeing the “Bible as that which both reflects and draws unto itself and engages and problematizes a certain complex order of existence associated with marginality, liminality, exile, pain, and

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<sup>10</sup> Wimbush, *Theorizing Scriptures : New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon*.

trauma.”<sup>11</sup> Hybridity demands that we engage how the Bible also provides a foundation for the opposing complex associated with authority, center, home, success, and peace. However, notwithstanding difficulty and failure, scholars and non-scholars alike must resist the sterile and pure categories of African and Christian and must begin to look for the new and creative possibilities that exist in different, marginal, and even dark spaces. The incongruence of searching for “peace in a strange land” and what many might consider a strange text is what is at the core of reading darkness as well as hybridity. This is what is at the core of Riggs mediating ethic and the performance of the Brotherhood and Father Divine. Reading hybridity and alterity is often reading for the unexpected overlaps and resonance. It means that as much as the renewed analysis opens us to the affirmation of darkness it also provides us greater insight into the defamation of darkness. Reading darkness and hybridity remind that the desire for Christian legitimacy amongst alternative Christianities is as much about self-determination as it is a legacy of lust for colonial intimacy. The Brotherhood of the Cross and Star and Father Divine ultimately exposes that there are no clean or clear solutions but that reading hybridity or alterity is akin to reading “the hidden name that no one knows but himself.”<sup>12</sup>

*The Future of Africana Christianities and Black Theology*

Using alternative Africana Christianities that are disarticulated in the African diaspora as the center of theological analysis not only helps us to rethink the nature of the biblical narrative and biblical scholarship but also the so-called mainstream and mainline traditions that have been traditionally studied by black theologians and thinkers of African American religious studies. The history of Africana Christianities is

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<sup>11</sup> Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible : Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Revelation 19:12, NSRV.

often written to suggest that influence only operated in one direction. Robert Young argues otherwise:

Culture never stands alone but always participates in a conflictual economy acting out the tension between sameness and difference, comparison and differentiation, unity and diversity, cohesion and dispersion.<sup>13</sup>

While it is clear that the construction of Christianity from extant normative imperial sources plays an extremely important role in the production of alternative christianities, the purpose of this reading is to include the ways in which a largely disaffected black Christian public began to explore the limits of European, American, and even black American discursive hegemony. The creation of discourses and practices that were configured within the crucible of the black Atlantic not only created the very possibilities for Africana Christianities but also radically re-organized the way that the normative modalities adapted and produced Christianities. The postcolony and the modern metropolis were the places where the master and the margin significantly overlapping become the site of “rhizomatic” possibilities for a reorganizing of Christian practices.<sup>14</sup> The creation of a counter-public becomes more accessible because of the work of African Christianities to rethink and explore the boundaries of the nation-state, race, and decoloniality. The very language of liberation and racial reconstruction are expanded to not simply include this new class of Africana migrants, but it enlarges the critical and practical capacities for the Christian witness to account for the varieties of existence or deprivation that are often obscured if not ignored by normative methodologies. Africana Christianities, therefore, in many ways returns to the constitutive insight of black theology that is often overlooked by critical theorists and readers of black thought. Black theology and the critical questions that it engaged make possible not simple an-other or another rendering of black Christian witness but it opens

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<sup>13</sup> Young, *Colonial Desire : Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*, 53.

up the very possibility for thinking the parameters of Christian praxis in a much larger frame.<sup>15</sup> It is exploratory in that it shows one particular instantiation of a much larger, more robust critique of epistemology, theology, and the modern project that cements racism, hegemony, and the supremacy of particular universalizing projects. It is therefore import to note that while black theology purports to give black Christians access to Christendom within the guise of black subjects, it should also be noted that it provides a more robust account of variability and mutability of the Christian project.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, *Divine and Brotherhood of the Cross and Star* remind that the modern moment was not the end of enchantment but it is more broadly a recognition that enchantment as constructed within the narrow confines of a post-enlightenment modernity no longer exists. This notion of spirituality or enchantment has not receded, but rather it has multiplied and taken on previously unrecognizable or irreconcilable forms.

*Scripturalizing, Black Theology, and Africana Christian Publics*

Finally, what the readings of *Divine and the Brotherhood* have exposed is the process of scripturalizing or creating or reshaping sacred scriptures within the black Atlantic Christian public. Scripturalizing within the black Atlantic Christian public is one practice that attempts to create a discourse for existence, resistance to suffering, and flourishing that often travels within an unexpected trajectory and between seemingly unconnected discourses. Thus, while the practice of exegesis and imperial epistemological projects of biblical studies, theology, and political theorizing have attempted to narrow the very possibilities of certain modes of Christian discourse, scripturalizing attempts to de-center these normative texts and to create a much wider berth for theological possibilities by mandating a renewed way of thinking about those

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<sup>15</sup> Long, *Significations : Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 36.

peculiar or estranged from modernity. This wider berth recognizes texts and discourses that are of import to an Africana religious identity and to take seriously those discourses and practices that move in this black Atlantic public. Specifically, the role of the extra-canonical prophetic figure, who is often not constrained by nation-state politics or regimes, is central to a method that wants to take seriously a people's experience with the divine and the creation of "texts, textures, and gestures" to account for this renewed understanding. The impulse to expunge these voices from certain forms of black theologizing is to render the black theological enterprise as one that is comfortable with a depiction of black Christianity that is not attentive to the margins, variety, and those influences from beyond or within the borders of the nation-state. Wimbush reminds with this shift from normative texts and disciplines that, "the primary focus should be placed not upon texts per se but upon textures, gestures, and power...associated with the phenomenon of the phenomenon of the invention and engagement of scriptures."<sup>17</sup> In this regard, Wimbush provides us a mechanism to return to Africana experience and in this case we have looked at the margins through a renewed reading of Divine and the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, in its transnational splendor, and to do this in a space where the varieties of religion, sacrality, racial identity, and resistance can be thought of more fully.

The intervention of scripturalizing within the frame of diaspora enables those interested in black Christianities, the varieties of god talk amongst dark and marooned bodies, to see and account for the production of discourses that are rendered invisible or relatively insignificant by black theological accounts. Scripturalizing, therefore, is an extension of the black theological project that enable us to not only see the constructive projects of competing Christianities like Father Divine and the Aladura Church movements but to also read the popular and the pedestrian in new and exciting ways.

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<sup>17</sup> Wimbush, "Textures, Gestures, and Power: Orientation to Radical Excavation," 5.



Thus scripturalizing opens not only the very possibility for variety and dissonance but using this method allows us to see the ways in which Africanity, Christianity, and diasporic identities were being shaped and combined to imagine black thriving and survival in a modern colonial world system. This method or way of thinking about black religious formation forces us to attend not only to the sources and discourses that are made visible by theology but also those sources and discourses that are often seen as insignificant to western and black theologies' organizing projects. In many ways, a renewed attention to transnationalism and the practices of scripturalizing encourages us to rethink black theology's foundational moments and to offer a space for scriptural projects that imagine liberation and Christianity in a variety of ways. The outcome of this work, therefore, is to re-engage the variety of scriptural projects within the black Christian public and to read how these projects shape and reframe the possibility of alternative modernities. Thus, the new focus of black theology will open up possibilities for engaging the diverse ways that Africana publics use scripture to challenge and engage the modern colonial system and allow for black theology to take seriously the political, racial, and the transnational outside of the confines of normative theological concepts and interpretations. This will then make possible it for black theology to be a project that investigates the use, deployment, and reformulation of texts and ideas central to the creation and maintenance of that which is broadly transnational, flexible, and open to variety and dissonance - Africana Christian publics.

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